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Ben DeSoto / Chronicle

Stan Mays wrote a novel that was inspired by a camping trip he took with daughter Lindsay. It took several years to get the story published.

BOOK TRENDS

A revolution in self-publishing

Authors discover new methods to get stories to public

By **LOUIS B. PARKS**
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A weekend trip with his 12-year-old daughter turned into a first novel for Stan Mays.

"It was just an overnight camping trip to Sam Houston State Park, Lindsay and me. I said, 'Hey, let's do a project. I'll write a short story and you'll do some illustrations, and we'll put it in a scrapbook.'"

Mays and Lindsay left camp with two pages of ideas. The scrapbook turned into a book that Mays believed tweens and teens would read.

"It's an adventure suspense tale, a farcical novel," Mays said. "There's always this element of danger, but

RESOURCES

INS AND OUTS OF SELF-PUBLISHING

If you want to self-publish, you need to know many terms. Be aware that not everyone uses the same interpretation. For information on types of self-publishing see the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America site, www.sfwaw.org/beware

- **Commercial**

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it's pretty funny. The heroine is a 12-year-old girl from Houston."

Writing a book was the easy part. Getting it published was another matter. After several rejections, Mays' book was accepted for consideration by publishing firm Arthur A. Levine, part of the company that publishes Harry Potter books. But two years later, the publisher still had his book, and Mays had no answer.

"I wanted to get this story out, so I started looking at self-publishing," he said.

Lindsay is now 17, and Mays, communications manager for an energy company, has joined the growing library of authors who are publishing their own books.

Since April he's sold about 1,000 copies, some through local bookstores and Web sites such as [BarnesandNoble.com](#) and [Amazon.com](#), but mostly through schools and personal contacts. He's even gotten small royalty checks from the printer, which is selling them online. You can find more information at [www.stanmays.com](#).

He originally hoped to sell 5,000 books the first year through personal contacts, but he got busy on other projects and had to cut back. Still, he says he gets some small royalties: about 10 books sell online every month. He hasn't recovered his costs, but he does have a sense of satisfaction.

Booming business

"At last count the self-publishers put out 78 percent of the books (in the United States)," says Dan Poynter, author of *The Self-Publishing Manual: How to Write, Print & Sell Your Own Book* (Para Publishing, \$19.95).

Self-publishing has become a major outlet for authors in all genres who, for whatever reason, don't attract a

publishing: Traditional publishing, which can include university and nonprofit publishers. Getting a book printed and distributed by a publishing company that pays the author for the manuscript, then edits, designs, prints, distributes and, sometimes, promotes the book. It takes a part of all sales and pays royalties. Highly selective, not necessarily for talent but for what will sell for them.

- **Self-publishing:** A catch-all for an author getting a book published through methods other than commercial publishing. But a different, more specific meaning is the author works as his own publisher, arranging and paying for editing, production design, layout, printing, distribution and promotion. The author owns all rights and gets all profits (if any).

- **Vanity press:** A publisher who charges the author to print his or her book. The term itself is derogatory and is regarded that way. A vanity press accepts anything, no matter how bad, because the writer pays all costs including the publisher's profits, and offers no service such as editing or promotion. It's the most expensive way to get a book printed. The author owns and stores the books. After a set-up fee, cost per book printed is low, but most publishers require that at least 1,000 books be printed. Vanity press has mostly evolved into subsidy publishing.

- **Subsidy publishing :** The publisher contributes part of the expense of the publishing process, usually marketing. It may claim to be more selective but the author pays, so there's limited incentive to screen material. It may offer services such as editing, marketing and distribution for a fee. It owns the book rights and pays the author a royalty if any books sell.

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commercial publisher. Of course, publishing is not the same as selling. The vast majority of books sold to readers are still those from commercial publishers. Many self-published books are printed in tiny quantities. Many are sold to the authors, who (theoretically) try to resell them.

But a person who wants to get published now has many avenues for doing it.

"Last year we assigned ISBN publisher prefixes to almost 11,458 new publishers. Of those, 11,344 were small publishers, meaning someone publishing one to 10 books," says Andrew Grabois, director of publisher relations at R.R. Bowker, the U.S. ISBN agency. (The International Standard Book Number is that unique 10-digit number on every book sold in any store.)

Do it your way

For her book of advice for parents from a preteen's point of view, marketing director Jackie Dryden knew exactly how she wanted to write and market it. She didn't want a commercial publisher.

"If I wanted to print however many, or give it away, I would have control of it, rather than having a publisher dictate what they were going to do with the book," Dryden says.

