

## Michael Signorelli

### THE APPARATUS AND YOU: A BRISK SKETCH OF BOOK PUBLISHING

Recently I was the representative editor on a panel alongside two authors (one who writes fiction, one nonfiction), an agent, and a publicist. We were to represent the flow of the industry, from a book's creation to its promotion. The talk lasted only an hour, so we briskly sketched an overview of our respective roles, and I thought we did a handy job. But one question from the audience resonated long enough for me to answer in full: for how much longer would a group like ours represent the industry? What follows, then, is my attempt to answer, to briskly sketch the challenges currently testing the industry, and, for good measure, to explain what this means for writers navigating themselves to publication. Also, the essay by inclination, if not quite by design, weighs traditional publishing and self-publishing against one another.

So, why the air of uncertainty? To state the obvious, media is being consumed in new ways almost every day. Book publishers, once a notoriously staid bunch, must adapt to dramatically changing market conditions. This accelerated development is due to the pervasive and rapid strengthening of online connectivity. Not only can you be Facebook friends with anyone in the world, you can sell them your book. The perceived anxiety of book publishers is partly a result of writers being able to package their own work and of online retailers/distributors being able to sell that self-published work directly to readers. A retail giant like Amazon or an e-book distributor like Smashwords believe they can transition the industry to a point where publishers are not needed to create or sell books because writers have their self-published manuscripts single-handedly ready to go. These two groups, writers and readers, are pressing toward one another, squeezing the publishing apparatus of agents, editors, publishers, and brick-and-mortar booksellers, which has long stood between them. Whether or not the apparatus can secure and strengthen its position against these pressures is the nervous-making question being answered in the marketplace.

And I should acknowledge now a specific casualty that has just (though telegraphed for months) foisted itself upon the industry (and this essay): the Borders Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Simply, the loss of the second-largest chain retailer hurts. But I wouldn't take this as a sign strictly of decline but of evolution. If you compare the actions of Barnes & Noble with those of Borders over the last decade, you'll see major differences. Barnes & Noble developed a viable website (*bn.com*) and successfully marketed the Nook e-reading device. In contrast, Borders partnered with Amazon to handle the fulfillment of online orders and failed to develop an e-reading device at all. While these aren't the only portentous facts to trot out (one might read Edward McClelland's February 19, 2011, Salon.com piece "How Borders Lost its Soul," for a smart perspective), they certainly do illustrate profoundly different mindsets. And so an entity unable to adapt to its surroundings dies—in a sense. One hopes that Borders will reconstitute itself as a healthier, wiser, albeit smaller company; but their market share is forever given up. With room now in the canopy, one expects the vacated space to be claimed by local independents, by nearby B&N's, and, most likely, by online retailers. Whatever may happen, it will be interesting to watch and will of course fuel the conversation of how exactly will consumers buy their books, how will they read them. Though, when Len Riggio, chairman of Barnes & Noble, says the industry is on the brink of "transformational growth," based on digital sales, I very much want to believe him (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/trade-shows-events/article/46415-riggio-tells-publishers-transformational-growth-ahead.html>).

When I said "online connectivity" above, I might as well have said "e-books," the great enabler of self-publishing gurus the world over. While self-publishing has a long history (John Milton, William Blake, Benjamin Franklin, Walt Whitman, and James Joyce were all distinguished practitioners), it's generally been considered an exercise in vanity. Now, though, when authors can identify the existence of a receptive audience and then court that audience through channels of connectivity, when there are fewer cost barriers, and no requisite editorial approval (save for that of the audience), any question of vanity is quashed by opportunities for good business and for reader interest. And the possibility remains that if the self-published book succeeds, it might be granted extended life by a traditional publisher that

has at last noticed. (Take, for example, the case of self-published success Amanda Hocking who, after proving that bestsellerdom is not solely the domain of traditionally published authors, still sought out the services of a traditional publisher “I’ve done as much with self-publishing as any person can do,” Ms. Hocking said in an interview. “People have bad things to say about publishers, but I think they still have services, and I want to see what they are. And if they end up not being any good, I don’t have to keep using them. But I do think they have something to offer.” [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/books/amanda-hocking-sells-book-series-to-st-martins-press.html?\\_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/books/amanda-hocking-sells-book-series-to-st-martins-press.html?_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss).) You go, Ms. Hocking.

This sounds fair. Anyone can be an author, and the most worthy books will receive word-of-mouth approval and will sell on their own. All authors have left to do is get people to notice they’ve published a book in the first place. While there may be endless shelves in the digital marketplace to accommodate all comers, the same consumers with the same limited attention spans are browsing the merchandise. In most every instance that I’ve read of a self-publishing success, a determined author has invested mountains of time, energy, and/or money to promote her book, to extricate her work from the morass of competing content, to place her message in front of the intended readers. In many ways, self-published authors often become publishers themselves. It’s no surprise that they should succeed. But neither is it a surprise that many hopeful authors are unable, unqualified, or unwilling to make that investment. If the goal is commercial success, self-publishing becomes the rightful domain of the motivated author who, for reasons of bad luck or poor timing, has not signed a contract with a full-service publisher and will recreate for herself the services provided by the publishing apparatus. It is also the domain of the motivated author who has identified an audience so niche, so specialized—and I imagine this applying almost exclusively to non-fiction—that a traditional publisher would be insufficiently motivated to hit such a specific target (i.e., dental professionals of Minnesota, pageant mothers of Texas, sensei of California, etc.) Authors with more literary/academic aims may self-publish simply to have their words bound between covers, available for distribution to friends and colleagues, and open to the possibility of who knows.

