

# The Dickey Biz of Self-Publishing

## Just Because You Can, Doesn't Mean You Should ... Without Some Help: Why Self-Published Books Aren't Quite the Next Best Thing

by [Amy Atkins](#)

They tumble down the back of a 6-foot-tall bookshelf behind my desk at work. They cascade from the top of a 5-foot-tall bookcase in front of me. They line the shelves of a 14-foot built-in at home lovingly referred to as The Behemoth and are wedged between Ayn Rand, Charles Bukowski, an enviable collection of sci-fi, old college texts and paperback copies of nearly every novel Jonathan Kellerman has written.

Their lack of correct syntax and grammar, their abundance of exclamation points and their disregard for continuity make them embarrassing cousins sitting among their brethren. But for the past few years, I've flipped through them, sure that hidden somewhere amid the stacks, the muddy paragraphs and convoluted plot lines is a gem. And while occasionally I come across one I'm able to finish, to date, the diamonds in the rough remain buried. They are self-published books.

I read so many of them--especially the ones by local authors--because I fear that if I give in to my desire to throw the whole lot in a recycling bin, I'll miss one so fabulous that it will shoot up the bestseller list and I'll be left at the bottom staring at the review copy I never cracked open. So I soldier on.

I've read about a guy who narrates the story of his past life as a Macedonian warrior who is married to Nefertiti, fights alongside Alexander the Great and is the only straight man in all of Greece. I've read about a killer Santa who terrorizes his village of elves. I've read about a group of narcissistic hipsters dying mysteriously. I've read a few romance novels and semi-autobiographical accounts of life in gay porn in which the characters' sexual exploits are always relayed in euphemistically flowery language. I've read maudlin memoirs, pointless poetry and horrible horror. With each turning page of these self-published novels, I'm a little less sure of finding the one that shines.

The problem isn't always the stories. As a matter of fact, the ideas contained within the books are often novel--as in new, interesting. The problem is that by the time I get around misspellings, confusing grammar and things like characters' names changing or swapping mid-story, I'm as lost as a kitten in a corn maze. One good edit by someone these authors trust--and someone who is willing to tell them the cold, hard truth--could have saved these books from the box marked "take to thrift store."

Middleton author Benjamin Sheppard is one such author. He's a guy with a story to tell and, not unlike a musician who records his own CD, saw self-publishing through Publish

America as the quickest way to get his books out there. But in his quest to see his words in print, his 2007 *The South Castor Project* and 2009's *The History of the Twill Massacre* fell prey to issues of continuity, punctuation and grammar, making his books cumbersome reads. In *The History of the Twill Massacre*, character names are switched, flashbacks reveal dates that don't coincide with earlier passages and anachronistic language is distracting. Sheppard said he didn't even realize how bad the problems were until after he'd ordered several copies printed.

"[Publish America's] performance as far as editing was terrible," Sheppard said. "The editing they said they did ... I re-read it after it was published and it was terrible."

Sheppard is a fine example of why, however obvious it may seem, an author really does have to be involved in all aspects of publishing his or her book. Sheppard is currently working on a third book, a story about a vigilante with psychological problems who speaks directly to the reader. Sheppard said his first expense toward the new book will be paying an editor.

Laura Delaney, owner of [Rediscovered Bookshop](#), carries self-published books written by local authors in her store. She also offers a number of workshops for genre writers (mystery, children's books, non-fiction) who think they want to go that direction. She warns that new and/or unknown authors have to be extremely vigilant when navigating the world of publishing. Different options are available, and authors need to understand why one way may work better for them than another.

Beyond traditional publishers at one end of the spectrum (an author gets an agent, sells the rights to the book and receives royalties) and self-publishing or "vanity press" at the other (the costs and the marketing are all the responsibility of the author), authors can look to a small press or even a micro press to get a book published.

A small press usually releases 15 to 100 titles per year. They have an in-house edit staff and often focus on specialty books: cookbooks, children's books, romances. A micro press is also more likely to focus on a niche market like poetry, and will put out no more than 10 titles per year and sometimes only one or two. They are often run by people who started out self-publishing, and then found other authors they wanted to work with and wanted to help avoid the pitfalls they fell in when self-publishing.

