

Guide to Publishing

Publishing a book does not make you a writer.

Writing a book makes you a writer.

When you are done rewriting your life, when you are able to see this representation of your personal transformation in novel form, you will feel an immense satisfaction. You will understand that the healing is in the writing of the story, not the sharing of it.

That said, some of you may want to explore publishing at the end of this healing process, and it'd be irresponsible for me not to share what I know. I will sidestep an "art for art's sake" discussion, even though I believe strongly in the inherent value of living a creative life. I won't even go any further into the established physical and mental health benefits of creativity, particularly with creative writing, as I've already covered that in depth. Rather, I'm going to give you three publishing options to explore if you so choose.

If you've edited your novel and handed it off to another set of eyes, and you're determined to get it out into the world, you have these three paths available to you:

- Snap publishing
- Traditional publishing
- Self-publishing

Snap Publishing

In snap publishing you type your manuscript, self-edit it once and have at least one other person give you feedback, and then upload it to Kindle (e-book) and/or CreateSpace (paperback book).

Snap.

You now have a book that anyone with Internet access and a credit card can buy. They probably won't buy it because your book will be one fish in a sea of 129,864,880, and they won't be able to find it. This is actually okay because writing the book is just one stage of the publishing process. It's the most important step, granted, just like gathering all the ingredients for a cake and mixing them together is the most crucial part of cake baking, but there's really only a small audience who want to eat your soggy batter. Most people prefer a cake to look and taste like a cake.

That's why you should never snap publish unless you have a specific, very small audience in mind for your manuscript, and they're okay with it in whatever form it comes. An example is a compilation of your grandmother's recipes woven with family stories that you'd like to give to your aunts for the holidays or a collection of poems that you wrote for your significant other.

The only other reason to snap publish—and the most important reason—is that this was a novel you needed to write for yourself. For a million excellent reasons, it was essential you get this story on paper, and you now want it to be bound and on a shelf so you can walk by it and be reminded of how amazing you are and how committed to doing a little better every day and how important creativity is to you. This is a perfect reason, the very best reason, to snap publish your book, and please, if we ever cross paths, tell me what you did so I can buy you chocolate and have the pleasure of knowing you are in this world.

Traditional Publishing

The traditional publishing industry hasn't changed much in the four-hundred-plus years since *Don Quixote* was published, though distribution may have evolved a bit. Cervantes' publisher, Francisco de Robles, sent most of the four hundred first editions of the book via ship to the Americas, where he was hoping for a better price. A shipwreck near La Havana claimed all but seventy. Now, as in Cervantes' time, the author writes the book, acquires a publisher, and the publisher assumes all costs, including providing editing, printing, marketing, and distribution services in exchange for a generous cut of the profits.

Up until a few decades ago, you could even send your manuscript directly to publishers and ask if they'd be interested in it. Now, around 80 percent of fiction projects, maybe more, require a literary agent. These professionals serve as gatekeepers for publishing houses.

Here's how the traditional publication route looks from the author's perspective, from idea to ISBN:

1. Write book.
2. Revise, fine-tune, and edit book.
3. Hire a professional editor.
4. Query appropriate agents.
5. Acquire agent.

6. Agent queries appropriate publishing houses.
7. Receive publishing contract. (Yay! Yayyayayay! Big celebration time!)
8. Sign contract and receive advance against future sales, as negotiated by your agent. Plan on receiving 10 to 15 percent of the book's wholesale price (wholesale price is approximately half the cost of its cover price), and bank on 15 percent of *that* going directly to the agent. What you receive after the advance is known as royalties, and royalties are mailed out twice a year.
9. Your publisher creates a publication plan, which usually results in your book being published one year, give or take, after you sign the contract. This involves the art department designing a cover, an editor working with you to polish the manuscript, a copywriter crafting the back cover copy, publicity sending the manuscript to reviewers and (if you're lucky) setting up interviews and possibly a book tour, and the marketing department working on the distribution plan.
10. Your book is released.

