



ALLi

Alliance of Independent Authors



Ten years ago the Kindle changed book buying and selling forever. **Orna Ross** reports on the rise of self-publishing and how a new generation of authors are doing it for themselves

Amazon Kindle turns ten years old this year. The launch of this electronic reading device was the starting gun for an explosive decade that has changed everything for everyone involved in publishing. And none more than authors.

The Kindle took e-reading and self-publishing mainstream, unleashing a ferment of creative and commercial activity that has taken English language books into new global territories, altered trading conditions at home and abroad, shifted power balances and ignited new publishing platforms, new genres and new literary forms.

Digital publishing had been around before the Kindle was born, and other companies, notably Sony, had already invested in its potential (see 'The evolution of self-publishing' overleaf). But Kindle publishing was different: the Kindle came attached to Amazon, the world's largest e-commerce store, and Amazon added both a digital publishing platform of revolutionary ease (KDP, or Kindle Direct Publishing) and a payment process that upended the traditional way of recompensating authors. This trifecta was absolutely transformative.

Suddenly, a consignment of print books sold through a bookshop was no longer the only route to readers. Authors could create their own digital files and hire their own editors, designers and marketers. And an online distributor-retailer was on hand to introduce their book to a substantial tranche of potential readers.

Liberated from a creatively dispiriting cycle of pitch and rejection, authors found that digital publishing – e-books, audiobooks and POD (print-on-demand) – gave them a global audience, relatively inexpensive production costs and a point-of-purchase the moment the reader discovered the book. Digital publishing also put an end to 'out-of-print', which both allowed a book time to grow a readership, and rebalanced a power axis that had become heavily weighted towards corporate publishers, advance-pushing literary agents and celebrity authors.

Entrepreneurial authors discovered that an author-published book, when published well online, could compete with a book produced by the most prestigious publishing house. Few, if any, readers knew or cared who published the book; the author's name was the only one that counted.

Today, while the Big Five and smaller trade publishers fight for their share of a shrinking bookshop market, and institutions and newspapers lament falling author incomes, a revolution is happening in the indie author sector. And, like most revolutions, it is being largely misrepresented or ignored by the establishment.

Win win

Soon after the launch of the Kindle, other publishing platforms – Apple iBooks, Barnes & Noble's Nook, Rakuten's Kobo, IngramSpark, Wattpad – emerged. As with Amazon's Kindle, the author was the publisher, not the platform. Unlike a traditional print publisher, there was no investment in the publishing process, but neither did they license the author's intellectual property.

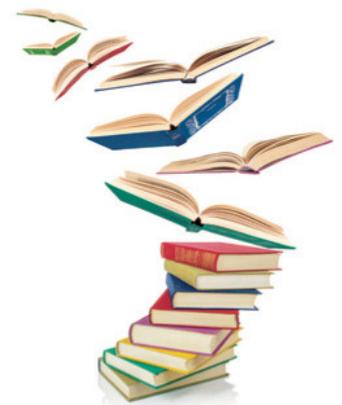
The author received the money paid by the customer, minus a commission (generally 30 per cent) paid to the platform. This meant that authors kept up to 70 per cent of the purchase price of each book, compared with the 10 per cent royalty (substantially less after discounting) offered by a traditional publisher.

The platforms also made everything so easy. Their terms and conditions were far more readable than a publishing contract; their payment terms were monthly (instead of biannually) – and they provided digital dashboards that updated in real time, so an author could see the results of her marketing efforts straight away. Most important of all, the author retained all publishing rights and was free to cut deals with overseas agents, TV and filmmakers and other rights buyers, including trade publishers at home or abroad.

Creative expansion

The opportunities were just as striking on the creative side. Authors enjoyed working with

few readers knew or cared who published the book; the author's name was the only one that counted



IS SELF-PUBLISHING FOR YOU?

Are you proactive?

As an independent author, you'll need to take responsibility for the risks, as well as the rewards, of publishing your own work.

Are you brave?

You'll need to risk time on ideas and marketing that may come to naught; as well as money for editorial and design services. You'll also risk your reputation with anyone who sees self-publishing as a second-best option.

Are you hardworking?

You'll need to be full of energy and commitment to educating yourself about editing, design and promotion.

Are you entrepreneurial?

You'll need to be constantly on the lookout for new ways to reach readers, including the use of social media, email lists, newsletters, offers and competitions.

Are you resilient?

As Mark McGuinness advises in *Resilience: Facing Down Rejection and Criticism on the Road to Success*, make sure you haven't exchanged traditional forms of rejection and criticism for others that can be just as painful: 'Successful indies have found ways to acknowledge the pain – and bounce back.'

