



2006 Self-Publishing Survey: Summary of Results

Overview:

Since 1997, Wordrunner Press has worked with over 80 authors to self-publish chapbooks of poetry and fiction in small, inexpensive editions of 50 to 100 books, as well as perfect-bound books in editions small and large. The purpose of the survey was to find out what happened to the books once published and how the experience of self-publishing was perceived, in the process collecting advice for other writers who are considering such a venture.

Twenty-seven authors whose books are self-published or who have started their own press responded to this survey, conducted in summer 2006. A few have published more than one book (two to four). Below is a summary of their thoughtful answers to the questions posed. A more detailed composite of actual responses may be found at www.wordrunner.com/chapbook/self-publishing_survey_results.pdf.

Overall, responses were positive, even though only about one-third of those surveyed actually realized a profit from self-publishing. Some never intended to sell the books. Others were disappointed their books did not immediately sell out. But all were pleased to have their work in print and all but one said they would do it again. It's a given that marketing books entails a great deal of time, effort and often expense. What works and what doesn't? The most successful, in terms of sales, were authors whose books were targeted to a "niche" market and also those who persistently got out in public to promote their books.

Many thanks to all who took the time to participate in this survey. Their names and books are listed at the end of this summary.

Jo-Anne Rosen
Wordrunner Press

Q&A

What convinced you to self-publish your book?

- Low cost, affordability.
- Creative control over work and appearance of book (freedom from editors).
- Difficulty of getting published otherwise (commercial publishers don't do poetry).
- An entry to publishing, getting the work out before the public, wanting to be read.
- A legacy for families or posterity.
- Submissions to literary magazines are expensive.
- A finished body of work as opposed to occasional publishings in lit mags, a summing up of accomplishments.
- A school project for BA or MFA.
- Having a niche market where books could be sold

What did you like about the process of self-publishing?

- Working one-on-one with book designer, having an active voice in the process.
- Freedom, self-autonomy.
- Total creative control over the process.
- Self-discipline.
- Low cost and convenience.
- Working with a skilled designer.
- Sense of accomplishment.
- ISBN for book (officially a published literary work)
- A process “as complicated and arduous, if magical, as writing itself.”
- The experience helped to produce subsequent books or got another book accepted by a traditional publishing house.

What did you dislike?

- Nothing (10 respondents)
- You are alone.
- Uncomfortable saying I’m a published poet.
- Feelings of shame and lack of self-worth.
- A great deal of responsibility. If something is wrong it’s your fault.
- Having to foot the bill.
- The aggravation of corrections.
- Inability to get reviews, notice, coverage. (Reviewers won’t look at self-published books).
- That it wasn’t published by a major publisher or reviewed by the *New York Times*.
- No wide promotion.
- Selling is a chore. Doing all the PR.
- Sometimes overwhelmed by decisions to make.

How have you advertised or marketed your book/s?

email announcements	16
book signing parties, readings at cafes and book stores	13
flyers, mailers	12
newspapers, magazines, press releases	12
web site or page for the book (other than WR page)	11
speaking engagements	8
local radio or television	3
did not intend to sell books	3
at book clubs	2
word of mouth	2
donated books to libraries and bookstores	1

How successful was each of these methods? Or unsuccessful?

E-mail notification and book-signing parties were successful marketing strategies for some authors, but not e-mail alone. Getting out in public and speaking about or reading from the books can be very effective. One author advised, “it takes a lot of focus and attention to sell anything, including books ... you are starting from scratch. It takes a long time. Don’t give up!”

Flyers (mailings), newspaper or magazine ads and websites were less effective, generally.

Three authors did not market their books as they were not intended to be sold. Two used their books as a stepping stone to other publication.

The authors with “niche” markets did best at speaking engagements or performances (e.g., the novel about intrigue among orchid growers sells well at orchid societies; the chapbook of Irish stories sells at Celtic music performances, along with CDs).

Where are your books sold?

