

Who's Afraid of Self-Publishing?

Jeffrey R. Di Leo

1.

Come on, admit it. You're afraid. How many successful writing careers have been launched through self-publication? How many have been maintained? And if you are in academe, then forget about it; self-publication is akin to career suicide.

Perceptions about self-publishing move in the opposite direction of those associated with mainstream publishing. If the latter are generally associated with publishing success, then the former are associated with failure.

But now that the technology for self-publication has greatly improved and the cost is enticingly low, will our perceptions about it change, too? Would you now opt to self-publish given the *choice* between working with an established publishing house or doing it yourself? To be sure, the latter proposition still evokes more fear among writers than the former, particularly those who publish in order to advance their reputation.

Self-publishing has always been the underworld of book culture—a haven for esoterica, wild ideas, and half-baked prose. It exists just below the imaginary border between books whose publication is paid by others and those whose publication is paid by the author.

For many, this border delimits the break between legitimate publishing and its opposite. Just as journals that charge publication fees for articles are often met with suspicion (especially when other journals in the same field do not), so too are books whose publication is fully underwritten by the author, particularly when there are plenty of publishers in the same area that publish books without being paid by their authors—and many of whom even offer them generous advances against their royalties.

More on par with vanity publishing, self-publishing has long existed as the last stop for authors bent on sharing with the world writing that has been spurned by traditional publishers. For most authors, the decision to self-publish does not involve a choice. Rather, it is a decision of last resort and their only way into the world of published writers.

Until fairly recently, self-publishing was more the exception than the norm in the publishing world. Not everyone has the financial means or the moral will to pay to have their writing published. And historically, even if one had the desire to self-publish, it has always been prohibitively expensive. But the cost of self-publishing has dropped dramatically. It is almost possible today to self-publish a book at no cost (provided access to a computer and appropriate software). A final fulfillment of one of the more egalitarian promises of the digital revolution.

For a little more, one can improve the quality of a self-published book by purchasing various degrees of support. For a slightly higher price, consider a deluxe self-publishing package complete with marketing plans and publicity materials. Exactly how much does all of this cost? Not all that much.

While self-publishing packages can run in excess of \$10,000, many are significantly less. For example, for basic ebook formatting and distribution, BookLocker charges authors \$675—and only \$475 if the author supplies the book's cover. Production time is within six short weeks. But if you are in a hurry, BookLocker will get your book out in two weeks for \$999. So, with prices like these, how popular is do-it-yourself publishing? Very.

To be sure, authors are taking advantage of DIY publishing services at unprecedented rates. In fact, self-publishing has now become the fastest growing dimension within the publishing world, to the point that self-published books dwarf the number of traditionally published books.

In 2007, the year the first Kindle Readers were released by Amazon and the first Espresso Book Machine was introduced at BookExpo America, there were 74,997 self-published books published in the United States (or roughly the same number published solely by Lulu in 2013). Of this total, 66,732 were print books, whereas 8,265 were ebooks.¹ By comparison, in the same year, it was reported there were 407,646 print books published by all publishers including self-publishers. This number is a fairly robust one, though, as it includes

¹ "Print on Demand Price Comparison (Updated 2/26/2015)." *Writers Weekly*.

all forms of print books including ones that are stapled and laminated. The previous year, when stapled and laminated books were not included, the figure was 292,353—over 100,000 fewer.

These publication figures are interesting for a couple reasons: first, a broader notion of what is (and is not) a book reveals a significantly higher book output in the United States; second, even as far back as 2007, the dawn of the ebook age, a very high percentage of all books published in the United States were self-published.

Through 2006, figures were not kept on these titles by bibliographic information provider Bowker, the major source for book publishing data. Bowker's data on book output—traditional and non-traditional—is based on ISBN information only. This means that if one does not purchase an ISBN, the book is not included as part of the overall book output data in the United States for that year. There are probably many more books published each year than our standard data set reports. Bowker's shift to a new methodology for reporting annual title output statistics in 2006 is telling—and further confirmation that book culture changed in a very fundamental way in 2007. Not only did the question of what is and is not a book change with the rise of the ebook format around this time, but it also led to a wider accounting of books of all types.

