

Paths to Publication - 2010

Prepared for Bookmarks Festival in Winston-Salem, September 11, 2010

by Judith Geary, Sr. Editor

Ingalls Publishing Group, Inc.

editor@ingallspublishinggroup.com

“Yes, the world is now flat for publishing as well.”

--Thomas Friedman

Like the quote above, much we hear about the new world of publishing is puzzling. “The NY publishing industry is collapsing.” “Anyone can get published.” “Ebooks are the future.” What does it all mean?

For the author, there are few guarantees beyond the fact that the technology is easily and affordably available to turn your content into a “real” book. Publication success depends on your choices among the many and varied pathways your completed manuscript may take from your computer to the readers’ hands. Will you compete for one of the diminishing supply of contracts from a New York Publisher? Will you submit your work to that rare resource: the traditional regional publisher? Will you decide to go it on your own as an independent and become your own publisher? Or will you opt for the world of compromise and use one of the self-publishing services or “co-op” publishers?

Ask yourself: What have I written? Where's the market for it? Can I reach each of these potential readers personally? What's important to me? Just getting the words out there? Artistic control? Time? Profit? Prestige? The answers will determine the appropriate pathway for you and your book.

First, you need a product to sell:

It *should* go without saying, but may need saying anyway, that your manuscript must meet publishing guidelines to begin the process. It must exist in a common digital format (as a computer file in .rtf, .doc or a limited number of other common formats), and be as clear of typos, misspellings and unintentional grammatical errors as you can make it. Check the publishers’ and agents’ websites for specific guidelines for submissions. The majority of publishers and agents today accept materials by email, and many prefer or insist on email queries.

If you decide to go for the big time:

Major publishing houses require submissions through an agent. A possible gateway into some publishing houses without an agent is by entering your manuscript in a contest sponsored by the publisher. Check the contest section in the *2011 Writer’s Market* for guidelines.

Getting an agent:

The best way to find an agent is to prevail upon your good friend, who happens to be a successful writer in the same genre you write and thinks your stuff is wonderful, to introduce you to her agent. You don’t have a good friend like that? Hmm. Well, then finding an agent is likely to cost you. I do *not* mean you should engage one of the “agents” who charge up front for their services. Before you consider engaging any agent, check them out with others of their clients and on a couple of websites:

Association of Author’s Representatives is the industry organization. The website includes a canon of ethics for members that provides a measure of protection. It prohibits reading fees from potential clients with the exception of conference fees (see below): <http://aaronline.org/>

Predators and Editors bills itself as “A guide to publishers and publishing services for serious writers since 1997.” Information is submitted by pleased (or more often disgruntled) clients of the services listed. If your prospective agent is not listed, it doesn’t mean they’re safe, as the agency could have changed their name. However, you should certainly check: <http://pred-ed.com/pearl.htm>

The second best way to look for an agent is to register for writers’ conferences specializing in your genre. Most will include agents on their programs and provide for an evaluation of limited manuscript pages and an appointment with an agent. These agents have been vetted by the conference organizers, but research by visiting their websites to learn their specific interests, and register early for appointments with one or more agents who seem a good match for your work. Engage the agent in pleasant conversation and seek a commitment to read the rest of your

manuscript. If he says it's not what he's looking for, ask who it might suit. Then you can write the second agent and say the first "sent" you. Ask questions. Listen. Get all the information you can.

You can still use the old fashioned method of surveying new publications that would appeal to the same audience as what you've written. You can find out which agents are successfully selling and what by working from such resources as *Publishers' Weekly*: <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/home/index.html> and *Publishers Lunch* <http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/lunch/free/>. *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Literary Agents 2011, 21E: Who They Are! What They Want! How to Win Them Over!* is the latest in a series of books Herman has published based on interviews with industry professionals. The series certainly has been successful for him, and the book may be useful in spotting the right agent. (In order to get your manuscript read by that agent see the recommendations above.)

Speculative Fiction is a special case. Major publishers in the genres of SF (fantasy and science fiction) maintain internet sites with discussion groups and utilities for sharing and critiquing members' manuscripts. Word is that editors from those houses actually participate and books have been acquired from those sources. If SF is what you write, netsearch the major houses and get involved.

