

Brought to Book

On the ups and downs of do-it-yourself publishing.

by Patricia Lynn Henley

Life as a self-published author is like playing on a small-town team in baseball's heyday. The pay is sporadic, the fans are enthusiastic but few, and it wasn't necessarily wise to quit my day job. But hey, I'm in there swinging and maybe, just maybe, I'll hit one out of the park while a major scout is watching.



The baseball analogy might be a stretch since writers generally work alone, but if I'm not a member of a team at least I'm part of a trend. There are more than 100 "author services" companies out there eager (for a fee) to assist writers who haven't been published through traditional routes. Digital technology allows a two-day turnaround to print a book at a relatively affordable price, even just one copy at a time.

James O'Brien

A number of Stanford grads have chosen self-publishing, for a variety of reasons. Many are frustrated with a conventional industry increasingly owned by multinational conglomerates they perceive as focused on blockbuster sales and the bottom line. Others enjoy the control a self-published author has over quality and content, often aiming for a niche market. There's also the ability to produce a book in months rather than years, or possibly never.

For me, time was the main factor. My co-author, Elda Del Bino Willitts, was 95 when we finished the story of her rags-to-riches immigrant life. When I placed our book in her hands in fall 2004, the macular degeneration in both her eyes had advanced to the point that even with a video monitor, she couldn't read more than one word at a time. That's how Elda viewed our 384-page work—word by painstaking word. She had devoured it in manuscript form, before her eyes had deteriorated so badly, but she was determined to read the published version.

We met in fall 1997 while I was a newspaper reporter. Elda had been featured in *Little Italy*, a documentary film about Italian-American immigrants. As I interviewed her, Elda radiated peace and serenity. She was one of the few genuinely happy people I had ever met.

When she was young, someone told her, "All the sugar's at the bottom of the cup. You might be tasting bitter coffee now, but the sweetness will come." Hearing that, I knew we had the title for the book. Our collaboration lasted almost seven years. Each week Elda would fix a glorious Italian dinner, I'd set my tape recorder on the table and we'd pour ourselves red wine. Then we'd eat, drink and talk about her life.

I wrote the book from Elda's point of view, capturing the sense of chatting with her leisurely. A publisher took our manuscript on as a special project, creating a high-quality hardback under

our own label, Zuccherro Press.

Elda died peacefully at home in January 2005. If we hadn't produced *The Sugar's at the Bottom of the Cup* ourselves, Elda never would have seen the finished product.

We printed 2,211 copies; Elda gave away about 500 personally signed copies before she died and the rest are mine. So far I've sold about 450 at \$24.95 each, with sales slowly picking up as word gets around.

I don't regret self-publishing, although it's thrown me headlong into a marketing whirl, promoting sales while attempting to enter the big leagues by landing an agent and a contract with a traditional publisher. I'm in there pitching, mailing out marketing packets to bookstores, Italian-American organizations, women's groups and anyone who might be interested. My calendar is filled with presentations at shops, arts festivals, book clubs, senior centers and more. If they will listen, I will come.

Almost no one uses the old term "vanity press," yet there is still some stigma attached to self-publishing. It's difficult to get reviewers' attention. For books created through iUniverse, Xlibris or any of the other print-on-demand services, stores are reluctant to stock them because they aren't returnable and don't offer a significant wholesale discount.

These limitations don't bother Stanley Cummings, because his target is an academic market. Self-publishing through Xlibris let him create *Behind the Hedge*, a 362-page account of his tumultuous year as head of a private school. Cummings, PhD '75, says writing it was a cathartic experience, and he hopes it will be used in classes on managing nonprofit organizations. "I'm trying to show people who are involved in nonprofits that it's a business and there are consequences when board members, who are volunteers, don't take their jobs seriously."

First-time authors such as Cummings aren't the only ones producing their own works. Elaine Hatfield, a psychology professor at the University of Hawaii, has published a number of textbooks and one novel through standard channels. However, as traditional imprints have been gobbled up by mega-corporations, relationships with authors have been strained, she says.

"As publishers merge, you may get bounced from one editor who wants things one way to another who wants you to go in the opposite direction. I once had to rewrite text five times as the ownership changed. That, of course, doesn't happen with self-publishing."

Hatfield, MA '61, PhD '63, and her husband, Richard Rapson (a history instructor at Stanford from 1962 to 1965 and in 1973-74), have co-written several novels. The first, *Rosie*, was picked up by a small publishing house, but they chose Xlibris to self-print their later works—*Recovered Memories*, a story of complex family relations and salvaged romance set in the Bay Area, and *Deadly Wager* and *Vengeance is Mine*, mysteries featuring Hawaiian sleuth Kate MacKinnon.

"My husband and I write novels for a very specialized market—people like our Stanford friends," Hatfield says. "Our stories are a mixture of character, plot and interesting fact. These

are not the kind of books that will appeal to a mass market. With self-publishing, we can reach people who are interested in intellectual novels.” Hatfield and Rapson have penned two more intellectual mysteries, centered on a 2-foot-4-inch detective in 1880s San Francisco. Their agent is trying to interest standard publishing houses, but if necessary they will self-publish.

It might be easier to distribute the novels if they had an advertising budget and a mainline publisher, but even that is no guarantee of support.

“I did book signings for my professional books; they would never have the books for sale in the stores where I traveled [giving radio and television interviews]. Somehow the sales people couldn’t coordinate with the publicity people,” Hatfield says. Touring, she adds, “felt horrible and useless.”

Morgan Entrekin, head of the independent Grove/Atlantic Press, agrees the industry is changing dramatically but doesn’t believe quality has dropped. “There’s no doubt that over the last 10, 20 years there’s been a tremendous consolidation in the business and all the main publishing houses are [owned by conglomerates]. Particularly if they are publicly traded companies, there’s tremendous pressure to show profits each year. That said, there is still a tremendous amount of quality publishing going on.”

Entrekin, ’77, says the mergers provide a fresh source of money, and companies are investing in a wide range of authors. “From the point of view of someone caring about quality writing, it’s not all bad news. It’s just a matter of change.”

But it’s harder to break into the big leagues. “It’s a little more difficult if you don’t have a very accomplished novel right out of the gate,” Entrekin says. “It used to be a publisher would take on a writer who showed promise and work with him over the next 15 years. Now the pressure is on from the very beginning.”

Self-publishing can be a good option. “I think it’s healthy. It allows for a nice diversity of voices in the culture,” Entrekin observes. “Increasingly you see the big New York houses looking to self-published books and self-published writers to take on new authors.” Take Rob Weisbach, ’88, president and CEO of Miramax Books and of the Weinstein Company’s new book division. *Publishers Weekly* reports Weisbach recently bought an eight-title series of children’s books by Elizabeth Singer Hunt, who self-published the first five.

If the trend continues, self-published books could become the literary equivalent of baseball’s minor leagues, with runs batted in replaced by sales numbers. It may not be the big time—not yet—but at least we’re playing the game we love.

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