In many ways, new mainstream technologies of the book, such as the introduction of the Kindle and the Espresso, opened the door to a new age of the book. Not only were new forms of publishing becoming mainstream (viz., the ebook), but so too were new forms of printing technology (viz., the Espresso). Now, more than at any time in history, was entry to book publishing more open. But nothing busted open the floodgates of book culture in America more significantly than the rise of self-publishing since 2007.

The year the Kindle and the Espresso were introduced, just about one out of five books published was self-published. However, by 2013, the number would increase by over 600%. In 2013, the number of self-published books published in the United States was reported to be 458,564—an ascent that makes the self-publishing industry arguably the most dynamic and fastest-growing dimension of the publishing industry. It is something the big five publishing houses quickly learned to manipulate for their own gain.

But the post-2007 self-publishing revolution is only a taste of the more general non-traditional publishing explosion over the same time period. While the traditional publishing numbers since the launch of the Kindle and Espresso have remained relatively constant, moving from 284,370 titles in 2007 to 309,957 titles in 2012 (a 9% increase), the non-traditional numbers have been off the charts.

In 2012, it was reported that 2,042,840 non-traditional titles were published. In addition to stapled and laminated books, these numbers also include reprints (which are often public domain), print-on-demand titles, and wiki-based material. They represent a mind-boggling 1,557% increase over the numbers in the same category in 2007. But what is most impressive here is that this increase is not even the high point of the non-traditional area. In 2008, there were 561,580 non-traditional titles published, but by 2009 this number had bloated to 1,335,474. However, 2010 was the absolute high point, for in this year it was reported there were 308,628 traditional titles published as compared to 3,844,278 non-traditional titles published.

Any way you cut the numbers, traditional publishing is no longer an effective gatekeeper in the publishing world, nor does it represent the majority of books published today. There are many more books published today that may look and feel like products of the traditional publishing world, but are not.

Most DIY books are published with little to no editorial oversight, and a modicum of publicity and marketing support at best. Though they may fulfill the publishing dreams of their authors, their chances of having an impact on the world of literature and ideas—let alone making a profit—is about as likely as their author winning the lottery. Problem is, many DIY authors do not know this.

The underworld of DIY books is beginning to dwarf the traditional publishing world, presenting a new set of challenges and opportunities for book culture in America. Strange as it may sound, DIY publishing is no longer in the shadows of traditional publishing, but is on its way to becoming a serious competitor. The growing giant of non-traditional publishing has become more than just a refuge for bad books, and may very well alter the course of traditional publishing in America.

2.

The self-publishing revolution will be televised! Tune in and check it out!

It's the end of gatekeepers deciding a manuscript is not publishable. The end of pesky editors demanding revisions and rewrites. The end of marketing specialists twisting and bending copy to lure in readers

and sell books. The world of self-publishing is a writer's dream—a paradise of endless programming on an infinitely expanding number of channels. Have something to say? Publish it! Nothing to say? Publish that, too!

The self-publishing revolution is equal opportunity and maximally diverse. All voices are afforded a stage; all authors are welcome. While many pay big money to play, any and all can join the revolution with little to no financial obligation. There are many entries into the world of self-publishing, differentiated only by the cost and the size of the dream promised.

But if the self-publishing revolution is televised, it is not on the Big Four (ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX). Nor is it on cable giants like HBO or Showtime, or even the public broadcasting mainstay PBS. In the publishing world, these broadcast venues are akin to the big houses like Simon & Schuster, Penguin, and Hachette.

DIY publishing is more akin to getting the 4 a.m. slot on your small town cable channel. Sure you get airtime, but you also have to adjust your expectations. Low production value, small audience, and minimal impact are common characteristics, tolerated only by those with no other choices.

Even compared to the smallest of small presses with a handful of annual releases and a limited or nonexistent marketing presence, most DIY publishing is marginal. Even at their most afflicted, the majority of small presses have an editorial backbone and an aesthetic or ideological *raison d'être*. The same cannot be said of the self-publishing industry, which exists to produce a profit and to prey on the vulnerability of those who desperately want to be published and are willing to do so by any means necessary. At its worst, the self-publishing revolution is a predatory practice—a financial extension of the neoliberal publishing industry. At its best, it is a revolutionary force that affords a greater diversity of writers and writing to populate the book world.

