# Audiblegate: a campaign to protect audiobook authors

Develop a writing process to suit your strengths and objectives

Understand your book's genre

When a publisher approaches you for a rights deal

Mark Leslie
Happy, thriving author: what’s the secret?
Prepare, Publish and Promote Your Book

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Hello ALLi members!

Welcome to the November issue of TIA.

We hope your writing and publishing proceed well as we approach the busiest time of the year for book selling. One key to a good writing and publishing life is to find a process that suits your kind of books, so you can produce as many titles as you want to, crafted to satisfy the market you sell in.

For many writers this can be a frustrating process of trial and error, and that’s what we discuss in our article on page 15. It’s also the thrust of our interview with prolific author and publishing consultant Mark Leslie Lefebvre. Mark had the opportunity to live the (supposed) dream by writing full time—but found he was more productive when he kept a day job as a publishing consultant. Read his insights on page 10.

Our recent online conference, SelfPubCon, wholeheartedly embraced the quest for friction-free writing. We gathered experts to discuss everything from prompts to craft to software tools that can help us write better and often. ALLi members get a free six-month SelfPubCon pass and you’ll find the complete run-down of sessions on page 20.

Another key for success is understanding your audience. We have an in-depth feature on genre (page 34) and an excerpt from our newest guidebook on publishing books for children, a sector that requires its own marketing approach. See page 40, and don’t forget you can get a free e-book copy of this and all ALLi guides from the member zone.

You’ll also find our regular features—the news roundup from Dan Holloway (page 5), a taster of the fact-packed posts we ran on the ALLi Self-Publishing Advice blog (page 32), and last but not least, our member interviews, in which Howard Lovy celebrates our members’ hard work, originality and talent in his Inspirational Indie Authors podcast (page 30).

Speaking of your hard work and talent, we’re introducing a new feature in this issue. We were pleasantly overwhelmed when we asked you to tell us about your recent achievements. ALLi member Rachel McCollin, writing as Rachel McLean, took the overall prize in the Amazon Kindle Storyteller award, and two ALLi members were also in the runners-up, Barry Hutchinson writing as JD Kirk, and Daisy James, but we’re proud to see all your successes, on whatever scale you operate. Take a look at page 34 to see the wide range of ALLi member accomplishments.

If we’re missing something you’d love us to have in your member magazine, we’re eager to know. As always, suggestions or comments are welcome at info@allianceindependentauthors.org.

Thank you for reading and for being an ALLi member.

Till next time, happy writing and publishing!

Orna Ross
ALLi director
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The Indie Author

November 2021 self-publishing news

Each week on the ALLi blog, our news-hound Dan Holloway brings us the latest trends and stories of interest to indie authors. Here’s his roundup of the most significant recent stories over the past quarter.

Last quarter’s news felt like it was all about Amazon. What makes this quarter’s news so interesting is that pretty much all the stories, whether exciting opportunities or worrying clouds on the horizon, are relatively Amazon free.

There are some exceptions, of course. The big story for Amazon focused on the Audiblegate legal action over the reporting of audiobook sales, which isn’t exactly new. This time big publishers have entered the fray and are taking action against Audible. The original Audiblegate campaign led so resolutely by indie thriller author Susan May continues, of course, with ALLi’s backing. You can support the campaign’s legal actions through its fundraiser (selfpublishingadvice.org/audiblegate-fundraising/).

But, like a management consultant’s lazy Powerpoint, this quarter has mainly been about wider threats and opportunities for indie authors.

I’ve been really encouraged by the increased opportunities in three growth areas we’ve been looking at for a while—subscription reading, subscription newsletters and podcasting. It’s the middle one of those I want to talk about, because the biggest story for me this quarter was the $12bn takeover of the newsletter provider Mailchimp by the financial technology platform Intuit. Many of us have been using Mailchimp for some time now, but I’ve noticed an increasing lack of interest in the service they offer. Many have moved to the likes of Aweber while others have chosen Substack in the hope of monetising their newsletters—most notably Salman Rushdie. But the takeover by Intuit has suddenly made Mailchimp the focus of attention again. That’s because Intuit also owns the accounting tool QuickBooks, among others. And it has set its stall out to provide a fully integrated discovery, selling and accounting platform for small and medium-sized businesses. That means a lot of the things we need will be in one place and automatically integrated in the coming months.

But it’s also been a quarter of worries. New developments in AI narration, for instance—these sound like an opportunity, but they also pose potential threats to the place of humans in the creative industries. Also the controversy with the OnlyFans subscription service, which temporarily banned certain kinds of adult content in order to appease their payment processing partners. This demonstrated that even as indies we are dependent on third-party infrastructure, which has nothing to do with the creative arts but can decide what we can and can’t produce.

But the biggest worry has been the supply chain for print books. Paper shortages and global logistics crises have meant many publishers are delaying the release of new titles. During the Covid pandemic, the print sector surprised us with its resilience, so these new problems are worrying. And indies are affected just as much as trade publishing. IngramSpark has had to raise prices to cover the issues it is facing.

If there is a glimmer of light in this, it’s that the publishing industry seems finally to have grasped that its environmental credentials are
far from glittering, and international industry organizations have agreed to sit down together and try to solve some of the worst practices. The one that springs most readily to mind is the wastefulness of the print supply chain with its wholesale pulping of unsold books. However, the increasing mainstream adoption of blockchain technology by the arts in recent months threatens to eclipse all such worries—a recent study pointed out that the carbon footprint of Bitcoin equalled that of Argentina. What I’d love to report on next quarter is that indie organizations are part of these discussions. So often we lead the way, and this feels like a wonderful opportunity for us to put our innovative hats on once again.

Dan Holloway writes poetry, non-fiction, thrillers and literary fiction. Find out more at rogue-interrobang.com and tweet him at @agnieszkasshoes

If you have a story you think would suit our news column, write to Dan directly: news@allianceindependentauthors.org

#Audiblegate: our chance to protect authors from abuse by big-tech monopolies

The Audiblegate campaign to seek a fair deal for authors and narrators has made significant gains, but has now reached an impasse. In order to continue this campaign, we need the indie author community, and authors further afield, to rally round and right this wrong, says ALLi director Orna Ross

As you probably know, ALLi has been supporting the Audiblegate campaign run by the valiant and inspiring indie thriller author Susan May, aiming to right the wrongs done by Audible-ACX’s user agreements and payment practices.

Already, the #Audiblegate campaign has put money back in authors’ pockets (see page 7) but Audible has now made it clear that there will be no further concessions.

The company, which turns over $2.5bn in the US and over £100m in the UK alone, is not willing to compensate authors for monies it admits to silently removing from their accounts. There is no appeal system and no mediation.

And so we must resolve this dispute in the courts.

Authors, we need your help, whether you publish audiobooks or not. If you don’t now, it is very likely you eventually will—revenue from audiobooks is predicted to overtake revenue from e-books this year.
What is happening in this struggle is being closely observed by other departments at Amazon, including KDP, and other self-publishing services too.

It will affect us all.

A win here is a win for all authors. Not to mention narrators and readers.

The Audiblegate Legal Fund is now open for donations at Donor Box. If you are a US taxpayer, your donation is tax deductible via The Equitable Rights Movement (TERM), the not-for-profit set up by Susan May.

Audiblegate: the back story

Audiblegate.com was founded by author Susan May, who is not very different from you—except that she has put her previously lucrative writing and publishing business on hold to fight this battle on behalf of all authors and narrators.

With the support of ALLi, May and her small team of volunteers have made real gains, which have put money back in the pockets of authors and narrators.

• Authors received a 5% bonus payment on December 2020 sales.
• “Returns” after seven days are no longer charged to authors.
• All returns now have to be reported by Audible-ACX.
• The seven-year exclusivity term has been reduced to 90 days.

And there’s more—but so much is still wrong. For example:

• Authors should only be liable for true returns, where less than 25% of a book is read. Seven days is still too long for authors to be subsidising Audible’s listener guarantee. This shouldn’t happen at all.
• There are too many terms and conditions that are unclear or unfriendly to authors.
• The percentage commission that authors pay to ACX is too high, given that the company has no input into production or promotion.

• We still have no clarity on how much Audible deducted from authors’ and publishers’ accounts pre-2021.

None of this is acceptable. It must change.

The cases

Susan May has commissioned Kanter Law Group to create an in-depth memorandum outlining Audible’s illegal behaviors for presentation to US regulators.

This memo will also allow TERM to move forward with a class action suit to recover damages for lost revenue.

You’ll find more information about all this at Audiblegate.com

Please donate

This is our opportunity to change the abuses of one of the big-tech monopolies in publishing. Its outcome will determine the behaviors not just of Audible but of all the services in our sector.

Once you’ve seen what’s at stake, I’m sure you’ll agree with the team here at ALLi that as authors, we need to come together to support this campaign, and take it all the way.

Please be generous. Reflect on how much the volunteers’ hard, dedicated, intelligent and diligent work has delivered so far, and how much more there is to gain if we support each other.

Please go across now and give whatever feels right at Donor Box.

Further reading

More posts on #Audiblegate and audiobooks

• Should you sell your audiobook rights?
• Audiblegate: where we’re at and where we’re going
• Alternatives to Audible
ALLi wins Indie Champion of the Year award

ALLi has received top honours in the 2021 Romantic Novelists Association industry awards, in a new category to recognise the growing significance of indie authorship in the genre.

The award, RNA Indie Champion of the Year, was announced in a ceremony in October.

ALLi director Orna Ross (pictured, left, with Debi Alper, Indie Editor of the Year winner) said: “It is my great pleasure to accept this award on behalf of the ALLi team, advisers and ambassadors—and of course our members, all of whom champion independence as they go about their work of self-publishing great books. We thank the RNA for this award and also for its openness to independent authors. Since digital publishing technology arrived, self-publishing romance authors have been at the forefront of innovation, particularly in marketing and promotion, so we are honored to have our work for indie authors recognized by this forward-thinking association of writers.”

ALLi members Clare Flynn and Joanna Penn (ALLi business adviser) were runners-up in the category.

The RNA created several new awards for 2021 that reflect the changing landscape of publishing, including categories for cover designers, editors and audiobook narrators. ALLi members gave a strong showing. Jane Dixon-Smith and Andrew Brown were runners-up in the cover designer categories.

Catch up on this year’s SelfPubCon

SelfPubCon ran in October this year. Find a complete run-down of the sessions in our feature on page 20, and catch up on replays here selfpublishingadviceconference.com/alli/

Latest guidebooks


New organization partner member

SCBWI is the first industry organization to become a partner member of ALLi, linking its 22,000 members to ALLi’s self-publishing information and education.

Organization membership is the latest initiative in ALLi’s Open up to Indie Authors campaign, which offers best practice advice to literary enterprises and organizations. In this way, ALLi hopes to bring the self-publishing option to a wider audience of authors and open new opportunities for indie authors to platform their books.

For questions about organization membership, contact our outreach manager, Michael La Ronn michael@allianceindependentauthors.org
Organization Partnership

For national, local, genre or special interest author associations that align with ALLi’s mission of ethics and excellence in self-publishing.

FOR ORGANIZATIONS:

• Guidebook for your organization: Empowering Independent Author-Publishers
• Affiliate program – 30% commission for each member you refer
• Helpful Facebook group (one representative per organization)
• Concierge service with ALLi’s Outreach Manager for any issues or questions you have

FOR ORGANIZATION MEMBERS:

• The Indie Author magazine, three times a year
• Self-Publishing Services Directory: vetted services you can recommend
• Free independent publishing guidebook from ALLi Director, Orna Ross: Creative Self-Publishing
• Curated content from:
  • Blog with 3,000+ posts
  • Podcast with 500+ episodes
  • 500+ YouTube video archive
• Bi-annual virtual conference with leaders in the author-publishing industry
• Weekly newsletter with self-publishing advice
Happy, thriving author: what’s the secret? Roz Morris meets Mark Leslie Lefebvre

Mark Leslie Lefebvre is a writer, professional speaker and bookseller with more than a quarter of a century’s experience in the publishing world. If you’ve been an indie for a while you might remember when he launched Kobo Writing Life; he’s continued working for authors ever since. Not only that, he’s published an impressive number of his own books. TIA editor Roz Morris quizzed him about how to thrive as an author.

Give us the express tour of your writing and publishing career.

Having always loved reading, something that started with comic books when I was young. I’ve wanted to be a writer for most of my life. I hammered out my first “novel” at the age of about 14 on an old Underwood typewriter I found in the back of my mom’s closet.

After years of rejections, my first short story was published in 1992, the same year I started working as a part-time bookseller. My first professional sale on a story was 10 years later, and my first book (a self-published collection of short stories) was released in 2004, long before self-publishing was the accepted norm.

I have since published more than 30 books both with traditional publishers and indie, and have worked in numerous types of bookstores including online and digital. My roles in the book industry included store and product manager and president of the Canadian Booksellers Association. I was the founding director of the Kobo Writing Life publishing platform and currently work part time as director of business development for Draft2Digital.

Mark, you’ve just co-authored a pair of books with valuable messages for indie authors. Let’s start by talking about The Relaxed Author: Take The Pressure Off Your Art And Enjoy the Creative Journey, written with thriller author and ALLi business adviser Joanna Penn.

This book was an absolutely delightful surprise to both Jo and me. When 2021 started, neither of us had any idea we would be collaborating and writing it together. It came out of a joke we shared during an interview on The Creative Penn Podcast when she was asking me about my book Wide for the Win. We laughed, saying we should write a book called The Relaxed Author and the minute listeners heard that, they responded that they also needed that book.