That’s not to say that self-publishing is limited to debut or emerging authors. Barry Eisler, author of *Inside Out*, turned down a \$500,000 advance from his publisher Ballantine Books in order to self-publish his book instead.

Read his full reasoning here: <http://jakonrath.blogspot.com/2011/03/ebooks-and-self-publishing-dialog.html>. But, unlike Amanda Hocking, Eisler isn't self-made; and it remains to be seen if his decision will pay off. Since he wants nothing to do with a traditional publisher, his agency wants nothing to do with him, and Eisler was dropped soon after announcing his plans.

As self-publishing and traditional publishing symbolically jostle one another, new direct-to-consumer connections have offered a rallying point for industry detractors. Traditional publishing is in decline, they say. The poor economy can't float their business model. Digital modes of content distribution threaten the very building block of the industry: the physical book. These are real evolutions, real challenges, and any publisher wishing to exist five years from now is adapting and broadening the services they provide to authors.

I'm certain that traditional publishers will weather the e-storm—and, furthermore, that they deserve to. Traditional publishers take chances on new talent everyday. They show, albeit in pockets, the same spitfire that any independent press could muster—while showing formidable muscle and reach in all cases. They energetically and cleverly promote worthy authors. They find new ways to sell more books to more people. The challenges facing the industry have of course encouraged iconoclasm, but this moment of necessary innovation does not exclude traditional publishers—nor does it eliminate the good they've always done.

I might sound reactionary in my preemptive defense but I don't feel particularly staid or Ostrich-like. It's the Wild West, as they say. There is uncertainty enough to go around. I mentioned that the publishing apparatus must strengthen its position in the evolving marketplace. Part of that effort is communicating its strength.

But before this veers unhelpfully off course, let's now ask the question: given the above, what does the aspiring-to-be-read writer do?

Most importantly, the writer should forget—for the moment—everything I've so far outlined. It's not the writer's concern, at least not during the period of creation. The writer should simply write and be satisfied with whatever may come of the effort. Thoughts of the commercial endgame will only infect the integrity of the work. I say trust that if the work is excellent and if the work educates, entertains, or illumines the reader, then it will deserve an audience and that there will be a viable publishing option

available to the writer when the time comes to sell and publish the work. Trust that good writing and storytelling create their own commercial value and not the other way around.

Now say the manuscript is complete and polished. What does the aspiring-to-be-read writer do? Let's say this writer is you. Unless you have some ideological sticking point about feeding the apparatus, then begin by pitching agents. Find agents who will be receptive to your work. Do your research. (Suggestions for research are all over the internet, so I leave it to you to find them.) Follow the potentially receptive agents' submission guidelines. Continue to submit to agents until you connect with one who wants to represent your work. This process of agent-finding may require dozens of submissions, any number of rewrites, and efforts to increase your platform in whatever way most appropriate considering the kind of book you're selling. Be thorough in this process. If you find representation, then work with the agent to find a publisher. I'll leave it to agents to explain that leg of the journey.

If, after a thorough and intelligent attempt (which can last almost any span of time depending on your patience and/or determination) to find an agent, you have not succeeded, you might then decide to self-publish the book in some way. (This decision point would also present itself if, even after securing an agent, the book never sells to a publisher.) I mentioned above some reasons and circumstances that might recommend self-publishing as your best option. But if the attendant effort of successfully self-publishing your book does not appeal to you, then perhaps a measure of acceptance is due. If your work has been roundly rejected despite your most informed attempts, you might then decide to scrap the book; either to profoundly revise or to begin anew on another project. It's not failure if you learn something, if you improve as a writer. Not every book is published, which is as it should be. If that weren't the case, the achievement of publication would be diminished.

If you simply must write for an audience, you might try your hand at building one by writing from a more accessible platform: a blog, for example. If you are serious about translating online attention into a book deal, make sure the everyday content of your blog focuses on the themes of your book. If your blog generates so much attention you can hardly believe it, I bet an agent or a publisher will be along shortly.

Now say all has gone well. You have come to a rare point. Your talent and your work have been recognized by the peripheral senses of the apparatus. You have an agent. The agent has enticed an editor, someone like me, into offering for your book. And the machine primes to turn its gears for you. While you may feel that to get to this point, to find me, a snugly tucked cog, involves a systemic snowjob, I, along with many other editors, attempt to counteract this impression by being an uncommonly open, honest, and excitable reader. I attempt to sense quality within the unhyped mass of content available for my consideration. And I attempt to shower the projects I sign with care, expertise, and advocacy with the goal of finding you the readership you deserve. If everything clicks, if the machine hums with benevolence, you'll have an entire business running on and for your words.

While change is upon us, and old modes of business must evolve, the core impetus of the industry, to connect readers with writers, remains the same. I do not think the apparatus as I've described it—the chain of agent, editor, publisher, and bookseller that links readers to writers—will ever dissolve so long as it cultivates value; that value then must be upheld by editorial standards, recognized by readers, and honored by retailers. Amazon, for example, must sell e-books at their true value—taking into account the effort put into writing, editing, copyediting, proofreading, designing, marketing, publicizing, and selling the e-book—and not at the price of a file. With Random House now on board with the agency model (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/46325-random-house-switches-to-agency-model-for-e-book-sales.html>), it seems safe to say that publishers will continue to make money from e-books in much the same way as they do from printed books. And I almost forgot, though e-books have yet to stabilize at a consistent market share, a hell of a lot of printed books are sold in bookstores with street addresses and humans beings behind the counters. I must move into the future of my business, but my heart is on a shelf. ☞