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Self-Published Books: Should Libraries Buy or Not?

Jennifer Culley

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Self-publishing has been around as long as books have existed. Before there were big publishing houses there were authors publishing their own works. Although there is now an abundance of publishers, a large number of self-published books are still being produced each year. There are currently publishers that only assist authors with self-publishing and the numbers are growing with the increase in formats of works, such as print books, e-books, audio books, zines (self-published magazines), etc. Self-published works can also be print-on-demand titles, and are sometimes referred to as vanity publications. There is some belief out there that self-published materials are of lower quality than books published by reputable publishers, that self-publishers have “never enjoyed stellar reputations, and were consistently on the sidelines of the publishing world.” (Dilevko & Dali, 2006, p. 209) Is this really the case? Is this stigma really deserved?

A large number of well-known and popular authors have at some point been self-published. “Among self-published authors are Margaret Atwood, William Blake, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Willa Cather, W. E. B. DuBois [sic], Benjamin Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Beatrix Potter, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Virginia Woolf. More recently, Mawi Asgedom (Of Beetles and Angels), Dave Chilton (The Wealthy Barber), Irma Rombauer (The Joy of Cooking), and James Redfield (The Celestine Prophecy) enjoyed self-publishing success.” (Dilevko & Dali, 2006, p. 209) Self-published titles are also being written by a wide variety of authors including children; there are some that are picked up by publishers after initially being self-published and have gone on to sell very well. (Lodge, 2011, p. 6) Just glancing at this list there is no question that these authors have had success as writers and are some of the biggest names in literature from the last few centuries.

Some reasons for the increase in self-publishing that we are seeing now is that “new authors, and even previously published authors, are having difficulties finding a traditional publisher for their work—often because the work does not match the publisher’s needs at the time, or due to financial restrictions, not any reflection on the book’s quality.” (Glantz, 2013, p. 20) Publishers are only looking for what topics are popular, and what they are sure will sell in the current market. Self-publishing is also known as independent publishing. Independent publishing is where the author is responsible for all parts of the publishing process, such as editing, printing and marketing. (Glantz, 2013, p. 20) There are numerous self-publishers available now such as “AuthorHouse, iUniverse, and Xlibris, all established in the late 1990s.” (Dilevko & Dali, 2006, p. 210) There is also CreateSpace, Blurb, Publish

America, Dorrance, Ivy House, Vantage Press, Archway Publications (a Simon & Schuster affiliate), and Shutterstock to name a few more. They can create print books ranging from novels to coffee table photo books, along with other formats. Businesses such as Amazon help authors to publish and sell print books, through a partnership with CreateSpace, or to produce kindle e-books and/or audio books. (Amazon, 2016)

In an attempt to learn more about self-publishing, an opportunity arose to create a book using one of these self-publishers, Blurb. The online web tool was easy to use and had numerous options and guides to assist in the production of the book. A small photo book was created, for use as a personal gift and not to be mass marketed, although any number of copies could be ordered. There were several options in book size, book covers such as hardback, paperback or book jacket and several paper quality options. The book page guides were similar to PowerPoint slides. The layout for this book was done manually, using personal photos with the page layout options provided by the publisher instead of using their helper. For a fee more aid could be given, through the use of their helper, to assist with organizing and placing photos on the pages. It was easy to upload photos to their web based program, and then drag and drop onto the page. Text can be added to various spots on each page as well as the ability to choose the color for each page, giving the author a lot of choices to personalize the book. The process was easy, and it took more time to choose which photos and text to use than to put it together. It was incredibly affordable: the book was about 7 inches by 7 inches, had glossy pages (about 20 pages) with shipping and handling cost around \$27 and arrived in less than 2 weeks.

Although these photos were of family members, had they been of a trip or location with good quality photographs instead would it have been any different visually than a mass produced photobook that a library purchases or gifts added to collections created by a big publisher? Had it been a novel instead, services that you would find at publishing houses such as editing and cover design would have been more important. However, editing services can be contracted independently from the publishing houses, making it available to self-publishers, as well as artists to assist with book jackets or covers. A great benefit of self-publishing is the amount of power and control the author now has over every aspect of their book being published, and the speed at which a book can be published.

Author G.P. Taylor personally financed the self-publishing of *Shadowmancer*. *Shadowmancer*, a children’s fantasy novel gained popularity by word of mouth, as the

popularity grew it drew the attention of British publisher Faber and Faber. It became a huge best seller and later was also published several other companies including G. P. Putnam's Sons, as well as launching Taylors career as an author. Self-published books have gained publishers attention, and "[l]arge publishing houses are keeping tabs on self-published authors and smaller imprints, eager to snap up successful books." (Clee, 2007, p. 28)

There are many types of materials that are currently being self-published, including handbooks and manuals, popular works, biographies or autobiographies. "Universities, community colleges, and colleges, taken together account for 62% of the total number of held 'popular works,' many of which...are histories of the United States, Europe, and Asia." (Dilevko & Dali, 2006, p. 224) Some of these histories are personal accounts, which add first-hand experience to the field and unique works of value to collections. An example of an academic university that has self-published holdings is The University of Southern Mississippi, a doctoral granting institution located in Hattiesburg, Mississippi with an enrollment of about 15,000 students. The University of Southern Mississippi has numerous self-published books in their collections, including the following publishers:

