A LOOK AT PARTNERSHIP PUBLISHING

If you’ve ever wished for a publishing option that blends the creative control of self-pub with the quality, curation and distribution of the traditional path, you may be in luck. Could the industry’s newest business model be the way of the future?

by April Eberhardt

Right out of the gate, Kristen Harnisch began getting great feedback from editors at major houses on her first novel submission, and it was accepted quickly by HarperCollins Canada in a two-book deal. When I submitted it to U.S. publishers in my role as Harnisch’s agent, however, things didn’t move along as quickly. They all had nice things to say, but none of them snapped it up, for vague reasons ranging from “We’re worried we can’t break it out big enough” (meaning sell-thousands of copies in a short period) to “We won’t partner publish well. Authors bear not only the cost of editing and production, but marketing and publicity. So as with any untested model, there is reason for the skepticism. After all, for years vanity publishing outfits have been notorious for taking authors’ substantial payments up front, printing hundreds or thousands of poorly edited and designed books, and offering no sales support. Even modern assisted-self-publishing services that are more transparent and diverse with their offerings have been criticized for the questionable value of what they deliver in return for a significant price tag.

Some authors and onlookers confuse partnership publishing with those sorts of self-publishing models, but there are key differences. Whereas self-publishing is truly a do-it-yourself approach, where anyone willing to pay for it can publish anything, partnership publishing is curated, with a focus on quality and marketability. Partnership publishers—often staffed by seasoned book industry professionals, including acquisitions editors and knowledgeable publishers at the helm—vet submissions just as traditional publishers do, culling those they feel have the greatest potential.

Partnership publishers have as much at stake as the author in seeing these books succeed, and authors are partnering with their team in every sense of the word. That’s in stark contrast to subsidy publishers, where books’ sales (or lack thereof) have no bearing on the company’s profits, which all come from fees charged for services up front. Most partnership publishers have access to traditional distribution channels, and staff sales reps who pre-sell their books into the marketplace.

As an agent who has accompanied multiple clients down the partnership publishing path, I’ve been impressed with the model. In an era when large publishers seem increasingly reluctant to take on new writers’ work, partnership models provide a high-quality alternative to traditional publishing. Previously the only alternative was self-publishing, which can work well for select authors with the right skills and platforms, but even then involves a steep learning curve and limited access to brick-and-mortar bookstores.

Pros and Cons of Partnership Publishing


A New-Era Publishing Model

Partnership publishing is a fairly new model, a revolutionary pay-to-publish or crowdfunding approach rapidly gaining traction among savvy authors who want greater control of their work, along with a higher percentage of earnings on the tail end of the publication process. These authors know what they’re able and willing to take the lead on, and what they’ll best leave to other professionals. They are attracted to partnership publishing over DIY or subsidy publishing because of what partnership models represent: a way to go indie but still benefit from a lot of the perks of traditional publishing.

Authors embracing partnership publishing have a distinctly different mindset: They’re often tired of the hoops they have to jump through for the implied “stamp of legitimacy” conferred by the traditional publishing industry, and they see the benefits of collaborating to produce a high-quality book that rivals a traditionally published one. Very significantly, they’re also comfortable investing money up front to make this happen (or, in the case of those who choose a crowd-funded partner publisher, helping to raise money to make it happen), calculating that the leap of faith will pay off as they earn a higher percentage of their profits (typically 40–85 percent versus the 8–15 percent traditional publishers offer).

Partnership publishers are modeled on traditional presses. In some cases, they are traditional presses, too (as is the case with White Cloud Press), or have a traditional arm to their business (as does Turning Stone Press, a part of Red Wheel/Weiser). Partnership presses typically publish their books in both print and e-formats, and the traditional print distribution they offer is a big selling point as the self-pub world turns ever more digital. And while many review outlets are still trying to figure out how to characterize partnership books, as of July Publishers Weekly began allowing partnership and other “hybrid” publishers to submit for reviews via traditional channels.

Like any new model emerging in an industry steeped in tradition, partnership publishing has its naysayers and doubters. Some authors balk at the idea of paying to be published under any circumstances—something they’ve been warned about by industry watchdogs (including WD) for decades. And indeed it is a big investment to publish well. Authors bear not only the cost of editing and production, but marketing and publicity. So as with any untested model, there is reason for the skepticism. After all, for years vanity publishing outfits have been notorious for taking authors’ substantial payments up front, printing hundreds or thousands of poorly edited and designed books, and offering no sales support. Even modern assisted-self-publishing services that are more transparent and diverse with their offerings have been criticized for the questionable value of what they deliver in return for a significant price tag.

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addition to liking “the mission and vision of the company,” he says, “they were able to lend a level of professionalism and polish I couldn’t do myself.”

In addition to industry expertise and guidance through each stage of the publishing process, partnership publishers provide an element of moral support. It can be scary to enter into a business you don’t know. Memoirist Stacey Couch, another Turning Stone Press author, had been exploring assisted self-publishing, but, “After looking for two to three months, I was fearful of unseen costs and the general lack of support,” she says. After contacting Turning Stone Press at the recommendation of another author who had published through them, she says, “I knew within 10 minutes that [their approach] was right for me. … The experience has been very supportive. It’s been a great education for me on how [the publishing process] works, and it was amazing to be in on the creation of the book itself.”

