

I've written a book . . .



DR FREDERICK DE JAGER

Editorial Project Manager, QuickFox Publishing

Introduction

I've written a book . . . are the first words many publishers hear from enthusiastic, aspiring – but uninformed – writers. It is as though writers fall into the trap of thinking that writing a book is the biggest challenge in the publishing industry, and that everything else from then on will just fall into place. With mainstream publishing limiting their projects to books that they believe will sell, many promising authors remain unpublished. Independent publishing offers such authors a way forward with their manuscripts. With respect to this way forward, however, which lacks the backing and reach of mainstream publishing, authors are not without responsibilities in terms of decision making, marketing and distribution. This paper, delivered at the 2nd South African Writers' Symposium recently, explores why the input of quality services into the production of independently published books necessitates an equally driven marketing strategy.

Good movers

Get-rich-and-famous success stories of self-published authors are not fiction. However, they tend to be blown out of proportion; there are over 500,000 books listed on Amazon, and of the handful of these that become mega-sellers, they should create urban legends out of their authors – rather than encourage an influx of countless sub-standard manuscripts. These few success stories, though, do just that . . . Yes, it is probably a fact that everyone has a story to tell, but to think that everyone's story will turn into a bestseller is to totally miscalculate the simplest of statistics:

- It is statistically impossible to get to know everyone: meaning, it is impossible to read everyone's story as there are around six billion people on earth
- There are various tastes in literature – overall readership is divided, in other words, with some people only wanting to read literary theory and others only thrillers, for example
- Even within such divisions, a large percentage of people have the same experiences in life, and the same ideas. The implication is

that many of our stories will be the same – that is, have the same plots

- An original manuscript is not necessarily coupled with a financially astute author; most independently published authors do not have the means to budget for the promotion and marketing of their stories
- Most of these authors don't want to promote their own work; they expect their editors and publishers to tell people how good their books are.

Despite such reasons, why we shouldn't all be trying our hand at publishing, *The Writer's Digest*, for example, encourages its readers to pay \$90.00 to attend a ninety-minute Internet meeting to 'learn how to write and sell' their memoirs (see March issue, 2012). Why, we might ask, would they encourage this? I would say, more than likely, feeding writers the 'bestseller' dream of making money is to make money themselves – not because readers' memoirs will necessarily generate large amounts of revenue.

A product control manager of an elite chain of bookstores once told me about a book that 'it's a good mover'. They were speaking about a business book on how to make money in South Africa. I thought 'good mover' meant that the title sells hundreds, maybe thousands, of copies each month. After reviewing the actual sales sheets, I learned that a 'good mover' did not mean hundreds or thousands, but only 'several dozen' – and this was during good sales months.

Business books actually *do* move well in South Africa – more so than other kinds of books. If business books are the better movers in South African bookstores (and by 'good movers' we mean only a few dozen in a month), what should we make of those literary genres that are not good movers? Meaning, if the best-case scenario isn't looking so great, how bad is the worst case? Which genre of book doesn't move at all? Or, what literary genres fall between being 'good movers' and total failures? If such genres are identified, then what type of sales can one realistically expect from titles written by unknown, first-time aspiring authors?

Business people, or business-minded people, seldom introduce themselves to publishers with the words, 'I've written a book'. They start: 'give me a costing on . . .' Rather, 'I've written a book' tend to be

the first words publishers hear from enthusiastic, aspiring storybook or autobiographical writers; writers who think that the biggest challenge in the publishing industry is coming up with a manuscript. The preconception seems to be that everything else will fall into place from then on; publishers will have a look at my manuscript and find it worthy of publishing (and if they don't, they don't know anything), they will do very little work on my manuscript (as hardly any editing and proofreading is needed), they will put up all the finance to produce and print my book in huge quantities (as I don't have any money), which will then become a bestseller, making me rich and famous.