In independent bookstores	13
At readings (bookstores, poetry/writing groups, galleries)	12
On the Internet or by email	13
At book fairs	4
Through a distributor (how did this work?)	4
With the exception of one author whose distributor is a group of performance artists he works with closely, no one fared well with distributors, who charged too much and sold few or no books.	
In community groups or special interest clubs	2
Through a print-on-demand publisher	1
Not sold	3

Other methods

Authors sell books to friends, family, by word of mouth, out of backpacks, and, in one instance, through a local newspaper column. In the “niche market” category is the author who sells her books in the retail family business (an orchid nursery).

Which of these worked best for you (or didn’t work at all)?

Launch parties and public readings are most frequently mentioned as successful venues for selling books, or contact with people in general. Some authors do sell books via the Internet; others report dismal results. Possibly, promotion via email accounts for the difference. Targeting special interest groups works for some books (niche market, again). Per a collective of writers with four chapbooks in print: “It is important to realize that in the beginning, patrons will be family and friends.”

4 | Self-Publishing Survey Results

Bookstore sales were generally limited, except when readings were taking place, but it was of value to place books in stores to give them visibility.

Some authors had little or no success with any venue and wound up giving many of the books away.

How many copies did you have printed or reprinted? How many did you sell?

The majority of authors surveyed published small print runs, from 50 to 100 books, and sometimes a reprint, whether in chapbook or perfect bound format. One author with a niche market published 2,000 copies of her novel and in one year has sold 60% of the books.

The table summarizes the results detailed in [self-publishing_survey_results.pdf](#). Four books sold 10% or less of the print run, while eight books sold out or have come close (90-100%).

Percentage of Books Sold						
(Some authors have published more than one book.)						
% Sold	10% or less	20%	30-40%	50-60%	70-80%	90-100%
# Books	4	2	7	4	6	8

Did you recoup your monetary investment in the books?

Yes 8
No 17

A few respondents remarked that this was not their intention. One said that is not the point of self-publishing, “particularly poetry. No one, not even the poet laureate, makes money with poetry.” Here’s some advice from the collective press that did recoup its investment: “It is important to keep the printing and selling costs reasonable. We only outlaid our own money to print the first book. “Limiting print runs to 100 at a time, they were able to sell the books and reinvest in the next printing or new volumes.

What kind of feedback have you gotten from readers?

Only two of the 27 authors queried reported no or very little feedback. The other 25 received excellent, positive, extraordinary, very good, very positive and etc. feedback. Some writers got fan mail, even new friends in the process of self-publishing.

On the distaff side: “People who don’t like the work keep their mouths shut.”

Was self-publishing worth the investment of time and money?

Yes	22
No	2
Yes and No	3

In the “yes and no” category are authors who found self-publishing both gratifying and frustrating. But the majority of respondents found it worthwhile, despite any monetary loss or even lack of significant response from readers. Several plan to do it again. Only two did not find it worthwhile.

From a positive perspective: “I think the process is very gratifying and there is a sense of fulfillment.... It’s kind of like sending a child out into the world.”

What is your advice to writers who are considering self-publishing as an option?

- Do it for your own satisfaction. Please yourself.
- If you want to market your book, you must expend time and money.
- Find an experienced and honest publisher who will work with you patiently and is committed to quality.
- Chapbooks are affordable and relatively uncomplicated. Longer works require more of a commitment, more costs.
- Take it as seriously as you would if submitting your work to a “big name publisher.”
- Search out target markets. Forget about making a profit.
- Wait until you have a body of work to choose from. Make sure you really do have a book.
- Go to many literary events in your area (open readings, etc.). Take copies of your chapbook to sell and read from.
- When you’ve published a few things in small magazines, then start thinking about a chapbook. Even a few credits on the acknowledgements page gives your collection credibility.
- Pay more attention to the writing than the publishing.

Would you do it again?

Yes	26
No	0
Maybe	1

Other comments?

There are many jewels in this section. I recommend reading the full report (at www.wordrunner.com/chapbook/self-publishing_survey_results.pdf). Here are some excerpts.