You'll notice how very little you control in this process. Other than writing the best book you can, making sure it is professionally edited before you send it out, and querying the appropriate agents in a professional and engaging manner, there's nothing you can do to acquire a publishing contract except possibly making a sex tape and, some days, that doesn't seem like my worst idea. To land an agent, you need to locate all the agents who are looking to represent novels in the genre you've written in. This can be done a number of ways, but I recommend these three:

- Look in the acknowledgments section of some of your favorite books in the genre you've written in. Authors often thank their agents. This works well for two reasons. One, you know this agent is good because they landed this author a contract. Two, when you query that agent, you can compare your writing style/chosen genre to that of their client whose book you read.
- Check out the Association of Author Representatives web page. This is free and awesome because all the agents on it have been vetted. They're above board. This means that they don't make any money unless they make money for you, too. This is how it should always be, but there are unscrupulous agents out there. Don't ever sign with one who asks you for money; they should only be earning a percentage of your royalties, nothing more.
- Check into the Literary Market Place. LMP is a paid service, so check your local library to see if it has a subscription.

Once you've got a list of at least fifty potential agents, none of them in the same agency, query them. The query letter, which is almost always sent via an email these days, should contain these parts:

- An attention-getter that includes the name, genre, and word count of your novel. "Imagine you're walking down a dark alley, and you feel a hot breath on your back. You have a millisecond to decide to run or fight. My 84,000-word horror novel, *Poe's Perils*, deals with those moments between paralysis and power."
- A one- or two-sentence synopsis of your novel. This is hard for many people, but since you already completed this exercise in the book, all you have to do is pull that sentence into your query letter.
- A comparison between your book and other, similar books that are bestsellers. This establishes the marketability of your novel. "Fans of Stephen King and Sarah Pinborough will be drawn to *Poe's Perils* fast pacing and intelligent gore."
- Any publishing experience you have. If you have none, no worries. Seriously. Every author didn't have publishing experience at one time in their career.
- The offer to send the completed manuscript upon request.

Short and sweet. That's it, unless the agent specifically requests more. This is a good time to underscore that you should send the agent *only* what they request and also *be sure* to send the agent exactly what they request. Proofread your query, too, and if you can, have a smart and amazing friend proofread it for you. If the agent is any good, she or he receives hundreds of query letters a week. Your polished gem must demonstrate that you're professional by respecting the agent's time and talent.

Then, you wait.

While you wait, I'll offer you this sadly inspirational tale that's shaped kinda like a turd but more like a pep talk. A pep turd: It took me over four hundred queries to land an agent for *May Day*: 423, to be exact. I'd haul fifty query letters to the post office because this was 2003, and we didn't even have dial-up where I lived. Those rejections would start flooding in, and I'd send out fifty more queries. Every now and again I'd get a word of encouragement or suggestions for revision and resubmission, and I'd always edit if the feedback was good. Mostly, though, I received a short rejection, sometimes printed on half sheets: "Sorry, but no."

Like, I wasn't even worth a whole piece of paper.

The first agent I acquired had a side business selling crystals in Colorado. You could literally click one part of her website for her agent page, and another click would land on a photo of her wearing fringy suede and balancing rose quartz and tiger's eye on her open palms. But damn she looked good to someone who'd been rejected over four hundred times. She didn't sell my book, and we parted ways amicably after six months. My next agent sold *May Day* and *June Bug* in a two-book deal.

Slow and steady—with a healthy dollop of self-awareness and willingness to revise if the rejections show a pattern—wins this race.

Not catchy, not quick, but true.

Self-Publishing

We've covered snap publishing: don't do it unless you have a specific and small audience in mind for your book.

Next came traditional publishing: I recommend you start with traditional publishing and go for the long game.

The third option is self-publishing, which I believe you should try only if you've exhausted all traditional publishing options. Remember how many books are out there? Nearly 130 million. It's difficult to be heard in all that noise without a publishing company with its own publicity and marketing team to help you. Plus, when you don't have the street cred a traditional publisher bestows, it's a challenge to get your book reviewed, let alone onto store shelves.