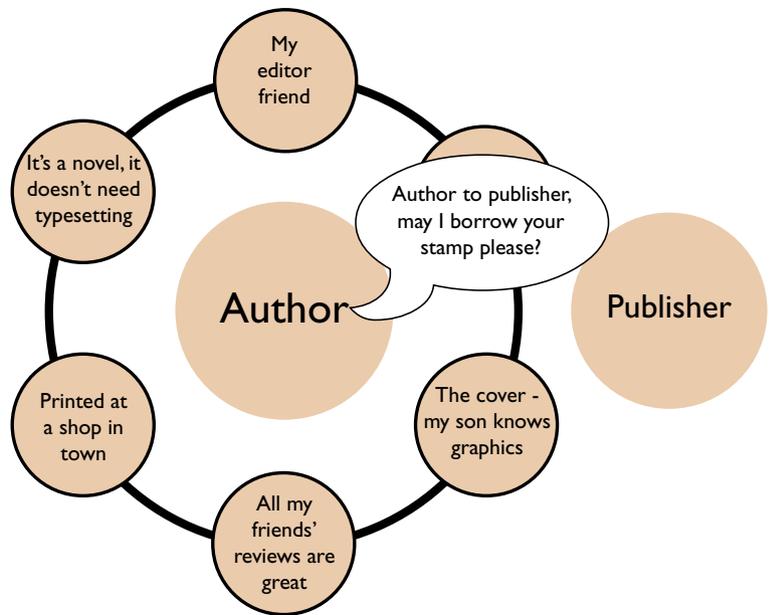
'If only the publisher could see that I am a hidden talent!', it is thought – despite the aspiring writer not being an avid reader, despite not having studied language to any degree, and despite not having written anything else other than commentary on Internet blogs.

Mainstream publishing

This of course can – and sometimes does – spot hidden talent, turning a rough manuscript into a bestselling book all at their own expense. They can do this because – similar to their investments in schoolbook publishing – they lay so many bets on the table, that one of them is bound to hit the jackpot. Mainstream publishing does the same with schoolbooks – they put together many titles, spending a great deal of money on each title. However, should a couple, or even one, of these titles be selected as 'prescribed reading' by an educational board, then these books are guaranteed to sell in such great numbers that it would have been worth their investment in the other titles (even if they fail). In short, placing so many bets – with books – is worth their gamble.

Self-publishing

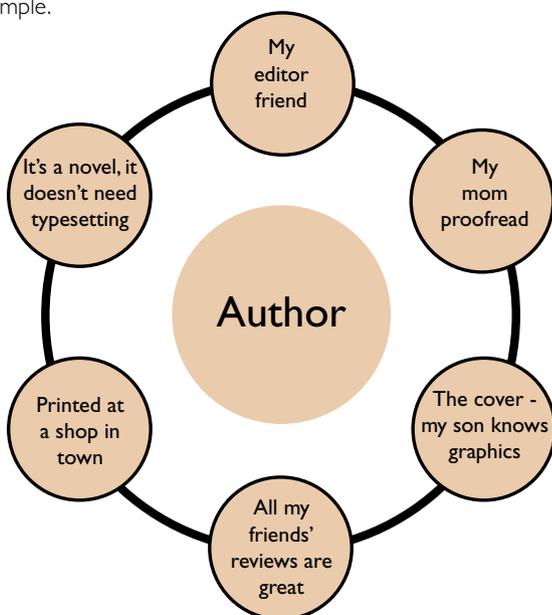
Authors can afford to gamble; the risk is entirely their own. If they lose the wager they have put on the appeal of their manuscript, they lose only their own investment of time and money. If they are responsible for their own production line and printing, then they are responsible for whatever gains or losses are incurred. If no one buys their book once launched, it is no one's fault – it is simply proof of their misconception that anyone can write a bestseller; and also proof of a duplicitous ego, which seems to lead many self-published authors into believing that everyone wants to read about their struggles, for example.



▲ Self-publishing (modified): an unfortunate misuse of publishers' imprints, logos and 'stamps of approval'

The above graph illustrates the lack of quality control in self-published efforts where a publisher does not project-manage the production of the book in question, but simply lends the self-publishing author their logo. If such a publisher did not take an active role in managing the quality of the production, then this sort of relationship devalues both the publisher's brand and the author's book; if a logo that represents 'publishing' is to be inserted into an author's book, it is obviously best accompanied by the management of the many skills required to produce a quality book.

