

Notes on self-publishing and Lulu

After many years of trying to get published, both with an agent and without, I had long wanted to have a go at self-publishing. In the past, writers such as Virginia Woolf, Balzac, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Rudyard Kipling, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Lawrence Stern, William Blake and many others have all self-published at some point in their careers. More recently, Timothy Mo and Susan Hill have successfully self-published – admittedly after they had made a name for themselves. But there are always examples of books coming out of nowhere. Jill Paton Walsh's self-published *Knowledge of Angels* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize (although it was soon picked up by a mainstream publisher).

However, publishing is an expensive business (which is why many big publishers won't take risks) and most writers can not afford to self-publish - even today with print-on-demand (POD), you need to put aside about £3000 which, to many of us, is a lot of money. For a long time, I couldn't afford it.

Then, in 2006, I discovered Lulu. With Lulu, you can publish a book with either yourself or Lulu as the publisher - there is little difference in cost (naming them as the publisher is a slight misnomer as you, the writer, still have to do everything from editing to designing the cover – Lulu only prints what you load up). You need to pay for the cost of the book and global distribution (in all about £150 including several drafts) but that is all. I discovered that it was cheaper to publish a draft copy of a novel on Lulu than it was to print out on my printer – about £10 including P&P. I had a go at self-publishing *The Trials of Tricia Blake* and I was pleased enough to publish the *Writing Fiction Workbook* and *A Divine War*. I have to confess – I was chuffed. There is something very satisfying in creating the whole product, designing the cover, choosing the typeface and so on.

However, the problem I've found with Lulu (and other print-on-demand publishers/printers) is that they, of course, need to make money as well, so the cost of production is quite high and profits are worn down by the time the books get onto Amazon and other online booksellers.

The other problem is, of course, marketing. How to get people to buy your books. This is hard. Made harder by the fact that it is almost impossible to get your books accepted by UK wholesalers and/or distributors, such as Gardners Books. This means that bookstores can not order your books easily. I had one bookseller who wanted to stock my book because of a review (great, I thought) but at a 55% discount (as that was the discount she would normally get when ordering a lot of titles from a wholesaler). This meant that I was selling at a loss. I would have needed to have priced the *Writing Fiction Workbook* at about £15 in order to make a profit and, for a book of 123 pages, that is expensive. Not so great.

I recently contacted a UK wholesaler and a representative told me quite bluntly that, 'only books that are pre-printed, and offered on a Sale or Return basis, are ever likely to appear in high street retailers. Even then, only those that are successfully 'sold' into retail outlets will ever be stocked and displayed, so the chances of a title from anyone other than the larger publishers being displayed in stores is slim.'

So, it is almost impossible for any kind of POD books or titles from small publishers (also usually POD) to find their way into high street stores.

And, while these books are available on Amazon and other online bookstores, writers who print their books with Lulu only really make profit if they are bought through Lulu. I have looked into other self-publishing options but it seems to be the same problem throughout.

There doesn't seem to be an easy answer - unless you can afford to set up a medium size publishing company. That said, it is, at least, one affordable way to get your books out there. That has to be a good thing. The divide between mainstream and self-publishers is creating an interesting alternative book world - perhaps not dissimilar to the old samizdat publishing of the Soviet Union. Of course, the divide is not political but economic. But maybe that's not so different. Whichever, I'm pleased to say that the following titles are available from:

www.lulu.com/lisa9

If anyone has any thoughts they would like to share on self-publishing, do feel free to get in touch.

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