The Perks and Perils of POD and Self-Publishing
By Joni Sensel, author and Dream Factory Books founder
www.jonisensel.com

Introduction
Self-publishing resources have exploded in recent years, thanks to new technology and the Internet. More writers are trying this course, sometimes after becoming frustrated with the slow and very selective processes of traditional (e.g., New York) publishers. Self-publishing can be a rewarding experience or a nightmare, with plenty of case histories on both sides.

The information to follow, based on the content of a seminar I presented at a 2007 writers' conference, is intended to help writers interested in exploring the self-publishing option. My intent is to alert you to important considerations and perhaps help ensure a more positive self-publishing experience for those who do choose that route. I have publishing credits and experience in both realms, so I think I have a fair view from the middle. (Admittedly, if I have a bias, it is *against* self-publishing for writers with certain goals; I think my reasons are clear below.) This document is not even remotely comprehensive, but can provide a starting point for your own research into what's appropriate for you. Good luck!

Definitions
Terms (and marketing hype) get quickly confused. For the purposes of this document only:
1. Self-publishing: Acting as the publisher for your own book, including, at minimum, paying for book production, and potentially including starting an independent press, obtaining design & printing services, and managing distribution and fulfillment. (In more general use, "self-publishing" defines anyone who uses a vanity press OR who goes the more labor-intensive route of starting their own press.)
2. Vanity or subsidy press: A firm that provides a menu of services for (paying) authors but that becomes the publisher of record. May or may not use POD technology. Examples: AuthorHouse, Publish America, XLibris, iUniverse, Trafford, BookSurge (Amazon's), Xulon. They may call themselves "supported self-publishing" or "not a vanity press" — but they are.
3. Self-publishing services company: A firm that provides a menu of services (possibly but not necessarily including POD) for paying self-publishers — but that does NOT become the publisher of record. Examples: booksjustbooks.com, JorlanPublishing.com, Lulu.com, cafepress.com
4. Print on demand (POD): A technology for printing that entails very small print runs, usually with electronic or paper plates (vs. offset printing) for lower per-copy costs. Even traditional publishers may use POD.
5. Web or internet publishing: Making your work available on the internet, either yourself or through an established internet journal such as *Slate* or many online fantasy journals. Beyond the scope of this document. (In relatively few cases does simply posting your work yourself actually qualify as publication, but it depends on the rights you sell or give away. Consult an arts attorney if you're interested or concerned.)

Quickie case histories
I know or have been in contact with several self-published writers. A completely unscientific sampling:
- I created a small press, with help from a grant, and self-published two children's hardcover picture books with environmental themes. I have a background in communications, printing, and marketing, so I knew I could do it. One of the books sold out (several thousand copies) and the other won a national award, so I consider it a success.
- I have a good friend who self-published non-fiction with Infinity Publishing. The book is related to her business and sells primarily through her business contacts. Though she's hit a few wrinkles, notably bookstore distribution, she's happy, has sold about 600 copies, and would do it again.

- Other writers who have used BookSurge and Xulon have had lots of problems with quality (as in, pages falling out of most books); distribution (e.g., paid for returnability and bookstores still would not order them because the computer system said non-returnable); and service once the book was printed (e.g., nobody at the "publisher" answered the phone when booksellers called to order, so the booksellers gave up).
- I know of at least two writers who have used iUniverse very happily. Still, I personally would not recommend this service for reasons that will become clear below.

A few sobering facts:
(Culled primarily from vanity press and self-publishing service web sites and online interviews with their principals. The numbers may change; the point is that self-publishing is not a quick route to fame and fortune for any but a few rare exceptions.)
- The average self-published or POD book sells between 75-150 copies, with more than half of those bought by the author.
- Vanity press costs may range from $0 - $5000 or more, depending on the services you need – PLUS the cost of the finished books.
- Illustrated children's books make up one quarter of Xlibris sales, and the average price for a standard 32-page book is $45 – 90 (vs. a $14.95 or $16.95 industry standard).
- Only about 0.1 percent (fewer than 20) of iUniverse's 18,000 active titles have national (brick & mortar) Barnes & Noble distribution.
- iUniverse claims that roughly one book out of every hundred they publish (4 of 400 per month) gets picked up by commercial publishers. There are reasons to suspect that claim, but even if you accept it, that's a rate of about 1% — not coincidentally, about the same rate that many traditional publishers and agents say they accept from their slush piles. The inescapable conclusion? See the next point…
- Between 1- 5% of self-published books are "worth reading," based on the experience and judgment of blogger POD-DY Mouth (who formally searches the haystack for needles and reports on them in her blog).
- Traditional publishers aren't likely to sit up and notice before you've sold a minimum of 1,000 (some say 2,000 or 3,000) books – and then they may fear you've already saturated your market.
- Still, there are some high-profile examples of self-published books becoming best-sellers, being picked up by traditional houses, or both. It does happen. But those cases are high-profile specifically because they are infrequent.