Are you prepared to do research?

You'll need to combine intuition with properly researched facts and figures. Whether it's keyword research, marketing studies, direct mail tests or dear old Professor Google.

Are you financially savvy?

Controlling costs is important for all businesses, so you must be able to make sure you spend money where it will produce the biggest effect.

Are you good at networking?

The camaraderie between successful self-published authors is outstanding. Indies often work from the 'co-opetition' model, where competitors co-operate for mutual benefit.

designers to create covers and marketing campaigns. New book categories and microniches have been appearing as readers make it clear what kind of reading they want. Social sharing platforms like Wattpad and Patreon have brought writers and readers close, igniting all sorts of creative sparks.

Creative freedom was my personal reason for going indie in 2011. It gave me untold satisfaction to take my rights back from my publisher so I could self-publish my books my way. Corporate publishing, lucrative though it was, came at too high a price: they changed my titles; my jacket blurbs left out the issues at the heart of my stories; my covers were given the neon-pink headless-female treatment; my poetry and non-fiction were discouraged.

Their strategies worked, taking my books to the top of the bestseller charts. But for me the experience was creatively heartbreaking and commercially shortsighted. I wanted to build a true readership over time, but never felt my books reached the readers who would have most appreciated them. And many of those who did buy, based on those covers, must surely have been let down by what they found inside.

Going indie has been the best move of my writing life. Since self-publishing, my books have won awards, hit bestseller lists and sold in more than 40 countries. (This month, my Kobo map tells me, I have sales in Mauritius, Japan and Peru, as well as all the usual places through North America, Australia and Europe). Self-publishing restored for me two precious things I was in danger of losing when corporate structures were my only choice: creative freedom and commercial autonomy.

Making an alliance

When I started to self-publish, I'd searched for an indie-minded authors' association to join but there wasn't one doing the job I felt needed to be done. After an evening of listening to me wax lyrical about the opportunities and lamenting the way self-publishing was being ignored, misrepresented and sidelined, my son suggested I start one myself.

Having run a writing school and literary agency in Dublin, I had no illusions about the amount of commitment such ventures take. I knew it would mean time away from my own writing, and from personal publishing possibilities. But I also knew that if my grandchildren were to ask where I was when the biggest change in six centuries was happening in publishing, I wanted to say, 'right at the heart of it, beating the drum for authors'.

I decided to launch the Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi) in 2012 at the largest gathering of the trade in the UK: the London Book Fair. ALLi's mission was ethics and excellence in self-publishing. On the ethics front we set up a Watchdog desk, Partner Membership to oversee self-publishing services, and an Ethical Author campaign. On the excellence front, we set up education and research programs, a daily blog, guidebooks and other resources.

A third strand of our work is an ongoing campaign to help the book industry to open up to independent authors – urging literary events,

festivals, prizes, reviewers, booksellers and others to find ways of including self-published authors in their programmes, events, listings and reviews.

Judged on merit

While this campaign has seen some success, we still have a long way to go to our goal, which is that books be judged and included on merit and suitability, not mode of publication. Alas, ignorance and stigma about self-publishing is still very alive, even amongst other authors.

Back in 2012, as self-publishing took off, mystery writer Sue Grafton described self-publishers as 'too lazy to do the hard work' of going through the submission and rejection process. Having her first three novels rejected, Grafton said, was good for her and she saw 'way too many writers who complete one novel, and start looking for the fame and fortune they're sure they're entitled to'. Comparing self-publishing 'to a student managing to conquer *Five Easy Pieces* on the piano and then wondering if s/he's ready to be booked into Carnegie Hall,' she called it a short cut: 'and I don't believe in short cuts when it comes to the arts'.

ALLi member and bestselling thriller writer Adam Croft, who sold over 250,000 copies of his books in that year alone, found this 'outrageous'. 'The complete opposite is true,' he said. 'Self-publishing means finding your own proof-reader [and] editor, finding your own cover designer, doing all your own marketing and sales work, etc.' He added, 'I don't even have the slightest desire to enter the negotiation stage with any publisher as there's no way any of them could offer me what I'm able to do for myself'. Society of Literature Fellow Catherine Czerkawska said Grafton's comments displayed 'a profoundly amateurish and unacceptable ignorance of changes to the industry'.

To her credit, Grafton conceded: 'It's clear to me now that indie writers have taken more than their fair share of hard knocks and ... are actually changing the face of publishing. Who knew?! ... I can see that a hole has been blasted in the wall, allowing writers to be heard in a new way and on a number of new fronts'.