Self-publishing a novel sounds like the way to go for an unknown author. And in some ways, it is. The author is solely responsible for his or her product from start to finish. A self-publishing author doesn't need an agent, doesn't need approval--even the blurb on the back or inside of the book jacket is totally at the author's discretion. And while they can pay for extras like editing and graphic design, ultimately, they simply send a digital file off to a self-publisher, pay for however many copies they want (or is in the contract) and a few weeks later, receive a box of their book in the mail. The benefit of publishing this way is that if any copies are sold, the author pockets all the profit.

That sounds appealing until you consider that "profit" is only what authors get after they've recouped printing costs. That's only going to happen if they sell enough copies. And that's only going to happen if the price is set low enough and anyone even knows the book is out there. Self-publishing presses often promise to help with all of those details, but the responsibility ultimately lies with the author.

Google "self-publishing" and thousands of Web sites pop up with links to how-to sites as well as sites full of what-not-to-do information. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America has a lengthy section titled [Writer Beware](#), which includes ways to avoid self-publishing scams and reminders about how important it is to be involved in every aspect of self-publishing.

"If you're looking at going with a commercial DIY publisher, be extraordinarily careful and always do your own research," Delaney agreed.

One particular element to keep close watch on is fees. And one fee that definitely falls in the "you get what you pay for" category is the cost of an editor. An English professor once explained, "Punctuation is everything and nothing." If it's done right, no one notices and even a bad story is at least readable. If it's done wrong, the most brilliant piece becomes mired in stuttered phrasing or an inability to distinguish what dialogue belongs to what character. A good copy editor can fix an author's bad punctuation and grammar; a good editor can help turn an OK book into a great one.

But even if an author has done all the right research, paid all the right fees and made sure semicolons have been used instead of commas where necessary, self-publishing has a kind of stigma attached to it. Although bookstore shelves are full of unrecognizable imprints nowadays, seeing one from a vanity press can be off-putting for some readers. The vanity implies that the author didn't have what it takes to really get published.

Boise author Aaron Patterson understands that and self-published his first two books anyway. His debut novel, *Sweet Dreams*, has done surprisingly well. Since publishing in 2008, he's sold around 400 physical copies and more than [3,000 through Amazon's Kindle](#). He even won third place in Boise Weekly's Best of Boise for Best Local Author. Though only recently available, Patterson's 2009 follow-up, *Dream On*, has already sold about 250 copies. In his opinion, self-publishing was the only way to get his books published.

"Right now, you can't submit to a traditional house because they don't take submissions unless it's from an approved author or through an agent," Patterson said. "And then agents aren't taking submissions because they're out headhunting. It's kind of like sports. [Agents] wait until people get self-published and then if they start to do well, the agents approach them with a deal."

Patterson, a rather entrepreneurial chap, decided the best way to follow the path to a traditional publisher, and at the same time avoid the stigma associated with a vanity press imprint, would be to start his own press. So he founded Borderline Publishing. He teamed

up with local business owner Martin Shepard of Treasure Valley Digital Printing. Shepard brought printing experience and equipment to the table and Patterson brought a year's worth of research into publishing, as well as his own books. What he didn't have was money. So he stepped back from a partnership role and instead printed his books through Borderline.

Seated at a conference table in Borderline's 11,000-square-foot offices near the mall, Shepard explained how he moved from printing brochures and business cards to printing books. And why it didn't work.

"Borderline started about a year ago on a whim," Shepard said. "Through Treasure Valley Digital, we would get requests to print books. Then someone asked, 'Do you do anything else with the books?'" as in offering other services like editing and marketing. Those questions started Shepard thinking. He looked into what would be involved in taking the books a step further and decided it was something he could do. So they jumped in feet first.

"And we fell flat on our face," he said. "It's a very complicated industry."

Shepard put a hold on operations, spent six months getting into the nitty gritty of the publishing world, and officially reopened [Borderline](#) about six months ago.

Currently in what Shepard likes to call "construction mode," Borderline's cavernous production/warehouse space is full of books in every stage of publication. Piles of guts--a book's printed pages before they're cut and bound--stacks of glossy covers and hundreds of cartons ready to be shipped to distributors sit amid the machines that get them ready for those boxes: cutting machines, printers, a machine that does nothing but score and fold covers, machines that glue those covers on. Borderline has about 10 people on staff--including an editor--and publishes about 50 titles by 40 or so authors, growing at the rate of three to five authors per week. Shepard plans to cap the number of authors he publishes at 500; he expects to reach that number by the end of 2010.