- It is important to be able to display and distribute fine work even if you lose money on the venture. The chapbooks helped primarily as an attractive way of getting attention for my work, which led to the publication of my first collection of poems by an established publishing house.
- If you are thinking about self-publishing and want to make some assessment of whether or not your books will sell, go to a bookstore and look on the shelves. These people are professional booksellers. They stock things they think they can

and which do sell.

- I would probably discourage anyone from self-publishing anything except poetry. There is a tradition of self-publishing poetry, especially in chapbook form, and hence an acceptance of the idea. People will not automatically ignore it. Self-published fiction (though there are a few notable success stories here) tends to be ignored and to sink into immediate obscurity unless the author is exceptionally good at self-promotion. I do, however, think that self-publishing can work well for things like family and local histories, where there is a limited but well-defined market.
- Never forget to value the accomplishment of creating a chapbook for publication. Perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a writer is to be ignored and having a publication of your own can help fight this.
- Cover design and good printing help sales.
- Given the tough market, you might as well try publishing yourself. You can now sell new books via Amazon Marketplace, just as used book dealers do. Amazon takes the order, but you ship books directly to the buyers. Amazon reimburses you for postage and pays you more than for books they retail directly (where there's a large markup).

NOTE (9/18/08): Books can be sold on Amazon Marketplace only if they are already listed in the Amazon catalog. The way around this (aside from paying \$40 a month for "Pro Merchant Program") is to sign up for the "Advantage" program (\$30/year) and get the book listed, then switch to the Marketplace. See www.wordrunner.com/publish/pb-marketing.html for details and links.

Respondents

The authors who participated in this survey and their books are listed below along with press names and websites, where applicable. Samples of their work may also be found at www.wordrunner.com/chapbook/booklist.htm.

Peter Baroth

Mounds of Sounds

Sessions

Ski Oklahoma

Linda Bielowski

Spirit Echoes

Frank de Caro

Ballad Girls and Other Poems

Tom Fallon

In the First Place

Romana E. Frey

In Our Own Words

judi goldberg (PenHouseInk Press)

Naked Writings

June Bugs Out of Season

Remembering Our Future

Refractions

www.penhouseink.com

John Gribble

Umbrella Bones

Jim Gunshinan

What the Body Wants

Ellen Hart

Miles to Go

Behind the Fog

Derek Henkel

Chapped

www.dirtyredkiss.com

Eric Hoffman

Tbrenody

<http://mockingbird.creighton.edu/NCW/hoffman.htm>

Ronald Jones

Twelve Love Poems

Christopher Ketcham

Notes from September 11

www.christopherketchum.com

Ed Krizek

In Memory of Virginia Ruth Cook Krizek

Threshold

James Heller Levinson

Alameda Street

Because You Wanted A Wedding Ring

See-saw (with Anthony Seidman)

Arlene L. Mandell

Variations on a Theme

Hank Mattimore

Legacy of the Heart: Writing Your Own

Spiritual Will

Life's a Growin' Thing: Ya Grows or Ya Dies

<http://yagrowsoryadies.blogharbor.com>

Keith Moore

Big Bruce Baddley

What They Mean by America

(and Other Poems)

Mary Motes

Redland Press

Kosova Kosovo

Orchid Territory

www.orchidmall.com/misc/motesbook.htm

Page Nelson-Saginer

Apex

Case Studies

Gallery Effects

Stern Ornaments

Gloria North

The Long Ritard

www.glorianorth.com

Kim O'Donnel

Search Party

Joseph Powell

Blood on the Page

www.musesreview.org/josephpowell

Barbara Toohey

(The Fourth Street Writers)

Nearly Naked

Michael Waterson

The Book of Kith & Kin

Dianna Wilder

America Under Attack!

Special thanks to **Laura Beausoleil** of Philos Press for her input into this survey. Laura doesn't self-publish; she started her own press to publish her friends, notably books by George Hitchcock, Susan Kennedy, G.P. Skratz, Wilma Stegmuller, Michael Tuggle and Nanos Valaoritis. Available at www.philospress.org.