Publisher Books in Southern Mississippi Libraries

AuthorHouse - 70
Blurb - 1
Createspace - 10
Dorrance - 89
iUniverse - 66
Ivy House - 1
Publish America - 3
Vantage Press - 200
Xlibris - 30

According to Sarah Glazer, Vantage Press, a vanity publisher, was printing between 300 and 600 titles a year around 2005. (Glazer, 2005, p. 10) Unfortunately, as a result of bad business practices and fines incurred from a lost court case regarding these practices, the publisher has since closed. (Milliot, 2012) Despite this one vanity press closing there are still an abundant and growing amount of self-published items continuing to be published. "In 2008, the production of print-on-demand books surpassed traditional book publishing for the first time and since then its growth has been staggering." (Depsey, 2010) According to Bowker there has been an increase in self-published titles from 2013 to 2014 by 17% with approximately 460,000 titles being published in 2014. (Cassell, 2015, p. 27) With so many works being published, libraries must at least take notice of them.

Quite a few of the self-published items found in The University of Southern Mississippi collections were located in Special Collections, particularly the Mississippiana collection. This is a collection of materials by Mississippi authors or with content related to the state of Mississippi. Collections such as this are prime opportunities to collect self-published materials, where subject or author are the

focus of the collection policy. The collection development policy for The University of Southern Mississippi does not include any language that discourages selection of self-published materials, however, in conversations with librarian liaisons over the years it appeared there was an aversion to acquiring them. Although, requests do come in for them on occasion and self-published titles that are received as gifts are frequently added to collections. Items in the general collection in Cook Library at The University of Southern Mississippi include Mississippi authors including faculty and cover a wide variety of topics. There are firsthand accounts of time spent in prisons or concentration camps, as well as other books on events in history. There are also fiction books, including plays, as well as non-fiction such as self-help books, in depth literature reviews and books about subjects such as physics. During a search for self-published titles in the catalog at The University of Southern Mississippi several e-book titles also showed up through a subscription package. However, the subscription service does not note in any way that these are self-published and unfortunately does not keep track of how many they provide in the subscription plan.

Although scholars who are on the tenure track at colleges and universities may tend to shy away from self-publishing while working to receive tenure, once tenure is granted they may be more open to publishing in this route. A similar example of where these scholars are self-publishing is in the creation of Open Educational Resources, also known as OERs. The University of Southern Mississippi created the Open Textbook Initiative for 2015-16 academic year. The Initiative was designed to assist faculty with creating open access textbooks by providing financial support, 50% from the Office of the Provost, 50% from University Libraries, and is administered by University Libraries. Faculty members submitted proposals and grants ranging from \$400 to \$1,600 were awarded to the winners. The objectives for the initiative were to "Save students money by eliminating expensive, commercial textbooks; Improve student learning with tailored curricular resources; Support faculty experimentation with open educational resources; Encourage an institutional culture that supports open sharing of scholarship." (J. Cromwell, personal communication, July 1, 2016) Currently there are three open source textbooks being created through this program with a scheduled launch date of fall 2016 and will be accessible in Aquila Digital Community, The University of Southern Mississippi's institutional repository. The Initiative so far seems to be successful and there are plans to repeat it for the 2016-2017 academic year.

During a brief stint as the Book Review Editor for *Mississippi Libraries*, with a responsibility for editing book reviews submitted by reviewers, a reviewer became upset that they received a self-published book to review. The reviewer was not happy that the book was self-published and was very critical of the quality of the editing. They did not feel it appropriate to review self-published titles at all. While this particular book may have been of questionable quality, the process of reviewing books--including self-published works--is how librarians find materials of quality

for their collections. Reviews are valuable resources for selectors of library materials, and reviews whether good or bad are helpful in collection development decisions. Reviews of self-published works are particularly helpful for libraries that are open to purchasing these types of materials as “self-published books are usually under-publicized and if readers don’t request them, libraries won’t order them.” (Hayward, 1992, p. 290)

Not all publications that review books will review vanity publications. “*New York Times*, have longstanding policies whereby they do not review books published by self-publishers.” (Glazer, 2005, p.10) However, not all publications have this policy. There are several journals that do review self-published books, such as *The Horn Book Magazine*, *The Horn Book Guide*; *Kirkus: Kirkus Indie*, *Library Media Connection*, and *PW Select*. (Glantz, 2013, p. 21) The ones listed here are mainly focused on materials appropriate for children or for school libraries. There are also several blogs that also review self-published books such as; “Book Blogger Directory (<http://bookbloggerdirectory.wordpress.com>); Book Blog, the Children’s Books group (<http://bookblogs.nihg.com/group/childrensbooks>). Indie Reader (<http://indiereader.com>).” (Glantz, 2013, p. 21) Although not specifically labeled as self-published, a cursory database search for book reviews of Createspace self-published books returned reviews in a variety of journals. Some of these journals include peer-reviewed, such as: *Heythrop Journal*, *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *Public Works Management & Policy*, *Adult Learning*, *Religious Studies Review*, and *American Music Teacher*.

