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Small Press and Self-Published Books: A Collection Development Dilemma

by **Matt Pacer** (Technology Librarian, Capital Area District Libraries, Downtown Branch) <mattpacer@hotmail.com>

Because of their sheer numbers, it is increasingly difficult to make informed collection decisions regarding small press and self-published books¹ regardless of format. The collection development process had remained static for selectors and collection development librarians during the last several decades. They mostly continue to use the well tread review sources such as *Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, *America Libraries*, and many others to make informed decisions. As new information portals became available through the Internet, librarians adapted well. For example, vendor sites such as **Baker & Taylor**, **Ingram**, **Follet**, and others aggregated reviews in one location for librarians. Publisher and author websites provide even more information about books or series. Librarians can also locate reviews and best seller lists from newspapers, TV, and the Internet. All this information made the collection decision process quicker and much easier. Even with all these available informational resources, it is increasingly difficult to make informed collection decisions regarding small press and self-published books, regardless of format, because of their sheer numbers.

In this essay, I will present an overview of the current literature. Then I will summarize what libraries are currently doing to address the explosion of small press and self-published books. My goal is to provide libraries with some steps to take when making collection development decisions regarding these items.

Literature Review

The current literature on the topic of collection development and how libraries treat small press and self-published books is scant. Most of the specific information that is out there comes from Collection Development Policies (CDPs) and procedures. This lack of information made it extremely difficult to discern where the profession is moving. There is a substantive hole in the literature that requires further research, especially in light of the continued growth of self-published books. To compensate for the lack of research, I expanded the literature review to cover the broader topic of self-publishing and small presses. It is not meant to be an exhaustive review. Much of this literature is from either the author's or the publisher's viewpoint. This expanded literature review is important since it provides a window into how the publishing industry is responding to the growth of self-publishing and how and why authors are using self-publishing technologies. By understanding these two viewpoints, libraries can develop better CDPs that address self-published books.

Much of the literature focuses on an author's inability to find a publisher for his or her book. In **Murphy's** (2013) article "Looking Onward and Upward," the author **Linda Pressman** struggles to get her book, *Looking*

Up, published. After a year of no success, she let her agent go and thoroughly reedited her book that she then self-published. She also used social media to publicize heavily her book, which has since sold over 4,000 copies. **Linda** views self-publishing as a way to let the book stand on its own merits rather than riding on a publisher's coat-tails by using their financial backing and marketing plan (Murphy, 2013, p45). Selling over 4000 copies of a book may seem small; but, to a previously unpublished author, it is a significant achievement.

The question about how libraries find these books still remains.

Three authors (**John Locke**, **Amanda Hocking**, and **E.L. James**) found success in self-publishing. Fan fiction sites, social media, and old fashioned word of mouth created

sales. The key for them was that, after they successfully self-published a book, a large publishing house discovered them. The publisher put marketing and financial support behind the author that led to even more financial and publishing success (Deahl, 2012, p5).

Each of the three authors mentioned above used the Internet to extend their audience. The old process of word of mouth is no longer a local phenomenon that focuses on family and friends. The reach of the Internet spans the globe and creates a large customer base. The author no longer has to rely on the publishing house. A Website, fan fiction sites, and social media can take a book viral very fast. The key to the book's success falls solely on its own merits. A good well-written story and other positive qualities will make the book "in-demand," perhaps catching the attention of large publishing houses.

The literatures states that self-publishing is a far easier process now than it ever has been. There are many companies to choose from to help the author self-publish. Each company provides many different services in an à la carte fashion regardless of format. These companies include **LuLu**, **Bookbaby**, **Kobo**, and **Amazon** (Hageman, 2012, p29).

An old argument still exists that such companies are more like vanity presses, but this argument is losing validity. I would suggest that all authors have some vanity by wanting their word to be in print and read by a large audience. Regardless of the press, this does not necessarily diminish quality. As **Deahl** (2012) pointed out, publishers will seek out popular books when they realize they can increase their profits (Deahl, 2012, p5). Technology

merely leveled the playing field for writers by minimizing the publishers' role as gate keepers to the publishing world.

In the article, "Changing the Way Books Are Found, Acquired, and Published," **Janet Spavlick** (2012) shows that eBooks offer authors an easy way to get published since there is a very low cost to publish them. Also, the author gets a larger portion of the royalties and can reach a wider audience as ereaders and tablets become more prevalent.

eBooks also offer a way

for authors to write for niche markets that large publishing houses overlook. An interesting point the author discusses is the contest hosted by **Apostrophe Books**. In the contest, readers rate a book chapter. The winner is awarded a book contract, and **Apostrophe**

publishes the book in different electronic formats (Spavlick, 2012, p6-10). The contest is a novel idea and takes advantage of social media by letting the readership decide the merits of a book. A second consequence is that the contest creates a ready-made customer base.

Publishing houses do not have the luxury of gambling on authors. They put money upfront into publishing and advertising that forces them to seek large franchises or best sellers. In the same way as authors have easy access to publishing technology, librarians need to expand their collection development activities beyond the traditional sources. Librarians need to embrace the digital culture. What I mean by digital culture is not simply finding traditional reviews in digital formats from vendors or websites but utilizing other social media tools.