Pitfalls of vanity presses (with or without POD technology):
- Although they may pretend (e.g., PublishAmerica), they do NOT make selective acquisitions. They take all comers with money; acceptance is not a measure of quality.
- They become the publisher of record. Even when you pay for cover design, etc., they retain all rights. This can make life difficult for you if your book IS particularly successful.
- The majority set the book's sales price, often over market, which can make them harder to sell.
- You often must pay set-up and/or printing costs AND per copy. You may get a royalty, but they get any actual profits. In most business ventures, if you put up the capital, YOU get the profits.
- Their books are usually non-returnable, so bookstores can be VERY reluctant to carry them. You can sometimes elect "returnable" options (from free to $700), but bookstores may not recognize it.
- Bookstores usually won't order at all unless you have distribution arrangements with Baker & Taylor or another third-party firm. (Your local bookstores may be willing to deal with you directly, though.)
- The only benefit of vanity presses is that they will do virtually all of the work for you – at a price. Gross generalization and my opinion only: It's not worth it. You can get similar service at similar prices and retain much greater control of your work with a self-publishing service firm.

All that said, I've talked to writers who are perfectly happy with their vanity press experiences. The primary perks: Ease and speed. No querying, no rejections, and you get your book in your hands (probably) faster than if you try the traditional route.

Pitfalls of using a self-publishing services firm or creating your own press:

- You may remain the publisher of record (which is good), but you must do all the work and handle all administration, legal, tax issues. And depending on your book and situation, it can be a LOAD of work that takes certain expertise to do successfully. But you can often buy many of the services, too.
- If you use POD printing, you'll have to research carefully to get books that meet market quality standards (but it is possible).
- POD titles are considerably more expensive per copy, virtually regardless of quantity, but your overall investment will probably be lower.
- POD distribution is rarely, if ever, available for illustrated children's books. (In other words, the author must simply buy a bunch and sell them directly).
- Web "distribution" (even Amazon) is highly overrated in practice. Just because it's on a web page somewhere hardly means that people will a) find it or b) buy it. Do everything you can to get traditional distribution through a wholesaler such as Baker & Taylor or a distribution company like IPG (Independent Publishers Group).
- Trade paperback may be your only cover option, which eliminates your book from most libraries, who need hardcovers for their lasting power.
- Traditional publishers may be less interested in hearing from you because a) you've muddied the rights and marketing waters and b) they may think you're a goof. But some agents and editors welcome self-published books rather than manuscript submissions; it's roulette. You never know.

The primary perks: Control (plus ease, compared to traditional publishing).

Recommendations for safe passage:
1. Know what you want (or will settle for) and its opportunity cost/price.
   a. *Long-term writing career? Critical acclaim? Multiple books? Wide audience? Your book in bookstores?* In my opinion, you are MUCH better off trying the traditional route for at least five years.
   b. *To share your creative work or family stories with family or friends? To publish your poetry collection? To hold your book in your hands with the smallest possible effort and cost? (Or as fast as possible because you have a terminal disease?) To fill a need in a niche, non-fiction market (especially if you have a platform such as a lecture circuit to sell from)?* Self-publishing might be right for you.
   c. *To have your self-published book "discovered" as a shortcut to a New York publisher?* Buy a lottery ticket instead; your odds are probably better.

   Ask yourself: Why do even self-published authors consider the height of success a contract with a traditional publisher?

2. Take your time. Do your homework, looking WAY beyond price. Don't assume that a low or no up-front fee is necessarily the wisest course – it may mean your paperback retails for $35, which nobody but your mother will pay.

3. Find a service that will allow you to be publisher of record, that is, to obtain the ISBN and the LAN barcode yourself. (Or Lulu.com will resell you an ISBN that is registered to you rather than them. Same idea.)

4. Ensure distribution through Baker and Taylor – even set up your own account if you can.

5. Ensure returnability if you want any bookstore distribution.

6. Get all prices up front. Watch for nickel-and-diming tactics.

7. Review samples for quality and sturdiness. Consider purchasing a few books from your selected service, if they won't provide free samples. Ask for customer references and contact them. If they won't or can't give you any, go somewhere else. (Many services have blogs or other means, but beware of bias. The firm might simply remove any posts from unhappy customers.)

8. Get a contract and read it. Try to get EVERYTHING in writing, not just the web pages. Realities don't always matching marketing hype. Enter multi-year contracts with your eyes open.

9. Pay attention to page counts (full signatures) and industry standards; they do matter, not only to price but also to the professionalism of the product, which will affect sales and the ability to get reviews.

10. Don't embarrass yourself by skimping on proofreading or other quality controls. Pay a pro.

11. Be prepared for distribution disappointments and stigma; that's where the persistence you could have used on New York must go. The bad reputation of self-published authors is somewhat warranted, unfortunately, based on overwhelming production of lousy books and bad experiences that booksellers often have with pushy self-published authors. Make sure you stand out from that crowd.

Resources
- *The Self-Publishing Manual* (15th edition) by Dan Poynter. Highly recommended for showing you the value of doing the work yourself, and in many cases, exactly how to do it.
- *Complete Guide to Self Publishing* (4th edition) by Marilyn and Tom Ross.
- Yahoo's (and the Ross') self-publishing group and listserve; subscribe by e-mailing Self-Publishing-subscribe@yahoogroups.com Tons of good information and experienced people to learn from.
- Educational links on booksjustbooks.com and on www.writeandpublishyourbook.com (run by Infinity Publishing)
- If I haven't convinced you of the value of retaining the publisher role (e.g., using booksjustbooks.com, Lulu, or CafePress), and a vanity press seems right for you, try Jorlan Publishing, Infinity Publishing, or iUniverse.

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Whatever your decision, good luck!