

# 6 SELF-PUBLISHING

DECISION, PROCESS, RESULTS: SEE WHAT THE EXPERIENCE WAS LIKE FOR A DIVERSE GROUP OF WRITERS

**Once upon a time, authors who paid to get their books published were perceived as second-rate writers with first-rate egos.** But in recent years, self-publishing has become so mainstream that *Publishers Weekly* gave the genre its own publicity vehicle, a quarterly section called PW Select.

Were I looking for high sales, money or notoriety, I would have tried my essay collection, *On My Way to Someplace Else* (Poetica Publishing, 2009), with traditional mainstream publishers. But my personal goal was attainable on my own. I sent this book of loosely themed essays about being the daughter of Holocaust survivors to Holocaust museums around the world. I also built a website, started a blog, and sent my book to reviewers, garnering praise that I had never imagined. My self-publishing adventure completely outdid my expectations.

I'm not alone. Many self-published authors have fulfilled dreams, sold thousands of books, built professional platforms and readerships, and signed contracts with traditional publishers. Recently I spoke to six authors to learn how they're benefiting from taking their writing destiny into their own hands.

**GLORIA MALLETTE**, author of the romance *Shades of Jade* (first printing by Gemini Press, 2000; second printing by Random House/Striver's Row, 2001)



Gloria Mallette

**You began self-publishing before it was mainstream. Why?**

I started shopping my manuscripts in 1986, but major New York publishers continually rejected my work. In 1995 I finally got my first book, *When We Practice to Deceive*, accepted by a small publisher as a mass-market paperback. There was no notice of its release. My second manuscript, *Shades of Jade*, was accompanied by letters that said, "Great story, but there is no market for your work." With five manu-

scripts in my file cabinet, in 2000 I took that leap of faith and ventured onto the self-publishing track with *Shades of Jade*, which changed my life.

**What was that process like?**

I purchased a book, [*The Complete Guide to*] *Self-Publishing* by [Tom and Marilyn Ross], which became my literary bible. I set about preparing my manuscript and designing my own cover because the cost to get someone else to do it was more than I could afford. Back in 2000, the cost of self-publishing was quite high. My first print run of 2,000 books cost me \$10,000.

**LINDA PRESSMAN**, author of *Looking Up: A Memoir of Sisters, Survivors and Skokie* (CreateSpace, 2011)



Linda Pressman

**Did you try the traditional route first?**

In late 2007, I sent out 11 queries for my book. Three agents asked for full reads and one for a partial. Two of the three offered representation. I chose one, but unfortunately that relationship didn't work out.

By the time I was ready to find a new agent, the industry had changed, and the idea of getting an agent in 2011 for a

memoir by an unknown writer was pretty much impossible.

**Why did you go with CreateSpace?**

By publishing with CreateSpace, my book would automatically be on Amazon and be indistinguishable from the other books on Amazon. I didn't want my book to differ from traditionally published books in anything—size, quality, appearance, fonts—only in method of publication.

Cost was also a factor. CreateSpace was one third of what I was quoted

by other printing companies. By using the advice of the CreateSpace community, I ended up doing it all myself. When I was ready to publish I paid for expanded distribution.

**What was your goal?**

The mere fact of my book lying in my computer unpublished was very difficult for me. I felt confident about its quality. I also felt that, with the book ready to go, I couldn't wait for the industry to sort itself out into whatever business model it would end up with.

# SUCCESS STORIES

By Sandra Hurtes

## **Shades of Jade sold 13,000 copies. How did you manage to market and sell that amount?**

I used the Yellow Pages to find two African-American book distributors in Brooklyn. They each took about 100 books and were calling me for more before I could get back home. It was the fabulous street vendors of New York City; they were looking for something new to sell to their customers. In addition, I sent bookmarks and postcards to African-American bookstores around the country. Bookstores, libraries and major distributors began sending me orders. I was out of print in two weeks. Within a two-month period, I ordered an

additional 11,000 books, which all sold out.

## **Did you reach out to publishers then?**

*Shades of Jade* was published in April 2000. I received a telephone call from the editor of Random House's Striver's Row imprint in July. I gladly signed on for a two-book deal. I was relieved because I had been overwhelmed with the self-publishing process. While it was quite rewarding and I felt like I had really set my own destiny, I didn't expect all the hard work. It was quite time-consuming.

## **Why are you returning to self-publishing?**

I left Random House in 2002 after I realized that there would be no mar-

keting or promotional campaigns with my second book, and signed on with Kensington. After publishing four books with Kensington, I decided to go back out on my own with *Living, Breathing Lies*, which won [two national awards].

As a self-published author, I cover all expenses and have all the say about the production of my book. It is my publishing company, Gemini Press, that publishes my books.

## **What is your advice?**

Self-publishing is the way to go if you want to see your book in print. And take advantage of the e-book format and the Internet; it can make your book a bestseller.