After a moment thinking about it, Joanna and I realized that WE needed that book ourselves. So we set about writing it in a way neither of us has ever written a book before.

I have to say that neither Jo nor I pretend to be relaxed all the time. Much of the book was a reminder, especially to us, of all the things that can stress authors out; and sharing ideas of how not to let all of it bother you, so you can spend more time focusing on the long term and what drew you to writing in the first place.
A reminder we all need to hear. So tell me about your other recent collaboration, *Taking the Short Tack: Creating Income and Connecting With Readers Using Short Fiction*, which you wrote with suspense author Matty Dalrymple.

This was another book that came out of a podcast—my own Stark Reflections on Writing and Publishing. Matty had written in asking if I could do an episode on strategies for using short fiction for marketing and to supplement author revenue. So it started with an episode. Then Matty suggested the co-authored title, so we collaborated to make it happen.

*So, Mark, how do you juggle it all? You’ve published more than 25 titles and you’re out and about in the publishing world, podcasting, speaking and consulting. Do you take time off to recharge and how do you enforce that?*

Well, I HAVE been at this for a long time, so I’m far from a prolific writer. I started my writing journey in the late 1980s and my first book came out in 2004. I’ve had a lot of momentum along the way. Part of the “secret”, if that’s what you want to call it, is that I’ve focused on both work and writing that I can be truly passionate about. If I love the projects I’m working on, the time spent on specific tasks, then it doesn’t feel like work, it feels like I’m living my dream. That goes not only for my writing, but for the other work I’ve been lucky enough to do.

I do take time off, and certainly don’t work all the time. But I find the work, and the process, so exhilarating and refreshing that I don’t need to escape from it. If anything, every day I get to escape into it.

*When one writes a how-to book, there are inevitably parts where it’s harder to practise what you preach. What’s your Kryptonite?*

That’s such a great question. I’ve been advising authors for so long based on patterns and best practices to help them to success. But I’ve long had trouble following all of my own advice.

One perfect example is the advice to write in a series. I’ve been telling authors to do that since 2012. But I didn’t start doing it myself until 2019. Prior to then I had published three standalone novels and a number of story collections, but no novels in a series. So I shouldn’t have been shocked to discover that when I took my own advice and started writing more books in a single series, sales of the books in that series started to grow far better than ever before.

*What worries or challenges you in writing and publishing and how do you overcome it?*

What worries me is likely common with most writers. I worry that I’m not good enough; that my next book will be the one people hate and they’ll say I’ve lost whatever talent I might have had. I suffer from significant imposter syndrome every single day. And I’m seriously quite the awkward and shy introvert. Except when people see me on stage or as a guest on a podcast or video chat, I’m really pretending to be confident, pretending to be outgoing. Thank goodness for a bit of a theatrical background where I can pretend to be something I might not be feeling inside. I overcome it because I have no choice but to go on, to persist, to keep at it.
Me too! I could continue this interview on that subject alone. It must be one of the great paradoxes of author life. Anyway, there’s more I want to ask about collaborations... You’ve also co-written several books on paranormal subjects. What advice can you give for authors who are considering co-writing and co-publishing? How do you share out the planning, writing, editing, production, marketing, publicity and advertising? And come out as friends at the end?

The best advice I can share is to consider the unique and different strengths each of you bring to the project, and do your best to leverage those to your mutual benefit. If you both feel you might be taking advantage of what the other person brings to the table, that could be a very good sign of the perfect balance.

Also, communicate. Even about the smallest thing. Maintaining clear and transparent communication from the beginning is critical to ensuring you both stay on the same page. The logistics of how you go about the process is all dependent on clear and consistent communication from the beginning.

I haven’t yet co-authored a book with a person that I didn’t fully trust, respect and admire. And no, it has never always gone the way I imagined. I’ve learned that in collaborations you need to be flexible and open. But if you choose the right person to work with, and you maintain clear communication throughout, you can navigate the difficulties and challenges that come up. Or maybe I’ve just been really lucky so far.

You’ve also edited collections of fiction. This can be a way for authors to raise their profiles. Any tips and pitfalls to share?

Short story collections are not big revenue generators on their own. They’re small pieces of larger revenue streams. Usually the revenue from self-publishing them is what I consider “gravy” after having already earned money from those same IPs.

Part of the magic is that collections can be any shape or size. An e-book doesn’t have to be 300 pages bound between two pieces of
card. It can be longer, shorter, it can be sliced and diced. It’s magic that way. Having another listing with your work in it helps increase your SEO in online catalogues. It also provides you with flexibility for offering different bonuses and free content for some readers, or to participate in different collaborations.

If you understand that fiction collections are a tool you can use for marketing and for small additional revenue streams rather than for some giant windfall payout, you’re on the right track to leverage them effectively.

You write both fiction and nonfiction. In terms of craft, how do they differ? Do you have different processes for each?

I think what’s the same about fiction and nonfiction is that they’re both storytelling. There’s a story arc to them—a beginning, a middle and an end. I still do a lot of research for some of my fiction, but the research for nonfiction is significantly different. For nonfiction, I often have to keep track of the various sources where I learned content. In fiction, I can be a bit more cavalier about those sources, as they help inspire, but then I employ my imagination and make everything else up.

I do enjoy both processes, and often like to have a nonfiction project and a fiction project at the same time, as I find when the energy and momentum on one starts to fade, I can easily flip over to the other.

Many writers dream they’ll ditch the day job and write full time. But you have a different perspective on this, don’t you? You tried to write full time, and found you couldn’t. Talk us through that. Why wasn’t it the dream after all?

I found that when I had too much free time, I wasted it. It felt like I always had another full eight-hour day TOMORROW to get whatever it was done, and would continue to put things off. But with restricted time to work on personal writing projects, I needed to leverage the limited time I had.

Within about a month of starting to work 20 hours a week for Draft2Digital, for example, I started to become more productive and effective than I had been when I had the entire day for my personal writing. If anything, I started to write and produce more in the smaller amount of time I had. I have always worked better to specific deadlines than open ends, so that helped.

But something else that helped was that I was occupying a different part of my mind being creative with a business that I’m truly passionate about. I do like to work with other smart and passionate people. I do like to connect with others. I love helping other writers. I love using my own experience as a writer to empathize with the struggles that writers face. And my work at Draft2Digital satisfied all those things.

What’s your split now in terms of working for others and working for yourself?

Right now I commit about 20 hours a week to Draft2Digital. That fluctuates. Some weeks it’s 40 hours, others it’s 10. I also do one-to-one consulting with authors, publishers and industry professionals. So sometimes my time for writing is limited. However, I don’t think only in terms of a 40-hour work week. I do a lot of writing and even other work during weekends.

Again, like I mentioned before, it never feels like work. If I end up working a 50-to-60-hour week, I don’t get stressed about it. I relish the fact that, much of the time, it doesn’t feel like work so much as something I’m lucky that I get to do.

Over the years you’ve held several key roles in publishing. Your CV goes: president of the Canadian Booksellers Association, board member of BookNet Canada, director of author relations and self-publishing for Rakuten Kobo, director of business development for Draft2Digital and professional adviser for Sheridan College’s creative writing and publishing honours program. This must give you a rare and valuable perspective on author publishing. What five takeaways can you give for indie authors now? Particularly, how have the factors for indie success changed in that time? Are there any practices that now don’t work as well as they used to, that authors perhaps should let go of?

Actually, one thing that I think authors need to recognize is that the publishing world, whether traditional or indie, has always been in flux. Here are five things that I think could bode well whenever an author is getting frustrated.
1. Trends come and go. Never lose sight of the long term. To riff on something my dear friend James Owen says, never sacrifice what you want the most for what you want the most in the moment.

2. You will fail. And you will make mistakes. More than once. The difference between someone who doesn’t succeed and someone who does is the person who believed in themselves enough to pick themselves up one more time, learn from the failure, adapt and try again.

3. You have to take chances along the way. And not every thing you try will be successful. Some will even set you back. But, as Canadian hockey legend Wayne Gretzky said, you will definitely miss 100 percent of the shots that you don’t take.

4. There are multiple people involved in writing and publishing. Editors, designers, business partners, platforms. But never lose sight of the two most important, without whom none of this would be possible. The writer and the reader. Without them, this magic dance cannot happen. So, you need to write, and you need to write considering that special magic the reader is seeking. In other words, never lose sight of who your ideal reader is.

5. You get to decide your destiny. You’re the one who ultimately determines what you do, when you do it, and how you do it. Again, I’ll leverage my pal James Owen. If you really want to do something, no one can stop you. But if you really don’t want to do something, then no one, no process, no tools, no strategies, no advice, can help you.

Lastly, you’ve been a bookseller. Any thoughts on the future of bookselling, whether on line or in brick-and-mortar shops, and how booksellers and indie authors might work together?

One of the things that truly disturbs me about the indie author community is the same thing that disturbs me about the way traditional publishers think. It’s too divisive and one sided. The reality is that indie authors are killing it when it comes to e-book sales, and that’s where they dominate. And traditional publishers continue to dominate and are killing it when it comes to print sales. Yes, there are exceptions in both cases; but in general, these are two completely different business models and focuses. And they can’t see the perspective of the other side, no more than in the political climate, the left and right are able to find a modicum of common ground. One thing I hate is that indie authors think print is dead, and traditional publishers think e-book sales have dried up.

The book will continue to prosper, even as new digital technologies allow it to become something more, something different. As Canadian digital marketing guru Mitch Joel says: “Everything is with, not instead of.” Technology has allowed us new opportunities, but not taken away the older ones.

I have long said that the future of writing and publishing will continually become more collaborative. Booksellers have always played a role curating titles for their customers; helping them sort and find the right books for them. Amazon does this in a digital fashion with algorithms and automated “also-boughts” and booksellers do this via personal connections and intimately understanding their customers. They both bring tremendous value, and both will leverage new technologies that allow them to continue to serve the needs of their communities. Regardless of whether they are on line or in brick-and-mortar buildings, readers need and depend upon an evolvingly complex combination of both those worlds to enhance and fulfill their reading lives. If writers are open to the possibilities that lie in embracing and leveraging both human and digital bookselling elements, determining benefits derived from collaboration, they can live long and prosperous writing lives.

Find Mark at his website markleslie.ca and on Twitter as @MarkLeslie.
Roz Morris writes literary fiction, memoir and writing craft books. She is also an editor and author coach. Find her at rozmorris.org and tweet her as @Roz_Morris.
Develop a writing process to suit your strengths and maximise productivity

Whether you write fiction or non-fiction, you need a way to get from first halting line to final glorious page. How do you arrive at an efficient process that helps you rather than hinders? In a recent episode of the AskALLi Foundational Self-Publishing Podcast, ALLi’s publication production manager Dan Parsons discussed writing processes for fiction, non-fiction and poetry with ALLi director Orna Ross. Abridged by TIA editor Roz Morris

1 Before you write anything—know your audience

First of all, figure out your audience. What kind of experience do they need from you? This sets the flavour of the whole book.

Dan says: “If you’re writing nonfiction guides, such as self-help books, you might prioritise clarity and actionable content. If you’re writing for children, your word choices will be different from the words you’d use in a thriller. The style grows out of your awareness of the audience and what will appeal to them.”

Dan says he makes this point because he took a wrong turning in one of his early books. “I was writing a children’s book but found I was using quite an adult vocabulary, and the plot didn’t align with that. That’s not to say you need to follow rigid rules to succeed in a particular genre, but there are standard marks you need to hit for each type of audience.”

You could just start writing and see where you go, but beware. Orna says she took 10 years to write her first novel, and even though she’s a fan of channelling her creativity through discovery writing and free writing, she agrees that when you embark on a book it’s better to think before you type.

“Focus on your genre and the typical forms it uses.” This will also pay off when you later publish—because, says Orna, “you’ll understand where you are positioned in the marketplace.”

And, says Orna, you also need to decide what kind of writer you want to be. “You might be writing to get several titles finished quickly, with an eye on making a living. Or you might want to win awards for the literary beauty of your work. Both require a different approach. These decisions can be a real act of self-discovery of who you are as a writer and as a publisher.”

Once you’ve understood your place in the great ecosystem of books, what comes next?

2 Establish the narrative shape of your book

Dan says: “Every genre has an established shape. With children’s fiction, there’s the idea of Home-Away-Home. In a lot of classic children’s fiction, the children start at home in the parental house, they go on an adventure to Neverland or Narnia or Hogwarts, and they end up coming home at the end of the story. That’s the Home-Away-Home structure.”

Dan says he makes this point because he took a wrong turning in one of his early books. “I was writing a children’s book but found I was using quite an adult vocabulary, and the plot didn’t align with that. That’s not to say you need to follow rigid rules to succeed in a particular genre, but there are standard marks you need to hit for each type of audience.”

A completely different kind of shape is found in non-fiction self-help. “You have the introduction, explanation and conclusion,” says Dan.

Again, to figure this out, start with reader expectations. What, ultimately, have they come for? If it’s non-fiction, are you providing step-by-step guidance, as in a how-to, or are you presenting a
The Indie Author

discussion that has room for doubts, theories and deeper nuances? If it’s a novel, are you aiming for a genre with well established traditions, or something more individual?

This shape may also dictate the book’s structure. Fiction has some well established story forms, like the three-act structure, where there are turning points or twists at the 25 percent and 75 percent markers. Most genre fiction will stick strongly to these shapes and readers will expect this.