What then should we make of this revolution in publishing? Should we view it with joy or dismay? Pity or pride? Optimism or pessimism? From the perspective of the thousands of well run small presses, the self-publishing revolution occurs outside the gates of legitimate publishing. Why? Because, at a minimum, a press requires an aesthetic or ideological aim that is guided and promoted by an editor. This minimal condition is a sufficient one to deem some works worthy of the press's catalogue and others unworthy. Without this condition, there is *no* quality control and there really is no *press*—only publishing. Publishing work without consideration of its content is nothing more than mindless duplication. Without an editor's eye, self-publishing is more akin to a mechanical act than an intentional one.

There is something troubling about publishing anything and everything submitted to a publishing house. Perhaps it lies in the very notion of “publishing” itself, a notion that seems to require the interaction of two individuals at minimum: the author and the editor. In a sense, self-publishing is an oxymoron as it implies a reduction of the author/editor relationship to one of identity rather than difference. Even more radically, one could argue self-publishing as a practice deconstructs the very notion of publishing by allowing anyone and everyone to reproduce their writing without review.

As the hierarchy of publications shifts and expands to contain everything from peer-reviewed, refereed journals to Wikipedia entries, it becomes increasingly important to trace the source of published materials and the journey they have taken to reach the reader. The responsibility of the reader to understand the provenance of published media grows as the methods of publication expand. The book traditionally has an aura of authority, but the rise in self-published work puts this assumption into question.

The self-publishing industry has become dominant in the publishing world by creating the perception that all publishing is equal and all publishers are equal. It plays on the notion that “to publish” is to make one's work available to the “public.” While this may be semantically true, it reduces the question of whether or not a piece is for public consumption to a non-issue, when the answer is always “yes.”

From the perspective of readers, the self-publishing revolution is either a nightmare or a dream. It is a nightmare if you as a reader do not have the time, energy or will to sort through the half-a-million self-published books coming out each year to choose how to spend your precious and limited reading time. The self-publishing revolution transforms the reading public into editors, as they are forced to sort through works as an editor might. Without the quality control of a press—large or small—the task of the reader in selecting newly published books to read becomes daunting. Some may relish the opportunity to sift through half-a-million books and find a gem. Others turn to curators and advisors from other sources, such as online reviewers or book clubs. But the process is not unlike rummaging through thrift shops in the hopes of acquiring a Picasso or a First Folio.

The saddest aspect of the self-publishing revolution is not the mountains of junk that are published—presses big and small also contribute to the production of literary waste. Rather, it is the predatory self-

publishers who sell authors the dream that publishing with them is hitting the Big Time, promising success on the level of Stephen King and Anne Rice. The most unscrupulous of the self-publishing services trade on the power and prestige of their parent companies to lure in authors and take their money (and a lot of it).

Simon & Schuster has a self-publishing subsidiary called Archway Publishing. Established through a partnership with self-publishing giant Author Solutions Inc., Archway Publishing gives their authors a piece of the prestigious publishing house of Simon & Schuster through a number of different packages. The Children's package will cost the self-published Archway author anywhere from \$1,599 to \$8,499; the Fiction and Non-fiction packages range from \$1,999 to \$14,999; and the package for Business writers starts at \$2,199 and tops out at \$24,999.² Operations like this one have all the markers of vanity publishing including the sliding price scale for Business authors—who presumably can pay more than Children's authors—to self-publish their books. How else can you explain the price differential? Even Harlequin has traded on its name, again through Author Solutions, to form a self-publishing imprint called “Harlequin Horizons.” Budding romance writers can now become self-published “Harlequin...” authors, albeit for a price. The company promises to include “special services aimed at the romance market, including unique marketing and distribution services.”³

The biggest controversy in self-publishing, though, is not the shameless selling of publishing brand imprints. Rather, it is publishing houses guarding profits in the case a self-published book actually makes it. Though it is as rare as winning the lottery, it can and does happen.

For most self-publishers, once the book is in print, there is no additional financial commitment to the publisher. In other words, if you hit the lottery and sell a lot of copies of your book, then the profits are all yours. But one company decided to do something different.