## **What are the results so far?**

The book was out only about two weeks when I started getting emails and Facebook messages from readers. That has continued to the point where I have many, many messages from people who took the time to write and tell me how the book's affected them.

I sent the book to *Kirkus Reviews* (which will do an independent review of self-published books for a fee) and received an excellent review.

My book is carried on Amazon, bn.com, in my local Barnes and Noble, and in a local independent store, Changing Hands [in Tempe, Ariz.]. It's

also carried in a number of online stores, from IndieBound and Books-A-Million to Powell's. It's in [a number of] libraries. Sales have been steady.

## **What is your advice to others?**

It's all about the writing. No one wants to read any book, traditionally or self-published, that is badly written. Also, platform matters, because without a network of people who are interested in your writing, there will be no one to buy your book. Start blogging now to build up a readership. Get on Facebook. Always carry a few books with you everywhere you go.

## **DENNY SHEEHAN, author of the novel *The Newest American* (published by author, 2011)**



Denny Sheehan

## **You have many short stories on the website Fodder for a Small Fireplace. Why?**

The only way one's work is going to be appreciated is to make it available. I wanted to put my stories out there for people to read and enjoy, and hopefully pass them on, and ideally seek out my novel and future work.

## **Did you look for a traditional publisher for your novel?**

I had always planned on self-publishing my first novel, but I did approach one agent I knew personally (how could I not?), but she was looking for a different genre.

## **Why did you choose to publish an e-book rather than POD?**

I considered POD, but I preferred to make it available as an inexpensive e-book, across all e-readers. At this point, most people I know who are serious readers read e-books (myself not included).

## **Did you hire professionals to edit?**

I decided to use people I trust, rather than professional editors/proofreaders. The basic story and outline were not going to change, so I was looking to have it edited for clarity and character development, and turned to the person I know who reads the most (my sister) and the person who knows me best (my girlfriend) for their insight and

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opinions. Thankfully, neither of them pull punches.

### What is your dream?

My goal is simply to build an audience: I want readers and fans more than an agent. The wildest-dream scenario would be to make a living writing the books I want to write.

### What has the self-publishing process been like for you?

The process has actually been extremely rewarding. The writing is always the toughest part, but once I had a product that I was proud of (after countless revisions) the self-publishing, Web design, marketing and release party came easy. It was a joy to be in complete control of everything: The book has the intended and appropriate cover, I didn't have the stress of having the book's publishing process out of

reach, I was able to offer a free excerpt, and I get to monitor the sales and pricing as I see fit.

### Are you satisfied with the results?

Rather than having spent the last six months writing unsolicited query letters and eagerly anticipating replies, I've been putting together an outline for my next novel, which I am about to begin. I don't expect to build an audience quickly, but I'm confident enough in my writing to know that if I keep it up, the readership will grow.

### What is your advice to writers?

Put the final draft through the ringer a few more times after you've convinced yourself it's finished, and don't let too many people in on the process too early. And, of course, the "traditional" route is not the only one out there.

## KATHRYN HANSEN, author of



*Brain Over Binge: Why I Was Bulimic, Why Conventional Therapy Didn't Work, and How I Recovered For Good* (Camellia Publishing, 2011)

### Kathryn Hansen How long did you wind up working on the book?

From the time I began jotting down my ideas and experiences until the book went to press was a little over four years (spanning from early 2006 until late 2010). It was an especially long process for me because during those four years, I also gave birth to three children.

### Did you start with a book proposal in hopes that you could find a tradi-

## NEAL POLLACK, author of the novel *Jewball* (CreateSpace, October 2011)



Neal Pollack

### As an author who has published several books through the traditional route, why did you now decide on an e-book?

My agent encouraged me to do it. He feels this is the way the world is going, and even if it's not, it's OK with me. He wanted me to experiment with a new form of publishing. I've always had a willingness to experiment. I saw things moving in this direction. I thought, "Why the hell not?"

Also, publishing is changing; the technology is there for authors to take control of their destiny. We can't do any worse than the publishing houses are doing now. The system works for a small percentage of authors but not most of us.

### Since you have a track record, though, could you have gotten a contract?

We sent the novel to my editor at HarperCollins, who liked it but wanted a finished book before he'd consider a deal. It struck me, and my agent, that I could probably get as much money, and as many readers, if I self-published the novel. And I could avoid the lengthy, big-publishing process and get it out fast.

### Have you hired any editorial or marketing professionals to help with your project?

I did hire a copy editor, but I'm not hiring anyone for publicity. In some ways, it's scary to have to depend on myself for my own publicity and marketing. But I have a lot of contacts.

I've been in the media business for 20 years, so I know a lot of journalists and writers.

### Have you received any prepublication reviews?

I just sent the book out this week. But daily newspapers have a small editorial hole for [articles about] books, and they're not about to spend that on a self-published guy unless he's local, and even then ... with the number of books published yearly, mainstream channels don't work. So I'm depending largely on the Internet—webzines, Jewish publications and sports blogs—to get the word out to their readers. And I've sent copies to people with large Twitter followings, hoping to back-door interest that way. Also a few sports-radio types.