Not all partner publishers are created equal. Samuel Lopez-Barrantes, whose debut novel is a new release from crowdfunding-based Inkshares, chose the company for its community philosophy. Inkshares works with select authors to analyze the amount of funding needed to publish their books, to then raise those funds, and finally to collaborate hand-in-hand to publish, promote and distribute the finished product. Inkshares offers distribution to major chains and independent bookstores through Ingram Publisher Services, which caters to many small and niche traditional publishers. Lopez-Barrantes’ choice of Inkshares was based strongly on his belief in the value of a support team, and his conclusion that the pursuit of conventional publishing would take too much energy away from his writing. “I value the writing more than anything else,” he says. “I see [Inkshares’] concept as a better way.”

Partnership publishing isn’t just for authors who can’t or don’t want to crack traditional publishing. Even authors with Big Five experience are increasingly turning to partnerships as a first choice, often because of disappointment with the traditional process, particularly the lack of support post-publication.

As an agent, I’ve shared this frustration. Mainstream publishers may push a book for as little as six weeks, recognizing that while a few books will sell well, most won’t. The winners take all. Others, that’s often the end of the line for them, at least as far as many traditional publishers are concerned. And therein lies the tragedy for many traditionally published authors. Because the publisher owns the rights to their books, the authors’ ability to do more with those books (often labors of love) is extremely limited at that point. Partnership publishers generally aim to treat authors on their lists more equally, and to see projects through a longer haul.

This is part of the reason partnership models combine print publishing with e-books. Brooke Warner, publisher of She Writes Press, notes, “We have published a handful of digital-only titles, but the impact is far less than the impact of our print books. For certain genres, especially fiction and memoir, e-books can only take an author so far. We aren’t interested in being in the digital-only space, and the main benefits of traditional distribution really kick in for print books more than for e-books, though those print books might drive e-book sales—which is just another bonus of having both formats available to readers.”

Historical novelist Claudia H. Long signed a traditional deal for her debut, but chose partnership publisher Booktrope for her second novel, in large part because of the longer-term investment the publisher is willing to make to help her book succeed. She says, “Booktrope is more like old-school publishing used to be: real editors, real marketing support and the idea of nurturing an author over time.”

That long view is not only a notable difference on the fiction shelves. Jay Harman, a business professional and author who initially worked with a traditional publisher on his nonfiction book, eventually opted to partner with White Cloud Press, citing publishing expertise and distribution capabilities delivered with a longer-term view. “My book isn’t a book that will hit its peak in a month … it will build over time,” Harman says. “I like to work in partnership with others. This is the way we want to do business.”

Most partnership publishers will tell you that they can see a direct correlation between the publicity and marketing dollars an author puts toward her book and the book’s sales results. For this reason, She Writes Press has recently reached an agreement with BookSparks, a PR company, to provide its authors with a broader range of marketing and publicity options. Booktrope’s standard contract provides its authors with some online marketing support, the cost of which is shared proportionally by the company and its members, including the author. Booktrope expects its authors to be active on social media and to pick up the full cost of anything extra (i.e. contest entry fees). Some authors, of course, choose to hire an independent publicist who, for a fee, will seek additional reviews, promotional opportunities, and other avenues for garnering reader attention and building sales. It’s worth noting that many self-published and even traditionally published authors elect to strengthen their efforts in this area by shouldering this expense as well.

It’s important to understand that most partnership publishers don’t sell books in markets other than the U.S., or in some cases North America. If an author is interested in seeing a book translated into other languages and sold in overseas markets, the author would need to retain those rights and sign with an agent who could pursue those opportunities as well as the sale of film rights and other subsidiary rights, such as audiobooks.

For some authors, the cost of partnership publishing can seem prohibitive, or beyond their budget. Authors I’ve worked with who’ve selected pay-to-publish models have found it to be a $5,000–10,000 investment, not including printing costs. (While choosing to publish exclusively digitally will eliminate print costs, it can still entail an investment of $3,000–5,000 for editing, cover design and layout.) Harnsich, who ultimately partnered with She Writes Press for the U.S. edition of her novel, estimates that she will need to sell 2,500 of those books to break even (earning 65 percent on e-books, which sell for $9.95, and 35 percent for print, which retail at $16.95). “On a per-unit basis, I’ll make 30 percent more on each [partner-published] book than I do on my traditional books, and 150 percent more on each e-book than I will from my traditional publishing deal,” she explains.

Is the partnership publishing route right for you? Only an honest assessment of your goals and definition of success, along with some analysis of the costs and rewards, will yield an answer. From my view of the rapid proliferation of models, and the popularity among authors wanting better control, quality and speed to market, combined with reader acceptance of good books regardless of publisher, partnership publishing is looking like an attractive option for those who are willing to try a new way.

April Eberhardt is the founder of April Eberhardt Literary. She advises and assists authors worldwide, helping them choose the best pathway to publication for their work, be it indie or traditional, digital or print.