Launched in April of 2011, Book Country is a self-publishing subsidiary of Penguin. Like the other self-publishers, Book Country charges authors a fee. There are three packages that initially ranged from \$99 to \$549. The idea is that for a price, authors could upload their self-published work to Amazon through one of three Book Country packages. In turn, the author would have a book listed on Amazon published through a subsidiary of Penguin. While there were complaints about the price of the packages, the real complaints were about the cut Penguin via Book Country would make on Amazon sales.

Amazon normally receives a 70% royalty on the sale of books directly loaded to their website by authors. While these are loan shark rates, they are the only option for most self-published authors who want to make their book available for sale to a wide audience. Book Country, however, also took a 30% cut of the 30% percent cut afforded by Amazon to their authors. This mob payment mentality did not go over very well and Book Country has since altered its royalty and payment structure to be more fair to authors for whom they played virtually no role in their success, yet still profited from.

Packages now range from free to \$399, and authors can get 100% of the royalties if they purchase the premium package (\$399) and their book is sold through the Book Country retail channel.⁴ They report that since 2011, eight Book Country members have sold their books to traditional publishers. Along with the Penguin imprimatur, Book Country is sold to authors as an online writing community. Its policy is that only after one has read and reviewed the work of another member can you then share your work with others. With more than 8,300 active members, they report that each workshopped manuscript receives an average of six reviews.⁵

But this, of course, is not the dream DIY authors were sold. Even if we generously view Book Country's eight authors selling their books to “traditional” publishers as success, how then do we regard the thousands of others whose self-published books languish in biblio-oblivion? The self-publishing revolution is in full swing *not* because most of its authors believe their work will be unread, unsuccessful, low-fidelity productions. Quite the opposite. It is booming because most of its authors tend to believe there is no difference between publishing a novel with FSG and iUniverse. But how can that be? Strange as it may sound, for many, the difference

² “Simon & Schuster Creates Self-Publishing Unit, Archway Publishing.” *Publisher's Weekly* (27 November 2012).

³ Jim Milliot, “Harlequin, Author Solutions Form Self-Publishing Imprint Harlequin Horizons.” *Publisher's Weekly*. (17 November 2009).

⁴ Calvin Reid, “Penguin Revamps Book Country, Adds Services, Reduces Cost to Authors.” *Publishers Weekly*. 17 January 2013.

⁵ Clare Swanson, “Book Country Launches Revamped Site.” *Publishers Weekly*. 23 July 2013.

between FSG and iUniverse is similar to the difference between Heinz baked beans and the store brand. Though the labels may be different, the products—baked beans—are essentially the same. Both come in cans and contain beans. From this perspective, quality is secondary matter to a more primary material logic: just as all beans are beans, so too are all books books.

Or, if there is a difference between FSG and iUniverse, it is that one will agree to publish your novel and that the other will not; that one sees something in your work and that the other does not. But do people really believe this? Do they really believe all publishers are equal? Do they believe a self-publisher who has not read your book really sees something in it? Given the rapid ascent of self-publishing, it appears so. Self-delusion is a powerful force.

But those whose life and livelihood is the printed word know better. For some, the self-publishing revolution is a victory for the Everyman Author. For centuries, the door to publication has been heavily protected by those whose financial interests and professional reputation could be compromised by publishing not-ready-for-prime-time work. The bouncers at the major publishing houses were kept busy because for every book that the big boys published, hundreds, if not thousands, were rejected. But is publishing all of those rejected titles (and more) really a proud and revolutionary chapter in the publishing world? To be sure times have changed in the publishing world, but are they for the better?

We now live in the Age of Acceptance, an age that began around 2007 when the number of self-published titles began to rise significantly each year. With 458,564 self-published titles coming out in 2013 alone—a number that represents the highest annual number of self-published titles in publishing history—one can and should fully expect the numbers to continue to rise. It is not too much of a reach to say that by the time 2015 is all said and done, there will probably be in excess of half-a-million self-published titles that came out over the course of the year.

Again, the best way to consider the impact of these titles on the publishing world is look to the world of television. The impact and significance of 500,000 new self-published titles is akin to 500,000 new channels on your television. And to borrow from Bruce Springsteen’s great song from 1992 (“57 Channels”), it’s like “Half-a-Million Books (And Nothin’ to Read).”

