

# Avoiding Disturbing New Trends in Publishing

What authors must know before submitting their books to publishers

The world of publishing has always been a complicated maze filled with choices that can make or break a new author's career. Most authors are not business professionals or publishing industry experts. Vanity presses (often called self publishing companies in promotional materials), take advantage of this and scam the inexperienced. Many traditional publishers will not even allow new authors to submit their manuscripts to them. While the vanity/self publishers seem to throw out life preservers that turn out to be drowning mechanisms for the unwary.

Things have only gotten worse in recent years as economic decline has forced big changes in publishing and left fissures for unconscionable publishing scams to reach through and snare unsuspecting new authors. Getting published, the right way, is

not hopeless, but new authors do need some guidance on navigating the treacherous seas.

This white paper steers inexperienced new authors in the right direction to begin a solid career in publishing while avoiding the many pitfalls that could trap them along the way.

## **The realities of the publishing industry today**

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America will stride into 2010 in the midst of the worst economy in decades. Unsteady financial footing has forced businesses in every industry to hedge their investment bets and dig in their heels. Layoffs are up. Spending is down—way down. And businesses, especially publishers, are increasingly unwilling to take chances.

### **New authors face steep competition**

What does this mean for a new author stepping into the maelstrom with an unpublished book manuscript in hand? The short-term outlook for a budding author's career seems dismal at first glance. The publishing industry has felt the economic squeeze and tightened its purse strings with regard to new manuscript acquisitions and author advances. Publishing giants are stemming their losses by laying off editors and consolidating imprints (the smaller branches of a large publisher that focus on a particular niche in the market, such as Simon & Schuster's low-cost imprint Pocket Books or the Penguin Group's Dial Books for Young Readers). Publishers are increasingly falling back on the tried and true—authors whom the reading and book-buying public already knows and loves, authors who write books that publishers know will make money.

*More and more traditional publishers are slamming their doors on unsolicited manuscript submissions, especially from new authors who do not have an agent.*

The road to publication for a new author has always been a steep uphill climb, but the competition for a coveted slot on a publisher's shrinking list of forthcoming books is more formidable than ever, especially as writers who are laid off or forced into early retirement finally sit down to finish and submit that story they've always wanted to write. More and more publishers are slamming their doors on this economy-related surge in manuscript submissions. Many of the biggest publishers refuse to read anything submitted by an unpublished author, or at the very least, by an author who is not represented by a respectable agent. (And procuring a good agent can be as tough as finding a publisher.)

### **Even talented voices slip through the cracks**

It all boils down to this: publishing is an industry, and publishers are businesses that must make money to stay afloat. Every new book is an investment. Books cost money to produce, and if a publisher's products do not sell, the whole business sinks. When times are tight, businesses do not take chances. They invest in known products (known authors, in this instance) and shun wildcards (new authors whose success rate is unpredictable). New authors feel like sand in a sieve, always slipping through the cracks because their names are not big enough to get lodged in a publisher's net.

Wherever there is opportunity, however, new business models always materialize to take up the slack. In the sea of unpublished authors clamoring for a publisher to toss them a line, some of these new entities are life rafts. But there are also sharks. Learning to distinguish between the two and choose a smart and viable alternative to elitist, big-name publishers may

be the most significant lesson a new author can learn to save the life of a fledgling career.

## **Big publishers: Leaving authors to drown**

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at traditional  
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author to break in.*

The publishing giants. Everyone knows them. They are the king ships on the sea, names like HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, Bantam Dell, and Doubleday. They shine like beacons in the publishing world, mesmerizing readers and propelling their authors toward bestseller status. They put out dozens or even hundreds of titles a year but work only with the most promising writers (almost always the ones with a big name backing them up). New authors, particularly those without well-known agents, stand little chance of getting their manuscript into the hands of an editor at these publishers. The reasons often have less to do with talent than with name recognition. Celebrities from all walks of life are writing everything from autobiographies to children's books, and their photo on the cover ensures sales even if their book's content leaves much to be desired. There is little room at these publishers for a non-celebrity to break in.

### **More than meets the eye**

Even with celebrity names bolstering sales, however, things are not always as rosy with the publishing giants as the public may perceive. Like any business, publishers feel the pinch when sales of their products are down. Early in 2009, for example, HarperCollins announced major layoffs and corporate reorganization, including the closure of its Collins branch. These announcements echo similar trends that have swept through the entire publishing industry from 2008 to 2010. Publishers are depending more and more on their bestselling A-list authors (like Dan Brown and John Grisham at Doubleday or Dean Koontz and Danielle Steele at Bantam Dell) to carry them

through tough times, leaving little room for the little-known author to make a debut sale and a lot of room for even established authors to be pushed aside and forgotten.