She set up her own publishing company, One Blue Button, to publish *Just Me* (\$11.95) by Just Jackie.

"I had no idea what I was getting into," she admits. But she did her homework. She researched printers and went to workshops and read books.

While Mays self-published in the broad sense of the term that means anything that is not traditional commercial publishing, Dryden self-published in a more narrow definition. She formed her own company. Her background in advertising art and as a creative director meant she could do her own cover, and friends donated photography and copy editing. She hired a proofreader and went without a story editor.

Her total cost for 5,000 copies of the 112-page paperback was \$6,500. That doesn't count the time and gasoline she has spent promoting and distributing the book herself.

Publishing using digital printing to store the book in a computer, then quickly make copies, thus avoiding warehousing large quantities that might not sell.

- **POD publishing:** A business model. Scores of POD publishers offer services ranging from almost none to almost all. Beware: Not all services are created equal. Some offer attractive services, but that doesn't mean they are done well, so check on the company carefully. Set up fees are low, often well under \$500, but price per book can be high.

- **e-publishing:** Electronically publishing books on the Internet for view on PCs, special electronic devices and other outlets.

- **Consignment:** When a bookstore takes a supply of books for sale, but the author is paid only after the books are sold. The author owns what doesn't sell.

LOUIS B. PARKS

To date she has sold about 1,500 books through intensive self-promotion and her Web site, www.justjackie.com, and has recently signed a contract with Biblio Distribution to get her books in stores nationally. She now has a CD version (\$16.95) of her book, read by kids.

She does her own promotions — radio, TV, book signings — but she enjoys that part, and she's already planning a second book.

"I've just about made my money back, and we're into the profit side," she says.

Not all is vanity

"Self-publishing is growing because the technology has made it less expensive than it used to be," says Kristin D. Godsey, editor of Writer's Digest. "And there are some options that are not so much like the vanity-publishing model of the past, where you are paying thousands and thousands of dollars and you are required to buy hundreds of books and they are sitting in your garage."

Say "self-publishing" and many people think of vanity presses. In vanity publishing — the name alone is a stigma — a writer pays a "publisher" thousands of dollars to print a book.

Vanity presses still exist, but most have added services and call themselves subsidy presses.

Reasons to self-publish are many. Sometimes a writer's idea has a target audience too narrow for a major publisher. Or the author may want control of design and distribution. Maybe the book has to hit the market quickly. (Commercial publishing is slow.)

"The big publishers' problem is they try to do (books) for everybody," says Poynter, a sky diver who wanted to market technical books about parachutes.

He did it himself.

"I put my parachute books in parachute catalogs, parachute stores. That makes a lot more sense. Only 10 percent of my books go to bookstores."



Buster Dean / Chronicle

Jackie Dryden wanted to have complete control when it came to publishing her book *Just Me*.

Different avenues

Those who want to get published have many options, all huddled

under the umbrella of self-publishing. They include "true" self-publishing in which a writer such as Dryden does every step of the process, or arranges them. And vanity presses, companies that publish anything for a price. In between are businesses that incorporate parts of both, including print on demand, e-books and subsidy publishing.

Print on demand, or POD, has spawned scores of new publishers. A book is downloaded into a computer, formatted and stored. The book can be printed in minutes, from one copy to 10,000. Quality varies.

POD technology makes printing books a snap. Digital technology allows fast setup almost anyone can manage. One company, InstaBooks (www.instabook.net) even has in-store kiosks — so far in only a few cities — where anyone can put a disk containing a manuscript into a machine and in a few minutes get 10 copies of a bound book for \$150. Of course, choices such as covers and design are limited, and there is no kindly editor hiding in the machine ready to correct misspellings or grammar.

The term "print on demand" has another meaning. It is used to refer to a publishing-business model that combines aspects of vanity and commercial publishing. There are many variations. In one, the author pays the company to print her book, as in vanity publishing, but the company offers some degree of promotion and marketing for the book and pays royalties, like commercial publishing.

While setup for offset printing at a vanity or subsidy press can cost several thousand dollars and require printing at least 1,000 copies, the cost of POD setup is much lower, usually \$200-\$1,000, depending on a variety of services selected such as editing, cover design and marketing. At iUniverse, one of the largest PODs, the basic \$459 package includes formatting, custom cover design and making it available online and in bookstores. The author gets five paperback copies. Other services, such as editing and promotional material, are extra.

The POD downside

POD publishers range from tiny operations to the megacompanies — iUniverse, Xlibris and AuthorHouse — each of which publishes thousands of authors. Critics complain that, like vanity presses, POD publishers charge fees from the authors, and most publish almost any book submitted — complaints that seem to miss the point.