Dan says: “In thrillers or whodunits, the villain has to appear in the first 20 percent of the book, and with romance the different protagonists have to come in at the right time to hit the happy-ev-
er-after markers.”

But if you’re writing a non-genre novel, structure can still be useful to you. It can be subtle. Instead of a pulse-pounding plot, you might structure a literary novel around a sense of development in the reader’s understanding. Essentially, the structure will help you keep the reader gripped, at a suitable level for their tastes.

For shortform and poetry, the rules are a little different. “With shortform,” says Orna, “you can get away with more experimental structures. They just work somehow. There is more latitude—but also they are easy to do badly. Ironically, with a novel it’s harder to go wrong—if you follow some of the general rules of form and structure.”

Indeed, you might already have a good grasp of how to structure your book. Many of us innately understand the principle of beginning, middle and end. Dan points out that we learn “just by watching movies and reading books. So you might accidentally write a three-act structure without realizing you’ve done it.”

The bottom line is this: all books need a structure. So it pays to figure out the structure that will be appropriate for your kind of book.

3 To plan or not to plan?

Welcome to the biggest split in the writing world—between planners and pantsers.

You can impose an outline beforehand, and write your book to it. Or you can write as it comes and organise later.

Orna says: “Some authors are discovery writers—the thing unfolds as they go and they don’t have a clear pathway at the beginning. This is particularly true for a first book. Sometimes there’s nothing for it, you might have some-thing very vague and you begin to go on that.”

Although discovery writing is creative, it has a big drawback. Discovery writers are more likely to write themselves into a corner, get disillusioned and give up. This is why most of us, even the most free spirited, opt for a controllable process.

Essentially, an outline saves time and angst. We know what material we’re going to use when. For fiction and memoir, we know where the big twists or turning points will be.

Are there dangers with planning too much?

Dan sees a major pitfall for fiction writers. “I think the one danger is that authors outline a plot without any consideration for realistic character reactions because they want a particular outcome.”

If that’s likely to be an issue for you, Orna has a suggestion: “Start a novel outline by developing a premise, and think about the characters and what would be authentic for them, before you develop the plot.”

Can you keep the best of both processes? How creative can you be while writing to an outline? If you’re worried about squashing the muse, Dan suggests: “Freewrite an outline, then edit out the bits that you know are going to go wrong. This will save a lot of time.”

Orna adds: “And use free writing to develop characters.”

In actuality, most writers are a mix of plotters and pantsers. We figure out our own balance by trial and error. In a novel or a piece of creative non-fiction, you might plan the broad strokes only—the tent-pole moments where the action peaks and the story twists. Or you might want the smaller moments in between as well—the small scenes that get the story from point to point and lay the ground for the set pieces.

What about poetry? Is there a place for planning?

Orna says: “If you’re writing a long epic poem that is a book in itself, it will follow, almost identically, the way a novel is constructed. If you’re creating a collection, you’re generally bringing a group of poems together. It might look haphazard, but the best collections are
structured with connecting points between the poems. Usually that’s at the thematic or the image level, so it’s not as obvious as it is in nonfiction or fiction, but it’s absolutely there. So if you can get a synopsis of ideas about what the book is, its theme, you know what’s in and what’s out, and you can order them so that the book has a natural shape."

Dan says: “I’ve heard musicians say they do albums the same way, where they’ve got a theme and it creates a story across the songs.”

Orna agrees: “It does seem there’s some kind of universal need in the reader, and in the writer, for this sort of pattern. The more aware you are of this, the easier your job becomes.”

4 Control your research

Research is essential. And it can run away, gleefully, with your time. Especially if the subject is one of your passions.

“Research is too much fun,” says Orna, who says she has learned by experience not to hop onto Google in the middle of writing a sentence.

“Personally,” she says, “I split my research into two categories. First is the facts I need to create the plot and characters. Second is the smaller questions I encounter during the writing. Instead of diverting from the text, I write a placeholder word and go through the manuscript later to fill the gaps.

“The more you can do your research in a structured way,” says Orna, “the better you’ll use your time.”

5 Drafting at last!

Dan is always impatient to get drafting. “The first draft is the fun bit. Full of passion. It helps to be very unfiltered and just write what you want.”

Wait—what about his outline? For him, the outline is the safety net. “I might glance at the outline every now and again to keep going, but I might also meander away then come back. Or I might have happy accidents where I create something different from what I originally thought, but I can fix everything in editing.”
So the outline can be fixed, like a tunnel. Or it can be a star to steer by. Whatever suits you.

Still, some authors don’t finish their first drafts. Why is that?

Dan says: “A lot of authors lack consistency. They lose the flow.”

Writing a draft is an intensive experience. Unlike planning, where you can hop in and out, drafting requires immersion, a grasp of moment-by-moment detail. Once you lose that, for instance, if you have a break, getting back can be difficult.

Dan has a rule that he never skips more than two days. “I’ve found that if I miss more than two days of writing, I lose the thread and I’ve got to go back and reread.” That’s where you start to lose enthusiasm, if you have to read 23,000 words before you can continue.

Orna raises another point. Sometimes the book doesn’t go as well as we hope. “It does take strength of character to keep believing in the book. Doubt can be a huge thing to deal with, because you feel like nobody cares, and your outline doesn’t make sense, and you hate the thing. This is why a lot of first books flounder. The writer gets lost.”

We all go there. We all learn to master the devil in our soul that says “you’re writing total rubbish.”

This is where you need your writing buddies, in person or on line. We are all used to sharing our strategies for getting through the doldrums.

It is all, says Orna, part of the process. “We read these amazing books and we assume they popped into the world fully formed and beautiful, and our baby is completely ugly in comparison, but every single writer goes through this process every single time. So keep going. Don’t stop.”

And remember, this draft won’t be the final book. You don’t even have to show it to anyone. You’ll edit before anyone sees it. (That’s a treat for later.)

This is why it helps to follow a routine. Also, figure out in advance what obstacles might stop you writing. Orna says: “We all have different lives and different levels of outside commitments. If you can’t write every day, make a commitment that you can manage. And if you can’t make it sometimes, reschedule, just like you would with a friend. Don’t let it go.”

Dan has another tip: remove resistance. Set up a place where you can start writing instantly. If you have to clear a space at the kitchen table, open the laptop, plug it in, you’ve already wasted 10 minutes and that might put you off starting altogether. If you can’t set aside a dedicated workstation, type on your phone. Or dictate the draft.
Orna says: “ALLi outreach manager Michael La Ronn writes all his books on the phone because he’s got a full-time job, and a family, and he’s doing an MA as well. So, he writes in the cracks of the day on his phone all the time.”

6 Self-editing

Your first draft will be rough in some ways, brilliant in others. What it certainly won’t be is fit for publication. From now on, you will be honing and refining until the manuscript is publishable. You’ll do some of this by yourself, then you’ll need feedback from others—beta readers and professional editors.

Allow plenty of time for all the editing steps. Editing isn’t just a question of tidying your phrasing or checking your grammar. Editing is a deep-level survey of whether the book works for the reader.

With your earliest manuscripts, this will be a longer process, but as with all the steps of writing, it’ll get faster.

First, give the manuscript a rest, then start by looking at the notes you made right at the start, about the reader you’re writing for. While you read your draft, consider how the book matches those intentions. It might have changed entirely, especially if it’s literary fiction or memoir. In that case, you might have discovered who you really are.


7 Beta readers and professional editors

There’s only so much we can do ourselves. We also get emotionally attached to our work, so at some point we need outsiders to assess the book. Beta readers are a good first step, but there’s no substitute for a detailed developmental edit from a professional.

“Editing is an investment,” Orna says, “not just in that particular work, but also in you as a writer. Every time you get a good editor, you’re strengthening your craft. You’re learning all the time, and that is the joy of writing, you’ve never learned all you can learn, there are always more improvements.”

“Every editor teaches you something new,” says Dan, “and you put their teachings into the next work you do.”

Dan also says his process has become more slick and effective. “My first book took four-and-a-half years, and that was actually my sixth or seventh attempt because I never finished a book before that. Now I take about six to nine months per book. You get confidence as you do more. Your first draft of your 10th book may be better than your final draft of your first book.”

In the end, your process is your process. You’ll make discoveries about who you are, in terms of the books you want to produce and the methods that get you there. Making mistakes is part of the process too—it’s how you learn your own needs as an author. Wrong turnings are positives in the end. It’s all a great investment for your future books.

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Orna Ross is a poet, novelist, creativity coach and director of ALLi. Find her at ornaross.com and tweet her at @ornaross
Roz Morris writes literary fiction, memoir and writing craft books. She is also an editor and author coach. Find her at rozmorris.org and tweet her at @Roz_Morris
SelfPubCon—the Self-Publishing Advice Conference—is a free online conference with interviews, panels and presentations from trailblazing indie authors and other experts in the indie publishing world. The most recent conference took place last month. Over 24 hours, our panellists and speakers delivered advice and guidance on all aspects of writing craft; from plotting your book to writing great marketing emails that convert. Highlights included:

- Publishing options for authors and what’s right for you right now.
- Techniques to write more books and reach more readers.
- New publishing platforms, formats, tech and tools.
- The craft of writing short books, children’s books, and audiobooks
- Ways to optimize what you are doing already.

ALLi members receive a free all-access pass to the most recent SelfPubCon AND ALSO to all past SelfPubCons (from 2018) for a limited period. You’ll find more than 100 sessions of the best indie author education available.

Accessing the conference as an ALLi member

Note that the conference website is separate from the ALLi website and you need to register there separately.

You will need your ALLi discount code, which you’ll find in the ALLi member zone.

To find your ALLi discount code:

1. Visit the ALLi membership site.
2. Log in.
3. Navigate to the ADVICE>CONFERENCE (remember, login is needed).
4. Locate the code in the lilac-coloured box.
5. Log into the website page: allianceindependentauthors.org/self-publishing-advice-conference/
6. Once you have your code, go to the six-month access pass purchase page: SelfPublishingAdviceConference.com/six-month-pass-purchase/
7. Record your email address and password for when you want to revisit.
8. Enter your code and you’ll have access to all past conferences for six months.
The Self-Publishing Advice Conference October 2021: programme

Publishing Through Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP): experienced authors and a senior member of the KDP team share their best practices for print and e-books. With Victoria Innell, senior relationship manager at Amazon Books, romantic novelist Nicola May, crime novelist JM Dalgliesh and thriller, comedy and romance author Suzy K Quinn.

Writing And Editing For Successful Self-Publishing, including types of editing for your manuscript and key editing points for your book title and blurb. With Kristina Stanley, CEO of editing software company Fictionary, Lisa Lepki, chief marketing officer of grammar and style app ProWritingAid, Tara Cremin, director of the Kobo Writing Life selfpublishing platform, and JoEllen Nordstrom, CEO of publishing services provider First Editing.

Crafting Beautiful Prose In Every Sentence with Sophie Playle, fiction editor and director of Liminal Pages.

Plotting for Pantsers: How to Plot a Book if You’ve Never Plotted Before with Troy Lambert, mystery author and education lead for the book outlining package Plottr.

Writing Books For Rapid Release: The Prolific Author Mindset with Carlissa Andrews, bestselling author and founder of the Online Revolution indie publishing school and podcast.

Writing For A Cause: Dos And Don’ts with Denise Baden, professor of sustainability at the University of Southampton, indie novelist and founder of the Green Stories free writing competitions.

Doing Research Well: Spend Less time For Better Results with Vikki J Carter, librarian, podcaster and author of research guides for writers.

Writing Great Dialog: The Essentials with thriller author Jeff Elkins, of The Dialog Doctor podcast.

Four Steps To Write Emails that Sell Books—workshop with USA Today bestselling author and marketing expert Nick Stephenson.
The Craft of Writing: Short Books (And Why You Should) with suspense/thriller novelist and podcaster Matty Dalrymple and horror writer/publishing consultant Mark Leslie Lefebvre.

How to Write for Audio—The Craft And Nuances. With fiction and non-fiction author MK Williams, and a super-trio from the Findaway Voices audiobook platform—Christina Calderone, Scott Curry and Will Dages.

Critique Groups: Finding One That’s Right For You with Ross B Lampert, science fiction novelist and co-founder of the Cochise Writers’ Group in Arizona.

Using Writing Prompts To Animate Your Work in Progress. Draw on spontaneity and your subconscious with novelist, short story writer and writing mentor Audrey Kalman.

Story Craft And Narrative in Travel Memoir with writer/editor Jeremy Bassetti of the podcast Travel Writing World.

Level Up Your Side Characters—tips for polishing an aspect of storytelling that is often overlooked. With YA author, writing coach and podcaster Sacha Black.

The Craft Of How-To Non-Fiction—how to write books for authors with Dale L Roberts, author and host of the YouTube show Self-Publishing With Dale, and Michael La Ronn, ALLi outreach manager and author of more than 30 science fiction and fantasy novels and self-help books for authors.

Write Every Day: Motivate Yourself To Success In 10 Easy Steps with romance author, author coach and former journalist Helena Halme.

The Craft of Writing Good Contracts And Agreements for Creative Work with intellectual property and internet law attorney Kathryn Goldman.

Writing Irresistible Kidlit—tips for conquering the children’s book market with editor and former literary agent Mary Kole.

The Craft of Genre Fiction—How To Entertain And Satisfy Readers Without Being Formulaic. With cozy mystery novelist Debbie Young and novelist/writing coach Lorna Fergusson.
From Story to Blurb to Cover: Signposting Your Themes To Your Readers. Learn how to attract exactly the right readers with Nat Connors, romantic novelist and creator of the Kindletrends author resource.