But whereas 57 channels on the television with nothing good to watch is only a quality (or aesthetic) problem, half-a-million books and nothing to read is more than merely a problem of quality—it is also one of ethics. While some of the DIY publishers sell only the opportunity to publish one’s book—with no promise or implication of sales—others take matters a step further. These publishers have come to be known as “hybrid publishers,” that is, publishers who straddle the line between traditional publishing and self-publishing. And it is upon them that the highest scorn should be placed. Hybrid publishing trades on brand recognition to bamboozle authors into thinking that by paying to publish their work with, say, a Penguin affiliate, they are publishing their book with Penguin. In other words, that they are a Penguin author.

This is the metonymic fallacy of neoliberal publishing. Though this fallacy is not limited to the publishing world, using brands and branding to lure in desperate authors so that the neoliberal publishers can make a few more bucks is one of its lowest and most predatory instantiations. If you are so inclined and have a lot of free time on your hands, set your television dial to Channel 500,000 and check out some of the self-publishing revolution programming. It’s on “The Boulevard of Broken Dreams.”

3.

Welcome my son, welcome to the machine.

Roger Waters’s classic lyrics could serve as words of welcome for new or aspiring writers. Maybe not words of comfort, but few are more appropriate to describe the cold soul of today’s publishing world. Hear the synthesized machine sounds played against the lyrics as they are repeated.

In the previous millennium, these words might have been nothing more than a cynical warning to aspiring writers regarding the world of corporate publishing. The rise of neoliberalism in publishing in the latter half of the twentieth century turned the writer’s life from an aesthetic endeavor to a market-driven one. This was particularly true of the largest and most powerful global publishing corporations—companies like Random House and Hachette, each with more subsidiary presses than books published annually by the overwhelming majority of the tens of thousands of small presses in America.

Entering the machine of the neoliberal global publishing industry in the twentieth century became less about the dreams of writers and more the drone of accountants. It is a machine that has continuously been refined ever since the day Random House sold to RCA. Now that Random House and Penguin have merged—and one in four books sold worldwide is the product of their joint operation—few companies worldwide have a higher global market-share for their product.

Corporate publishing is big business, and growing every year. To enter into it as a new author or aspiring writer is both an honor and a horror. The honor comes with knowing that your writing is part of a lineage that goes back to the great writers of your press. Publishing with Random House, for example, places you in the prestigious company of Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, Truman Capote, John O'Hara and James Joyce. The honor of being part of an illustrious lineage quickly gives way, though, to horror *if* the sales of your first book are poor. Don't expect the corporate publisher to wait around five to ten years to see how your book fares over an extended period of time, let alone give you a second chance to publish another with them. Not only are books that don't sell well taken out of print quickly by the big boys, the new emphasis on "pre-sales" as determining the success or failure of your book makes the task even more daunting for the first-time author.

The corporate publishing machine is geared toward low risk and high return. The handmaiden to corporate publishing is not the perfumed hand of aesthetics or the golden arm of literature, rather it is the calculating brain of the marketing and accounting departments. Big data drawn not only from sales figures and market analysis, but now also individual digital reading habits and social media activity are the key predictors of whether your book will succeed—and when it will fail. The publishing industry today is about providing immediate and maximal gratification to its consumers, not testing the limits of literary taste or aesthetic innovation.

The story of the corporate publishing machine is not a new one. Most writers today know the conditions for entry into the market, and are aware at how these conditions have intensified as the machine has grown in size and power. Publishing for Penguin Random House is, first and foremost, about selling books and making a profit for the global publishing corporation, not about the longevity of *literature*. Who has time to evaluate an author or book's contributions to culture or impact on broader social discussion? Rather, the global publishing machine privileges the immediacy of *fiction*—a world judged solely by balance sheets and units moved.

