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THRILLERS WITH HEART

IS "KINDLING" FOR YOU?

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Advice on why and how to self e-publish your books with a list of resources for authors.

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The publishing industry is in an era of upheaval, forcing many authors to flex their entrepreneur muscles, searching for new avenues of income and ways to keep their books in the public's eye.

One way of doing this is to self e-publish your backlist or other books that you hold the rights to. With more and more readers embracing e-books and e-books becoming the fastest growing segment of publishing, the idea of cutting out the middle-men and keeping profits for ourselves is tempting.

Here are a few things to think about before walking the path of electronic self-publication:

Why self e-publish?

Like many authors, once I was firmly established with NYC publishers, I never thought about e-publishing or self-publishing, much less doing both!

But I found myself with four manuscripts that were all previously in the hands of NYC publishers but that for a variety of reasons never made it to publication. Then I saw a blog by multi-published thriller author JA Konrath discussing his own experiment with electronic self-publishing. His argument was logical, the numbers impressive, but I was still skeptical.

I wanted these books to find an audience but I didn't want to tie them to contracts I might later regret, especially as these four novels were all romantic suspense/thrillers and my career has moved to more mainstream suspense/thriller. So, I decided to perform my own self-publishing experiment.

I realized that I could use these books as promotional products as well as money-makers. Since I was in control of when they were released, how long they were available, and what their price was, I had a greater freedom than I do with my traditionally published works.

This turned out to be an unexpected bonus as by the time I had them formatted and ready for publication it was December, 2009. Then a few weeks later the earthquake in Haiti hit. Since I'm a pediatric ER doctor as well as a thriller novelist, I wanted to raise money for Doctors Without Borders.

What better way than using my experimental self e-pubbed books?

I sent out a newsletter and posted on my website and a few blogs that I was donating my proceeds of my Kindle sales for the month of February to DWB. I chose the Kindle format simply because it is exceptionally easy to track Kindle sales on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis through my Amazon's DTP (digital text platform) account.

What I discovered was: Kindle readers read...a lot! I ended up raising over \$1600 for DWB, which translated to almost 1700 books sold in one month on Kindle.

Possible Pitfalls

Anyone deciding to self-publish should have a good grasp of their target audience. You want to build an audience who will stay with you and help spread the word of your books--and that means making a promise to always deliver a high quality read.

Konrath agrees. "E-books are a perfect place to experiment and try new things, and since you own your rights, you aren't tied down to any particular genre, and you can always delete something that isn't working.

But whatever you put on Kindle should be perfect. No errors, well-edited, great covers, perfectly formatted. This should be your best work, presented in the best way possible."

In other words, just as in mainstream publishing, self e-publishing is still all about the reader.

It's not about clearing your closet of dusty manuscripts just because you can. Unless you plan on giving your work away for free, your goal is to attract paying customers. Which means the books you self e-publish need to be just as good as any book a NYC publisher is selling.

If you have a backlist that you own the rights to, they've already been professionally edited, you're good to go. Do be aware that publishers own the cover art, so you'll need to create a new cover for your e-book.

If you're planning to publish a book that hasn't been previously published, make certain it is professionally edited. The four books I chose for my experiment were all edited prior to my self-publication--three by NYC editors (before their road to publication went astray) and one by a professional freelance editor. Do not rely solely on your critique partners or your Great Aunt Martha who gushes to her bridge club about your writing!

Remember, not only are you competing against NYT bestsellers, you're also selling a product to a consumer. If you expect to win their hard earned money--and more importantly, their time, attention, and *future* sales loyalty--then you need to create a worthy product.

When using a previously unpublished book, you'll want to register a copyright (I did all four in one electronic batch using the US Copyright office's online registration) and include a copyright notice in the front of your book. You may also want to purchase an ISBN number (this will allow you to better track your sales). More on this in Part 2.

