

Friday, May 22, 2009

Self-publishing finds commercial niche in digital age

[Kelly Jane Torrance](#) ([Contact](#))



Headlines bring news every week of another industry failing. One, though, is doing better than ever — self-publishing.

On Tuesday, the bibliographic information company Bowker released statistics showing that last year, for the first time, more books were released by on-demand publishers than by traditional ones.

Traditional publishers released fewer books in 2008 than in 2007 — 275,232 new books, a drop of 3.2 percent. However, on-demand publishers, the route many writers take to self-publish, released an astounding 132 percent more — 285,394 in 2008.

Self-publishing used to be derided as "vanity publishing." No longer. Self-published books finally are getting more respect, thanks to two things — belt-tightening in the publishing industry and technology that makes it easier to publish and promote books electronically.

The big publishers have laid off scores of employees since last year's financial meltdown, and at least one, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, has announced a freeze on buying new manuscripts.

"Publishers are going into hibernation right now," said Jason Boog, an editor at the publishing blog GalleyCat, to The Washington Times a few months ago. "While they hibernate, a lot of writers aren't going to have a place to publish."

Some already are looking elsewhere. Wil Wheaton declares, "The incredible ease of distribution online and the fact that more authors — and actually, all creative people — can reach their audience and their customers more easily and more directly than at any other time in history, I think makes self-publishing an option that can be considered in the first round of choices rather than the last resort it's been perceived as up until, let's say, 1998 to 2001."

The writer and actor — best known as Wesley Crusher on "Star Trek: The Next Generation" — has self-published all but one of his books, which include the memoir "Just a Geek." Mr. Wheaton, who made a new name for himself as one of the earliest bloggers, researched the industry after deciding to publish eight years ago. "What I saw repeated was the truism that books sell as well as their authors promote them," he says, "whether you're publishing yourself and receiving the lion's share of the profits or published by a big publisher and receiving a tiny portion of them."

He thought his renown as an actor actually would hurt his chances of being taken seriously as a writer by a big publisher, so he decided to go it alone.

"The first book was an overwhelming success," he says. "If you combine 'the long tail' with what Kevin Kelly calls 'the 1,000 true fans model,' it's really realistic and reasonable for creative people who are willing to work really hard to be successful via self-publishing, whether that's books or music or movies." In other words, an artist can make a living selling his or her niche product to a small but devoted group of people.

Mr. Wheaton's one experience with traditional publishing — for "Just a Geek" — he found "frustrating and disillusioning and disappointing." The book was promoted just to "Star Trek" fans rather than a general audience.

It seems the books he sells himself have sold better. He doesn't want to talk sales figures, but he says his latest — the short sampler "Sunken Treasure" — has "sold like crazy."

He points out that it's easier to get noticed with online retailers — authors aren't competing for the finite shelf space at their local chain store. Also, sites such as GoodReads.com allow readers to tout their favorite authors, no matter who publishes them.

Mr. Wheaton makes a comparison between his two fields. "If I'm represented by the same agent who represents the gigantic, above-the-title box-office multimillionaire actors that can open a movie no matter what the movie is about, an agent is not going to waste any time working for me," he says. "It's just an investment-return math problem." Certain sellers get the promotional dollars at most publishing companies.

Melinda Roberts last month got what she calls "the holy grail" for authors — an appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." Her book? The self-published "Mommy Confidential."

She published herself after agents said they loved her writing but couldn't sell another memoir. "My mother is a writer and editor. I'm a graphic designer. Between us, we had all of the publishing skills we needed," she says. Her book, based on her humorous blog, has been described as "Erma Bombeck meets Bridget Jones."

She admits it's been tough going: "When I sell a book, I can buy a Big Mac, and that's about it

She admits it's been tough going. "When I sell a book, I can buy a big Mac, and that's about it. My last quarterly check, which is sitting on my desk waiting to be deposited, was \$24."

