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CURLING UP WITH A GOOD KINDLE

The Changing Face of the Publishing Industry



Walking through the streets of Doylestown in the 1930s and 40s, you might have encountered Pulitzer Prize-winning authors and playwrights such as James A. Michener, Oscar Hammerstein, George S. Kaufman and Pearl S. Buck. Due to its proximity to New York City and the serenity of country living, Bucks County became a popular place for well-established literary figures to call home.

And while this area is still dubbed as a “genius belt” of artists and writers, the days of Michener and his contemporaries hacking away on typewriters next to trashcans overflowing with crumbled white paper are long gone. Today, technology is reinventing the way writers work and is opening up

alternative routes to the traditional methods of publishing books.

With the ever-increasing advancements in online technology, book publishing has changed dramatically. Authors now have the ability to self-publish. Readers can use digital devices, like Amazon’s Kindle or Sony’s Reader, to enjoy their favorite works instead of buying of physical copies.

But concerns are being voiced about these unconventional approaches to books and the effects they may have on the traditional publishing industry, as well as the quality of what is actually being published.

“My fear with technology, as it applies to writing in general, is that we are just going to whittle

our attention spans down to the point that long-form story telling isn’t quite what it once was.” says Mike Sielski, sports columnist for Calkins Media and author of “Fading Echoes,” a book highlighting two local football rivals turned war heroes. “However, from a marketing standpoint, the power of the internet is unbelievable. I have a ‘Fading Echoes’ Facebook page, and it has been a great way to promote the book. I just wonder if someday the quality of what we are producing will be affected by technology.”

Still, for all the new technology available, Sielski believes the conventional avenues still apply: “I would like to think if you have a good idea and can write well, a book publisher is going to find you and want to put your book out.”

Traditional Means

As a general rule, aspiring authors attempting to get their work published through a publishing house start by submitting a book proposal. A professional proposal usually consists of several elements that may include: a general overview of the book; the market or audience to whom the book would appeal; a description of the competition – differentiating the book from other similar books on the market; an author biography; chapter summaries and one or two sample chapters; details on the delivery; and the expected length and time frame to complete the writing.

In most cases, a literary agent is sought out by the author to read proposals or manuscripts and decide whether they can bring the book to

market. Editors at publishing houses often deal with agents – with whom they already have relationships – and serve as a liaison between authors and publishers. If there is interest by the publisher, a contract and negotiations ensue, where details like advances, royalties, content, printing, marketing and distribution are worked out.

The process of writing and editing the actual book – if a manuscript is not already completed – commences after the final contracts and details are approved. The time frame for this arduous process, from proposal to finished product on the shelves of a bookstore, varies greatly and may take a year or more to complete.

Print-on-Demand and Self-Publishing

Print-on-demand services utilize digital printing technology to provide publishing services to writers who want to individually print books in small quantities. They range from services like Lulu.com, which offers free online templates that allow anyone to upload and format a book that can then be ordered from the service’s Web Site, to companies like Xlibris, who – in addition to self-publishing services and e-books – will include editing, custom cover design, enhanced marketing and other extras.

Most of these types of publishing companies do not typically screen content and also charge a fee for production, whether printing individual copies or minimal print runs. Editing, cover design, marketing and promotions are additional charges or purchased from another independent provider.

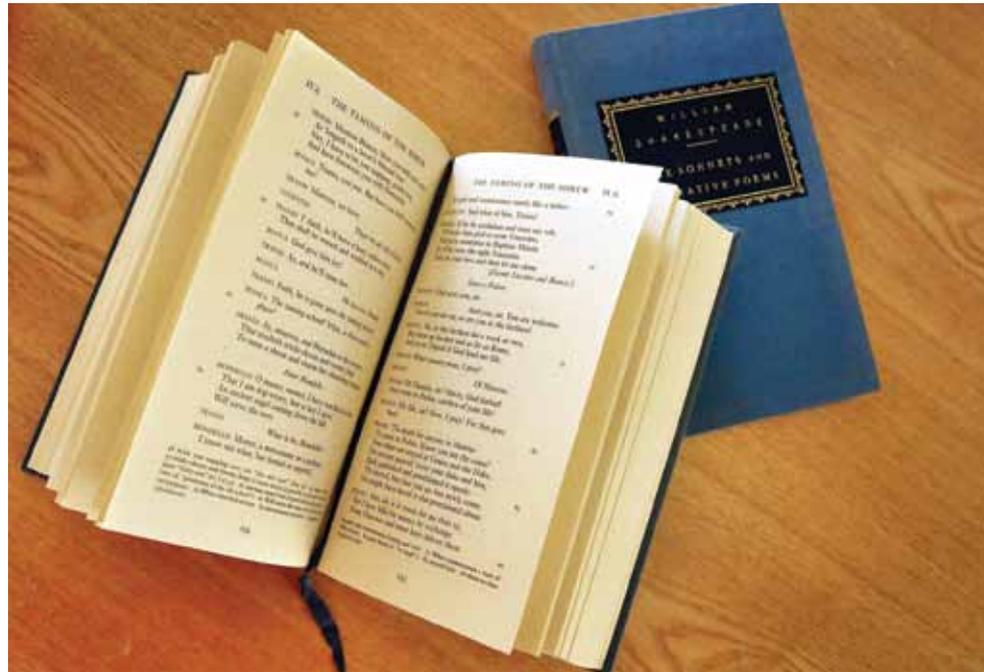
For writers who don't want to use commercial publishers or who want to produce a personal memoir or book for private distribution, a print-on-demand service can be a good option. Since the book is produced only when ordered, there is no excess inventory to sell or production costs to recoup.