The safehouse for literature is *not* the global publishing machine, especially not the literature that was produced since the last quarter of the twentieth century. Take, for example, one of greatest writers of the twentieth century, William Gaddis. His first novel *The Recognitions* was published by Harcourt, Brace in 1955, and his second, *JR*, was published in 1975 by Alfred A. Knopf. In 1993, Penguin (now Penguin Random House), reprinted both. However, since 2012, both Gaddis books are now in the hands of Dalkey Archive Press, a small press which will never put them (or any of its catalogue) out-of-print. But how many Gaddises and Gasses (Dalkey Archive reprinted *The Tunnel*, which was only first published by the global publishing machine in 1995) will be saved from the "out-of-print" death of the machine? And where is the rage against the machine when it comes to its role in the death of literature?

The global corporate publishing machine has the same role McDonald's has in our culture. Everyone complains about its ubiquitous global presence, the way it has put many mom-and-pop restaurants out of business, and diminished our palate—but still billions of burgers are served. And the one in four books served by the penguin company is far greater market penetration than the billions of burgers served by the clown company.

But the global corporate publishing machine taking the likes of Gaddis and Gass off the menu is an especially bad omen for literature today. So where can we look now for a reprieve from the machinations of the global corporate publishing machine? Oddly enough, it may be the very technologies that have opened up book production to the masses, namely ebook and POD technologies.

If the previous millennium closed with the corporate publishing machine at the apex of its power and control of the global book market, then the new millennium is quickly being defined by the potential of wresting much of this power and control from the accountants and giving it back to the authors. The unprecedented opportunity today for authors to self-publish their writing provides them with the ability to have absolute control over the products of and profits from their artistry.

The down-side of DIY publishing is both that too many *bad* authors are using it as a vehicle to bring to light works that should remain in the dark, *and* that too few *great* writers are using it—an act with the potential to weaken, if not to bring down, the corporate publishing machine. What if Thomas Pynchon, for example, decided to self-publish his novels rather than publish them with Penguin? What would be the effect of high profile acts of independence from and defiance against corporate publishing? Would such actions spur other great contemporary writers like Don DeLillo to do the same?

While I am not sure that Pynchon's corporate publishing independence day would be widely celebrated by other high-profile and high-profit authors, it is certain that actions like this would be noticed by young and aspiring writers. His assertion of independence from the corporate machine would be a clarion call to the next generation of writers that the future of publishing is with the self-publishing revolution—not the world of corporate publishing.

In the hands of worthy authors, self-publishing can be seen as an act of defiance against the neoliberal corporate world—a world centering upon branding and prestige, not writers and literature. Thomas Pynchon needs the prestige of publishing with Penguin to validate his literary worth about as much as Joyce would need Random House today. Now the financial part of the equation is another matter.

To date, few in the self-publishing arena have been able to produce the kind of profits of publication enjoyed by the big authors at the big houses. Sure there are writers who have done well self-publishing their work, but not along the lines of being able to command six- and seven-figure advances for their work. In the corporate publishing world, solid pre-sales predictions equate to solid advances against sales. In the world of self-publishing, pre-sales figures are about as valuable to authors as buffalo chips.

The publishing machine in the new millennium is very different than that of the old millennium. In the previous millennium, the machine of publishing was an *industry* created around maximally profiting from artistic production. As the industry has evolved, it has come to be dominated by fewer and fewer companies with increasing levels of power, control and capital. In the new millennium, however, the machine of publishing is quickly becoming a literal one.

Technologies are now available to the public where, for a small price, individuals can produce and reproduce on-demand print volumes of the same quality as corporate publishing. Machines like the Espresso Book Machine open up the potential for manuscripts to sit indefinitely in digital purgatory awaiting an audience to find them and print them out. No more relying solely on presses to delimit inventories of titles. Similarly, digital books are a technology that also allows individuals to produce volumes that need never materialize as paper products or warehouse stock. Machines like the Kindle or the iPad open up the potential for ebooks to be downloaded and enjoyed by readers in greater numbers than were ever previously seen by a generation that carted around books in a knapsack.

Since 2007, the year in which the Kindle and the Espresso Book Machines were introduced, the publishing world has enjoyed the rise of a new form of mechanistic existence. In addition, most new and aspiring writers are savvier about opportunities for utilizing these machines for their writerly endeavors than they are with those of the corporate publishing machine. Still, the lure of publishing prestige weighs heavily upon authors. It is seen most exploitatively in the efforts of so-called “hybrid publishing,” which draws on the prestige of publishing houses to charge authors a few extra dollars to self-publish their work.