The Writing to Heal Panel—Using Writing To Process Trauma, Grief And Life Challenges. With extreme athlete and memoirist Cami Ostman, author and welfare activist Laura Formentini, and novelist and publishing advocate Alexa Bigwarfe, who first turned to writing after the death of her infant daughter.

Writing With AI—Enhance Your Storytelling, Produce Manuscripts More Efficiently And Sell More Books. With Alessandra Torre and Matthew Jockers from tech company Authors AI. Alessandra is also the New York Times bestselling author of more than 20 romance and suspense novels, and Matthew is professor of English and data analytics at Washington State University and co-author of The Bestseller Code.

Publishing through IngramSpark: Setting Up Your Writing For Success. Top tips from children’s writers Alice Clover and NGK.

WE HELP AUTHORS THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLISHING

“The passion that drives us to write is seldom wedded to the skill required to navigate the complexities of publication. Enter Jason and Vidya, angels sent from cyber heaven. They calmed my anxieties and brought order to the myriad steps required to turn a manuscript into a book. My many emails were answered promptly and courteously. My experience was completely positive and I would recommend their services without qualification to any aspiring author.

J. C. Douglas Marshall, author of Homer’s Odyssey: a translation with an introductory letter to my grandson

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The Indie Author

In this new feature, we are highlighting you—our wonderful members. Each quarter we’ll spread the word about your awards and achievements.

Rachel McCollin (writing as Rachel McLean)–Amazon Kindle Storyteller Award winner 2021

“I was over the moon to be picked as a finalist with my murder mystery novel *The Corfe Castle Murders* and truly shocked to win—I hadn’t prepared a speech or anything and had to think fast when the judge, Clare Balding, asked me to say a few words!

“I think it’s great that the Kindle Storyteller Award is a serious prize for indie authors and also that reader reviews are taken into account when shortlisting.

“Publishing on KDP and being an indie author have allowed me to realise my dream of making a living from my writing—winning this award is the icing on the cake.”

Daisy James–Amazon Kindle Storyteller Award finalist 2021

“I was absolutely thrilled and honoured to be a finalist with my romantic comedy *Escape to the Hummingbird Hotel*. It was a wonderful feeling to get the phone call to be told my book was one of only five selected from thousands of entries. I could hardly believe it, to be honest.

“The awards are a wonderful celebration of independently published books across multiple genres and it was so easy to enter, too. I’d definitely encourage anyone who is thinking about entering next year to do so. I’ve had a fabulous time meeting the other finalists, meeting Clare Balding and attending the drinks reception to celebrate all things literary at the Houses of Parliament.

“I love being an indie author. I enjoy having complete creative control over all aspects of the publishing journey and Amazon KDP has given me this. There’s always something new to learn and I’m at the beginning of my journey, but I’m really looking forward to seeing where it will take me.”

Amazon Kindle Storyteller contest winners: from left, Mary Kingswood, ALLi member Daisy James, ALLi member Barry Hutchinson writing as JD Kirk, judge Clare Balding, ALLi member and winner Rachel McCollin writing as Rachel McClean, and Tao Wong
Barry Hutchison (writing as JD Kirk)—Amazon Kindle Storyteller Award finalist 2021

“It was a huge shock to make the final with my crime thriller An Isolated Incident. With so many brilliant indie books published in the last year, I didn’t think I stood a chance of making the shortlist, so I was over the moon to find out I was on it.

“It’s still so difficult for indie authors to break through into many of the big literary prizes, which are often restricted to traditionally published authors, so having something like the Storyteller award to celebrate the new wave of indie publishers is tremendously important.

“Having come from a traditional publishing background, I have found KDP has been literally life-changing, giving me the creative and financial freedom that traditional publishing was never able to.”

MORE AWARDS

AJ Thibault’s paranormal novel Ghost Town is an award winner in the horror: supernatural/paranormal category of the 2021 American Fiction Awards.

Amy Rivers has been selected as the 2021 Indie Author of the Year by the Indie Author Project.

Angela Cecil Reid’s YA novel Nile Cat is shortlisted this year for the International Rubery Award and has been awarded a B.R.A.G Medallion.

Angela MacRae Shanks’s latest historical novel, Under A Gravid Sky, has won a Chill With A Book Premier Readers’ Award.

Bill Thompson has won the 2021 EVVY award for horror for his paranormal suspense novel Die Again.

Carissa Andrews has been named 2021 Best Indie-Published Young Adult Fiction Author in the State of Minnesota by the Minnesota Library Foundation and Indie Author Project.

Claire Stibbe is the Writing Award fiction winner in the 2021 Page Turner Awards for her unpublished thriller manuscript No Good Lie.

Cynthia Sally Haggard’s debut historical novel Thwarted Queen has won the 2021 IPPY Gold Medal for audiobook, while her second novel Farewell My Life has won the 2021 Independent Press Award for Women’s Fiction.

Dawn Brookes’s crime novel Body in the Woods has won the Readers’ Favorite gold medal award for crime fiction, and has also been shortlisted for consideration by Wind Dancer Films for TV or film production.

Debi Alper has won the inaugural RNA Indie Editor of the Year 2021.

Denise Bossarte’s self-help title Thriving After Sexual Abuse: Break Your Bondage to the Past and Live a Life You Love has been given a gold award in the NonFiction Authors Association awards.

DJ Martin’s latest novel Reinventing Herself has won the 2021 Pencraft Award for paranormal fiction.

Ed Lehner’s short story “Katie” has won the award for memoir prose in the Southwest Writers 2021 Literature Contest, New Mexico.

F Scott Service’s second memoir, Playing Soldier, has won five international book awards, including the 2021 IndieReader Discovery Award for Memoir.

Felicia T Farber’s novel Ice Queen has won 11 awards, including first place in YA, best YA e-book and best first book.
Holly Johannes has been awarded two first places in the Milwaukee Veteran’s Creative Arts competition—one for humorous poetry and the other for short story.

India Powers’s fantasy novel *Demon’s Bane* has won the 2021 PRISM Award for best first book and is a finalist in the Soon To Be Famous Illinois Author Project.

JC Fields has won a medal in the Readers’ Favorite international book award—for the fourth year in a row.

Janet Wong is the 2021 winner of the NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children award.

Jeanette Taylor Ford has been awarded an Indie B.R.A.G. Medallion for her romance novel *The Ghosts of Roseby Hall*.

Jenny Lisk’s debut memoir, *Future Widow*, has taken first place in its category in both the New York City Big Book Awards and the Zibby Awards.

Judy Taylor’s DIY title *Save That Rug! A How-To Guide for Repairing Hooked Rugs* has won the eLit Book Awards and the Chanticleer Book Awards.

Judy Taylor’s biography *The Boy Who Wrote Poetry* has won the bronze award at the eLit Book Awards.

Junia Wonders’s children’s picture book *The Night the Monsters Came* has won gold and bronze medals in the 2021 Moonbeam Children’s Book Awards in the e-book category.

KB Taylor’s Western romance *Hattie’s Family: Through the Eyes of a Dairymaid* has won the Will Rogers Medallion award in her category.

Kelly Collins has won a Readers Favorite gold medal for her contemporary romance *A Tablespoon of Temptation*.

Leigh Roberts has won a Readers’ Favorite silver award for her epic fantasy *Khon’Tor’s Wrath*.

Leith C MacArthur’s suspense thriller *The Death of Harry Crow* is a 2021 Firebird Award winner.

LoLo Paige’s debut romantic suspense *Alaska*
Spark has received an Indie B.R.A.G. Medallion, an Eric Hoffer award, a Next Generation Indie Book award, a Kindle Book Review award and is a semi-finalist for the Page Turner Awards in the novel-to-screenplay adaptation category. It has also been featured in the Publishers Weekly Booklife magazine.

Matthew John Meagher has won the 2021 Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award for best Juvenile/YA with his novel Irish Town.

Merryn Glover’s Highlands novel Of Stone and Sky has won Book of the Year at the Bookmark Festival in Perthshire, Scotland.

Paul W Papa has been named the Will Rogers Bronze Medallion winner in the Western Non-fiction category for Desert Dust.

Rick Duffy’s YA coming-of-age epic fantasy The Sigil Masters has won first place in the 2021 Firebird Awards.

Rohan Quine’s fantasy novels and novellas have received accolades from the NYC Big Book Award 2021. The Beasts of Electra Drive is a winner in the cross-genre category; The Imagination Thief is a Distinguished Favorite in the literary fiction category; the Platinum Raven novellas are Distinguished Favorites in the anthology category; and The Beasts of Electra Drive is a Distinguished Favorite audiobook.

Ruthie Godfrey has won the Firebird Award for her children’s novel Success.

Timothy Kilby has won the 2021 International Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society book award for regional genealogy nonfiction with Gourdvine Black and White.

**AWARD FINALISTS & LONGLISTS**

Andrew Brown from Design for Writers has been shortlisted for the Romantic Novelists’ Association cover designer of the year 2021.

Carol Cooper’s historical mystery The Girls from Alexandria is a finalist in the Novel London Literary Award 2021.

Monique Singleton is a finalist in the Page Turner Screenplay-Book Adaptation awards.

Phil Featherstone saw three of his novels reach the final of the Page Turner Book Award.

Reina Cruz’s debut paranormal novel Daughter of Isis is a finalist for the Page Turner Award.

Stephen Collier is a finalist in the Page Turner Awards for his crime novel Driving Dead.

**OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS**

Caitlin White is on the USA Today Bestseller list with the Sunny Side Up Cozy Mystery Box Set.

CJ Archer’s historical fantasy novel The Spy Master’s Scheme (Glass and Steele #12) landed on the USA Today bestseller list upon release.

John S Langley gained a Master of Arts (Poetry) and inclusion in British Library Cultural Archive.

Laura Morelli debuted as a USA Today bestseller with her historical novel The Stolen Lady.

Sarah Weldon has been picked up by Sky Studios as a new writer for film and TV.

If you’d like to tell us about a recent triumph, submit your news here.
Direct to your ears: the full list of AskALLi podcasts

No matter what your interest or experience level, ALLi has a podcast for you. From news to newbie Q&As to advanced-level advice, our #AskALLi series of weekly podcasts will pack your self-publishing toolbox with knowledge. Here are some of the podcast highlights from this past quarter.

**Advanced Self-Publishing Podcast with Orna Ross and Joanna Penn**

Top tips, tools and trends for running a successful author business with ALLi director Orna Ross and ALLi business adviser Joanna Penn, plus analysis of the latest self-publishing news. This salon is for those who know how to self-publish and want to expand their income and influence.

Find all the Advanced Self-Publishing podcasts here: allianceindependentauthors.org/advanced-salon/

**Members’ Q&A with Orna Ross and Michael La Ronn**

Answers to members’ current self-publishing queries, with ALLi director Orna Ross and ALLi partner liaison and US ambassador Michael La Ronn. All are welcome to listen and learn, but only ALLi members can submit questions.

Find all the Members’ Q&A podcasts here: allianceindependentauthors.org/membersqa/

**Recent highlight:**

Focus on your strengths as an indie author to beat “comparison-itis”: Comparisonitis is unfortunately widespread in the indie community. It makes us think other people have it easier or are doing better, getting more accolades, or selling more, or writing better. We talk about how to relax and be yourself as a writer instead of comparing yourself to other people in an unhelpful way.

selfpublishingadvice.org/focus-on-your-strengths/

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**Recent highlight:**

How can I set my first book up for success?

Do I need to purchase barcodes for my paperback book?

Offset printing or print on demand? Which is better?

Is there any way to create a spine for a short book of only 32 pages?
Would ALLi ever consider doing a member-based box set?

Who manages a traditional publisher’s sales pages? What can authors learn from that?

selfpublishingadvice.org/first-book/

Foundational Self-Publishing with Orna Ross and Dan Parsons

Each episode, ALLi director Orna Ross and ALLi’s book production manager Dan Parsons discuss a theme that’s important to indie authors at all levels.

Find all the Foundational Self-Publishing podcasts here: allianceindependentauthors.org/foundational-self-publishing-podcast/

Recent highlight:

Use book pre-orders to grow your author business. Book pre-orders are not a new idea, but the rise of self-publishing and e-books has changed the way they work. Indies have used pre-orders to build avid readerships, improve their read-through and even find new ways to hit coveted bestseller slots. You may be panicked by the idea of a looming deadline or the logistics of setting a book launch months in the future, but using pre-orders could give you a real edge. We discuss ways to use pre-orders to reach more readers and sell more books.

selfpublishingadvice.org/book-pre-orders/

Self-Publishing News podcast: Dan Holloway and Howard Lovy

ALLi news editor Dan Holloway and multimedia manager Howard Lovy bring you the latest in indie publishing news and commentary.

Find all the Self-Publishing News podcasts here: allianceindependentauthors.org/self-publishing-news/

Recent highlight:

Paper shortages as we reach the holiday bookbuying season, AI audiobook narration, and the brief OnlyFans ban: what do they all mean for indie authors?

selfpublishingadvice.org/podcast-paper-shortage/

Our #AskALLi advice sessions are broadcast first as video livestreams each Monday, on Facebook, YouTube and in the ALLi member forum. The podcast is released on the ALLi blog each Friday at 1pm, with full transcript and shownotes.