### What is your goal?

A realistic goal is to sell 5,000 copies as a download or print-on-demand [book] (that edition will follow the e-book one closely). If I do, I'll consider that a success.

### What is a book-release party like for an e-book?

I'm inviting a bunch of friends to a bar. ... We'll drink beer, I'll read for about 15 minutes, and we'll crank up the jukebox. If we end up doing print on demand, maybe I'll preorder 30 copies, if I have enough in the bank account to do it.

### What is your advice to writers?

Don't fret too much. Books aren't going away. Just keep writing, and your work will carry the day. One way or another, you will have a book.

### tional publisher?

When I first started writing, that's the direction I thought I would try first; however, I soon realized it would probably not be a wise use of my time and resources. I am an unknown, first-time author without the typical credentials of other writers of eating-disorder books. But I still believed I had a very important story to tell that could help others, which is why I began considering self-publishing.

### Did you hire professionals to help with the process?

I hired two editors, a graphic designer who did three interior figures in the book, a typesetter, and a book printer.

### What was your goal?

My goal from the first time I put pen to paper was to help others. When I was in the grip of bulimia, I promised myself I would write a book if I ever

found a way out, in hopes of helping others in the same situation.

### Did you meet your goal?

Yes. Only a month after I published the book, I got my first email from a reader telling me that my book helped her recover. After reading her email, I felt my book was a success. Since that initial email, I've received several more similar messages from readers; and I'd love for the book to help even more people in the months and years to come.

### In general, was your self-publishing experience gratifying?

It was gratifying to accomplish a long-time goal and finally see the book in print. It was also gratifying because I felt that, through my writing, I was able to take a negative experience in my life and turn it into a positive.

But most importantly, it is gratify-

ing to me to know that the book has helped others.

### What is your advice to others?

If you believe you have something worthwhile to share, self-publishing is a great option, but it's also not easy. There are many good resources out there that can guide you. I used *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing: Everything You Need to Know to Write, Publish, Promote, and Sell Your Own Book* by Marilyn Ross and Sue Collier.

### Did you make any mistakes you can guard against next time?

Our budget wasn't very big, and I didn't give enough consideration to my cover design until late in the process. By that time, I had nearly run out of money and had to design it myself with limited resources. I'd like to try and budget for a new cover if I do a second press run.

**JERRY MCGILL**, author of the memoir *Dear Marcus: Speaking to the Man Who Shot Me* (iUniverse, 2009; forthcoming from Random House/Spiegel & Grau as *Dear Marcus: A Letter to the Man Who Shot Me*)



Jerry McGill

### What was your goal in writing this?

I had a strong urge to tell my story, even if only 500 people read it. But, I wrote the book hoping that thousands would read it. I knew the limitations of self-publishing, and I knew getting a contract was a gamble.

I made postcards and sent them out, created a Facebook page, and had local book signings in Eugene, Ore., where I lived at the time. A few friends sent my book around for review, but couldn't get anyone interested in reviewing it. But I had been hearing from many people and knew I touched them. I told myself, "Maybe that's enough, I shouldn't want more." But I believed that eventually something would happen.

### Did you try the traditional route?

Going the mainstream route was too difficult; I didn't bother. I thought, I'll see what happens.

### Why did you choose iUniverse?

I read an article in *The New York Times* about a self-published author who had success with iUniverse. They sounded good, and if they worked for her, maybe they'd work well for me.

### What were your publicity and marketing efforts like?

### How did you get *The New York Review of Books* to read *Dear Marcus*?

I had just read Lorrie Moore's novel *A Gate at the Stairs* and thought she had a beautiful style. I sent her my book on a total whim. I told her, "It's OK if you put this on your shelf and never touch it." A few weeks later, I went to my Facebook page and saw that I had new fans and an email from a *New York Review of Books* staff member, letting me know my book was being reviewed by Lorrie Moore.

They told me the review would be

in their April issue, "Keep an eye out." I felt on cloud nine. But, I didn't sell that many books [after the review came out]. The best thing that happened to me is that a week later, I got an email: Someone from Random House/Spiegel & Grau called and said they want to publish my book.

### What has the transition in publishers been like?

The quality of the writing has changed. The editors helped me to illuminate parts by deepening the story about my relationship with my sister and mother. They brought a much higher quality of copy editing and editing. With iUniverse I would have had to pay money for these services. The book is now stronger and more affecting.

### What is your advice to writers?

Write. Show [your work] to people you respect. Don't be too hard on yourself. Trust your instincts. Write some more.

### Sandra Hurtes

Sandra Hurtes is the author of *On My Way to Someplace Else* and the chapbook, *Rescue: A Memoir*. Her work also appears in numerous publications and anthologies and she is an adjunct lecturer at John Jay College in New York.