



Self-publishing: time for a reality check

Liz Thomson

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Yet another article in a national newspaper suggests self-publishing offers an easy route to success. Not so, argues Liz Thomson.

An **article** across two half-pages of yesterday's *Observer* claimed that ,when it comes to self-publishing, "women lead the pack". The piece - topped off by large photos of Lisa Genova, Barbara Freethy and the inevitable E L James - was written by Maggie Jones, occasioned by last week's Westminster Media Forum on the prospects for books, publishing and libraries, and it quoted research by Alison Baverstock, associate professor of publishing at Kingston University.

That research, Jones reported, "showed a clear gender split, with 65% of self-publishers being women and 35% men. Nearly two-thirds of all self-publishers are aged 41 to 60, with a further 27% aged over 61. Half are in full-time employment, 32% have a degree and 44% a higher degree." All fine and dandy and entirely plausible, though we do need to know who, if anyone, funded the research and how big the sample was.

In any event, Baverstock refuted the view that self-publishing was an act of last resort and that "as vanity publishers" they "may not have much formal education". James, she said, showed "self-belief" and an understanding of her (as yet potential) audience.

However, let's leave gender out of it, for there are plenty of men who self-publish, and my thoughts are not about male/female but rather about the business of self-publishing.

The use of the term "vanity publishers" is interesting (it's not in quotes so it's unclear if Baverstock herself used it) since it has been largely displaced by "self-publishing" which acknowledges that it is these days entirely possible to write and digitally publish a book without intervention from any other human while avoiding the opprobrium of "vanity publishing". However, "self-publishing" is clearly already suspect, for **Daily (W)rite** blogged that she prefers "independently published" because, after all, she uses the service of a freelance editor.

In theory at least, established publishers bring to any project they take on a package of skills, not least editing. That editing seems to be (in Britain at least) a dying art is a subject for another day, but Baverstock's research suggested that, in 2012, 59% of those self-publishing had used a freelance editor - ergo their work attains parity with a novel from HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, Penguin *et al*. This is disingenuous: editors in this instance are merely hired hands, their job to flatter, to attempt to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Two well-known agents, one on each side of the Atlantic who spent brief periods as editors for hire during lean times, told me what a depressing experience it was. Both felt sullied by it, aware of the charade in which they were engaging.

To get back to the *Observer* report: Baverstock alleges that "traditional publishers" have for too long ignored "respectable soft porn" and "gentle memoirs of everyday disasters, such as losing a child" - a highly debatable claim. However, she then goes on to make some rather valid points: that editors come from a "very limited gene pool ... all agree on what they like ... they know each other, and are not necessarily in



touch with popular taste". If we're talking, as Baverstock undoubtedly is, of mainstream London publishing, that "gene pool" indeed remains, even today, overwhelmingly white, often public school and Oxbridge-educated and mostly metropolitan. But it's not so much that they "agree on what they like" - rather that they behave like sheep, terrified of missing out on the next big thing.

For example, once Random House had signed E L James, every publishing house in town scrabbled to find its own would-be soft-porn super-seller. HarperCollins even signed a "how-to" manual, presumably to help readers replicate the *Fifty Shades* escapades. I'd wager that almost every one of them turned in a limp performance. Similar panic has taken hold in the wake of other phenomena - there were numerous *Da Vinci Code* and *Harry Potter* lookalikes for example, all now long forgotten. Publishers, eager to concentrate on a few "bankers", are always worried about missing out on "the next big thing".

Baverstock then goes on to argue that the new ecosystem threatened agents dependant for a living on a percentage of client success. I'm not sure of the extent to which agents feel threatened by the rise of self-publishing *per se*, though like publishers they trawl the ether for newbie authors on the brink of success. Signing one is a quick-fix - a rapid return for little or no work, as E L James proved. (Rarely does anyone undertake any further editing - why bother, if the author is already selling?) No, what keeps agents and publishers awake at night is the much bigger threat from Amazon (an enabler of self-publishing to be sure), whose terms are punitive. They probably remember Jeff Bezos' stated aim: "I see the elimination of gatekeepers everywhere," he told Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* in May 2012. That would mean, Friedman wrote, no agent, no publisher, no paper - just an author, who gets most of the royalties, plus Amazon and the reader. Chilling, no?

Fear of the future combined with the realities of a present in which both sales and advances are down has led publishers and agents to dally in areas from which they would once have fled - setting up publishing courses which are often run from their offices and for which aspirant authors pay a pretty penny. Faber "graduate" S J Watson is a soaring success but he's in a minority. Penguin even bought a self-publishing company, Author Solutions, against which any number of class actions are now pending in the US. The *Guardian* offers a one-day course on the "Secrets of Successful Self-Publishing with Ben Galley" (£249), and there's even an MA in Self-Publishing at the University of Central Lancashire (£5,000 a year).

BookExpoAmerica, the London Book Fair and Frankfurt all now feel obliged to make self-publishing a focus of their programmes for the simple reason that all of them need to fill their floor space and generate revenue at a time when consolidated traditional publishers are taking less space. And *Kirkus*, once the gold-standard of independent-minded pre-publication reviewing, now offers itself as a service for self-published authors: depending on how soon you need it, the cost is \$425 or \$575, for which "a qualified reviewer" will write "a full review (approximately 250-350 words)".

Self-publishing offers "high satisfaction", Baverstock asserts, adding that "the author with experience of self-publishing is empowered" - though surely only if their self-published book is a success. And the fact remains that the chances of real success are *infinitesimal*. Self-publishing - even if the book is half-way decent - is not easy, but that's *not* what you're led to believe. There's now too much at stake. A whole new industry has grown up in which there are many co-dependents. No one wants to pull the rug or say the emperor has no clothes.

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