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Tell us your backstory: Inspirational Indie Authors podcast

Tune in to our podcast interviews with ALLi author and authorpreneur members who are publishing their own books, their own way. Each week an innovative author explores their motivations and inspirations with Howard Lovy, ALLi’s multimedia manager. Here are a few highlights of recent interviews

Nicholas Nawroth
Nicholas Nawroth [selfpublishingadvice.org/inspirational-indie-author-interview-nicholas-nawroth/] took his interest in art and dogs to create a series of children’s books featuring the adventures of dog characters based on real canines he has known. What gives Nick the most joy is the thought that his books are creating special moments for children when they settle down to a story with an adult.

“That’s why I do this, for that magical moment when the parent reads to the child right before bedtime or naptime, or the middle of the afternoon. Or it might be the grandparents, or even the big brother, big sister... just those moments of family time.”

Mary Louisa Locke
Mary Louisa Locke [selfpublishingadvice.org/inspirational-indie-author-interview-mary-louisa-locke/] was first inspired to write in 1979 when her academic research uncovered the stories of some incredible 19th-century women. But it wasn’t until after she retired and began her new career as an indie author that she gave these women new life in historical fiction. Mary Lou’s story is one of patience, perseverance and a vision of the future as well as the past.

“That dream that more people would learn about these women if I wrote a historical mystery series has absolutely turned out to be more than I could have ever imagined. That’s one of my messages: if you have a dream, don’t give up on it. Sometimes, the path to it is very different, but frankly, I would not have sold a quarter of a million books if I’d gone through the traditional route.”

Phil Simon
Phil Simon [selfpublishingadvice.org/inspirational-indie-author-interview-phil-simon/] has written a number of books on collaboration. We all know that self-publishing is a misleading term because most self-publishers work collaboratively with editors, designers, marketers and other specialists to produce a book. Phil not only writes about collaboration but practices it in the way he publishes.

He says: “Whether you’re publishing as an indie or working with a traditional publisher, if you can get them to use a collaboration hub—Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Slack, Google Workspace—then you keep all your information in one place. So if you’re my developmental editor, Howard, and you win the lottery and say, ‘bye-bye, Phil. It’s been nice knowing you,’ and I hire someone else as my developmental editor, I don’t have to forward a bunch of emails ... and all the information that you exchanged with me does not die in your inbox.”
Matty Dalrymple

Matty Dalrymple selfpublishingadvice.org/inspirational-indie-author-interview-matty-dalrymple/ is a mystery and suspense author who discovered that her whodunits sell very well the indie way. In fact, she’s found so much success, she gives back to the community through her podcast The Indy Author. Matty enjoys the personal connection with her fans that only an indie author can receive.

“People will drop me notes or sometimes buy me a virtual coffee for something I’ve done on the podcast that they really enjoyed. That is always tremendously energizing and gratifying to get feedback from the people you want to be serving.”

Alessandra Torre

Alessandra Torre selfpublishingadvice.org/inspirational-indie-author-interview-alessandra-torre/ began writing romance novels on a dare from her husband and discovered that people read what she wrote. A lot of people, in fact. So many that Harlequin and Hachette both offered her contracts. But she found that indie publishing gave her the freedom she desired to write and market her books her way. Alessandra also discovered that the secret to success in fiction writing could be packaged and sold as software that helps writers find their voice. That’s how her company, Authors AI, was born.

“I am so excited about the future, of what is ahead of us in books because our industry has not really changed much in the last 10, 20, 30 years. We want to change that, and I think this change is coming and I’m so excited for it.”

Find the Inspirational Indie Authors podcast here.

Howard Lovy is multimedia manager of ALLI. He is also a journalist, book editor, podcaster and memoirist, with credits in Publishers Weekly and Longreads, and has been an executive editor of Foreword Reviews. Find his website here and tweet him at @Howard_Lovy
On the ALLi blog this past quarter, we’ve been working hard to bring you “ultimate” guide posts, full of tips, strategies and real-life member case studies. We cover niche topics relevant to every level of your author business from newbie to seasoned pro. This quarter was even more packed than usual. ALLi blog manager Sacha Black gives a taster

### Mindset topics

In the vast majority of industries, but especially creative ones, much of our success comes from mindset and grit. This quarter we covered one mindset topic in particular: rest.

We dived into what rest is, why you might need multiple types of it, and why it’s crucial for maintaining peak performance. Read more here:

**The Ultimate Guide to Creative Rest for Indie Authors**

### Marketing topics

We had several marketing topics this quarter. In *The Ultimate Guide to SEO and Findability for Indie Authors* we examined what SEO is, how much indie authors should worry about it, on and off-page SEO, SEO for blogs and podcasting and tips and tricks for improving your SEO.

We also looked at reader magnets for indie authors—what they are, why you need them and how you can use them to harness readers. Read more on page 44. In a similar vein, we looked at pre-orders—when you should and shouldn’t use them, the benefits of pre-orders in different stores, and how to generate buzz during your pre-order period. Dive into the detail here.

Last, we ask how you should find comparison authors—people whose work is aimed at the same readers as yours. It’s a great way to learn about the industry and your genre, from how to write it to how to sell it. That’s what we discuss in this article.
Business topics

As the indie publishing world evolves, so does its business environment. One important topic we covered this quarter was **What to Do if Amazon KDP Asks You to Prove Your Publishing Rights**, a situation that is more common than it should be. It can also be terrifying. In the post we explain some of the ways you can prove your rights.

Awards are a good way to raise your profile, but what does it take to be a winner? In this article, we look at tactics to increase your chances.

If you’re interested in growing your print publishing sales, this article is for you, discussing all the main options from print on demand, consignment printing, print partnerships and more.

Another key business topic for authors is rights: rights reversion and what to do when you’re approached by an overseas publisher. Rights reversion is all about taking back rights from a publisher you’ve previously licensed them to. If you’re not getting the sales you want, then it’s time to dig out your contract and see whether you can get your rights back. Find out more here.

If you’re emailed by an overseas publisher it can often seem like a spam contact. But sometimes it’s a genuine opportunity to get your book to a much wider audience, in languages beyond your own. See our article on page 49.

Thank you

To the dozens of members who have given us quotes, case studies and examples—you help us make these guides as comprehensive as possible. Thanks this quarter to the ALLi members and partners who regularly contribute to posts, in particular, Ethan Ellenberg, Katlyn Duncan, Jane Davis, Hugh Howey, Penny Sansevieri, and Michele DeFilippo.

If there’s a topic you’d like us to cover in an ultimate guide, email ALLi’s blog manager Sacha Black

sacha@allianceindependentauthors.org.

Sacha Black writes writing-craft books and young adult fantasy novels. She edits the Self-Publishing Advice Center blog and manages the Self-Publishing Advice conference. Find her at her website sachablack.co.uk and on Twitter @sacha_black.

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—Lisa Lindahl author of Unleash the Girls and inventor of the sports bra

A Complete Publishing Solution for Today’s Indie Author

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Understanding the genre you write is one of the most important elements of being an author. Not only does it help you craft books that will please your readers, it is important market information, helping you decide how to present your work to maximise your sales. So what do you need to know and where do you look?

ALLi partner member Nat Connors began publishing romantic comedies in 2016. At the time, he looked for data on his market in the Kindle store but found it unsatisfactory, so he compiled his own summary of the information he needed to market his books. Soon he was doing the same for author friends, and this has now become Kindletrends, a weekly newsletter for self-published authors, providing in-depth information on the trends in each genre across all the main e-book platforms—encompassing blurbs, covers, titles and more. Here, he gives ultimate insider tips for understanding your genre, and using that information to make marketing decisions.

In this article, I’ll describe how to research your genre using the most common e-book platforms: Amazon Kindle, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Google Books and Apple Books. These e-book platforms aren’t the entire landscape of the independent author’s market, but they are an immediately accessible and cost-effective way to research a genre, so they’re a good place to start.

Four aspects of genre research

There are a lot of theories about what a genre is, and you’ll come up with your own definitions as you do your research. There are also a lot of well-researched and thoughtful books about specific aspects of genre. The approach described here is one of many, and you’ll find the ideas will fit well with other material you read elsewhere.

I’ve chosen to divide research into four areas I think you need to master to understand your book genre.

They start with the ‘innermost’ and most fundamental one—the content of your book—and work outwards through blurbs, covers and genre mechanics. I suggest tackling them in this order so you can see how each influences the other.


In each section I’ll explain ways you can look at aspects of e-book publishing platforms to identify the key features of your genre. I’ll also provide links to other resources that have helped me, and to authors and writers who I think are accomplished in this area.

1 Content

Our method begins with content, because I think understanding content is the most important part of writing successfully in a genre. This doesn’t imply that you have to copy what others have done, or even be bound by it. But
the more you understand what’s in a genre, the better you’ll see how your own work fits.

Ultimately, the content of your story is what you are delivering to the reader for their time and money; promising it through the cover, developing that promise in the blurb, and delivering when they decide to buy your book. This means that understanding the relationship between story elements in a genre, and the reader’s expectations, is one of the best ways to spend your research time.

Start by looking at the relevant category in each online store. Here’s a table of links to categories, by platform:

- **Amazon Kindle**
- **Barnes & Noble**
- **Kobo**
- **Google Books**
- **Apple Books**

You don’t have to look at every store in detail; since Amazon has the largest market share, a pragmatic approach is to focus your genre research on the Kindle store. Then look briefly at the other stores with the goal of understanding the differences between the way your genre is represented in each of the stores.

Each store is slightly different in structure, and some are easier to navigate than others. The books in each are separated into categories; by this, I mean the divisions you can usually see as a list of names on the store website when you’re browsing books.

Categories generally have a hierarchical relationship—for instance, space opera might be a category under science fiction. In a few cases they converge—that is, a single category belongs to two different hierarchies. All the stores share large overarching category divisions, like science fiction, politics, romance, history or fantasy, but beneath those they may differ quite a bit. In addition, the type of books in the stores in each category may differ subtly, most often in the cover and blurb.

One of the most challenging parts of genre research is that a store’s division of categories may not match our own understanding of genre as authors and readers. As authors we sometimes have problems categorising our books because some genres are clearly and comprehensively represented by categories (for instance, Western fiction), and others aren’t.

Furthermore, genres are subjective, non-exclusive, fuzzy edged and rapidly changing. For instance, the litRPG genre is popular now in self-published fiction, but was not at all popular three to four years ago. BISAC codes ([bisg.org/page/BISACSubjectCodes](http://bisg.org/page/BISACSubjectCodes)) represent another view of genre, one that is oriented around the traditional publishing industry, book distribution and libraries.

Each of these frameworks is important, and that can be confusing. For the moment, focus on understanding what’s in the relevant categories on the online stores, and thinking about how they relate to what you write, or want to write.

First, look a number of the top books in the category. The books presented first to a customer on the website are typically the top-selling or top-earning books for that category. Although they don’t always represent the entire category in terms of themes or presentation, it’s still important to understand them. Make notes on how old those top books are: if there are a lot of new books less than 30 days old, that shows the category is pretty active, and new books are coming out every month. This might mean it’s easier to get into the top-selling list, but it might also mean that you need to publish more frequently, and advertise more, to stay there.

On the other hand, a low number of new books might mean you don’t have to publish as frequently in this category, but it might be harder to break into. You can also watch this figure from week to week and month to month, to see if the category is getting more, or less, busy.

### Reading your genre

To understand a genre, you need to read a lot of books. If you’re in a country that offers Amazon’s Kindle Unlimited subscription program, and your genre of interest is represented there, this can be an inexpensive way to read a number of books for research. Otherwise, many authors will offer temporary discounts on e-books, or price individual e-books (for instance, the first in a series) very cheap or free. Watch for these in the categories you’re studying to keep costs down.
Choose a few books that you would like to have written. Make notes on why they look appealing to you, before you read. Afterwards, your experience and opinions will change, so it’s important to record your initial observations.

As you read, pay attention to the major story and style elements; make notes on where story elements happen in the book, and how each is linked to the others. Reading for this kind of research is different to reading for enjoyment, or for style and storycraft reasons. Try to stay high above the story and focus only on the main elements, and the emotions they communicate to the reader. Plotting and craft books can help this process. I list a few popular ones at the end of this section.

Next, go back to the store page for the book and read the reviews, both positive and negative. If you see a common element that readers liked or didn’t like about the book, note it down. The details of what readers say are often not as important as the elements they identify. A story element that is memorable will be commented on in a review; so for each relevant comment, think about what would cause a reader to feel that way.

When you’ve worked through a few books, compare your notes on them. Which elements are the same, and which differ between books? How do the similar or different elements affect the plot? Which elements are commented on by readers—positively or negatively?

The more books in a genre you read, the more you’ll get an idea of the relationship between story elements and reader expectations; how those expectations are established and then fulfilled in a satisfying way.

In the following sections, we’ll return to these notes, and add to them as you look at how the blurb and cover work to set reader expectations, and which story elements specifically relate to them.

Further reading

There are many good plotting and craft resources, so I will only recommend a few. I encourage you to read a lot of different perspectives, and take the parts that work for you.

- Jami Gold has many useful resources for writers, and her beat sheets are an excellent (free) synopsis.
- Romancing the Beat by Gwen Hayes. A fun and accessible book for all writers even if you have no interest in romance—a good way to analyse plotting.
- Save the Cat! Writes a Novel by Jessica Brody. This is a more traditional story-structure method and may take a little longer to work through, but is one of the most widely cited.

2 Blurbs

Blurbs are typically the last thing readers see on an e-book store before they decide to buy your book. Writing effective blurbs is challenging, and takes practice—but of all the elements we’re discussing in this series, it’s also the one that is cheapest to improve, and the most in your control.

