

What to know when writing a book

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So you want to write a book? If this is the case the first thing you have to consider is your reason for doing so.

If you want money and fame I have bad news for you. Only the top 5% of all authors become rich and famous. Perhaps you just want a second source of income? This is more realistic as there is no doubt that with hard work you can achieve at least a measure of success.

Another reason may be that you want to improve your credibility in whatever field you are in, be it academics or business, and being a published author can certainly give you a certain standing.

However, I would like to believe that most of us have good personal reasons for wanting to write. For instance, we may have certain life-experience that we wish to share with the world, something that needs to be told, either to teach or to help others. Writing is also an excellent way of dealing with personal trauma, as sharing and expressing your feelings and thoughts can be very therapeutic.

Having a passion for writing may simply have come naturally. You may have a good imagination and these stories keep coming and you are able to shape them in the form of novels. Whatever your reason, know that there is possibly a long and difficult road ahead, and you will need that passion to keep you going during the bad times.

I would also suggest joining a writing group to receive feedback on the quality of your writing and your style, and you may need to consider coaching if you find that it is not up to standard. In this regard I would suggest the SA Writers Circle (sawriters.org.za) or some other writers groups on Meetup.com.

So what are the problems you are likely to face as a first-time author?

If you follow the traditional publishing route, you will first need to understand that publishers need to know that they will make a profit from the sale of your book and this leads them to be very selective. In other words, they will first evaluate your 'saleability' before committing to any book deal. It certainly helps if you are a well-known personality, famous sportsman or celebrity, but

for most of us, this is not the case, so I will try to highlight the challenges using my own early experiences as a first-time author.

Getting published was even more difficult back then in the early 80's, as there were no computers or internet in South Africa and everything had to be typed and processed by hand. And there was also no data-base of publishers.

So I began by writing down the postal addresses of suitable publishing houses by looking at books in my genre on the shelves of different bookshops. After a few weeks, I had not found a suitable South African publisher and therefore decided to send my first hand-typed manuscript overseas via registered post, which was costly even in those days. You must remember that before computers manuscripts had to be hand-typed on a typewriter and could be very bulky. In my case, it weighed two kilograms.

A waiting game

Over a period of a few years I sent the manuscript to a number of different overseas publishers and waited for a written reply by post. Following up on these submissions was difficult, as the phone details of the publishers were not listed on the printed books, only postal addresses, and in any case, overseas telephone calls were also hugely expensive. The turn-around time for these submissions was about 3 months, if and when they did reply, and in most cases I had to send follow-up letters to get an answer.

So my initial efforts at finding a publisher were unsuccessful and I received a variety of rejection letters.

'Sorry, not applicable for our lists'

'We have decided to remain with our current authors'

One MS was even returned *unopened with the message; 'After careful consideration it is not suitable'*. There was also no guidance, feedback on the quality of the manuscript or encouragement from any of these publishers.

It was only twenty years later with the help of the internet that I managed to find a publisher in Cape Town who accepted my manuscripts and I became a published author.

The situation today

It is a lot easier today. The internet has made publishers more accessible as they now have websites with details on how to correctly submit manuscripts. But there are still many challenges in getting your book accepted by a traditional publisher and achieving sales success.

- **Genre**

For instance, you need to find a publisher who specialises in your genre, which may not be that saleable and your target readership market may be small. Not many people read books today and certain genres are more popular than others. For example, fiction novels are quite popular, but my non-fiction self-help books need time and effort to process and many people are reluctant to give up this amount of time. The following website (may help you to find a suitable publisher: Publisher's Assoc. Of South Africa (PASA)

<http://www.publishsa.co.za/members/category?all=all>

- **Quality**

You also need to make sure that your book is well-written, edited, and sent exactly as each publisher wants it. Even if your manuscript is accepted there is still a lot of work to be done.

- **Building a recognisable public profile**

Your public profile is most important. Even if you do find a publisher, if you are not an established name, bookshops are reluctant to order your book. Your name either sells or it doesn't. Publishers do not market you or create your profile. You as the author have to create a public profile using social media, book launches, public talks and appearances etc. Public appearances in the form of talks to book groups or other organisations help to improve your profile and also provide a 'captured' audience for the sale of your books.

The problem is that you can only draw the crowds once you are well-known, which means that your public appearances will initially not be well-attended and you have to accept this.

- **Unsympathetic bookshops**

My dealings with bookshops have led me to believe that many are only concerned with sales and profits and not really interested in supporting local

authors. Some are still reluctant to arrange book launches unless you are already well-established and they can be sure that it will be successful.