That said, if you've tried the traditional route and it didn't bear fruit, or you're already traditionally published and want to become a hybrid author, then self-publishing is for you, and it can be incredibly lucrative if you treat it like the job it is.

I have firsthand experience with *The Catalain Book of Secrets*. I received a lot of confusing rejections, crazy praise for the book followed by a big, ugly, unsupported "but." This is a book I love, a deeply personal fictionalization of lifelong traumas. My freelance editor and agent both adored it. It got close to finding a home in the big houses, but ultimately, it was rejected by every one of them. I was heartbroken, but I wasn't willing to let this novel die on the vine.

I chose self-publishing.

It's important to note that self-publishing is an entirely different beast from snap publishing. In self-publishing an individual takes on all the roles of publishing a book: writing it, locating and paying for

(or trading services for) a content and then a copy editor, locating and paying for (or trading services for) a cover designer and an interior (hard copy and digital) designer, printing, marketing, and finally, distribution.

Because self-publishing, like traditional publishing, can be expensive, I turned to crowdsourcing to fund *The Catalain Book of Secrets*. As a good Midwestern woman who would be embarrassed to ask for help if she was choking let alone request money from strangers to publish, market, and distribute a book, I found it incredibly painful to put myself out there. But I believed in the book, and I couldn't afford to self-publish on my own.

On October 1, 2014, my Kickstarter campaign went live.

I requested \$12,056.

By October 31, 2014, I'd raised \$12,671.

I self-published the next month.

Self-publishing allows for more diverse authors to be heard, more experimental and niche content to be written and read, and for traditionally published authors to gain more control over their careers. Indie e-book sales eclipsed the Big Five publishers' sales on Amazon for the first time in 2015. Self-publishing is not going away, and its increasing power and popularity have created an exciting and challenging time for readers, writers, and writing organizations. Here's how to do it:

1. Write book.
2. Revise, fine-tune, and edit book.
3. Hire a professional editor.
4. Either design your own cover or hire a cover designer. Books really are judged by their cover, so if you do not have design skills, I recommend hiring someone who comes highly recommended. Online social media groups like Facebook can help.
5. Either set up your book's interior yourself or hire someone to set it up for you.
6. Send your book out for reviews. Check out Jane Friedman's website (janefriedman.com) for excellent publishing advice, including where self-publishers should go for credible reviews as well as deeper coverage of the self-publishing and traditional publishing basics I'm only touching on here.
7. Upload your book to CreateSpace and Kindle. I've worked with both and found them to be responsive and helpful in the setup stage as well as the royalty-paying stage. They are also both free to use; like

an agent, they only make a percentage of what you make. There are other selling options, including Smashwords and Barnes & Noble, but the majority of self-pub sales currently come through Amazon, of which CreateSpace and Kindle are the paperback and e-book arms, respectively.

8. Market your book. Ms. Friedman's website has great details on how to do this, as well.

A caveat. Once your book is out there, whether you snap, self-, or traditionally publish, there is no taking it back, not now, not in the digital age. Don't let it go until you're ready.

And you don't have to be ready. You do not have to publish that manuscript, ever. The benefits lie in the writing, independent of whether or not you ever publish. If you do publish, realize that no matter how good your story is, there will still be people who don't like it, just like there are crazies who don't like Chunky Monkey ice cream. If you decide to never send your novel into the sharp world as the wobbly kneed newborn it is, that's just fine. Hang onto it and start writing your next book. I don't say this lightly. I was so desperate to get published that I literally cast spells to land an agent, and I'm not even a witch. But who's to say those earth momma candles sprinkled with sage, their wax used to seal my dreams in a Ziploc bag that I slept on for three nights beginning with a full moon, didn't work? But ultimately, the act of writing a powerful, authentic, healing novel is so much more important than publishing it.

Start there.

If you want to get published, you will.