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Vanity Of Vanities

Penn State English professor Tom Rogers had published three novels to critical acclaim as of 2002 and was looking forward to seeing his fourth in print. His first and second novels, "The Pursuit of Happiness" and "The Confessions of a C

hild of the Century," were finalists for the National Book Award. "Pursuit" was made into a movie in 1971. His fourth novel was titled "Jerry Engels." Engels had first appeared in Rogers' third novel, "At the Shores." But the accolades notwithstanding, Rogers, who was working on his fifth novel when he died this year, could not find a publisher for "Jerry Engels," and so he did something that would have been unthinkable 10 years earlier. He published it himself through a vanity publisher.

Vanity publishers used to carry more baggage than a fully loaded 747. In addition to the stigma—the suggestion that a writer wasn't good enough to find a "real" publisher—vanity presses of the past meant that the writer paid a company to publish his book and the writer had to purchase a substantial number of copies of the book to boot. Besides that, there was little or no editing, next to no marketing or distribution and the production values were not that high. It was caveat emptor.

Vanity publishers required authors to buy a number of books to hold down their production costs, books that usually ended up gathering dust in the author's garage. At one time, the more units printed, the lower the per-unit cost.

No more.

Thanks to changes in technology, a publisher can now print one book just as inexpensively as 100,000. And that's what Tom Rogers did. He self-published with Xlibris, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in April.

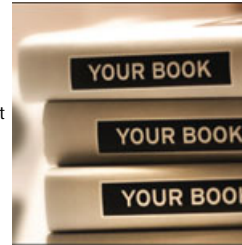
Author, Author

You don't have to be a famous novelist to self-publish a book. Thanks to a number of vanity publishers offering print-on-demand services (see box), you can publish your own book. I've had very good experiences self-publishing, from paying a publisher to format my book and obtain an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) to publishing my own book at no cost and selling it on the World Wide Web.

As the number of senior citizens grows, we will see more people interested in publishing family memoirs or autobiographies. Thanks to the changes in technology, publishing can be as simple as uploading a Word file to a Web site or paying a publisher for a variety of services, from editing the book for grammar, structure and libel to designing the cover.

Just the basics

After I retired in 2003, I wrote a novel and decided that I didn't



In the past, self-publishing was considered a vehicle for those writers not good enough for 'real' publishing houses. But the print-on-demand world has changed all that.

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want to spend my time trying to find an agent or a publisher. Instead, I contracted with Aventine Press for its basic package (\$399), which gave me, among other things, choice of a cover design and an interior style, listing with online booksellers, and most important, an ISBN. The ISBN is necessary if you want your book listed with an online bookseller or purchased by a library.

But if that's not important, there are less expensive publishers. For my third book, a collection of photographs I had taken in China between 1994 and 2005, I chose Lulu. And let me confess that I did try some commercial publishers first because I felt that the book had a market, especially among the Chinese Diaspora in the United States and Canada. But when the publisher I thought was perfect turned me down, I decided to self-publish.

Depending on what you want, Lulu offers a no-charge option to a range of fee services that include translating your book into another language or creating an audio book, services that are provided by third parties. If you go the free route, you will not get an ISBN; that costs about \$100.

As examples, I've had self-publishing experiences at no cost to me until, of course, I bought one of my own books.

Last year I attended a cousin's wedding. It was almost a family reunion and everyone was taking photographs. When I returned, I created a photo album and notified my cousins that they could buy it for \$15.58. I noted that most of them would get their film developed, look at the photos once, and then throw the package into a drawer and forget them. Here was an inexpensive full-color booklet that captured the memories and was nice enough to leave on a coffee table, not hide in a drawer.

Not only have I created memorable books, I've done it inexpensively. For every trip my wife and I have gone on, I have created a photo album on my computer and then printed. If you own a printer, you know how expensive color print cartridges are and how seemingly little ink they hold. Most of my albums required at least one and half print color cartridges, which sell for about \$35 apiece. Then there's the paper, which is relatively inexpensive.

For example, a 96-page album in an 8.5-by-11-inch spiral-bound notebook of a five-day visit to Wellington, New Zealand, cost me an estimated \$65. And I can't even calculate the aggravation of having to set out the photos around the house for 24 hours in order to dry.

But once I discovered Lulu, I stopped creating expensive albums at home and instead set them up with desktop publishing software and uploaded them to Lulu. I designed the covers, although Lulu does have templates. Just for fun, I created a collection of my travel photos titled "Peeping Tom: The Street Photography of R. Thomas Berner." At 151 pages, it probably would have cost me \$100 to publish at home. Based on the number of pages, Lulu determined the sales price and allowed me to add a royalty (optional). The book sells for \$29.99. So I not only saved \$70, I have the satisfaction of knowing that someone actually bought a copy.

Tell-tale Typos

Self-publishing has its downside. With most vanity publishers, unless you pay for it, there's no editorial support.

Any would-be author should recognize that no writer is above the pencil. We all need an editor. I have a friend, a professional editor, who edits everything I write. Because she's a friend, she

does not charge.

At a professional publishing house, someone will check your manuscript for libel and for copyright problems. No matter where or how you publish, the laws of libel do prevail. As for copyright, you might be surprised to learn that the treasured letter you received from your now-deceased Aunt Minnie isn't yours to publish. Her heirs own it and you will probably need their permission to quote it in its entirety or even to print a large portion of it. And if Aunt Minnie libeled Cousin George, who is still alive, you have another problem. If you publish the libelous statement, George can sue you.

If you know nothing about desktop publishing, you might see if someone in your family (a teenager) or neighborhood (a retired journalism professor) can advise you or check your local community college for courses. Despite my years of publishing experience, I have benefited from courses about publishing offered at my community college.

And if you're an aspiring novelist and not just interested in publishing your memoirs for your children, take heart. Tom Rogers' fourth novel, the one he self-published, was ultimately picked up by a "real" publisher and was favorably reviewed in *The New York Times*.

R. Thomas Berner is a professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at The Pennsylvania State University. He lives in Santa Fe, N.M., and is working on his second novel, which he intends to self-publish.