She worried about the stigma, too. "It's almost like marrying beneath yourself," she says. "It's a matter of public record, and you can't take it back once you've done it."

Now that she's been on "Oprah," though, she has agents calling her. "One woman said, 'If you want to write anything else at all, call me,' " she reports.

Both Mr. Wheaton and Ms. Roberts have published with Lulu.com, a Raleigh, N.C.-based print-on-demand publisher that has no upfront charges and keeps just 20 percent of profits on books sold.

Gail Jordan, Lulu's director of public relations, says the recession is certainly helping her company. "Unfortunately, people have more time on their hands than before to finish that great American novel. Then people are taking it into their own hands and like the control they get. With Lulu, you control your copyright, you control your price," she says. "Even people who haven't lost their jobs are looking to supplement their income."

She says the Internet has made people "savvier in general," which encourages self-publishing. "Who needs a travel agent when you have Expedia? We're much more used to taking things into our own hands and controlling them. Lulu is not going to tell me they don't like Chapter 10," she says. "It's up to the marketplace to decide if it has value."

Anyone can self-publish, too. "It's so ridiculously easy. We have 6-, 7-, 10-year-old kids publishing on our site and doing it themselves." Those who want help for formatting or cover design can buy those services through Lulu.

The majority of self-published books aren't selling like "The Da Vinci Code." Neither are most mainstream books — and there certainly are self-published successes. Ms. Jordan confirms that Mr. Wheaton's "Sunken Treasure" is "selling hand over fist." And the Lulu-published "My Stroke of Insight" by Jill Bolte Taylor went on to get picked up by Viking Press.

"Penguin and its subsidiary imprints all have self-published books in their catalogs past and present," says Viking and Plume President and Publisher Clare Ferraro, who discovered the book when hearing the author's "incredibly affecting" talk at the Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) conference. "There isn't a belief here that self-publishing is stigmatized."

"Jill's incredible story and its mainstream appeal were immediately evident. Coupled with the remarkable viral effect of the author's TED conference online and the universal and profound messages in 'My Stroke of Insight,' Viking could not pass up the opportunity to give such a deserving book a large-scale publication," she says, adding that Viking is not trimming its list.

An author can get his or her Lulu book in days. One also can self-publish within minutes, thanks to the increasing popularity of e-books. Amazon.com allows authors to upload a book in minutes and see it for sale in its Kindle store within hours.

April L. Hamilton has done just that. Her two novels are available as Kindle books and paperbacks, and she has published the IndieAuthor Guide to help others do the same. "At last, we're living in a time when authors can go 'indie,' just like musicians and filmmakers before them," she enthuses.

She had an agent but couldn't get published — like Ms. Roberts, she found people liked her work but thought it couldn't sell. She entered Amazon's Breakthrough Novel Award contest on a whim and got dozens of glowing reviews from the site's customers.

"I decided maybe New York editors don't really know what the book-buying public wants," she says. "I think the publishing industry is looking more like the movie industry all the time. Big, mainstream publishers want blockbusters and sure things. They can't cover their overheads on books that only sell a few thousand copies. But that doesn't mean a book that's destined to sell only a few thousand copies isn't a good book that would be very much enjoyed by its audience. And many an aspiring author would be very happy with a loyal readership of a few thousand."

Ms. Hamilton has founded an online community for indie authors called Publetariat. "The

stigma is much greater among writers themselves than among readers or even publishers," she says. "Readers aren't biased against self-published books; they're biased against bad books."

Mr. Wheaton argues, "There's a sharp distinction between self-publishing and vanity publishing." He encourages writers who are serious about their work to self-publish — if they're certain they've written a good book. "Retain creative control. Retain the profits and the satisfaction that comes with being published," he says. "If you're serious, hire an editor. And pay for it. Listen to the editor. If you think your story about magic ponies is really awesome but nobody wants to buy it, there's probably a reason for it."