

## **Many Ways Through the Door**

### **By Craig Lancaster**

Not too long ago, publishing – at least publishing generally considered as legitimate – was an easily defined, difficult-to-scale proposition: You developed your work, you found an agent to shop it around (or, if you had the connections, you submitted directly to an editor) and you waited for an answer.

That's still the drill for a lot of folks, but the orderly chaos of traditional publishing is now sharing space with all manner of self-publishers, consortiums, collectives, boutique presses and Web-only initiatives. Advances in technology have put the ability to create a real, physical book in the hands of the masses. To some, this is nothing less than a sea change in the way books are created and consumed, a much-needed breaching of gatekeepers' walls. To others, the lack of barriers between half-baked crap from wannabes is a blight on culture.

Whatever your view, this is the world we're in, so any time spent wishing for something else is time wasted. If you're here today, I'm going to make a couple of basic assumptions about you: First, that you're not a dilettante. Second, that you're taking a good, long look at various paths before you decide which one to tread.

The topics we explore in our 50 minutes together today will be largely up to you. I want to foster a conversation – even a debate, so long as it's respectful. I'll start with a short rundown of my own background as a published novelist, one that takes in much of the current landscape. I can offer some first-hand experience in the ins and outs of self-publishing and being traditionally published, and I'll try to outline the pros and cons of each.

### **Breaking in**

Like many people, for years I thought I had a novel inside me. But it wasn't until I was 38 years old, nursing my wounds after a bad motorcycle crash and wanting to explore some of the dreams I'd deferred, that I got serious about it.

The result was my first novel, "600 Hours of Edward," which was drafted in 24 days of November 2008. After spending the next couple of months polishing it, I released the book through CreateSpace in February 2009. I chose CreateSpace mainly for the pre-made templates (a mistake) and for the access to Amazon.com as a sales outlet (a good thing). I figured my parents and a few friends would buy it. They did, but something bigger than that happened.

I started putting the book in front of any civic group that would have me. People started reading it and liking it. They told friends. I arranged signings and appeared at arts festivals. The book generated some buzz. Agents praised it (but ultimately passed on it). Finally, Chris Cauble at

Riverbend Publishing in Helena took a look and offered to acquire it. It re-emerged in October 2009 and has gone on to be a Montana Honor Book and a High Plains Book Award finalist.

Due in large part to the success of “Edward,” my second novel, “The Summer Son,” has been acquired by AmazonEncore, the newly launched publishing arm of the online giant. To say that I’m thrilled with the prospect of worldwide marketing by the biggest bookseller on the planet is to perhaps understate the meaning of the word “thrilled.”

### **The game has changed**

On Tuesday, June 22, mystery writer J.A. Konrath wrote this in his widely read blog, *A Newbie’s Guide to Publishing*:

“It would take a great deal of money before I ever signed a print deal again. And that liberation is easily the most wonderful feeling I’ve ever had in my career.”

What happened? Fifteen months ago, Konrath started putting up Kindle editions of the early novels he wrote and New York publishers rejected. He priced them at \$1.99 apiece, to attract readers who were just buying the new e-readers. Then a funny thing happened: Those never-published books started to sell. Really, really well. To the point that he began to see that e-books – which he wouldn’t have to run through the publishing gamut and could release himself – would soon become his primary source of income and that print, the gold standard for most people seeking a publishing deal, would become supplementary income.

He’s since taken the full plunge, turning down publishers interested in two horror novels written under a pen name and releasing them himself through Kindle. With several books on Kindle, he’s on track to make well into the six figures this year – all net money in his pocket.

Now, does that mean anyone can do it? No. Konrath writes in a genre particularly suited to cheapie Kindle versions, and he’s without peer in the art of self-promotion. I wouldn’t expect a writer of literary fiction to be able to move so many units.

But bear this in mind: He’s one guy, exploiting one aspect of the technology. And he’s making a killing at it, so much so that he can bypass New York publishing altogether. The lesson, I think, is that any author trying to break in today needs to be aware of the many possible paths to take.

In the next couple of years, I think we’re going to see a lot of similarly established authors make similar moves. The turmoil in big publishing has put a lot of midlisters – the workhorses of the literary world – on the street. They have built-in audiences, in many cases out-of-print work that is primed for an e-book revival, and a vested interest in finding a way to further their careers. If they can sell 20,000 low-priced e-books a year – a number that wouldn’t necessarily interest New York – they can make a living wage.