Somewhere between the reach of mainstream publishing and the misplaced optimism of self-published authors comes independent publishing – an emerging hybrid form of publishing. Independent publishers – such as QuickFox Publishing – offer the same quality production line as mainstream publishers to self-publishing authors; meaning, independent publishers supply and manage the qualified and skilled personnel needed to make a self-publishing author's book read like those of the mainstream professionals, whilst the individual author retains full copyright of his/her manuscript and, potentially, receives the greatest portion of revenue generated from book sales. In this partnership, authors are to budget, accordingly, for production and printing, and are also responsible for making decisions that determine the extent to which they will be liable – in terms of warehousing, marketing and distribution. As proof of this sort of partnership, the independent publisher brands and imprints the book, giving the book a stamp of approval that attests to its quality.



▲ Self-publishing (version one)

Average costs of independent publishing

| Description | Qty | Unit Cost | Subtotal | VAT | Total excl. VAT | Total incl. VAT | Hours of Work |
|--|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Editing (55 000 words @ R0,250 per word) | 550000 | R0,2500 | R13 750.00 | R1 925.00 | R13 750.00 | R15 675.00 | 150 |
| Book interior style sheet design/setup | 1 | R950.00 | R1 000.00 | R140.00 | R1 000.00 | R1 140.00 | 3 |
| Typesetting and layout of book | 182 | R35.96 | R6 385.96 | R894.03 | R6 385.96 | R7 280.00 | 8 |
| Barcode generation for ISBN | 1 | R175.44 | R175.44 | R24.56 | R175.44 | R200.00 | 1 |
| Cover design and makeup | 1 | R2 600.00 | R2 600.00 | R364.00 | R2 600.00 | R2 964.00 | 5 |
| Writing back cover blurb | 1 | R1 096.49 | R1 096.49 | R153.51 | R1 096.49 | R1 250.00 | 5 |
| Final proofreading after typesetting | 55000 | R0.03 | R1 650.00 | R231.00 | R 1650.00 | R1 881.00 | 15 |
| Print prep and creating print-ready PDFs | 182 | R2.00 | R364.00 | R50.96 | R364.00 | R414.96 | 2 |
| Sample book for signing off | 1 | R450.00 | R450.00 | R63.00 | R450.00 | R513.00 | 1 |
| Project costs | | | | | R21 499.96 | R24 509.96 | |
| Project management and administration fee (10%)* | | | | | R2 150.00 | R2 451.00 | 190 |
| TOTAL PROJECT COST | | | | | R23 649.96 | R26 960.95 | R124.47 p/h |

Copy editing

Authors who want to publish their own work, with the expertise and quality assurance of an independent publisher, pay for hours of skilled input, but they save – post production and printing – a lot of skilled professionals' time. For instance, read the following unedited and unattributed extract from Jayram Daya's book on creation (2012):

- *Unedited*

With this complex¹ argument no one² has been able to describe life or creation in a universal manner. Universally speaking time, space, energy, and matter are in abundance in the universe.³ It is the knowledge gatherers⁴ intelligence that has given it orderliness. Mental aging occurs through the blockage of our channels of perception⁵ by old ideas, emotions, opinions and beliefs. It prevents us from seeing things fresh and direct. The old mind is trapped in aged memories. In fact, the accumulation of preconceptions causes the mind to age. To take the mind beyond death requires dying⁶ to the mortal mind and awakening to our higher or factual self beyond our ordinary thoughts and bodily identity.

Objective criticism includes consideration of: 1) self-importance; 2) unfounded exaggeration; 3) tautology; 4) punctuation, grammar and syntax; 5) citations: says who?; 6) gratuitous wording: goes without saying.

- *Edited*

The above extract becomes this:

No one – with their earthly understanding – has been able to describe life or creation in a universal manner. Time, space, energy, and matter are in abundance, and the intelligence of knowledge-gatherers has, to varying degrees, imposed an earthly sense of orderliness and an understanding of science onto these aspects of the universe. This, seen concomitantly with the fact that our earthly ways of thinking may be self-limiting, means that dying is probably the only way to take the mind beyond its 'mortal' understanding of creation – with all of its preconceptions, trapped and age-old memories, emotions, opinions and beliefs – and to awaken it (in whatever form it then takes) to its higher 'factual' self. Our ordinary minds, in short, with all of their memories, are our mortality – as they cannot take us beyond death. This is the final limitation of intelligence gathering. Such intelligence needs to be used, and appears to serve a purpose, only within the immediate surrounding for which it was intended. In a way, knowledge-gatherers are citizens of two worlds – the world of inner ambitions and the world of outer circumstances, but both are nonetheless limited to earthly thinking, which is borne of our mortal bodies.