To understand a genre through blurbs, it can help to work on a blurb for your own book. Even if you haven’t finished a book, you can think about writing a blurb; many successful authors start writing a blurb at the same time as they start their book, and polish and perfect it as they write.

Let’s imagine you have a book concept, and you want to understand more about your genre by working on a blurb. Start by going to the store of your choice, and looking for books that are similar to yours. Taking just the blurbs, rank the books in order of their appeal to you. Try not to think too much about this, just do it quickly; the goal is to adopt the mindset of a reader who is browsing for something to read.

If you can, enlist someone who isn’t a writer to do this as well; comparing their ranking with yours may tell you about things you’ve missed.

Take the top three blurbs in order, and write the blurb for your book in the style of each of those three. If they’re similar styles, go further down your list until you have three different styles. Don’t worry if they don’t quite fit; you will rewrite them, and the purpose of this exercise is to get a feeling for different ways you can write your blurb.

Next, go back to the notes you made in Part 1: Content. Compare the blurbs for those books with the story elements you identified.
In a good blurb, every sentence is there for a reason, and every sentence indicates something about the book. For the books you have read, what story element or elements does each sentence in the blurb indicate to the reader? Pay particular attention to elements mentioned by readers in their reviews; these are good targets for emphasising in your own blurb.

With this knowledge, go back to your three blurb versions and edit them. Your goal is to make each sentence in each of your blurbs tell the reader something about your book—something that is a popular story element, or is mentioned by reviewers of other similar books.

This is a challenging exercise, and you will probably find one of these blurbs more appealing to you than the others. However, don’t give up on the others just yet.

When this is done, try to find an audience to test your three blurbs. This can be colleagues, friends and family, or a genre-specific readers’ or writers’ group online. Present all three blurbs and ask people to rank them in order of their appeal; I find this more useful than asking people whether they like a single blurb. If you get a clear winner in terms of style, go with that; if you don’t, ask people what they like about their favorites, and combine them into a single blurb.

Further reading

- The successful romance author and former copywriter Rosalind James has an excellent post about her blurb writing formula; this is how I start writing blurbs in all genres.
- Nicholas Erik (who I recommend again later) has a valuable blurb cheat sheet which is a good general approach for all genres. In particular, his method of hand-copying blurbs then writing your own and then reading it aloud is very powerful.
- My current favorite book about blurbs is Book Blurs Unleashed by Robert J Ryan. This has a lot of useful insights about different types of taglines, and good examples of how they can be applied to different genres.
3 Covers

Your book’s cover is usually the first thing potential readers see—in a newsletter, blogpost or online advertisement.

Just like blurbs, covers make a specific set of promises to the reader—in particular, covers usually tell the reader about the book’s genre and subgenre. They also play an important role in author branding, making sure readers can identify two books by the same author, even at thumbnail size.

To learn about covers in a genre, start by scanning the covers relevant to that genre, every week for a month. You’ll typically see two or three major types of cover in a genre, with a sprinkling of others that don’t fit any group. Make notes about the elements that persist from week to week, and about what you think is in each book, based on these.

When you’ve got an idea of the major types of cover in your genre, start making notes, looking at the following:

- **People**: their presence or absence, framing (face only, in close-up, whole body), angle, dress style
- **Objects**: how are they relevant to the story?
- **Color**: what are the dominant colors and shades? The colorboard in the weekly Kindle-trends newsletter can help with this as well.
- **Typography**: font size, type placement. Relationship between the author name and the title—are they in different fonts?
- **Other cover elements**: taglines or devices (for instance, badges or medals).
- **Series and author similarities**: for books in a series or by the same author, what are the consistent elements that make it clear these books are related?

Next, go to the blurbs for these books. Look for elements in the cover that are linked to key words or phrases in the blurb. As with blurb research, your goal is to understand what each element in the cover tells the reader—something about the genre, about this specific story, or about the author or series.

When you’ve worked through this exercise a few times, you’ll be in a good position to choose a few specific covers as a basis for deciding on your own. When you’re working with a cover designer, this exercise will allow you to send them relevant examples of covers in your genre, and also to be specific about the elements you want, and why.

Further reading

- I don’t have specific recommendations for cover designers, because they vary a lot from time to time, and from genre to genre. When you see covers you like, check in the acknowledgements in the book (which may be visible from the Look Inside feature) to see if the designer is credited. If they are not, consider emailing the author and asking who designed the cover; most authors are happy to support their cover designers with more work.

Don’t forget that as an ALLi member you have access to our trusted partner directory. Log in to the member zone [allianceindependentauthors.org](http://allianceindependentauthors.org) and navigate to APPROVED SERVICES>SEARCH FOR A SERVICE to find approved cover designers.

4 Mechanics

By genre mechanics I mean ‘everything else related to your genre that isn’t specifically about your book’.

The mechanics of a genre are not the content, but they are closely related to it; in principle you could write a great story, with a sharp blurb and a killer cover, but if it isn’t attuned to other important aspects of the market, it won’t perform as well as it might otherwise. Your understanding of genre mechanics might affect the type of market you choose to write for because of the amount of time you have available, or because of your preferred work style.

To learn about genre mechanics, look in the stores of your choice for the following.

Release frequency

How frequent are new books in your genre? When you do ongoing research, keep track of how long books persist at the top of the chart, and how quickly they drop down.
Traditionally published books

Traditionally published books may have a different lifespan from self-published or small-press books in your genre, so it’s worth looking at both groups to get a sense of the differences. If you’re not sure whether a book is traditionally published, look up the publisher name on Google; if it’s an imprint of one of the big commercial houses, it will almost always come up as the first result.

Standalone vs series

Some genres heavily favor books that form a long series, to maximize read-through. Some readers love a set they can binge on—so that when they finish one, there’s another right there.

If you’re planning to write a series, you may want to do specific ‘series research’ in your genre. This is particularly relevant for planning covers: cover design for a series can be challenging, because you need the flexibility to change some elements for each title, while maintaining overall branding.

Length

Most stores will show the length of each book as an approximate number of pages. Note down 10-20 of these, and take the median to get a sense of the length of a ‘typical’ book in that category. As with other elements, you don’t have to write to the exact same length as other writers in your genre—but be aware of reader expectations, particularly at a specific price point. Estimates of the number of words per page reported by e-book platforms vary quite a bit, but I use between 200 and 250 words per page.

Price

Some categories will show a wide variety of prices, so look at the books at high and low price points to understand why they’re different. Traditionally published books might have higher prices than indie or small-press books. The same goes for books that are published wide, which are priced higher than those in Kindle Unlimited. For further insightful discussions on pricing, see Nicholas Erik’s Ultimate Guide to Book Marketing, linked below.

Further reading

Two recommendations here, which are well worth the investment:

- Chris Fox’s Write to Market series. These are short and full of solid advice on all aspects of genre mechanics and research. Chris Fox’s approach to branding also emphasizes integrity and going to where your readers are to find out honestly what they want.

- Nicholas Erik’s Ultimate Guide series. Nicholas Erik’s material is high quality, actionable and valuable. I also recommend you bookmark the resources page on his website and revisit it frequently. Everything on there is worth money, but is not charged for.

Conclusion

Understanding your genre allows you to make informed decisions to position your books and—if you wish—change your course as you build your writing and publishing business.

Nat Connors is a romantic comedy writer, medical scientist and dance teacher, and creator of the Kindletrends newsletter for genre fiction authors. Find him on Twitter at @kindletrends
How to publish a children’s book: new ALLi guide

Children’s titles are a big section of the industry, and require specific knowhow, especially for marketing. Our latest guidebook draws on the expertise of ALLi’s self-publishing children’s writers, including ALLi’s children’s adviser Karen Inglis, to bring you everything you need to publish and promote books for this market. Here’s an excerpt

How long does it take to publish a children’s book?

While writing a children’s book may be quicker than an adult book because there are fewer words, there are additional aspects that may take more time. One of those is illustrations. Not all books for children are illustrated, but most are. If you’re working with an experienced illustrator, there will be a waiting period, maybe weeks or months.

And you need to allow time for good editing (yes, even children’s books should be edited), proper formatting, and to set up marketing and promotion.

All told, you should give yourself a year from concept to completion.

How much does it cost to publish a children’s book?

Children’s books are generally shorter than books for adults, but that doesn’t mean they’re cheaper to produce. Illustrations for children’s picture books can cost anywhere between $2,000 and $10,000, (though they generally don’t exceed $6,000). Each book’s particular circumstances alter the costs of the process: a more polished manuscript, for example, will be less expensive to edit. For that reason, we’re wary of giving estimates when individual cases differ so much.

That said, if we have to give a ballpark figure for the cost of self-publishing a children’s book, we’d say you should expect to spend at least $5,000 and probably more for a picture book.

Do I need an experienced or qualified illustrator?

Absolutely yes. The success of an illustrated children’s book depends on its art. If the illustrations aren’t engaging, the book won’t interest young people. An experienced or qualified illustrator understands children’s publishing and how to bring your story to life.

For more on working with illustrators, see this blogpost here.

Should I self-publish exclusively with Amazon?

One of the most important early decisions to make is whether you keep your e-book exclusive to Amazon by joining the KDP Select Program in exchange for the promotional benefits, or “go wide” and publish your book everywhere, including your own website. ALLi recommends the latter.

KDP Select’s biggest selling point is its linked customer-facing program Kindle Unlimited. Authors’ e-books are made available free to customers with a Kindle Unlimited account, and you’re paid a commission (which Amazon calls a “royalty”) based on the number of page reads your book gets each month. Kindle Unlimited can be lucrative, and many writers of YA and books for adults make a living on their KU income alone. You only get access to this if you sign up for KDP Select and exclusivity. While you’re in KDP Select, customers who...
The Indie Author

don’t sign up to Kindle Unlimited can still buy your e-book, and you receive the usual royalty on those sales alongside any page-read royalties.

A further benefit of joining KDP Select is that you get access to promotional extras, such as Countdown Deals or the option to set your e-book free for five days in any 90-day period. If used effectively, these can help boost flagging sales, raise the profile of a forgotten backlist title, or get your book off to a great start. You can enrol your book in KDP Select for a 90-day period, then decide whether to continue. You can’t use these tools unless you go exclusive with Amazon.

So why does ALLi recommend “going wide” and avoiding exclusivity, since you can pull your book out after 90 days?

First, we believe the best way to have a sustainable author business is to develop income from many different sources. That way, you’ll be insulated if one of them dries up. If you rely on Amazon for your income, and Amazon makes a change to KDP Select that is unfavorable to you, you’re in trouble. We’ve seen this happen to too many authors.

The author who chooses exclusivity, whether through a trade-publishing contract or self-publishing through KDP Select or ACX exclusive, cuts off multiple territories and opportunities. While you may have good reasons for making that choice, do not make it without due consideration.

However, you might get good results from using KDP Select in a tactical way, rather than enrolling all your books all the time. Offering your e-book free for a set number of days each quarter can be invaluable for raising its profile on the largest online retailer in the world. It can also be useful for garnering early reviews. Many picture book authors use this tactic by sharing information about their free days in Facebook groups where parents hang out. As picture books are quick to read, the chances of getting reviews are greater than for books for older children.

If you’re publishing your first book and you need income and reviews to get on your feet, it may be a good idea to go exclusive for a short time. Once your author platform is more established, you’ll do better long term by being nonexclusive and diversifying your income. Moreover, if you want to get your children’s e-books into libraries or bookstores, you need to publish wide, as Amazon doesn’t distribute to libraries at the time of writing and bookstores prefer to buy from Ingram rather than Amazon.

You will hear indie authors who swear that income from other retailers can’t match what you can make on Amazon, but evidence from ALLi members indicates that’s not true for all. Also, it takes a long time to build an audience on every retailer, including Amazon, sometimes many years. The longer you wait to publish wide, the longer you will take to build those readerships.

For children’s authors there is a lot to consider, and ultimately only you can decide which route is right for you. What’s definitely not recommended, for anyone, is pulling your book in and out of KDP Select repeatedly, as you destroy any audience you have built up there or on the other platforms.

Use KDP Select at the beginning only if you intend to go wide, or use it to become an Amazon author and stay there if you are
comfortable with full reliance on a single platform.

For more on this, see ALLi’s ultimate guide to publishing wide: SelfPublishingAdvice.org/publishing-wide/ ALLi adviser Mark Lefebvre also has a great book on the topic, Wide for the Win.

How can I promote to children?

Children’s books are a marketing challenge, because you don’t market to your target audience. Children aren’t buying the books themselves. So you market to the people who buy books for children: the adults in their lives.

This gives you a double challenge—to write and publish a book that children will love, and that their parents and relatives will want to buy.

What’s the single best way to promote a children’s book?

The school or library visit, in person or online, is very popular. Most schools and libraries welcome visits from authors and most have an annual budget for this. Libraries love to host story hours with local authors and most have weekly scheduled story times already, with lots of children and parents who regularly attend. Larger libraries even offer multiple story times based on different age groups, making the targeting of your book’s audience even easier.

Get in touch with a local school administrator or librarian. And don’t miss the opportunity to sell your book. Bring a number of print copies on the day of the event, which you can sign as an extra enticement.

Have fun with your visits. Get creative, involve the kids in your reading, let them ask questions, and bring props or costumes related to your book that you think the kids might enjoy.

While in-person visits are great, don’t neglect digital promotion. Many of ALLi’s most successful children’s authors use carefully targeted social media advertising to reach readers.

There’s more on this topic in chapters 8 and 9, marketing and promotion.

Can I get my book into bookstores?

It’s definitely possible for self-published authors to get books into bookstores, but the economics are punishing, especially in the highly competitive children’s book market.