Self-publishing companies are increasing in popularity and vary greatly in available services and practices. Print-on-demand services do provide a form of self-publishing, but there are still important differences between the two. Generally, self-publishing companies charge an initial fee and then produce print-runs, or large orders, just like a traditional publishing house.

With self-publishing, the writer controls all aspects of the publishing process, from cover art to font to pricing. The writer keeps all revenue from sales, retains all rights and has full ownership of the book, including the ISBN number, a unique numeric code that identifies all commercial books. Conversely, with most print-on-demand services, the company owns the ISBN and sometimes has a claim on digital or electronic publishing rights.

E-books to s to 'Vooks'

Electronic versions of print books, or e-books, that can be downloaded and read on a computer or device like the Kindle or Reader are becoming more prevalent as mainstream consumer options. While readers can purchase an e-book on disk, the most popular method of obtaining an e-book is to purchase a downloadable file from a Web site or online book retailer. Some e-books can be downloaded for free or at reduced cost, however, prices for many e-books – especially bestsellers –



are similar to those of hardcover books and sometimes higher.

Although it's not necessary to use a reader device in order to read an e-book – most can be read as PDF files – they are popular because they are smaller, portable and offer options similar to those of a traditional book. Electronic readers can bookmark pages, make notes, highlight passages and save selected text. Typically, a hand-held reader weighs from about 22 ounces to three or four pounds and can store from 4,000 to over 500,000 pages of text and graphics, depending on its specifications. A popular feature is its backlit screen, which allows for reading in the dark.

A brand new medium that allows consumers to combine the experience of reading and watching videos has recently been introduced in the form

a "vook." Interspersing video footage amid electronic text, a "vook" can be viewed online or on handheld devices, although not all are compatible with the popular Kindle or Reader.

Past, Present and Future

"Technology has made it possible for an author to do themselves, everything that only a publisher could do in the past," says R. Foster Winans, author, former columnist for the Wall Street Journal and president of Winans Kuenstler Publishing.

Winans' Doylestown-based firm offers high-end publishing services that include ghost writing, editing, design, production, distribution and marketing to professionals and authors who want to publish books. "It is a huge change that 10 or 15 years ago writers who never had a chance to get published or get their book in print can now do it

today," continues Winans. "I think it's an incredibly good thing for people to be able to express themselves and tell their stories."

Even with the onslaught of new technologies and ebook sales on the rise, book publishing still remains a strong industry. According to figures released by the Association of American Publishers in July, book sales were up by 1.9 percent for the year, and monthly sales figures still total in the billions.

This is good news for independent retailers like the Doylestown Bookshop. "We are just starting to see the impact of technology on book sales," says Shilough Hopwood, book buyer at the local retailer. "The decline in wanting to purchase physical books may be true for the casual reader, but for someone who loves books and is a die hard reader, electronics may not affect how they buy and read. I think it could eventually be similar to what happened with the retail music business. People with a passion for music are still buying CD's and records, but casual music listeners have switched to iPods and downloads."

No matter how technology alters the future of book publishing, the rich literary culture that dates back to the days of Michener seems alive and well with many writers and readers in this area who continue to have a passion for the written word. "There are always going to be people who want real books," adds Hopwood. "Fortunately, here in Doylestown, we have a demographic that really appreciates the look and feel of a good book." 

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