Regional Publishers and Small Independent Presses:

In general, traditional regional publishers do not require agency representation, do not pay advances (but do pay royalties) and are focused on books and authors in their own geographic area. Like larger publishing houses, they limit the books they publish to those they have the resources to market. If your book meets their guidelines, publication with a regional press may be the best pathway for you and your book. As with all publishing companies these days, your query should include a marketing plan for your book. Examine their guidelines and contracts carefully (Some post a sample), as some do expect a financial commitment from the author.

Ingalls Publishing Group, Inc is "my" publisher. IPG is currently looking for mysteries and romantic suspense, both contemporary and historical, set in the southeastern US with series potential.

www.ingallspublishinggroup.com

John F. Blair is the largest of the regional publishers in North Carolina and distributes for about 30 smaller presses. They publish only regional nonfiction, but information about fiction publishers they distribute is available on their website www.blairpub.com

Canterbury House Publishing is a relatively new but active press, distributed by Blair, accepting southeastern regional fiction. <http://www.canterburyhousepublishing.com/>

For a more complete listing of small regional presses, check the website for the High Country Writers organization: <http://highcountrywriters.tripod.com>

If you decide to self-publish:

This is not a simple decision, but it may be the right one for you and your book. Many POD (print-on-demand) services allow you to upload your book without charge. You pay only for the books you order, and charges can be reasonable – often less than half the retail price of a similar book. The risk to you is that you alone are responsible for the quality of the finished product. Traditional publishers use a team to produce a professionally edited and produced book. How closely your book resembles a book from a traditional publisher (or how loudly it shouts "DIY") depends on the quality of your team.

When selecting a service to help publish your book, be very, very careful. Some services, like PublishAmerica have become infamous for their practices. (See *Predators and Editors* above.) Others may be reputable but mark your work as from a self-publishing service. This may not matter to you, but should be part of your decision process.

Createspace (formerly Booksurge) is a subsidiary of Amazon. A mouse click makes your book available on Amazon.com. Orders are printed and shipped from Createspace and the royalty deposited into your bank account. IPG has used Createspace as a printer for review galleys and ARCs and we've been satisfied with the quality. Personal satisfaction with the experience varies with services you contract for and your relationship with your account representative. www.createspace.com.

Catawba Publishing Company in Charlotte works with small runs. They began as a printer and have expanded their services for independent publishers. They have a reputation for creating a quality product and being good to work with. <http://catawbapublishing.com/>

Editing and design services for self-published books are generally available (for a fee) from the company that will print the book. If you value the artistic control of creating your own book, however, you may want to work with

professionals in your area and create your own publishing team. At that point, you're becoming your own independent publisher.

Distribution is key when selecting a publishing service. If your book is not on Amazon and related websites, how will readers find it? If it's not available at the standard industry discount of 40% and fully returnable through a national or regional distributor, it will not be ordered by bookstores.

About Ebooks:

Ebooks are a hot topic among readers, publishers and authors and a topic I've been following closely for the last couple of years. As technically challenged as I am, I do have some experience with creating ebooks through available resources, and I've been able to pump information from those better equipped to understand and make recommendations.

Ebook readers. The hand-sized readers are really slick and offer numerous and well-publicized advantages over paper books and each other. Prices have come down recently, to \$139 for the Kindle from Amazon, and even less for some others. Not so well publicized are the free, yes FREE, ebook reader programs you can download from Amazon (Kindle), Barnes and Noble (Nook) and Adobe (epub for Sony and numerous others.) As an author, this gives you resources to become familiar with the formats and the process of reading a book on-screen. (Sorry, availability for MAC isn't quite so universal as for PC.) Be aware that your computer screen is back-lit and the reader screens generally are not, so the experience isn't quite the same.

Resources available to the author or publisher. Amazon allows the author or publisher to upload books directly, and offers a user-friendly enough utility to make it practical to do so. Barnes and Noble does not yet offer direct-upload (as of September 2010) but is advertising that it will soon. Numerous other web services will make your book available as an ebook, in varying formats and for varying prices.

Smashwords.com offers a user-friendly service for both readers and authors/publishers that accepts a precisely formatted MSWord document (Read the style guide carefully!), and converts it to a number of formats readable on both hand-held devices and regular computers. They allow the author to set the price and pass on 70-85% of the selling price to the author. The files are "drm free" meaning there's no technical reason they can't be freely copied and shared. The Smashwords site makes it clear, repeatedly, that the content is copyright protected and is not intended to be shared (although the purchaser is encouraged to try content on numerous devices and may print copies if they wish.) They also offer generous "free samples" which they do encourage readers to share with others. By following all the rules carefully, Smashwords claims you can make your book available in the iPad Store, Barnes and Noble and numerous other outlets. The Ingalls book, *Faster Pastor* has been "approved for premium status," and may be available now. It is already available on Amazon Kindle

Author comments on various discussion boards express general satisfaction and positive experiences with Smashwords.com. A reservation is the amount of time it takes for the process to be completed and the amount of time it takes to receive your royalties. . (Note that Smashwords also advertises a POD print service, but I have no personal experience with it.)