But not everyone is as open to persuasion as Grafton. Pulitzer Prize-winning US novelist Richard Russo has said that the thought 'literally chills [his] blood'; bestselling writer Jodi Picoult advises, 'DO NOT SELF PUBLISH'. As recently as 2016, the *Guardian* ran an article by Ros Barber entitled, 'For me, traditional publishing means poverty. But self-publish? No way!'. Why? Because self-published authors must spend ten per cent of their time writing and 90 per cent of their time marketing; because the 'vast majority' of indie authors have tweet streams that are 90 per cent adverts; because an author of literary fiction needs critical acclaim and literary prizes to build their reputation; because Amazon is responsible for undermining author income – and because authors offering design or editorial services to fellow indies is running what amounts to an 'authorpreneur pyramid scheme'.



Prejudice vs fact

All of these are untrue prejudices masquerading as facts. Addressing such misinformation and misunderstandings around self-publishing with actual facts and figures is a big part of ALLi's work.

The UK Arts Council recently looked at the 10,000 bestselling fiction titles over the past five years and concluded that: 'Outside of the top 1,000 authors (at most), printed book sales alone simply cannot provide a decent income... [which is] a source of deep concern'. ACE's concern is understandable but its solution – literary grants – completely ignored self-publishing.

The authors of the ACE report either didn't know, or failed to point out, that authors who self-publish, or who combine trade- and self-publishing, make more money. Written Word Media (WWM), an author-marketing agency, ran an analysis of the global market at the same time. They found that of all the authors they surveyed who earned more than \$100,000, none were purely trade-published: 72 per cent were self-published only and 28 per cent were what they call 'hybrid authors', publishing both through trade- and self-publishing platforms.

To be fair, WWM point out that 'only about five per cent of overall respondents were solely traditionally published (James Patterson did not take our survey), so traditionally published authors didn't make up a big part of the surveyed audience', but they believe it significant that 'none of the [traditionally published writers] were in the 100K club'. (See 'Facts about self-publishing'.)

Of ALLi's members, five per cent have sold more than 50,000 books in the past two years (or had equivalent reads on Kindle Unlimited), and some of our members have sold over a million – one thriller writer has now exceeded 3m sales.

Many thousands of others are producing work of outstanding literary merit.

Equally of interest are those who are not making a killing, creatively or commercially, but who *are* making a living – by which I mean selling in sufficient numbers to quit their jobs and become full-time writers. You've probably never heard their names but they are happily building their readership and their author businesses.

Of course self-publishing doesn't guarantee an income either but it does deliver equal opportunity. Writers may relish the challenges of self-publishing or may quail at them, but poverty for the majority is not systemically built into the self-publishing model.

In self-publishing, all that stands between you and success is creative skill, hard work and the ability to hook readers. One of the great surprises of the self-publishing revolution is just how many authors relish these challenges and have mastered the skills of making and selling books as well as writing them. And just how many are good at it.

'Tsunami of crap'

But what about what one publishing executive once memorably, if disrespectfully, referred to as the 'tsunami of crap': the abundance of substandard books being released onto self-publishing platforms every day?

When the only way to reach readers was via print books sold in bookshops, publishing worked from a scarcity model grounded in commercial principles: the selection of a few books for investment potential. The digital revolution works in a completely different way, with an abundance model, grounded in creative principles.

In an abundance model, it doesn't matter how many bad books are enabled – they don't hinder

THE EVOLUTION OF SELF-PUBLISHING

Self-publishing 1.0

The first sea-change for authors wanting to self-publish was the arrival of 'desktop publishing' in the late 1970s, which allowed them to prepare their own texts for printing. This was followed by print-on-demand technology (POD), as digital printing processes made it economically viable to print single copies or small batches to order. A band of enterprising pioneers began printing books and pamphlets to sell by mail order, or touring bookstores with car-loads of books. Authors like Wayne Dyer, who later became household names, started out this way.

Self-publishing 2.0

1990 – 'International Year of Literature' – launched the era of the e-book, with books in .txt, .mobi and .doc formats marketed for the first time. However, it was not until 1998 that the first digital bookstores appeared and publishers and authors began to sell books online to be read on computers. Mass market 'e-paper technology' arrived and Sony released the first e-book reader in 2004, followed shortly by the Kindle eReader in 2007.