"The way we look at it, it's a democratic process," says iUniverse's Carol Ash. "We'll allow anybody to publish a book. There's a lot of authors who may just want to see their manuscript or family memoirs in print. They may just want to give it to family and friends."

Some PODs up-charge authors for services such as promotional mugs and bookmarks. And "extras" like book design, editing and marketing may not be first-class.

Another complaint is that while they promote making books available online and to bookstores, they may not really try to sell them. Most PODs make profit from selling printing to authors, not selling books to readers. They may not have the experience or motivation: Sending a copy of a book to a book critic does the author no good if the book ends up in the trash.

Most newspapers — including the Houston Chronicle — don't review self-published books. They don't have space to review more than a fraction of commercially published books.

"(Self-published books) are essentially books that have not gone through an editor," said Chronicle books editor Fritz Lanham.

Putting the book in online stores or in computer-order services may generate some sales, but it does not get them on bookstore shelves, where most readers can discover them.

Some PODs promote their method as a way to get picked up by a commercial publisher, but that rarely happens.

Making a choice

Mays chose a small Maine-based publisher, Booklocker.com, to print *Wicked Little Camp Story*.

"I liked that they accept only about 5 percent of the work submitted," he says.

Booklocker.com publisher Angela Hoy says the company can afford to reject most books because it is a small operation run from her home. You can hear her 3-year-old son Max in the background as she talks.

"You wouldn't believe how many books submitted have typos and misspelled words in the first sentence," Hoy says. "Companies are publishing these books, and it is giving our industry a bad name. They're chock-full of errors, they have bad writing, it's badly formatted.

Booklocker.com's base setup fee is \$217, plus \$99 for a template cover, or \$199 for a custom-designed cover. Extras include listing in its Web site bookstore and making it available for order by other bookstores.

Know your market

Regardless of the type of self-publishing, an author who wants to sell books must have a ready market.

Sarah Gish knew there would be a lot of Houston parents interested in an annual book on local summer camps for kids.

"I had gathered a bunch of brochures and was sitting in a park one day, and all these women came around looking at my brochures," she says. "I thought, hmm, there's something here."

She believed there was little chance of getting a commercial

publisher because the target audience was limited and the time window to sell was narrow. She published *The Summer Book: A Guide to Houston Day Camps and Classes for Kids* (Gish Creative, \$12.95), through her own marketing company, Gish Creative.

"I really wanted to be in control of the money, the distribution, how the book was marketed, the design and all of that." She arranged selling at Barnes and Noble stores and on BarnesandNoble.com and www.thesummerbook.com.

Gish knew self-publishing would be complex, so she attended a workshop at Barnes and Noble with Mack E. Smith and Sara Freeman Smith, authors of *How to Self-Publish & Market Your Own Book* (U R Gems, \$15.95).

"It was a very scary process the first year. First you research your subject, research the market and the price," Gish says. "(Then) you must sit down and write the book."

As her own publisher, Gish owns all the rights. "I keep everything, but I also have to pay everything. I'm still paying off the first (edition) some. Next year (the fourth edition) will be the break-even year."

Few writers, even those who go with commercial publishers, reap instant fame or fortune. Self-publishing writers often never see their investment returned.

As Mays, Dryden and Gish prove, getting published is just half the battle. Promotion is important for best-selling authors. It's essential for unknowns. Getting attention from buyers comes from store placement, book signings and media attention — all very difficult.

"No question there is a direct correlation between (sales and) how much effort you put into promoting it," says Mays, who lines up his own store appearances and school readings. "If I want to do a book signing, I have to pick up the phone and make that happen. I have to create my own tour and create publicity where I can. The more I do, the bigger the sales."

The cliché of the author selling her own books out of a car trunk is usually true. They need to go beyond that for tangible success. Mays, Dryden and Gish managed to get some area bookstores to sell their books, mainly through personal contacts. They all got their books on either Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com.

Even in the age of computers, bookstores are where most books are sold.

"What works for us and a lot of bookstores is that if we can't work with the publisher, we will take books (from the author) on consignment," says David Thompson of Houston bookstore Murder by the Book. "If they don't sell after a month or two, the author just picks them back up."

"We try to be very supportive of the local writing community," says Karl Kilian, owner of Brazos Bookstore. Kilian laughs. "I

hate to say that. I'll have people lined up with their mimeographed poems."

Most writers who take on the challenge of self-publishing find it a tough process, and they usually don't make money their money back.

But for many there are other rewards.

"All I wanted," says Dryden, "was to help one person. The book is a success."

louis.parks@chron.com

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