I also find that they generally tend to openly display the most popular novels by famous writers and offer very little in the way of display space to local authors. They will often return your books to your publisher if they are not sold within 6 months and orders for your book (s) soon dwindle

Try to create a demand for your books by using social media and informing those who attend your workshops and talks to specifically order your book at the bookshops.

- **Royalties**

The royalties given to you by a traditional publisher are also very small, usually only about 5% to 10% of the final sale cost of the book. This means that you have to sell large volumes in order to cover your investment costs. The communication between the publisher and yourself with regard to royalties is often poor and you may have to wait many months or even a year to find out what is the pittance you have earned.

- **The dangers of 'vanity' publishing**

Some overseas publishers target writers who desperately want to gain acceptance as a published author by offering 'author packages' which include editing and printing and promise sales and marketing opportunities. These 'packages' are very expensive, as they usually have to be bought in dollars or other strong currencies. Unfortunately, there is no way in which you can monitor the efforts of these companies and if they are actually delivering on their promises, and some South African writers I know have had little success with these costly ventures.

So what other options are there?

The self-publishing model

Self-publishing means you have to do everything yourself, from typing the manuscript to finding an editor and arranging the cover, printing and marketing of your book. Many famous authors have started out by self-publishing (Stephen King and even Mark Twain).

In the early days self-publishing was costly as it had to be done on printing presses and printers did not want to print less than 1000 copies. This made it very expensive. Now with desktop publishing being freely available, smaller publishers have emerged who will print only a few copies using computerized systems. This is called **print-on-demand**.

If you are successful with the self-publishing and marketing of your book, you may eventually attract the attention of a large publishing house which will be prepared to take over the printing, sale and distribution of your book.

There are a number of advantages to self-publishing

- Your royalties are higher as there is no publisher involved
- You have more control over your book and its design than an 'author package' you may have bought
- You can print only as much as you need
- Your books are your property (copyright)

However, there are also a number of drawbacks when it comes to self-publishing

- You will have to pay for your own editing, printing and design work (covers)
- You have to sell to bookshops 'on consignment', which is when they keep the books on the shelves but only pay you a percentage if and when the book is sold
- It is often not easy to convince individual bookshops to take your books, as you still need to build a public profile and do the advertising and marketing of your own books
- Many bookshops are not really interested in self-published books, claiming that the quality and content is substandard. You will therefore have to make sure that your book is well-written and presentable
- **Royalties**

Bookshops also take much of the profits from the sale of the self-published books, usually between 35-45 %, leaving you as the author with all the costs of printing and marketing and very little in the way of royalties

- **Stocks and postage**
- Another problem is that you will have to keep stocks of your own books, go door to door to the different bookshops and attend a variety of shows and festivals to display and try to sell them
- If you take online orders, you will have additional costs with packaging, postage and transport

A new online publishing model (e-books)

With the advent of Kindle and other digital book readers, online publishing of your book as an **e-book** has become a real option. In this case your manuscript is published in the form of an e-book on world-wide platforms and sold internationally through sales portals such as Amazon. Buyers can then order a hard copy on **print-on demand** from Amazon if they so wish

There are a number of benefits of this model:

- **Cost effective**

The e-book option is extremely cost-effective, as, although there are initial costs with editing, design, conversion and uploading, these are far less than the packages offered by overseas 'vanity' publishers.

- **Ease of marketing and sales**

Obviously, efforts to market yourself, such as public talks and appearances have to continue, but this can now be combined with online marketing and the use of social media, as the process has now been simplified with potential buyers only having to log onto your website to get sales links to your e-books. Your book is also instantly available internationally.

- **Print-on demand**

There are also no packaging or postage costs, as the buyer pays for the delivery of hard-copies done by the sales platform in their own country. These print-on-demand copies can now be delivered internationally, including to South Africa.

- **Ease of monitoring**

The online sales portals provide facilities for you to monitor all your sales and income and generate your own reports.

- **Higher income from royalties**

E-books and print-on-demand pay much higher royalties, as there are no middle-men such as bookshops or other overheads involved. Royalties from Amazon can be as high as 70%.

- **No need for storage**

You do not need space for storing e-books and there is no chance of damage or loss due to flooding or theft.

To conclude, all I can say is that if we had had online publishing and print-to-order 30 years ago, I might not have had so much grey hair as I now have. Becoming an author has really become easier and income from my e-books now exceeds that of my hard-copy sales following the traditional route.

If you are interested in this e-book option, I recommend that you contact the team at www.myebook.co.za

Best wishes for your writing career!

Jimmy Henderson