My recommendation is to go through the process with Smashwords, but reserve the Kindle distribution for yourself. As *relatively* simple as their process is, they offer to refer clients to independent service providers for technical help. After your files have been accepted by Smashwords, you may use those files for the Kindle process. Kindle will also accept simple b&w illustrations, so you can add those before you upload to Amazon.

Ebooks are not going away. We can no more ignore them or deny their legitimacy than we can insist on reading from a hand-written scroll or a clay tablet. So, let's share our experience and continue the dialogue on this one.

So, how do you make your decision?

Revisit that set of questions in the opening paragraph. What have I written? Where's the market for it? Can I reach each of these potential readers personally? What's important to me? Just getting the words out there? Artistic control? Time? Profit? Prestige? The answers will determine the appropriate pathway for you and your book.

All publishers today, even the largest and most prestigious like Thomas Dunne (publisher of the *Da Vinci Code*) expect author participation in the marketing process. Of course, if you self-publish is all on you.

Hypothetically, let's say you are an expert on an exotic breed of dog – the Kismet. Your family has owned and bred them for generations and in shows devoted to the breed your dogs almost always win, primarily because your dogs are much better behaved than is usual. (The Kismet has some unfortunate behavior patterns.) There are approximately 1000 owners of Kismets in the U.S. and Canada (most of whom belong to the association – Kismet

Owners of America), and you're sure all of them would like your book on training and caring for the dog, *Ko-existing With Your Kismet*.

You should seriously consider self-publishing. You have written a non-fiction book on a topic in which you are a recognized authority, and have the means to contact a small but dedicated group of people who will surely want your book. The production technology you choose will depend on your resources in terms of skill in getting the book ready and the cost of the services you need.

In contrast, your best friend has written a mainstream thriller. Production and promotion of such a book at a level likely to reach even marginal success require major resources in either financial backing or serious sophistication in social networking. (Note that I recognize the possibility of success through a “viral” campaign and ebook distribution.) Unless your friend has that kind of resources, self-publishing is likely to be an expensive self-indulgence.

Between these two extremes lie the self-help books and genres of regional fiction and poetry. If you're approaching the publication of your book as an artistic enterprise – a creation all your own whose existence as a physical entity that matches your vision is more important than expectation of financial gain – then the new technologies (and the companies prepared to use them on your behalf) can be a valuable resource.

If this is a book you're willing and able to "hand sell;" a cook book to market at craft fairs and local stores, a poetry book or inspirational book to sell at readings directly to the public, or a book you're confident you can market directly through the internet or genre contacts – go for it!

Regional Publishers and Small Independent Presses:

Publication by a small independent publisher can give the author the best of both worlds. The author has the credibility and resources of the publisher's team behind their book, but in many cases the author has more input in the final product.

If you've written fiction strongly tied to a specific geographic location, and you can find a small publisher focusing on that region, a regional publisher may be a great match. Small independent presses in specific genres, “women's fiction,” LGBT, inspirational and Christian fiction may also be a good match. (Note, however, that *Road to Tater Hill*, by Edith Hemingway, was published in 2009 by Delacort Press. This is a strongly regional YA book, published in NY. Edie says she met the editor at a conference.)

Ebooks are the new frontier. With only minimal technical skill, and no financial commitment, you can upload your book to become an ebook. Getting the word out becomes an exercise in social networking – a topic for a different workshop.

Don't be afraid to explore this new world of publishing. Just be careful out there!

Judith Geary serves as Senior Editor for Ingalls Publishing Group and handles marketing and promotion, teaches at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC, and is a scenario evaluator for Future Problem Solving International and Scenario Director for the NC affiliate. She struggles to keep up with current technology in all these areas. She writes historical fiction set in ancient Rome and the first of her Getorix series, *The Eagle and the Bull*, is internationally reviewed and recommended for classroom use in sixteen states. The next in the series, *Games of the Underworld* will be released from Ingalls Publishing Group in 2011.