### **The reality of big-name publishing today**

Freezes on acquisitions of new manuscripts are up. Publishers' imprints (and editing staff) are vanishing. Marketing departments are underfunded and understaffed. Many books already accepted and contracted by publishers are being delayed in the production schedule, bumped to the back of the line by books and authors promising better performance. And cash advances for new authors who do get through the gate? Don't count on it. Author advances are becoming much smaller if one is lucky enough to be one of the few offered one these days.

*Some traditional publishers are bolstering their own income by tossing manuscript submissions to self-publishers.*

### **A disturbing new trend**

Even more disheartening than the lack of publisher interest in finding and promoting debut authors is news that some traditional publishers are bolstering their own income by tossing the bulk of their manuscript submissions overboard to a maelstrom of self-publishers churning in the waters. Such publishers are turning to earning supplemental income by confusing the writers that had submitted to them into thinking that they are approved to be published by one of their imprints, when it's really a vanity press subsidiary. Publishers like Thomas Nelson and Harlequin have recently entered into vanity publishing to make their money at the expense of such deceptive practices that drown authors' opportunities to succeed.

### **Vanity publishers: Preying on the desperate**

For a new author, pursuing the traditional route of querying publishers and amassing piles of rejection letters certainly has

*Publishing mills, claiming to act in the author's best interest, offer costly editing, design, and production packages for books, often charging authors exorbitant fees for substandard services.*

its disadvantages. It can take a writer years of such toil before (if ever) becoming a published author. The alternative, to some, is to self-publish their book. At its best, self-publishing means that the author does all the editing and design work on his or her book or hires freelance editors and designers to do it; applies for and obtains the ISBN (International Standard Book Number) that will allow bookstores to carry and sell the book; pays a printer to print a certain number of copies; and then takes on all the sales and marketing tasks alone. The endeavor does cost money, but the business-minded author stands to make a return on his or her investment if the book is high quality and a good market is identified and effectively pursued. The bonus? All the profits from whatever books the author sells remain in the author's pocket.

Unfortunately companies advertising themselves as Self Publishing companies rarely perform those required services or do so well, and are really vanity presses in disguise. (This is easy to determine from the onset if they assign you one their ISBN numbers.) Few writers approach the self-publishing process like a business entrepreneur would. So-called "vanity publishers" take advantage of the fact that few self-published authors truly do so. These publishing mills, claiming to act in the author's best interest, offer costly editing, design, and production packages for books, often charging authors exorbitant fees for grossly substandard services. The authors must pay for the books they receive, which are often of such poor quality that bookstores won't even carry them. Then to make matters worse the books are only printed after an order comes in for them, and are not provided to bookstores on a freely returnable basis thus eliminating bookstore sales from the get go. In such a business model, the only one who makes money is the vanity press. And deceptive as the process sounds, new authors are falling for the scheme in droves.

*Author-services conglomerates take on any new project indiscriminately and charge hundreds to thousands of dollars to put a printed book in the hands of the author.*

### **Author Solutions: A mega-vanity press**

Known by many names—including AuthorHouse, iUniverse, Trafford, Xlibris, Wordclay, Inkubook and traditional publisher’s divisions like Thomas Nelson’s WestBow Press and Harlequin’s Harlequin Horizon—this author-services conglomerate takes on any new project indiscriminately and charges anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars to put a printed book in the hands of the author. Its website claims to have helped 85,000 authors self-publish 120,000 titles in the past 13 years, a success rate that sounds admirable at first glance. But of those 120,000 titles published, the website features merely a handful of books that it touts as success stories. Certainly, all 85,000 authors are not rich today (or have even made a profit that covers their out-of-pocket expenses). Industry journalists state “AuthorHouse reports selling more than 2.5 million books in 2008, which sounds like a lot, but averages out to around 41 sales per title.” Assuming an average charge of \$20 per book, the average AuthorHouse author has only made about \$800. And since the cheapest package this self-publisher offers costs the author about \$600 to begin with, this is not an income one can brag about.

Perhaps the truest picture of vanity presses like Author Solutions is painted in stories like a November 2003 court ruling in Wichita, Kansas, that held AuthorHouse responsible for publishing libelous content in one of its books—content that a reputable publisher with a reputable editing staff would have discovered and edited out. Court decisions like these confirm rumors that self-publishing houses do not even really read the content of the books they churn out. The quality services they claim to provide are merely bait for thousands of unpublished authors seeking fame and fortune and willing to pay a pretty price for it.

