

THE BEST TIME IN HISTORY *to be an* AUTHOR



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It seems that we have always been creatures who want to tell stories—to use words, and sometimes pictures, to entertain, inspire, explain, motivate, or help others overcome obstacles. While our motivation for writing can vary greatly, the goal for most writers has always been the same: to turn their manuscript into a book.

Until recently, the goal of getting published was beset with a long, arduous road filled with rejection and delays, and, in most cases, never actually ending up with a published book. It was tough to be an author. But times have changed. Advancements in technology and changes in consumer shopping habits over the past ten years have made it possible for more writers to become published authors than ever before, making this the best time in history to be an author.

How did it become so good for authors?

The road to getting published used to require securing an agent, submitting proposals, and waiting for some response ... and then waiting ... and waiting ... and waiting. However, about ten years ago, three innovative technologies were introduced at the same time that made it possible for an author to bypass the historical method for getting published and get a professionally produced book in the hands of readers quickly and affordably.

The first technology was desktop publishing. Even in its infancy, desktop publishing eliminated the need for typesetting and allowed for the design of a print-ready book on a computer screen.

The second innovation that appeared about the same time was digital printing. This new method of producing books eliminated the need for big offset press runs to make books affordable. With these new printing presses, you could now “print on demand” or POD as it became known. It was not only more eco-friendly, it just made better economic sense. Books didn’t need to be printed until they were ordered, so there was no need to tie up lots of capital in inventory that may or may not sell.

The third and final technology that enabled this revolution was the development of the Internet as a retail channel. This made it possible for an author to gain instant distribution to potential readers all over the world. Amazon is clearly the company credited with creating this book-selling method, but actually the first company with an Internet bookstore was Trafford Publishing. Trafford, a self-publishing imprint founded in Victoria, British Columbia, is now part of the Author Solutions family of publishers.

While each of these—desktop publishing, POD, and Internet bookstore—was equally important, it was the convergence of these three technologies that spawned a whole new industry—self-publishing. Most importantly, this set of circumstances created a whole new world of opportunity for authors.

More opportunity for authors. More choices for readers.

If you are an author with a manuscript, you now have more options than ever before to get your book into the hands of readers.

As always, you can hire an agent—if you can find one to take you—and pursue traditional publishers. While that method has always required patience and a thick skin, recent economic struggles in the publishing industry have made it even more unlikely that non-celebrity authors will get published by traditional publishing houses. A soft economy, the proliferation of new distribution methods, and the onslaught of new e-book readers have greatly diminished the chances for a new or unknown author to get picked up. In fact, Brian Murray, CEO of Harper Collins, stated recently in a Wall Street Journal article, “If new hardcover titles continue to be sold as \$9.99 e-books, the eventual outcome will be fewer literary choices for customers, because publishers won’t be able to take as many chances on new writers.”



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—Brian Murray, CEO Harper Collins

While I agree with Mr. Murray’s assessment of the future, if you look at the world through the lens of a traditional publisher, I disagree with the conclusion of what these changes mean for readers. In fact, I think the number of literary choices for customers is actually going to grow because authors now have the opportunity to take control of their publishing destiny through self-publishing.

Traditional publishers also are joining the indie revolution. Leading Christian publisher Thomas Nelson partnered with Author Solutions in October 2009 to launch an indie publishing imprint called WestBow Press.

This groundbreaking partnership provides authors a publishing option that enables their books to get to market quickly and affordably. Titles published through WestBow are monitored for quality and retail success by Thomas Nelson. Ultimately, Nelson may choose to pick up some of these titles for publishing under its world-leading traditional imprint. This farm-team arrangement opens up publishing like never before to new authors and allows publishers to cultivate new talent.

What can an author expect?

Authors who use supported self-publishing have the advantage of retaining ownership of their content and typically enjoy a higher retail royalty.

	Traditional	Supported	DIY
Agent	Yes	No	No
Royalty	5%-9%	10%-20%	Depends
Rights	No	Yes	Yes
Distribution	Yes	Yes	?
Returnability	Yes	Yes	?
Books	Offset/POD	POD	POD
Investment	Yes	Yes	Yes

Self-publishing—not a synonym for vanity publishing.

Depending on your experience with book publishing, the term “self-publishing” will mean different things to different people. In the past, self-publishing was often thought to be synonymous with the words “vanity publishing.” This condescending term was intended to describe people who were vain enough to produce a book themselves rather than go through a traditional publisher. The biggest problem with this method is that “vanity publishers” were often just printers—not publishers. So that meant the author often had to buy books but did not have access to other services typically available through a publisher, such as editorial or marketing support. In addition, the books usually did not carry an ISBN, so they were not available through retail distribution channels. While that may be how self-publishing was thought of in the past, it is definitely not how it should be thought of today.

DIY versus supported self-publishing

If you have a manuscript and want to self-publish, you have two viable options: Do-it-Yourself (DIY) or supported self-publishing. DIY is typically an online tool you can use to upload a manuscript and produce a book. That service is almost always free, but the book that is produced will only be sold from the publisher’s Web site and will not be available in distribution. Supported self-publishers, on the other hand, provide personal publishing consultations and customer service throughout the publishing process. Supported self-publishers also typically offer a full range of publishing, marketing, and book-selling services.

Ultimately, for an author, it simply comes down to budget and personal publishing goals when choosing the best publishing method. The beauty, though, is that no matter what the budget and goal, authors can publish their manuscripts quickly, affordably, and professionally.

Not everyone is happy about these new opportunities for authors or choices for readers

As with any change of this magnitude, there are always those who resist or are critical. It is no different here. Certain writers’ guilds, retailers, and agents have decreed that self-publishing is not really publishing because the content has not been properly vetted and approved by gatekeepers. While this may be cause for concern for some, it is no reason to fret, because readers will decide if a book is any good or not. They are smart and know what they want, and they will either buy the book or they won’t. They will either

recommend it to a friend or they won't. They will not simply read a book because the author got a big advance. They welcome more choices because now they get a vote as to which content thrives in the market.



“... self-published books are not just winning in terms of numbers but also making up ground in cachet.”

—Virginia Heffren, *Authors Online Unbound*, *New York Times magazine*

The numbers tell the story

While the critics have been vocal, no argument they make can drown out the statement made by the recent numbers released by Bowker, the company that issues ISBNs for every title published in the U.S. In 2009, traditional publishing experienced a small dip in new titles—about one-half of 1 percent. New non-traditional titles, which include POD self-published books, increased 181 percent year-over-year. These figures surely show the face of publishing is changing—quickly.

Citing those statistics, Virginia Heffren observed in an article she wrote in the *New York Times magazine* titled “Authors Unbound Online” that, “self-publishing is becoming book publishing” and that “... self-published books are not just winning in terms of numbers but also making up ground in cachet.”

Could it possibly get even better for authors?

Even though there is more opportunity for authors to get published than ever before, I think it is only going to get better. In the coming months and years, we will likely see:

- agents change the way they do business and work with self-publishers to help cultivate new talent and help more authors get published.
- retail bookstores welcome local self-published authors to do book signings, because the stores will recognize how those authors can drive traffic to their locations.
- the continued proliferation of new e-book and rich media readers creating alternate ways for authors to connect with promote their books to readers.

Why die with a manuscript in your drawer?

Having an idea for a book is easy—starting to write a book isn't that difficult either. Completing a manuscript? That is hard work. The reward should be getting published. Now that reward is attainable for every author who can write to the finish. So there is no need to keep that manuscript in your desk drawer any longer.

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