Self-publishing 3.0

This is the phase that is just beginning. It involves expanding out to use multiple services, including direct sales from author to reader. Self-Publishing 3.0 includes patronage, often crowdsources, subscriptions, membership models and other forms of direct engagement between authors and readers, with no intermediary apart from an online purchase mechanism. At the moment, this is only a small part of most self-publishers' business model, but changes in publishing and consumer purchasing habits look set to accelerate this trend. For more see www.allianceindependentauthors.org/self-publishing-3.0

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the creation of good books and quickly fall into invisibility. On the contrary. Throughout cultural history – in medieval Germany, Renaissance Italy, Elizabethan England – whenever new creative forms emerge, the means of expression become available to more people. And though this might facilitate a ‘tsunami’ of tyro and aspirant work, it also results in more virtuoso art. More masterpieces emerge as the tip of an enlarged mountain. The same is happening today with digital publishing.

Panning for gold

Despite the growing number of self-published titles, finding good books is not a problem for readers. Online algorithms are already highly effective at guiding us towards the books we’re likely to enjoy – and they are getting better all the time. Though perhaps not as pleasant as bookstore browsing, book searches through categories and keywords are probably more efficient discovery tools. And readers can easily discern whether a book is for them, by looking at the cover, book description, reviews, and a pre-purchase sample.

The author who invests time in producing a good book and marketing it well has nothing to fear from the new abundance model. And if time is tight, an entire ecosystem of editors, designers, and marketers has sprung up to ensure that (for a very reasonable investment) a self-published book can be as high quality as any published by the trade.

Of course, it’s not day-long laughter in indie-author land. Learning to balance writing, publishing and running an author business is challenging. Enduring the many misconceptions about our chosen path is challenging. And getting our print books into bookstores and libraries, and finding ways to sell our rights, is challenging.

And although self-publishing has brought our readers closer, the majority of indie authors are still a long way from true autonomy. Content is still mediated by large corporations – albeit these are Silicon Valley companies like Amazon, Apple and Google, rather than Manhattan and London trade-publishers. And while self-publishing

through a wide variety of outlets beyond Amazon does make an autonomous business possible, the mass of authors relying on that one publishing outlet remain vulnerable – as evidenced by the panic that breaks out in the indie author community whenever Amazon changes its terms and conditions. (ALLi’s Self-Publishing 3.0 Campaign is now addressing these, see panel.)

Flying into the future

Digital text, books and media are currently being re-imagined in ways that are likely to have a big impact on authors and author earnings in the next decade. Blockchain, for example – the technology that underlies cryptocurrency (digital money) – seems poised to allow direct payments to authors for the first time (see ALLi’s White Paper ‘Blockchain For Books’ for more on this). Whatever innovations are in the pipeline, the only authors who can benefit are those who have developed an independent, creative and empowered mindset.

But the most profound change of all is one that is only beginning to make its mark: a huge increase in author confidence. As the cap-in-hand publish-me-please mindset fades, as more and more of us take up the challenge of publishing independently and create successful author businesses, our sense of what is possible is expanding.

Whatever comes next indie authors are here, now, a new fixture on the publishing landscape. Here to stay. And, in the next decade as in the last, here to lead the way. ■

ORNA ROSS is a bestselling and award-winning author. She writes novels, poems and non-fiction guides for other indie authors and is currently at work on a nine-book series for creative entrepreneurs. She is Founder-Director of the Alliance of Independent Authors and has been named ‘one of the 100 most influential people in publishing’ (*The Bookseller*).



SELF-PUBLISHING STATS

- ▶ **Readers:** One in four US readers (the most developed digital market) now read e-books. Self-publishing accounts for 24-34 per cent of all e-book sales in each of the largest English-language markets.
- ▶ **Global reach:** Self-publishing platforms now take English language e-books into 190 countries.
- ▶ **Earnings:** Research conducted in 2016 found that over 1,600 indie authors who debuted in the last decade now earn over \$25,000 a year on Amazon, compared to fewer than 1,200 (US) traditionally published authors.
- ▶ **Bestsellers:** In 2018, 28 per cent of the top-selling e-book authors in the US (the most developed self-publishing market) are indie. Six per cent of ALLi members have sold more than 50,000 books in the past two years.
- ▶ **Gender:** 2015 figures revealed that 67 per cent of the top titles published via self-publishing platforms Blurb, Wattpad, CreateSpace and Smashwords were by women; 61 per cent of the Top 100 traditionally-published titles on Amazon were by men.
- ▶ **Film rights:** The 2015 film adaptation of *The Martian*, a sci-fi thriller originally self-published by Andy Weir on Amazon KDP, was directed by Ridley Scott, starred Matt Damon and had grossed \$630m worldwide by 2017.
- ▶ **Silent success:** It is possible to earn over \$100,000 annually without appearing on a bestseller list. A 2016 survey of 142 top-earning ‘invisible’ authors on Amazon.com found that 105 were self-published indies.

Sources: *Alliance of Independent Authors, Author Earnings, Bookscan, FicShelf, Nielsen, Pew Research.*