You will probably have to reach out to bookstores directly in order to get a coveted spot on their shelves. But you can reach readers without this. When is the last time you purchased a book from a brick-and-mortar bookstore yourself? Self-publishing makes it easy to sell all around the world through online stores, not just in print, but in e-book and audiobook format.

If your heart is set on selling your book in a brick-and-mortar store, see our guidebook Your Book in Bookstores, by Debbie Young. Don’t forget, ALLi members get free digital copies of all our books and short guides.
Where can I get help and advice?

The Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) is the international professional organization for authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults. It is open to anyone with an active interest in children’s literature, from picture books to young adult novels—aspiring and published writers and illustrators, and also librarians, educators, translators, artists, students, dramatists, musicians, filmmakers and others. A passion for children’s literature is the organization’s number one criterion.

SCBWI has more than 70 regional chapters around the world, where you can network with local, like-minded children’s authors. The annual fee is $80, but members say it’s well worth it—even if you only using a fraction of what they offer. Find out more at SCBWI.com.

ALLi members also recommend the Children’s Literature Association, childlitassn.org.

ALLi members: claim your copy

ALLi members can download a complimentary e-book copy of How to Publish a Children’s Book in the Member Zone. Structured by the seven stages of the publishing process—editorial, design, production, distribution, marketing, promotion and rights licensing—the book will teach you:

- How to work with professional children’s editors, illustrators and designers, and how ALLi can help you to find them.
- Why in-person events like school visits matter and how to do them successfully.
- How tools and tech can help you and make your publishing life productive and profitable.

To download your copy, navigate to allianceindependentauthors.org and log in. Look for: BOOKS>GUIDEBOOKS. Other formats are available to members and non-members in ALLi’s Bookshop.
Reader magnets: what are they and how do you use them?

What is a reader magnet? Why are they so important for book marketing? How do you create one that works—and how do you deliver it? ALLi director Orna Ross discusses

The term “lead magnet” was coined back in 2012 by Leadpages, a company that provides landing page services for digital commerce. Marketing experts in the author-publishing space adopted the term and soon everyone was talking about reader magnets.

A reader magnet is something we give away to encourage our readers to do something we want them to do—most commonly, signing up to a mailing list. If you want to build a relationship with new readers, or encourage existing readers to continue supporting your work, then a mailing list is vital. A reader magnet is one of the most effective ways of building this.

To add to the confusion, there are several other terms for reader magnets. They’re also known as an ethical bribe, a freebie, an opt-in incentive, a publication for prospects, a sign-up offer and more.

Reader magnets and ACCESS marketing

In the ALLi guide Creative Self-Publishing, I explain that there are three kinds of marketing for authors: influencer marketing, algorithm marketing, and ACCESS marketing. The reader magnet is at the heart of the latter.

ACCESS stands for:

- **Attract**—Attract readers through one or more channels—social media, blog, advertising or another method.
- **Capture**—Be interesting. Even better, be remarkable. Craft your content and post regularly on your chosen platform(s).
- **Connect**—Talk to your readers. Have a contact form. Invite email contact.
- **Engage**—Start and continue conversations. Ask questions. Perhaps invite input into your books—characters, plot turns (fiction), ideas and quandaries (nonfiction), word choices and formats (poetry).
- **Subscribe**—Invite your followers to subscribe and offer them your attractor, your reader magnet.
- **Satisfy**—Now you have that precious email address, make your emails delightful and send them regularly, on a promised schedule.

ACCESS is a proven process that pulls the reader along the pathway of discovering you, your author platform, and your books. The “attractor”, the reader magnet, makes it easier to get that sign-up in the first place.

Once a reader has signed up, enjoyed the giveaway and your follow-up emails, selling a book to them is significantly easier. They’ve come to know, like and trust you. You’re a fit for each other. When you have a new offering, there’s nothing “salesy” about it—you know they want to hear about your new work.

ACCESS marketing encourages authors to be creators, not hustlers. There’s more about this in our podcast episode here.
What should your reader magnet be?

This is one of the most frequently asked questions on the ALLi support desk. What should you offer as a reader magnet? What gets the best response?

The most common type of reader magnet is a full book. But when you only have one or two books in your portfolio, that’s not realistic. So what can you offer?

Usually the magnet is a digital product, but it could also be a discount, a consultation or physical merchandise of some kind. Other common kinds of reader magnets are:

1. Digital downloads of short stories, chapters, whole books, in some cases whole libraries of books.
2. Discount coupons.
3. Audio files.
4. Downloadable, printable resources such as infographics, checklists, cheatsheets, reports, quizzes.
5. Courses or training presented as text, audio or video.
6. Swipe files for social media posts or other communication templates.
7. Consultations, calls or personal appearances.
8. “Live” online events.

Drilling into this further, if you’re a fiction writer, you could offer a novella, a short story or a collection of flash fiction. You could create ‘extras’ that complement your main work, including a short story using your protagonist or a side character. Or an official or secret file, if your material is in the thriller or crime genre. You might reimagine a scene in your novel from another point of view. You could write up a section of background story, or a scene that is mentioned in your book but not shown. Perhaps this might be an event from before the plot began.

If you’re a poet or artist, you could bundle up a small selection of your poems or designs into a themed digital chapbook that says something about your work.

If you write nonfiction, you can easily turn your book, or a section of it, into a checklist, a cheat sheet, a resource guide, workbook or something downloadable that is helpful to your readers. Get creative.

How do you deliver a reader magnet?

If you’ve not read our mailing list three-part series, we recommend checking it out.

- Mailing list strategy
- Growing your mailing list
- Maintaining your mailing list

The easiest way to deliver a reader magnet is to use a service like BookFunnel, which seamlessly integrates into your mailing list. You load your reader magnet into BookFunnel in a variety of forms: PDF, epub, or mobi, then you tell BookFunnel where to send readers once they’ve signed up and asked to download their gift.

Once your readers download the freebie, and are enjoying it, you want to keep the contact warm. Here’s where you need an autoresponder sequence—one for each mailing list. This automatically sends out a series of pre-written emails, on a planned sequence, to new subscribers. While you write your next book, you’re also keeping them engaged and satisfied.

For a more detailed breakdown of the mechanics of the setting up your reader magnet, see our AskALLi post on the topic by thriller/science fiction author and website expert Rachel McCollin.

Quality is key

Although you’re giving your reader magnet away free, resist the temptation to skimp on covers and editing. First impressions count hugely. If your reader magnet looks unprofessional, or has errors, or is poorly conceived or executed, it will scare readers off instead of attracting them. Put as much effort into your reader magnet as you would into any book. In many ways, it’s your most important production.
Marketing methods for your reader magnet

Back of book

Always have a page dedicated to your reader magnet at the front or back (or both) of the books you have on sale. A reader is most likely to sign up when they have just finished your book and thoroughly enjoyed it. They might also sign up just before they start reading, and are full of anticipation.

Your sign-up request should be simple and clear. Here’s an example.

“If you enjoyed this book, you’ll love the FREE bonus story / download / discounts which you can get here [insert link]”

Nonfiction authors might find other opportunities to reference their reader magnet in the body of the book, near relevant content. However, this won’t work if you’re a fiction author or poet— you can’t break the flow of your novel to mention a free giveaway.

Sign-ups or sales?

You can also drive traffic to your reader magnet through advertising and promotions. Some authors are reluctant to do this, feeling that if they’re investing in advertising, they want to send readers to a purchase page. But that can be shortsighted. Author ads guru Mark Dawson has regularly said he’d rather have a sign-up than a sale. A reader who signs up, if actively engaged, can go on to buy many books.

If you’re wavering about sending paid traffic to your sign-up forms, does this indicate you’re not confident about your reader magnets and autoresponder sequences? This is why they have to be carefully crafted.

Other ways to get sign-ups

Other ways to get sign-ups include running a giveaway. Ask readers to join your mailing list for a chance to win XYZ. To do this, you can use platforms like StoryOrigin and BookSweeps.

Newsletter swaps are another way to get sign-ups. Another author in your genre shares the link to your reader magnet and you return the favor.

Again, as with all promotional tactics, the same word of warning applies. If you offer a prize, subscribers may not stick around afterwards or buy anything from you. The highest quality subscribers are those who are organically attracted to you or your books, who sign up from your website or book pages.

ALLi member experiences with reader magnets

ALLi enterprise adviser Joanna Penn explains why it’s important to think long term with your reader magnet. She has different strategies for her fiction and nonfiction.

“For nonfiction, I have used my Author Blueprint as my lead magnet on TheCreativePenn.com since Dec 2008. I update it every four to six months so it is always the latest info. Also, it’s not published as a book, so it’s only available as a reader magnet. I send traffic to it through content marketing—my own blog and podcast as well as interviews on other podcasts. I also include the link and sign-up in every book. TheCreativePenn.com/blueprint

“For my fiction, I have used a novella as lead magnet since about 2016. It is also for sale and I keep meaning to write something unique, but never get round to it. I have a sign-up at the back of all my books and I also mention it on my Books and Travel Podcast and link to it from my main site. JFPenn.com/free

“I have used three different email delivery systems over the last 13 years, and currently use (and recommend) ConvertKit. My main tip is to bite the bullet and get your reader magnet written and set up. Then, consistently drive people to it over the long term. It’s a slow build but well worth it.”

Rachel McCollin explains that she sees the process as a numbers game.

“I have a prequel novella as my reader magnet. I have a pinned post on Facebook and Twitter and it’s the first thing the reader sees in my back matter, but I don’t run paid ads to it. I also have a big banner image on the front page of my website encouraging people to download it. Approximately 5 percent of readers sign up (which is almost exactly the same percentage of reviews I get, which might or might
not be the same people). When I didn’t have a reader magnet, I was getting about 1 percent signups. I know my signup rates aren’t that high but I prefer to have a smaller number of organic subscribers than run ads and have to weeding out freebie-seekers.”

Cozy mystery author Debbie Young has found innovative ways to offer and promote her reader magnets.

“When I wrote a novelette (12k words), The Pride of Peacocks, in the same world as my main series, this transformed my mailing list growth. It also introduces my second series. Joining my mailing list is the only way people can read this book—it’s not for sale. I promote it in the website sidebar so appears on every page. I also have a paperback edition to offer as an occasional prize for my monthly Readers’ Club draw, or to give to fans who send me an especially nice email. I have a business card with its beautiful cover (thank you Rachel Lawston) on one side and mailing list details on the other—which I always carry with me. And it also on the website pop-up. It is a standalone story so will make sense regardless of whether you have read the other books. It certainly works for me—and was great fun to write.”

Science fiction author Kevin Partner has these tips on maximizing your reader magnet.

“Make it a complete story. Length is not so important, but it must satisfy on its own. I have reader magnets from 5k to 20k and they all do their job.

“Also, remember your reader magnet is your shop window—it should be well created and edited, and have a good cover. It mustn’t be seen as an afterthought or a burden or an obligatory freebie—it’s the opportunity to begin a long-term relationship between author and reader.”

Creative writing teacher and fiction author Louise Tondeur talks about how blogging can help recruit new sign-ups.

“I’ve got a free writing prompts e-book and a free short story available at the moment. I’m finding that if I blog regularly and share, people join my mailing list because they’ve visited my website and like the blog, and the freebie is an additional incentive. I have a few free writing courses too on Thinkific and Udemy. It’s much harder to get people from Udemy onto my mailing list than the other way round.”
Mystery author **Anna Castle** stresses the importance of keeping your voice consistent in your reader magnet.

"I use my first novel, a historical romance set in 1101, as my reader magnet. I now write mystery. But it’s consistent with my mysteries in voice and style, and it is historical. I’ve been using it for years. Probably it would be better to use a novella that aligns with one of my main series, but I can’t get around to writing it. My list grows steadily. I also give new subscribers short stories with my main series characters as part of the onboarding sequence. BookFunnel multi-author promotions are my main list-building tool."

Historical fiction and science fiction author **JJ Toner** has a warning about subscriber quality.

"For my new departure into science fiction, I have two short stories as magnets that are only available to sign-ups, as well as a third short story and a book of short stories, both of which are available for purchase. I started in September 2020 with a list of 1,100 and, by regular participation in group promos on BookFunnel, I increased it to over 2,000. I was disappointed to discover, recently, that about 1,200 of those are not interested in my SF, and just signed up for the free stuff. I’ve stopped participating now."

Mystery novelist **Wendy Percival** prefers pushing for organic traffic to paid advertising.

"I have a prequel novella as a reader magnet which is only available through my website, delivered by BookFunnel. The link is on my home page, at the bottom of my weekly blogpost and in the end matter of my novels. My best take-up was when it was mentioned in a genealogy newsletter and I had a burst of new subscribers. At first, I did some Facebook ads, but now I rely on organic traffic."

Poet and artist **Emma Blas** says:

"I gathered a collection of poetry and art collaborations I shared on Instagram and created a PDF chapbook of them. I deliver it via MailChimp to new sign-ups via the welcome email."

Crime novelist **Dawn Brookes** says her reader magnet was a good investment.

"I introduced a 32k-word novella as a reader magnet earlier this year. It’s a prequel to a spin-off series. I have increased my mailing list twentyfold since using it.

"I put the paperback up for sale at the same time and once my list grew, I put the e-book on sale, which has not reduced sign-ups. My list continues to grow and I’ve more than made back my initial investment on editing and the cover. I will be publishing the audiobook soon. I have the sign-up in the back of every book, on my website."