In the new millennium, “welcome to the machine” means something much different to new and aspiring writers than what it meant in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The cold soul of capitalism has finally run the publishing industry into a place that looks more like a dead end than the road to the future. Gone are most of the bookstores and print review venues that were in the pockets of the publishing industry. What remains is a digital expanse that offers anyone and everyone the opportunity to not only self-publish reviews, but also to easily and affordably self-publish books.

Within this brave new digital world of publishing is the opportunity to rage against the machine of corporate publishing by embracing technologies for book production and reproduction that are outside of their control. The question is whether writers will use this opportunity to produce and disseminate important, innovative, and aesthetically challenging literary work or whether it will be more of the same. Hybrid publishing is a step back to the future of corporate publishing; self-publishing, though, is a step into a future where writers are in full-control of their work and any benefits that they may produce.

My hope is that our welcome to the new machines of publishing is one where the aesthetic, social, and political dreams of writers are provided with absolute freedom and autonomy from corporate censure and control. Welcoming new and aspiring writers to the machine is to welcome them to the opportunity to find an audience for their work. Corporate publishing aimed to manufacture the needs of its audiences, whereas self-publishing gives the power of aesthetic choice back to the reader. If some of the great writers from our generation were to embrace the opportunity to self-publish their work, there is even more reason to believe that the publishing world of the future will be more progressive and democratic than the publishing world of the past.

Welcome to the new machine of the publishing world.

4.

Speaking of great writers self-publishing, consider the story of the greatest of them all: James Joyce.

Outlawed either officially or unofficially in nearly every English-speaking country, Joyce's *Ulysses* was confiscated, burned, pirated, and smuggled for many years. Those who printed it, sold it, or distributed it risked going to prison. Even those who carried it through customs could face a five thousand dollar fine or up to ten years in prison. Yet in spite of these and other risks, many brave individuals contributed to the dissemination of this book.⁶

When no publisher would accept it for fear of fine or prison, the owner of a small bookstore in Paris took up the task. Sylvia Beach met Joyce at a party in July of 1920. Though Beach's bookstore, Shakespeare and Company, had just opened in November of 1919, it quickly became a center and community for literati.⁷ The party, hosted by the French poet André Spire, was held to welcome Joyce to Paris, which would become his home for the next twenty years. Beach had not been invited, but was brought to the party by a friend.

Their encounter was fortuitous. The next day, Joyce stopped by Beach's bookstore and began to forge a relationship that would result in her offer in 1921 to publish *Ulysses*. Earlier that year, the "Nausicaa" chapter of *Ulysses*, which had appeared in *The Little Review*, a small journal edited in the States by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, was found in violation of New York state law against obscenity. This meant the prospect of publishing the entire novel in the U.S. was slim.

Marked by an obscenity conviction and no viable option for publishing the novel in either the United States or Britain, Joyce vented to Beach. "My book will never come out now," said Joyce. Her reply was simple and direct, "Would you like me to publish *Ulysses*?"⁸ The process was far from easy.

The plan was to produce a private edition of the novel sold directly to customers by mail order. Purchasers included Hart Crane, W. B. Yeats, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Winston Churchill. Direct shipping through the mail was illegal, making delivery difficult, but Shakespeare and Company managed to sell twenty-four thousand copies of the book in nine years. By comparison, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* sold nearly that many copies in its first year of publication.

Beach's printer, Maurice Darantière of Dijon, did not use a linotype machine to cast the lines of Joyce's six-hundred page novel. Rather, they were set one letter at a time. Making matters even more difficult was that Joyce was not finished writing the novel even after the manuscript was sent to the printer. He continued to write through the galleys and page proofs, and is said to have gone through as many as four galleys and five page proofs for every page of *Ulysses*. Resetting pages of tiny metal blocks was time-consuming and expensive. Fortunately, Beach, with financial support from Miss Weaver, Joyce's patron, allowed him to work with the printer until he was satisfied with each page.