One pitfall I hadn't totally realized prior to publishing these books was branding. These books were all romantic thrillers while my traditionally published novels were medical suspense (although with some romantic elements). Since the romance community had praised and embraced my medical suspense novels, I thought readers would assume these books were a

logical extension of my writing, although in the romance genre.

Most readers *have* embraced these books—after publishing them, I received dozens of letters from fans asking if there would be more, telling me how much they enjoyed these e-books.

BUT, the first few customer reviews on Amazon were not good. Since Amazon allows you to track sales on a daily basis, it was easy to see sales plummet after these reviews. They were still good, about 40 books a day, but much lower than before the reviews when they'd averaged 50+ a day.

Since then I've had some good reviews from readers and sales increased and have remained steady. But I still struggle with the knowledge that it's clear that some readers were disappointed by my foray into another genre.

Questions I asked myself were: should I keep the books up with poor reviews? Should I change the author on them to a penname so I didn't "contaminate" my CJ Lyons brand?

I decided to leave them up under my own name. It might not be the right marketing decision, but I stand by these books and it didn't feel right to make money off them and then disown them.

However, I did revise their descriptions to more strongly advertise them as romance, so my mainstream readers won't be surprised. I also offer a large excerpt for free, so readers can easily try them before they buy them.

If you'd like to visit my Amazon page and check the books out for yourself, it's here: <http://tinyurl.com/374dafm> and to check out how the books look in other formats, go here: <http://cjlyons.net/books/e-books/>

The Nuts and Bolts

Being a cyber-klutz, I thought this would be the most difficult part of self e-publishing, but it actually was quite easy (if a bit tedious and time-consuming).

All the major e-pub sites have guidelines available. All you need to do is to follow them.

The major e-pub sites that I used initially were: Amazon, Scribd, and Smashwords. I also loaded my books onto Lulu after several readers requested an avenue where they could purchase print copies. (Note: since books printed by POD technology are more expensive, I kept the price on the print books as low as I could, so I essentially make no profit from these sales, they're more to generate good-will.)

Step one is to create an account at the sites you'll be using. Through this account you'll upload your books, track sales, make any revisions to your final product, and, at some sties, interact with customers.

Step two: read each site's guide to formatting and follow it closely. For all the sites I worked with, this basically came down to stripping all formatting from a Word doc of your manuscript and then exporting it in the format the e-publishing site requires. I found the Smashwords guide to be very thorough and in-depth with a lot of trouble-shooting tips, so I start there, transforming my Word doc to a document suitable for Smashwords and then simply export it as a html file for uploading to Amazon.

This step is the most time-consuming because you need to go through every line of the manuscript ensuring that no errant formatting remains behind and that the resulting manuscript is readable.

Step three is almost as equally tiresome as step two. You need to upload the re-formatted manuscript to each site and proofread it (yes, again!) to ensure that nothing is lost in translation.

Step four: add cover art, a description, tags, and set a price. This is where using more than one platform comes in handy. I start by publishing my books on Smashwords because if they are qualified for their Premium Catalogue, then they'll be distributed to a variety of channels including the Sony, Barnes and Noble, iBooks, and if you want, Amazon Kindle stores. You can also inexpensively purchase an ISBN for each book. Smashwords also has an easy to use coupon generator, which is perfect if you're trying to target certain groups and want to measure your success.

I preferred to distribute to all of the channels through Smashwords except Kindle and Barnes and Noble's PubIt—those I did myself. I liked being able to control the Kindle and PubIt channels myself since I knew they would be the ones with the most sales.

Step five: Hit publish and you're done!

What about the money?

Some authors may choose to give their work away for free in order to gain new readers or as a promotion tied to other books. But most of us will be hoping to earn some income from our e-published books.

Konrath believes that the price point you set is the key. "I truly believe the secret to big sales is a low price point. At \$1.99 per download, the author is earning 70 cents. That's more than an author earns on a \$6.99 paperback sale. Make your books impulse purchases by keeping the cost low."