"I participate in Story Origin giveaway groups. I list the freebie on BookSweeps. I run reader magnet ads on Facebook for a couple of weeks, pause when the price goes too high, then run them again a few weeks later. My list is growing every day. The freebie-seekers quickly unsubscribe, which is fine, then I build a relationship with the newbies through my email onboarding sequence. Some freebie-seekers have become ARC readers which is fine by me."

"I feel I get the best of all worlds. I feel comfortable giving the people the option to buy if they don’t want to subscribe, but that’s just me. I also give secret extras when they join, with access to an audiobook and character sheets. I only wish I’d done this earlier."

Science fiction and psychology author **Connor Whiteley** makes the most of his assets by reusing first editions of books.

"I offer exclusive stuff using MailerLite and BookFunnel. I give links in the back of books and on my websites. For nonfiction, I mention the sign-up on the podcasts and include a link in the description. For my fiction I offer an exclusive short story that fills in a major detail for the series. For my psychology books, I offer a free, exclusive eight-book box-set of all my first editions. I’m on third editions for most of them now. I also offer material for my Global Author training series."

Orna Ross is the director of ALLi. Follow her on Twitter [@OrnaRoss](https://twitter.com/OrnaRoss)
When a publisher approaches you for a rights deal

Once your work gets noticed, you might be approached about foreign rights or other rights deals. If you have an agent, they’ll be the conduit. Otherwise, you’ll get these approaches directly.

In our times of internet caution, your first instinct might be to question whether they are genuine. So how do you weed out the scams from the real opportunities? And what should your next steps be when making a deal? ALLi blog manager Sacha Black advises

When are you likely to be approached?

Generally, if your book is selling well, you may attract the attention of overseas publishers. How many copies is that? Much depends on your genre. If you write general fiction, you’ll usually need to have high sales—as many as 50,000 upwards. However, if you write in a super-niche genre, or if you write nonfiction, publishers might have much lower sales thresholds—especially if they are specialists in your niche.

How do you work out if it’s a scam?

First you need to verify the offer is genuine, so research the publisher.

1. Check out the publisher’s website and social media channels. Most of the content will probably be in a foreign language, so use Google translate or another app to view the content. Are they posting book-related content? Do they publicize their authors? How frequently are they publishing? Do the posts make sense (allowing for machine translation)? What can you discover about their reputation?

2. Email them. Ask for a list of authors they publish. Then contact the authors who speak your language and ask whether the publisher has been professional to work with. Ask about the timelines, the swiftness of payments and quality of communication.

3. Browse the Internet for any other commentary about them. Look for any news articles or blogs that question the publisher’s authenticity.

Don’t forget that ALLi offers a dedicated rights support desk for members, via New York literary agent Ethan Ellenberg. If you’re an ALLi member, you can ask the dedicated rights support desk for a second opinion. Log in and navigate to RIGHTS & CONTRACTS> LITERARY AGENT.
Ethan advises:

We live in an information ocean so your first step is due diligence. Search for the publisher online and gather a great deal of accurate information about them. If this reveals red flags, ignore the query.

After you’ve done your research and are satisfied the company is legitimate, these are usually the next steps.

• Once your initial questions are answered, you might be asked for a submission package. This will include a one-page CV about your writing and your writing career, and a synopsis of the book they are interested in. They will certainly want a PDF of the book.

• Within two to four weeks you should hear whether they intend to make an offer. If you haven’t heard, it’s worth politely chasing. Some publishers may take longer and some have set processes. Ask to be kept in the loop.

• If the publisher offers a contract, you can accept, negotiate or decline.

Some authors are worried about sending PDFs because of the fear of piracy. But if you’re dealing with a publisher in another language, they would have to translate the book before they could sell it, and doing this without a license makes little financial sense. The consequence of being caught would be considerable.

You are in sales mode now. You want to make this sale unless there are compelling reasons not to. Selling foreign rights is a key income stream. My guidance is to be aggressive about licensing these rights, so long as they don’t interfere with your own publishing.

What will a genuine offer look like?

Your offer should contain certain key pieces of information. If it doesn’t, you need to ask for them. You’re looking for:

• Advance royalty rate.
• Royalty percentage rate.
• Length of contract term.

The offer might also include:

• Estimated print run (number of copies).
• Unit pricing.
• Publishing dates.
• Publisher information.
• Any information on additional rights such as audiobooks.

A few points to note

Publishers are in business. This means they will want to squeeze as much out of the deal in order to make the most profit as possible. So do you. Translation advances are lower than other kinds of publishing advances, so be realistic in your expectations. An overseas offer of $5K to $10K is good, depending on genre. But again bear in mind that their first offer will be their lowest, so there’s no harm in trying to push a little higher.

The tighter and more specific the publishing terms, the better they are for you. Always aim to limit the term, territory and the format you are licensing. For example, the offer might say “estimated publishing within 24 months of signing.” This might seem specific, but if you’re publishing a series, it might not be. Is that an undertaking to publish the first book in 24 months, or the whole series?

• Be careful about the scope of rights granted. Do not grant movie, TV or game rights. Those don’t belong in the hands of a foreign publisher.
• Many foreign licenses are language specific, so check that you are granting Spanish
or Portuguese language rights only, not the right to publish in Spain or Brazil (which might imply all languages published in that country, including English).

**More considerations**

- You’ll need to speak to an accountant about withholding tax and whether your country has a treaty with the country making the offer.
- Expect delays due to government blocks, legal issues and other unforeseen circumstances.
- Payments might also be delayed for similar reasons.

**ALLi member experiences**

**Larry Feign, author of historical fiction and cartoonist**

“I’ve been approached by numerous foreign publishers and agencies. All requested PDFs. I checked their backgrounds to the best of my ability before replying. Several of these approaches resulted in contracts, others did not. Some advances—for instance, from Korea—have far exceeded what even a US publisher offers for first rights to a new author. The one thing that irked me is that fewer than half of the publishers have sent me the actual printed books, even though this was written into the contracts.

“Here’s something I want to emphasize: often when an author posts a question about a foreign publisher on an indie author group, the kneejerk reaction is: “Scam!!”—especially if they’ve requested a PDF; You’ll find 10 or 15 responses shouting “Scam!” before you find one with calm advice on how to proceed. Think about it: without a PDF, how are they supposed to evaluate your book?

“If they’ve heard about your book and seen its sales rankings, that doesn’t mean they’ve read it. They’re contacting you because they’re willing to put in the time to read it for possible rights acquisition. They’re offering you a business opportunity. And don’t expect them to buy your book first.

“Certainly, you need to be diligent and cautious, but if you dismiss such approaches by assuming they’re scams, you are likely costing yourself money and the pleasure of seeing your work in another language and market.

“I’m not saying there aren’t scammers out there. But of the many approaches I’ve had over many years, every single one has been legitimate.”

**Sara Rosett, mystery author**

“I’ve been approached by two foreign publishing companies interested in my fiction titles. They sent emails introducing themselves with links to their websites. I vetted them by checking the websites and asking in writers’ groups if anyone was familiar with the publisher. The publishers requested a PDF of the book, and I directed them to PubMatch where they can find a copy. I asked what specific rights they were interested in. They either sent an offer or their boilerplate contract. In each case, I thought the offers for the rights they wanted were very low. I’m project-managing my own translations now.”

**Helen Harper, urban fantasy author**

“The first few times I was approached, it was straightforward. I received an email from a foreign publisher asking whether the rights were available. I confirmed they were, and did a quick search to establish that the publishers were legit, and we negotiated rights—which mostly consisted of me saying ‘great’ to everything because it all seemed remarkably reasonable. I signed contracts, the books were translated and I made money.

“Things got more complicated when last year, within the same week, two different German publishers got in touch for the same rights. I decided I had no interest in playing them off against each other and got in touch with ALLi who directed me towards an agent. Since then I’ve used the agent to negotiate other rights when I’m approached by publishers I don’t know. It’s not something I have to spend very much time on myself.

“So far, I have books translated in French, German and (soon) Hebrew.”
Amy Shojai, author of petcare books and thrillers

“I’ve had several approaches about my nonfiction titles—some from agents, and some from editors at publishing houses. Most came from China, one was from Taiwan, and one from Italy. One contacted my agent (who I am no longer with, but she forwarded the email). The rest contacted me directly. Each introduced themselves and shared details about their company (usually a website). In all cases, they requested a review copy in PDF, which I sent.

“I then heard nothing for months, so I followed up with each. Only the contact from Italy replied with apologies—a personal medical issue derailed the process, she said. None of the others responded.

“I no longer reply to any of these approaches, and I suspect the ones in China may have simply been ways to get the material—although not all of them downloaded the book. I’ve also been approached by companies wanting to license material to put on an app—again from China. And after previous experience, that was a hard no.”

ALLi’s rights licensing resources

In 2020, ALLi ran a six-month program to educate authors about selective rights licensing to trade publishers, TV and film producers, and other rights buyers at home or overseas. You can watch the videos and find out more in this Ultimate Guide Post.


This guidebook shows how to approach rights buyers, what they’re looking for, and what to expect when discussing the license or ‘sale of rights’ for your book. You’ll learn how to pitch, negotiate and close a deal, and how to work with literary agents and global publishing companies—everything you need to successfully and selectively license your publishing rights.

ALLi members can download complimentary e-book copies in the Member Zone. Navigate to allianceindependentauthors.org and log in. Then navigate to the following menu: PUBLICATIONS>GUIDEBOOKS.

Sacha Black writes writing-craft books and young adult fantasy novels. She edits the Self-Publishing Advice Center blog and manages the Self-Publishing Advice conference. Find her at her website sachablack.co.uk and on Twitter @sacha_black
10 facts about self-publishing

We don’t have full data about self-publishing so most of the “facts” you read in trade press reports are flawed or even wrong. Trade publishing releases its figures long after the fact. Self-publishing platforms like Amazon, Kobo and IngramSpark do not release the data they hold about sales. And many more indie sales are invisible because some authors are selling directly to readers through their own websites or don’t use ISBNs. Despite these omissions, the following figures give encouraging snapshots of our vibrant and growing industry.

**Books are big business** The book industry is a huge, influential and reliable global consumer market, says [Mark Williams](https://www.allianceindependentauthors.org), director of international communications at StreetLib and editor-in-chief at [The New Publishing Standard](https://thenpublishingstandard.com) (TNPS). In 2018, the most recent year for which full figures are available, 675 million print books were sold in the US, 190.9 million print books in the UK. The market is valued at AUD$312m in Australia and NZ$1.8m in New Zealand. The digital formats of e-books and audiobooks generate billions in global revenue each year.

**A world of readers** Africa has more people online than the USA and Canada, combined, more than Latin America, more than the European Union. But does anyone read in these places? They certainly do, says Mark Williams, as shown by public attendance at book fairs. "The Algeria, Iran, Sharjah (UAE) and Kolkata (India) International Book Fairs each attracted over 2 million visitors in 2019. The Riyadh (Saudi Arabia), Baghdad (Iraq), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Bangkok (Thailand), Havana (Cuba), Colombo (Sri Lanka), New Delhi (India), Muscat (Oman), Hyderabad (India) and numerous other international book fairs each attracted over 1 million visitors in 2019.

**Beyond America part 2** Aggregator PublishDrive reports that sales in international markets continued to rise from March to August 2020 and continued to grow in September. The US captured about 30% of PublishDrive’s overall sales in that period, while **70% came from global markets.**

**History and music** In September 2020, the bestselling fiction category on PublishDrive was historical, especially World War II and medieval. The bestselling non-fiction category was music, especially the musical instruments subcategory.
Instant gratification Lockdown may have converted more readers to e-books for convenience and immediate delivery, says Ricci Wolman at Written Word Media, whose latest report says an average reader is buying 30% more in e-books than they did before the pandemic. “The largest increase in sales came in Q2. Although growth in Q3 slowed, overall sales are still well-above pre-pandemic levels.”

Female voices While male authors tend to dominate the bestseller lists in trade publishing, the opposite is true in self-publishing. A study by FicShelf found that women wrote 39% of the top traditionally published titles, but 67% of the top-ranking self-published titles.

Print The global book printing market is anticipated to grow by 1% a year to 2024, according to Report Buyer’s book printing report. Within that market, self-publishing is the fastest-growing segment, projected to expand by about 17% each year.

Nimble businesses As more readers discover and buy books online, they are venturing beyond established giant retailers. The UK publisher Verso reported a 300% increase in direct-to-customer sales during lockdown. Faber’s CEO admits “lockdown lessons will outlast the pandemic” so indie authors should capitalize on nimble business structures and increase global reach, says Mark Williams. “We are participants in a digitally driven, global renaissance. Don’t obsess over one company and one or two markets.”

Patronage Readers and other consumers of the arts are supporting creators while they work. Crowdfunding platform Patreon says the average initial pledge amount has increased by 22% in the last two years. The number of new patrons who pay more than $100 a month to an artist they support has grown by 21%.

Self-starters Book publishing will continue to grow, but the growth will be in self-publishing, not in trade publishing, says industry commentator Mike Shatzkin in a column of October 2020. As more sales move away from bookstores, as publishers merge and no longer bid against each other for new works, as setting up a title no longer requires a large risk of capital, authors will increasingly find little advantage in a deal with a trade publisher.

We need better data. We need your input. At ALLi, we want to commission a study to fill the data-hole in the self-publishing industry. That’s where you come in. We want this work to be useful and valuable for our members. We want it to cover the areas and topics you’re most interested in.

So tell us, what are your knowledge gaps? What data would you like to see in a report about self-publishing?
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