Social media tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube, fan fiction sites, and others offer channels where library users can identify writers and topics. Librarians need to incorporate the rating systems used by these tools when making collection development decisions. Likes, retweets, and comments may not be professional reviews; but they do show interest in authors. Our patrons use these tools, and so libraries must be there too. Libraries should maintain accounts on several of these sites, particularly Goodreads and LibraryThing. *50 Shades of Gray* was a successful self-published book before it went mainstream. To stay relevant, libraries need to find those titles and authors. **Rosen's** (2013) "Author Turns to Self-Publishing" shows how important small press and self-published books will be in the future.

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Trends in publishing change quickly. Authors wanting to write about the next big thing may not have the time to wait for a publisher to release their book without missing trends and sales (Rosen, 2013, p7).

As more authors choose self-publishing/small press, libraries will need to make decisions on these titles. Sooner or later, popular authors will choose the self-publishing/small press route. Libraries will be left behind, dealing with a patron base who no longer values libraries, unless they find a way to discover and collect these books.

The specific current literature out there on self-publishing and libraries mainly comes from CDPs and procedures. Any general Internet search can retrieve many hits. The following is a summary of what is out there. Most CDPs and procedures that address small press and self-published books in print or digital format discuss three points: local content, collection plans, and selection criteria.

When referring to local content, the literature emphasizes local community interest such as special collections or local history rooms. Most CDPs have separate sections that detail the types of material the library collects for those rooms. Much of the material comprises local history, manuscript collections, papers, and ephemera.

There is little or no mention of local authors who do not fall into those previous categories. Books published by this group of authors must adhere to the collection plan guidelines or policies. In many cases, the CDPs rule out self-published/small press books if they do not have professional reviews, but this policy may cause the library to overlook materials that will be popular with its users. Selection criteria as listed in the CDPs also discount the self-published/small press books.

Any general Internet search for CDP and self-published books will provide many results. Much of the language used in the CDPs is similar. A next step in research could be posting questions on library discussion lists to solicit feedback on how libraries are treating self-published books to gauge whether libraries are changing their selection processes of these materials as the market expands.

Conclusion

What we see from the literature is that self-published/small press titles are proliferating. Libraries should include them in their collections. The fundamental challenge for libraries is to figure out how. For eBooks, libraries can subscribe to services such as Overdrive or 3M to provide access. Self-published/small press books are typically not included in their catalog. Libraries are also missing the printed

self-published/small press books in many cases because of CDPs' provisions to exclude works not professionally reviewed.

Recent developments make locating reviews for these books a little easier. In 2010, *Publishers Weekly* announced *PW Select*, a quarterly supplement. Authors can pay a listing fee for their books to be included in the supplement that includes information such as author, title, format, ISBN, brief description, ordering information, etc. about their books. *Publishers Weekly* selects approximately 25 titles per issue that it deems worthy of review (Slowik, 2010). Another option that is a little older is *Kirkus Discoveries*. It is a program where authors can purchase a review. Libraries may have philosophical difficulties with paid reviews, but they are nonetheless often the only source for reviews (Hadro, 2010). These two resources help libraries locate reviews or lists of self-published books. Both options, however, do not solve the collection development problem facing librarians of not having policies in place to purchase them.

What is needed is for librarians to reconsider the guidelines for making collection decisions regarding self-published/small press books. Must a review appear in a reputable source? What defines a reputable source? What constitutes a good review? How much emphasis should be placed on print runs? While these questions are valid, they are less applicable to self-published/small press books that may nonetheless be worth purchasing.

Here are some actions libraries can take. Librarians should be more active in the literary scene and reader groups in their community. Librarians should also monitor LibraryThing, Goodreads, and similar sources. Attention should also be paid to other social network sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Circles, and others to help identify trends, topics, titles, and authors. Library collections should not be limited to user demand. Librarians need to be proactive active in identifying trends, titles, and authors. Even after these titles have been found with great effort, it will be difficult to add them to the collection. Adding print materials is easy; eBooks present a problem. This will take negotiations with vendors, publishers, and possibly authors. Except perhaps for the **Douglas County Libraries** in Colorado, I do not currently know of any library that has developed their own in-house methods to loan eBooks that they purchase without vendor support.

With so many book choices, libraries will need to figure a way to limit the scope of self-published books they add to their collections. Collecting local and regional authors and subjects is one good place to start. What is most helpful is that libraries currently do this with local history or special collections. Libraries should make more effort identify-

ing other local authors with no connection to local history.

As libraries develop ways to incorporate small press/self-published books, those procedures should also be included in the CDP. Those procedures must include how to incorporate sites such as Goodreads and LibraryThing and their ratings systems.

The growing importance of self-published/small press books makes it dangerous for libraries to pretend that they don't exist. This article presents some steps that public libraries can take to integrate them into the regular flow of collection development.

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Endnotes

1. In this essay, I use the terms self-published and small press almost interchangeably. The distinction between the two is blurring with new Internet-related technologies and POD (Print-on-Demand).