I did my own experiment, setting various price points for my four novels. The first, NERVES OF STEEL, is a romantic suspense that includes a cover quote from Sandra Brown as well as endorsements from a dozen NYT bestsellers, so I set it at the highest, \$3.99.

The next two books, CHASING SHADOWS and LOST IN SHADOWS, were romantic thrillers, the first two of a series, and were a bit shorter in length than my other two novels, only around

80,000 words. I priced them at \$2.99.

The last novel, *BORROWED TIME*, was the oldest manuscript of the group, and I priced it at \$1.99.

I wanted slightly higher price points than Konrath had recommended because I thought it would be nice to have special “sales” tied to my traditionally published releases in the future.

My results? In the first week, with no advertising or promotion, the most expensive, *NERVES OF STEEL*, sold 42 copies on Amazon and 4 on Smashwords.

CHASING SHADOWS sold 85 copies on Amazon and 10 on Smashwords. The second book in the Shadows Op series, *LOST IN SHADOWS*, sold 49 copies on Amazon and 9 on Smashwords.

And the least expensive of the four, *BORROWED TIME*, sold 37 copies on Amazon and 4 on Smashwords.

Each of the books sold three trade paper copies on Lulu and no copies of any of the books has been sold via Scribd. Even though the Smashword sales lag behind Amazon’s, I’ll continue to use them because of the ability to distribute to the other major e-stores such as Apple.

After that first week, when I began to advertise my program to raise money for Doctors Without Borders, my sales increased dramatically to an average of about 50-55 sales a day on Amazon alone.

Since then, given the new 70% royalty rates, I re-set all of my books to a minimum of \$2.99 without hurting sales. This encouraged me to try a new price-point with my latest e-book, *BLIND FAITH*. It’s priced at \$4.99 (about the same as one of my traditionally published books would be in a chain store such as Walmart) and is my second best seller.

It’s not a huge amount of money, but I’m on track to make more in a year than I would if I took any of the offers from NYC publishers that I’d received for these particular manuscripts. All with no expenses incurred other than my time and a few dollars for the copyright, ISBNs, and the stock art I used in the cover design.

As Konrath says, “E-books aren’t a substitute for print books. Your results may vary. But this is a very exciting time to be an author. It’s free to post books on Kindle. For the first time in history, we can potentially reach a wide readership, all by ourselves.

Just make sure you’re giving those readers something they’ll enjoy.”

I firmly agree. Self e-publishing has its place in an author’s career path, whether to keep a backlist alive, to try new genres and markets, to use as a promotional tool in conjunction with traditionally published books, or to generate a little income on the side.

About CJ:

As a pediatric ER doctor, CJ Lyons has lived the life she writes about. In addition to being an award-winning medical suspense author, CJ is a nationally known presenter and keynote speaker.

Her first novel, LIFELINES (Berkley, March 2008), received praise as a "breathtakingly fast-paced medical thriller" from Publishers Weekly, was reviewed favorably by the Baltimore Sun and Newsday, named a Top Pick by Romantic Times Book Review Magazine, and became a National Bestseller. Her award-winning, critically acclaimed Angels of Mercy series (LIFELINES, WARNING SIGNS, and URGENT CARE) is available now and the series finale, CRITICAL CONDITION, hits stores November, 2010. Her newest project is as co-author of a new suspense series with Erin Brockovich. To learn more about CJ and her work, go to www.cjlyons.net.

Resources:

JA Konrath's blog, A Newbie's Guide to Publishing

<http://jakonrath.blogspot.com/2009/10/kindle-numbers-traditional-publishing.html>

US Government Copyright Office

<http://www.copyright.gov/register/>

Amazon's Digital Text Platform

<http://dtp.amazon.com>

Scribd

www.scribd.com

Smashwords

www.smashwords.com

Lulu

www.lulu.com

PubIt

<http://pubit.barnesandnoble.com>

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