

CLEARING UP THE MYSTERY OF THE BOOK PUBLISHING WORLD

Time and again in my writing classes and when I speak publicly I hear the same refrain, "I think I'm able to write fairly well, but I am deathly afraid of publishing. I just don't where to look or what to do to have my book published properly."

The publishing world does seem like a maze until someone takes you by the hand and leads you through it. Today, I hope to give you the kind of overview of publishing that will help you make the choices that are so critical to bringing your book to life. Over the next few weeks, we will dissect that overview and explore each of the categories of publishing in detail.

There is no one size fits all in the publishing world. Different books require different approaches. As a most simplistic example, I might turn to self-publishing for a number of different reasons that suit the nonfiction book I plan to write. Indeed, I did when I published *The Writer Within You*. The choice must have been right because the book has won a number of Best Book awards and has been quite successful.

But if I were Mr. Obama and wanted to complete a book, I would head straight to a major traditional publisher because that kind of house can supply exactly what I might need. So let's take a quick look at the options you have when it's your turn to select a publisher.

Traditional Publishing

Two categories comprise this method of publishing: major houses and smaller independents (indies). Most of the household names that you have heard of regularly are among the majors, names like **Dutton, Penguin, Doubleday, Random House**, etc.

These companies were once highly independent, great lovers of the printed word, family owned and operated and devoted to quality. Unfortunately, today most have been swallowed up by huge conglomerates, some of which are based in foreign lands. Profit has replaced quality as their guiding principle. They deal primarily with books written by celebrities, politicians and well-established authors. (Or at least ghost-written books that cite the celebrity as the author.)

The chances that you will be able to sign on with one of these big boys is rather slim. It has been done by first time authors, but it is unusual. These publishing houses will not accept a manuscript submitted by anyone but an established Literary Agent.

Agents are as hard, possibly even harder, to land than publishers. But if you can find one who agrees to represent you, he/she will prove invaluable not only at convincing a publisher to accept your book, but also in negotiating a contract and in guiding your book through the arduous and lengthy process of producing it. The agent also will manage the revenue you receive from the publisher once selling begins.

The traditional publisher will handle all aspects of distribution for you once the book is ready for the market. However, most of the promotion of the book will fall on your shoulders. That means both the work and the cost. The publisher will assist modestly, but the days of lush launch parties and coast-to-coast signing tours are a privilege of the past.

Indies are far more cooperative and take a much greater personal interest in their authors. The companies are much smaller, and therefore can relate to writers more comfortably. The process for obtaining an indie is essentially the same as for a major. A literary agent will be extremely helpful in locating the right indie for your book and then shepherding it through the contract and production cycles.

However, most indies do not insist on an agent to represent you. They will accept your manuscript or book proposal for review directly, if you wish. If you are not agent-represented, I strongly urge you to retain a literary attorney to handle contract negotiations. And it should be an experienced literary attorney, for book contracts are vastly different from the usual legal agreements and in the end you will regret that you didn't retain the right professional guidance.

Publishing on Demand

The monumental changes in printing technology have spawned a brand new category of publishers called "Publishing on Demand" or POD houses. These are ideal for beginning authors and gradually used more frequently even by previously published writers. Their value is that they will handle all of the nitty-gritty of publishing that normally would be the responsibility of the traditional house.

POD houses are far easier to reach. They are much less demanding than the traditional folks, and because their acceptance rules are far less rigid many books of poor quality have been produced by them. This has made bookstores and better reviewers somewhat leery. Not all

bookstores nor all reviewers will work with POD authors. But that is gradually improving because POD houses are becoming more quality conscious and many of the earlier charlatans have been routed out.

You pay a production fee up front. It usually runs anywhere from \$300 to \$1000, depending on the work you specify. A good, basic contract can be drawn for as little as \$300-\$500, and that's all you need.

In return, the POD house designs a book cover, formats the interior type, obtains an ISBN and barcodes, files for copyright, secures Library of Congress certification, prints and binds the book and contracts a book wholesaler or distributor. If you sought that kind of help from the marketplace, your tab would run into the thousands.

No library or bookstore will accept your book if it is not sold to them through a bonafide wholesaler or distributor, and the POD house will place your book with one of the respected wholesalers. As the author you are entitled to a royalty payment on all POD books that are sold.

Self-Publishing

Many authors claim they are self-published when they contract a POD house to produce their book. It is obviously not so. Self-publishing means just what it says. You do the entire job yourself. Each of the tasks I outlined above that the POD house does for you is done by the author or someone he/she hires either to do it or to guide the author in performing the task.

No author is skilled enough to be able to design a professional book cover or format the interior text well. And obviously, the author can't print his/her own book. So all of those tasks must be farmed out and meticulously monitored by you, the author. There is no one to "pass the buck" to. You have become the sole publisher, and the full responsibility falls directly on you.