The initial block quote shows Jayram Daya's intelligent and profound ideas, but they are trapped in prose that is too compact and exaggerated, amongst other common writing pitfalls. Reviewers of newspapers, for instance, do not have a lot of time to figure out what self-published authors attempt to say. Editing, in other words, is one of the essential skills required for self-published authors to reach mainstream expectations, and to reach the attentions of reviewers in the media. Other production-oriented essentials include typesetting, layout and designing, indexing, paginating, referencing, barcoding, formatting, and proofreading.

Printing also requires skilled and knowledgeable input; book design and finishes are often things that can in themselves sell a book. Contrary to what self-publishing authors think, printing a book is not simply a matter of making PDF's out of a Word document, and requesting the printers to cover their A4s in gloss. Rather, there is a long list of things to consider – and follow – when making a book out of a manuscript, even come time for printing: dimensions, page weight, paper type, binding, trimming, cover options, et cetera. Therefore, added to the above production costs, a self-published author who is looking to compete with the quality of mainstream publications must be prepared to budget for a print run of at least a few hundred copies – the project, then, amounts to almost R40,000, in this example. With R40,000 representing the total 'budget' for their project, at least 266 books (at, say, R150.00 each) need to be sold directly to end buyers, with no middle-men taking commissions off from retail, for this project not to have been a bitter financial lesson.

266 books do not sound like a lot of sales, but if you are a nobody in the literary world – or within your social world – then this figure is quite high. Without a name to ride on, one relies on family and friends for their support. It is doubtful whether enough books would be sold to cover the project's cost; and, even if such a large family and collection of friends did purchase enough copies to cover the project, these 'sympathy' purchases would hardly be a truthful reflection of the raw value of the book. A bookstore alternative to covering production costs looks more or less like shown in the graph below.



▲ Bookstore sales and distribution

Consider the selling points

If self-published authors choose to focus on chain bookstore selling, they will have to sell about 1,400 copies of their title to cover the cost of their project. If their book happens to be about business ('good moving' genres), they can look forward to covering the cost of their project after about three years – as per statistics given at the beginning of this paper. An online bookstore option is roughly the monetary inverse of this model – with the self-published author receiving about 60% return of retail. Some online bookstores, for instance www.publisher.co.za, offering 70% of retail, are thus a most feasible option for South African authors who must recover, and even profit, from their book production costs.

In short, especially first-time or unknown authors who decide on financing the independent publishing of their books in order to reach quality trade standards are best advised – even before they begin writing – to consider the selling points of their story. This consideration would be to determine:

- which kinds of people
- which bookshops
- which libraries
- which online forums
- which magazines and newspapers
- which clubs or societies, et cetera, might be interested in purchasing copies.

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This active promotion of one's own book is essential, even if one's independent publisher markets and distributes your title to the best of their ability, and to the full extent of their means.

Added to this sort of personal market research, aspiring authors should also be advised on unseen distribution costs, as well as the full scope of commissions and discounts that might apply to retail prices. Once goals have been set – that take cognizance of overall project and all subsequent costs – and mechanisms in place to reach those strategized goals, then reaching those aims become but a realistic endeavour. From an Editorial Project Manager's perspective, an overview of our past independently-published authors shows that writers with a clear vision about how to sell and whom to sell to do much better than simply covering their projects costs.

Dr Frederick De Jager (B.A., U.P.L.M., M.M., M.A., Ph.D.) is an academic in varied areas of cultural interest – gender studies, music and literary arts. He has published articles and presented many lectures internationally on interdisciplinary theory, particularly in relation to Western ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries. His articles have appeared in accredited journals, including Literary Theory and Criticism, Samus, Musicus and LiNQ. He is the editorial project manager at QuickFox Publishing. He has been interviewed on ABC radio in Australia, SAFM in South Africa, and called a 'connoisseur on the Romantics' in France (La République, 2004).