*Horror stories of books printed with no more editing than a word processor spell-check are combined with tales of loose pages that fall out of final bound copies.*

### **PublishAmerica: A non-discriminating scam**

On its website, PublishAmerica calls itself “the nation’s #1 book publisher” and says it “treats authors the old-fashioned way—it pays them.” It claims to have a choosy acquisitions staff procuring only the most promising 20 percent of manuscripts. It describes an acquisitions policy that is author-friendly and snubs the preachy author agents clamoring for its attention, “no matter how hard they sometimes try.” It boasts of having published more than 40,000 authors and asking no publishing fees from any of them, ever.

As is always the case, however, there is more to the PublishAmerica success story than meets the eye. It is true that PublishAmerica takes no money from authors to print their books. But the only way for authors to see their books in print is to buy them from PublishAmerica, and therein lies the catch. Horror stories of books printed with no more editing than a word processor spell-check and no more design effort than a stock photo or clipart image are combined with tales of loose pages that fall out of the final bound copies of PublishAmerica’s books, which in spite of their cheap appearance cost authors \$25 or more per copy. And the claim that this “publisher” is selective is nonsense. This print mill has operated since 1999 and claims to have published 40,000 authors, suggesting it publishes an average of 4,000 new books per year, more than 300 per month. Most big-name, traditional publishers report receiving about the same number of unsolicited manuscripts each year as PublishAmerica actually publishes. The conclusion is that PublishAmerica accepts everything anyone submits, whether it’s a good book or not. Many industry experts warn that PublishAmerica provides writers no real opportunity to succeed and is a scam vanity press in disguise.

## A dangerous publishing masquerade

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*Once upon a time, there was still a firm distinction between small commercial publishers and self-publishing scam firms... that line has begun to blur.*

The world of self-publishing is rife with scams that take advantage of authors wanting to see their own names in print. But going the traditional publishing route means, statistically, that most authors will never succeed (although at least a rejection notice from a big publisher costs authors nothing but the postage to submit their manuscript in the first place). Many authors, having failed to get noticed by larger publishers, submit to small ones, and once upon a time, there was still a firm distinction between small commercial publishers and self-publishing scam firms. In the current economic slide, however, as some traditional publishers are facing the end of the road financially, that line has begun to blur. Some formerly traditional publishing houses have dipped into a practice before unseen in the publishing world—they have begun to “sell” their own rejected authors and manuscripts to unethical vanity presses like AuthorHouse.

### **Thomas Nelson: Selling out authors in the name of good morals**

In existence since 1798 and the largest Christian publisher in the United States today, Thomas Nelson states on its website that it specializes in “books with Christian morals, inspirational themes and family values.” In the very next sentence, however, it announces its new business model, which is something less than inspirational and moral. It rampantly encourages authors to self-publish through its subsidiary self-publishing arm, WestBow Press. “Even if your ultimate goal is to publish traditionally, WestBow Press can be your foot in the door,” the website states. Some fact-digging reveals that Westbow Press, launched in October 2009, is in truth just another facet of the vanity press calling themselves a self-publishing company scam

*Publishing a book  
seems more like a  
mine-riddled  
battlefield than  
ever.*

Author Solutions. From what Thomas Nelson’s website describes, its rejection pile is now routinely shuffled over to its convenient (and profitable) new vanity press arm. It is reasonable to suspect that authors are being routed to WestBow Press to pay for services before their manuscript even gets full consideration from Thomas Nelson for a traditional publishing contract. Westbow’s packages charge authors from \$999 to \$6,500, depending on what “services” the author wants to purchase. The new system seems to be, “Submit a manuscript, then be hit up for money.” In partnering with tricky businesses like Author Solutions, publishers like Thomas Nelson have now become salespeople to authors—not the other way around.

### **Osprey Publishing: Feeding on hopelessness**

British publisher Osprey Publishing, a niche publisher specializing in military subject matter, also launched its own self-publishing arm in 2009, which is supposedly a “special service being offered to Osprey members” whose books, despite high quality, don’t quite fit the Osprey Publishing niche. The sales tactic is performed with military efficiency, and the alliance is formed with none other than AuthorHouse, a branch of the same self-publisher that is getting paid to gobble up the rejection pile from Harliquin and Thomas Nelson. Publishing a book indeed seems more like a mine-riddled battlefield than ever, with publishers like Osprey selling their submitting authors out by feeding them to publishing mills and charging them preposterous fees.

## Mid-level publishers: Bringing drowning authors aboard

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*Some publishers  
may even see  
“self-published”  
as a negative on a  
resume.*

In these tough economic times, big publishers are cutting loose large portions of their staffs, refusing to consider unknown new authors (however good their books may be), and neglecting even their established authors when it comes to book marketing and production. As more and more hopeful authors get turned away from the traditional model, more are also falling victim to the hollow promises made by an abundance of self-publishing scams swarming the waters and feeding on the unaware. A book in print, even a self-published one, is often touted as a valuable foot in the door in the publishing world—but it does not really work that way. Bookstores, themselves trying desperately to make it in tough economic times, are mostly stocking what the big-name publishers are publishing, the profit-earning bestsellers. You can't get published these days, it seems, unless your name is Dan Brown or Stephen King or Stephenie Myers, and largely, that's because bookstores won't carry books by no-name newbies.