Reading reviews isn’t the only way librarians can research self-published titles for purchase. Many libraries, as part of their collection development guidelines, search for award winning materials. There are some awards that include self-published works. One such award is the SELF-e Literary Award, an award given by the BCALA, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and Biblioboard. Mitchell Davis, the BiblioBoard founder and Chief Business Officer, states that “[a]s publishing continues to evolve in the digital era, it is clear that self-published authors will play an ever-increasing role in the literary landscape.” (Verma, 2015, p. 19)

Awards aren’t the only way that SELF-e is helping authors. “Smashwords partners with OverDrive and Baker & Taylor to help self-published authors get their books into libraries...indie [independent] authors everywhere may be able to get books into libraries via Self-e, a new collaboration between *Library Journal* and app and e-publishing platform Biblioboard.” (Sargent, 2015, p. 35) SEFL-e is for electronic versions of self-published books and caters towards public libraries only. (Anderson, 2015) In addition to SELF-e there are other companies that offer assistance to self-publishers in marketing their books such as BookStub, which is “an e-book marketing tool that provides self-published authors a way to distribute promotional copies of e-books. A BookStub is a wallet-

sized plastic card featuring an image of the author’s book cover on one side, and an individual product code, QR code, and download instructions on the other.” (Boretz, 2012, p. 2)

According to Betty Kelley Sargent (The founder and CEO of Bookworks, the Self-Publishers Association) the SELF-e platform is currently in beta testing, and participants at this level are: Arizona State Library, Cuyahoga County Public Library, the Los Angeles Public Library, the San Diego County Library, and the State of Massachusetts. (Sargent, 2015, p. 35) It is with great hope that SELF-e will create a more inclusive environment, and will prove to be a great tool to assist independent authors in connecting with libraries. (Verma, 2015, p. 19) Bringing more attention to indie self-publishers is becoming a reality today, according to a newsletter sent out recently from BiblioBoard which states that “[m]ore than 150 school and public libraries across North America have signed up to host Indie Author Day events on October 8th[2016].” (Biblioboard, personal communication, June 30, 2016)

Authors who do wish to self-publish should make sure that they are aware of what buyers, such as libraries, are looking for. They should make sure that the “price is right, find a real distributor, hire an editor, hire a designer for your cover, do NOT contact the buyer more than three times,” and they “need to pay attention and try their best to match the market.” (Joachim, 2013, p. 68) Self-publishing impacts collection development in all types of libraries. According to Shelley Glantz in her article “Do Self-Published Books Have A Place In Your Library?”, traditionally published titles are usually more expensive than self-published. However, this should not be the only deciding factor when selecting titles for purchase and libraries need to make sure they select titles that maintain the needs, standards and quality of the library. (Glantz, 2013, p. 21)

According to Jane Friedman “[s]elf-published books need to succeed on some level or be betted by reviewers...” (Friedman, 2015) to get the attention of programs like SELF-e. A major hurdle for authors is to get their books in a libraries catalog. Once titles have records in OCLC their visibility increases and authors can show that there are libraries who are collecting their works. As an acquisitions librarian I have had a self-published author state this very idea. He wanted to gift copies of his book to our library, because we perform original cataloging and can put the record for his title in OCLC. Once there he can go to public libraries and show them that we own his book to justify why they may need to purchase it as well.

With so many opportunities to publish and to create high quality works, libraries need to take a serious look at self-published materials. Famous librarian Nancy Pearl is quoted as stating that “you can find nicely written, well-plotted self-published titles pretty much as easily as you can find badly written and poorly conceived traditionally published titles.” (Pearl, 2012, p. 22) Good quality self-published books can contribute a lot of value to collections,

but may be difficult to find or distinguish from traditionally published titles.

Simply identifying self-published books can be problematic because many publishers do not explicitly state that an item is self-published. Self-published works frequently have a publisher imprint, which complicates the issue unless one is familiar with the myriad of self-publishing outlets available. When ordering materials, it can be difficult to distinguish between some self-published items versus books published by small publishing houses. Some book vendors do not stock self-published books and as a result, they do not show up in those vendor's new book lists. Libraries usually do not receive catalogs from self-publisher presses. Many journals and other book review resources do not review self-published books, which makes it difficult to know what is available or to even find self-published materials.

There may be some issues with collecting or avoiding vanity or self-published books, such as the fact that they are difficult to tell apart from those printed by small publishers, and many known works are reprinted by print-on-demand services. While there may be some lower quality self-published books, not all self-published are of lower quality. Libraries should use the same collection development policies to evaluate these materials that they do when evaluating materials from major publishing houses. With the increase in the amount of self-published materials on the market it would be a folly for libraries to exclude them when there could be so many that could add great value to collections. With so many opportunities to market self-published items and publications willing to now review these items, visibility will certainly increase and make it easier for libraries to find these items. There is, or could be, a place for self-published items in almost any type of library, be it academic, public or school libraries.

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