However, it would not be until over ten years later that Joyce's self-published masterpiece would be picked up by a U.S. publishing house. On December 7, 1933, Judge Woolsey famously ruled that the book

⁶ Kevin Birmingham, *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014), p. 261. The general information about Joyce's publishing saga with *Ulysses* is primarily drawn from Birmingham's excellent, highly readable, study.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

“may, therefore, be admitted into the United States.”⁹ It was a victory for Joyce and modern literature, but an even bigger one for corporate publishing. Recall that the reason *Ulysses* was put on trial was the consequence of a young publisher making sure a copy of it was seized by authorities.

Bennett Cerf, the heir to a tobacco fortune, inherited one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars at the age of sixteen. After graduating from Columbia University, he became a successful Wall Street stockbroker and added to his fortune. At twenty-four years of age, he became vice president of the publishing house Boni & Liveright (an achievement facilitated by a twenty-five thousand dollar loan). It was the year after *Ulysses* was first published by Shakespeare and Company, and Cerf now worked for the press that launched the Modern Library in 1917. Horace Liveright tried to acquire Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for the Modern Library, but John Quinn said it was too “modern” for the Modern Library. For Quinn, to be in the Modern Library was “a declension into the sunset preceding the dark night of literary extinction.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, Cerf coveted the Modern Library and wanted to own it for himself. In May of 1925, he had his opportunity. Liveright’s father-in-law was pushing Horace for payment of monies owed to him. Liveright said to Cerf, “Oh, how I’d like to pay him off and get rid of him.”¹¹ Cerf suggested that an easy way to do this was to sell him the Modern Library. They agreed to two hundred thousand dollars, what was to be “the highest price every paid for a reprint series.”¹² In order to secure the balance of the funds to purchase the Modern Library, Cerf went to his Columbia friend, Donald Klopfer. The publishing house that resulted from their collaboration was named “Random House” because they aimed to publish a few books on the side at “random” in addition to the Modern Library backlist titles.

Needless to say, Random House became one of the most powerful publishing houses in the world. In 1965, it was sold for forty million dollars. While the Modern Library was the cash cow of the press, according to Cerf, its “first really important trade publication” was their publication of the first legal edition of *Ulysses*.¹³ Only six years old, the company was looking for a book that would take their press to the next level of success. So they decided to import a single copy of *Ulysses* from Paris and make sure that the government seized it as a violation of the Tariff Act, which banned the importation of obscenity.

Funny enough, the book was not seized at customs and arrived safely at the offices of Random House. Morris Ernst, the lawyer who would defend the book against obscenity charges, took it back to the New York customs office and insisted that they inspect it. When the customs agents saw it was a book that “everybody brings in” and one they don’t pay attention to, Ernst demanded the book be seized.¹⁴

Judge Woolsey was the perfect judge to try the case. And even though it wasn’t an easy case to decide, he believed that “things ought to take their chances in the marketplace.”¹⁵ Woolsey’s decision opened the door for Cerf’s Random House to prosper as the marketplace for *Ulysses* proved substantial. It sold more copies in three months as a Random House publication than it had sold in the preceding twelve years. And after ninety years in print, it sells roughly one hundred thousand copies a year and has been translated into twenty languages.

From the perspective of an age where anything can be self-published with ease and sent electronically without fear of prosecution, Joyce’s self-publishing saga is a vivid reminder of how far the publishing world has come in such a short time. Less than a century ago, a literary giant could not find a publisher and was the subject of government sanctioned book burnings. Today, finding a publisher for one’s work is an *option*, not a necessity. Most anything can be self-published cheaply and easily without fear of governmental reprisal or editorial intrusion.

If self-publishing is the future of publishing, then why not make Joyce its patron saint? Why not step back in literary history to gain a perspective on self-publishing that is *fearless*? If the greatest novel of the twentieth century was sown in the garden of self-publishing, might we not also look forward to the greatest

⁹ Ibid., p. 329.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 269.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 270.

¹³ Ibid., p. 301.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 306.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 324.

achievement of the next century to come from similar grounds? In fact, maybe we should also *expect* it. To do so is not only to embrace self-publishing as an aesthetic opportunity, but also to recognize the formidable limits corporate publishing places literary innovation.

“Would you like me to publish *Ulysses*?” says the digital generation’s Sylvia Beach.

“Yes,” says its Joyce, handing her a thumb drive. A few minutes later a copy is printed on the Espresso Book Machine in the lobby of her store.

The rest is literary history.