Although Shepard prefers the term "short-run publisher," Borderline is technically a vanity press. Unless the material is what Shepard deems offensive--pornography--anyone can send Borderline a manuscript, pay the fees and get it published. But unlike print-on-demand publishers (like Publish America or Lulu), from whom an author can order one or two copies printed at a time--a prohibitively expensive process--or traditional publishing in which the press owns the rights to a manuscript, Borderline usually prints 500-1,000 copies and tests the market. They don't just print it and forget it.

"We beta test the books. We use the same distribution circles everyone else uses. We market the books to see if they're going to be a viable product," Shepard said. "Most of our books have been successes."

The support from that statement comes from sales, reviews and feedback from people who buy and read the books. Borderline actually chases down that marketing information

because, unlike a standard vanity press, they don't want to push a book that isn't going anywhere.

Along with following the numbers trail, offering in-house editing and graphic design services and an open-door policy for authors, Borderline offers another rather special service: Shepard reads every book that crosses Borderline's threshold. It's the kind of personal attention that an author isn't likely to find through another vanity press and only people like Stephen King and Nora Roberts probably receive at traditional publishing houses.

"What I like about [Borderline] is, unlike Publish America, when you get the proof, you can walk into their office and talk to a real person," Delaney said. "That is their biggest advantage. "

But with few exceptions--Burny Wells' *Boise Boys*, a fictionalized account of this city's homosexual witch hunts in the '50s, and Jay McCall's *Christian kids'* book, *Jeremiah's Angel*--the two things most self-published books have in common is the glaring absence of an editor's fingerprint and the sad realization that so many of these writers didn't do enough of their own editing legwork. Or hire someone credible to do it for them.

Patterson hit the proverbial nail on the head: "The problem with self-publishing is there's no one standing back saying, 'This is crap.' You can write anything you want and get it published. And in the end, that can be a detriment," Patterson said. But even he fell victim to a lack of oversight: In early printings of *Dream On*, the word "character" is spelled "charter." On the title page.

Five or six years ago, I had a dream about a guy and his dog. Even upon waking, I didn't remember the whole dream, but I vividly remembered the guy--lanky, mid-'30s, rather morose. And I remembered the dog just as clearly--little, black and brown, bouncy, ugly and named Niko (I have no idea where that came from). And somehow I knew that the guy, who was walking the little dog near a fountain in a large courtyard, didn't like the dog and looked after it only because he didn't have the energy to do anything else with it.

I started writing a novel about the guy, a banker I named Jerry, and Niko. Jerry's wife has left him for his podiatrist, and during Jerry and Niko's regular morning walk, Jerry meets Penny, a rumped, exasperating but sweet dog washer and her St. Bernard, who both soon work their way into Jerry's life.

From the day I started writing about Niko and Jerry, I imagined sending a manuscript off to Random House or Harper Collins, who would, of course, accept it.

My novel would sport some kind of gorgeous and intriguing art on the cover and be available on store shelves all over the world. I would spend my days promoting it on the talk show circuit, laughing with Ellen and Oprah and Matt Lauer over funny anecdotes about my next book.

About 20 pages into the next Great American Novel, I realized I was re-writing Ann Tyler's *Accidental Tourist* (actually, I was re-writing the 1988 film adaptation that starred William Hurt and Geena Davis). I also realized that was the least of my problems. Having a book published by a large press is the exception, not the rule, and it's one most authors will never realize. One of my biggest decisions is not what line to give Penny that makes Jerry fall head over heels in love with her. It's where do I go once my book is done? Do I hire an agent and hope, like millions of other authors, that she knows people who know people and gets my book into the right hands? Or do I self-publish and hope that I can get enough traction through social media, conferences, book signings and book tours that I catch the attention of a traditional publisher?

For now, all of those points are moot.

Jerry and Niko are stuck on page 32 and won't move on to page 33 until after the holidays, when I can clear the docket for a few days and get them moving along.

What I do know is that if I decide to go the self-publishing route, I have more than a few options available to me, even locally. I also know that even though I am one myself, I will set my ego aside and hand my book over to an editor.