This, in turn, will be good for self-publishing in general. If there's a last bastion for naysayers, it's this: "Self-published books are crap." Too many are, it's true. An influx of established, skilled writers will crowd out the pretenders, raising the standards and the profile of all smart indies, new and established.

### **Pros, cons of traditional publishing**

#### **Pros:**

- Vetting, editing to trade practices (in most cases)
- Established distribution channels
- Marketing support (sometimes)
- Someone else manages the laborious publishing process
- Greater chance of critical, popular breakout

#### **Cons:**

- A lengthy, sometimes flawed gatekeeping process
- Protracted wait from beginning to end
- Fewer opportunities
- Lack of editorial input (in many cases)

### **Pros, cons of self-publishing or independent publishing**

#### **Pros:**

- Full editorial control
- Opportunity to exploit niches New York generally doesn't touch
- Low cost barrier to entry

#### **Cons:**

- Most individuals aren't equipped to be writer, designer, typesetter, marketer
- Standing out in a sea of self-published titles
- Editing to professional standard
- Designing to professional standard
- Stigma (though this is fast fading, I contend)
- Workload

### **So you want to self-publish?**

Two pieces of advice to start: First, know what you're getting into. Second, try not to suck.

Some things to think about on both counts:

- You need professional-standard editing, cover design and typesetting. Can you do that yourself? If you can't, can you hire someone who can, or can you swap sweat equity with a like-minded editor/designer?
- ISBNs: Buying a single ISBN instantly tags you as a dabbler, as does taking advantage of the free ISBNs through the myriad self-publishing services. If you're serious about doing this, be serious enough to start your own publishing company (very simple in Montana) and buy a block of ISBNs through Bowker that are registered in that company's name.
- Offset or print on demand: A lot of the business of publishing lies in margin. Offset-printed books are much cheaper on a per-unit basis (more on this in a bit) but require the writing of a big check upfront. Using print on demand through Lightning Source (my recommendation) or CreateSpace will cut into your margin but also instantly puts you into the biggest distribution channels. If you print offset, you're going to have to find someone to distribute those books for you.
- Think through your marketing. How much can you rely on bookstore sales (most self-publishers can't), Internet sales, public-event sales? How are people going to know about your book? How many copies are you willing to set aside for reviews and giveaways in order to generate buzz?
- Do you have time to do all of these tasks and keep writing? The point, after all, is to write more books and build an audience.

### **Quick economics lesson**

If you're independently publishing, you must quickly become acquainted with the ins and outs of the dollars and cents. Our sample book is a 280-page trade paperback novel (a fairly standard size).

Through Lightning Source print on demand, each book will cost you (the publisher) \$4.54 to manufacture. Here's how that breaks down:

- Base cost: \$0.90
- 280 pages at \$0.013/page: \$3.64
- Total: \$4.54

Now, if you want that book to be attractive to bookstores and other retailers, you're going to need to make it returnable and give it a standard discount (55 percent). So what price do you need to set in order to return a profit on each sold book? Let's try this:

- Retail price: \$15
- 55% discount: \$6.75

- Minus production cost (\$4.54): \$2.21

The money disappears quickly, doesn't it? Two bucks and some change is a better clearance than a standard royalty on that book, but still: You're going to have to sell a lot of books to make decent money. And if your returns – that is, the booksellers can't sell your product and get full refunds – are too large, you'll be publishing at a loss.

Now, let's look at the same book uploaded directly to Kindle and set at a price of \$2.99 (the minimum to get Amazon's 70 percent royalty for small publishers):

- Retail price: \$2.99
- Amazon's cut (30 percent): \$0.90
- Your clearance: \$2.09

Looks a lot better, doesn't it? I would posit that self-publishers need to make their works available in print and e-book, but the former should be carefully targeted to readers who want physical books and booksellers who will do more for your book than simply put it on a shelf. As for e-books, I recommend going all-in with low prices and aggressive marketing.

One more point of comparison. Let's go back to our 280-page paperback, only now let's say we're doing a 1,500-copy offset print run. I recently received a quote from a printer for \$3,570 to print 1,500 copies of a trade paperback novel of that size (I ended up not doing the deal). Here's the breakdown:

- Retail price: \$15
- Wholesale discount: \$6.75
- Production cost (\$2.38): \$4.37

A four-buck clearance is a lot better than \$2.21, yes? This is how the big publishers do it. The bigger the print run, the lower the per-unit cost, the higher the margin on a sold book. There are some advantages to being a small publisher, but a lot of times, economics aren't among them.