In short, the pervasive vanity-press myth that a self-published book can find shelf space at bookstores is dismally untrue. Bookstores don't like dealing with POD [Print on Demand] services. They cite high prices and poor quality of the books and the fact that vanity presses often do not offer the discounts and book-return guarantees that larger, traditional publishers do. The self-published author is rarely positioned for future success at a traditional publishing house, and some publishers may even see “self-published” as a negative on a resume (after all, they may reason, if your work was any good, why did all the traditional publishers turn you down?).

*The answer to a new author's publishing woes may lie in publishing houses that are not entrenched in the same centuries-old traditions crippling the big publishers.*

The answer to a new author's publishing woes may lie in publishing houses that are not entrenched in the same centuries-old traditions crippling even the big publishers today. Innovative publishers are seeking new ways to tap into modern technology and are coming up with solutions to traditional publisher's problems, all without charging exorbitant and unethical fees the way vanity presses do.

### **Harper Studios: Blending the old with the new**

Reacting to economic troubles that are hampering big publishers, Harper Studios, a new imprint of HarperCollins founded in 2008, is pioneering a business model that will perhaps prove to be better positioned to survive in a modern economic world. "We believe books are a vital part of our culture," states the company's website. "We believe traditional publishing models are broken and are experimenting with new ones. We believe in embracing technology. We believe the future is now."

Harper Studios is forging new selling practices with big chain bookstores that include a no-returns policy (meaning it won't buy back the books that bookstores can't sell, which is a huge money loser for big publishers and one of the reasons it costs so much to publish a book traditionally in the first place). It is shunning the time-honored practice of paying cash advances to authors in the hope that their book will sell enough to cover the up-front expenditure. Instead, it is waiting to see how a book sells before paying the author money—but since it is also tapping fully into the internet as the modern book-selling powerhouse, more of its books are indeed selling, so its authors stand to make much more money. And by recognizing e-books as a viable selling point, Harper Studios is making money on what sells, not losing money on what it printed that didn't sell.

This is not to say that Harper Studios doesn't covet the celebrity name—its list of authors includes singer Leann Rimes and chef Emeril Lagasse, as well as posthumous work by Mark Twain. But it is proving that the publishing industry can indeed change with the times and adapt when the economy implodes.

### **American Book Publishing: A debt-free business model in publishing**

*The publishing industry can indeed change with the times and adapt.*

In business more than a decade, American Book Publishing is another publisher that has always taken an innovative approach to the traditional publishing model in that it values the cultural importance of books and prides itself on finding and publishing promising new authors. Like Harper Studios, American Book Publishing recognizes that the hefty author advance traditional publishers pay to big-name authors in bidding wars is a stone in the path to eventual bankruptcy. Author advances force many traditional publishers into debt, since they have paid out large sums months or years before the books are in print and making any return on the investment. American Book Publishing operates a debt-free business model, meaning it can afford to take on new projects and new authors even when the economy takes a hard turn for the worse.

“Many great writers today live in obscurity,” says American Book Publishing’s website. “They are not being given a voice, and our global community is not being blessed with a diversity of reading material that can stimulate the imagination, motivate aspirations, and enrich minds with a greater variety of style, opinion, and thought.” Among the rare non-vanity publishers that are still open to submissions from unpublished authors but that choose among submissions carefully before offering contracts, American Book Publishing prides itself on finding talented new voices and treating them as the respected

*The important lesson for authors is not to lose hope, and also not to sell themselves short.*

professionals they are, from manuscript submission to publication. Publishing an average of less than 100 new books a year, American Book Publishing devotes professional editorial, design, and marketing attention to each of its carefully selected authors and books. Hundreds of positive author references demonstrate that American Book's innovative publishing model is a viable and reputable life raft for many talented authors whose work remains undiscovered by the elitist publishing houses and who are wise enough to avoid the vanity-press scams that feast on other publishers' rejection piles.

### **New authors, don't lose hope**

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In tough economic times, everyone in publishing is feeling the pinch. Changes are coming, and the best companies will adapt and succeed. The important lesson, for new authors, is not to lose hope when all the big houses slam their submission doors, and also not to sell themselves short at a career-killing and pocketbook-busting vanity press. Smart authors will do their research, find their way to reputable small presses like Harper Studios or American Book Publishing, get published, and achieve their dreams. The waters are choppier than ever, but a new author *can* find a strong life raft in a good publisher and weather the storm.

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