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The Rise of Self-Publishing

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

I love out-there theories and the people who are seized by them. I'm a sitting duck for crackpots. Maybe that's why I like the Web.

But even those of us who pride ourselves on never showing skepticism arrive at a crossroads sometimes. Should I really sacrifice 20 minutes of my life to hear out this particular rant (about Google, Obama, the Fed) or politely back away from the ranter? Well, you really sound as if you're on to something, sir!

In analog times, one sign that it was time to retreat was if a big talker, having declared himself an author, produced his "book" and something about the book just wasn't . . . booky. Maybe the pages carried a whiff of the Xerox or mimeograph machine. Or maybe the volume — about Atlantis or Easter Island — looked too good, with engraved letters, staid cover, no dust jacket. After a casual examination of the spine or the title page, realization would dawn: self-published.

In this time of Twitter feeds and self-designed Snapfish albums and personal YouTube channels, it's hard to remember the stigma that once attached to self-publishing. But it was very real. By contrast, to have a book legitimately produced by a publishing house in the 20th century was not just to have copies of your work bound between smart-looking covers. It was also metaphysical: you had been chosen, made intelligible and harmonious by editors and finally rendered eligible, thanks to the magic that turns a manuscript into a book, for canonization and immortality. You were no longer a kid with a spiral notebook and a sonnet cycle about Sixth Avenue; you were an author, and even if you never saw a dime in royalties, no one could ever dismiss you again as an oddball.

But times have changed, and radically. Last year, according to the Bowker bibliographic company, 764,448 titles were produced by self-publishers and so-called microniche publishers. (A microniche, I imagine, is a shade bigger than a self.) This is up an astonishing 181 percent from the previous year. Compare this enormous figure with the number of so-called traditional titles — books with the imprimatur of places like Random House — published that same year: a mere 288,355 (down from 289,729 the year before). Book publishing is simply becoming self-publishing.

And self-published books are not just winning in terms of numbers but also making up ground in cachet. As has happened with other media in this heyday of user-generated content, last century's logic has been turned on its head: small and crafty can beat big and branded. As IndieReader, an online source for self-published books, puts it, "Think of these books like handmade goods, produced in small numbers, instead of the mass-marketed stuff you'd find at a superstore."

Cheap, digital-publishing technology — especially print-on-demand options, which let individual buyers essentially commission copies of books — has been a godsend to

writers without agents or footholds at traditional publishing houses. It has also been a quiet godsend to literary history. Books that defy traditional classification now appear in print, and reprints of public-domain titles account for the biggest category of self-published books. (There are more reprints published than traditional books.)

Outfits like BiblioBazaar (which aims to “bring back the canon of global out-of-print literature and books”) and Kessinger Publishing (“to publish and preserve thousands of rare, scarce and out-of-print books”) style themselves as a kind of public trust, while Amazon’s CreateSpace (“self-publish and distribute your book”), Lulu.com (“bringing a bigger audience to you”), as well as several imprints of Author Solutions (“Mr. Gutenberg would be proud”) see themselves as heroically amplifying and even monetizing independent voices. IndieReader reminds us that luminaries like Gertrude Stein, Anaïs Nin and Edgar Allan Poe self-published books.

Self-published books also look great these days — altogether booky. This is no trivial matter. CreateSpace makes it clear that any book it publishes for you will have a full-color cover, a professional-quality binding and an I.S.B.N. Looks just like the real thing. And perhaps it is the real thing. The last-century notion that a book was a writer’s badge of having crossed over — from eccentricity to acceptance — may be obsolete. Perhaps a book is just a cluster of symbols, printed and bound and distributed, or not.

But if everyone is carrying official-looking volumes with his name on them, how do I find the old-fashioned crackpots? As I explore indie-publishing sites, I do this by searching by familiar subjects. And there they are: “Bacon’s Shakespeare: Facts Pointing to Francis Bacon as Author of the Shakespeare Poems and Plays”; “The Jim Morrison Myth.” And someone at IndieReader directed me to a wondrously weird memoir by Robert McKnight: “The Golden Years . . . The Florida Legislature, ’70s and ’80s.”

Vintage kookery. Hurray. Some things never change.