

Three Problems to Avoid If You Publish a Fiction Ebook



Today's burgeoning ebook market has made something possible that used to be very frowned upon: self-publishing. It used to be that if you were a Serious Author, you would only sell your work to a Real Publisher, and do this the old-fashioned way: by honing your craft, acquiring an agent who liked your masterpiece, then selling the book to a publisher, and thus breaking into print. Those poor schmucks who saved their money to print 2000 copies of their masterpiece, and who still have 1880 copies sitting in boxes in their attic: well, those folks were rightly called "self-published" authors, their works put in print by vanity publishers. Those publishers printed (and still do) anything for a fee. The tacit understanding in the Real Publishing World was generally that you have to be vain to think your work was good enough to publish, and to pay for it yourself - especially when no Real Publisher would touch your work.

This lack of professional publishing engagement with your work meant something. It often meant your work had only niche appeal, thus not justifying a publisher's expense of bringing something to market. But more often, it meant your work actually sucked. You had not yet mastered your craft; you wrote something no agent would touch and no publisher would buy. Sure, spend your money on vanity publishing: when you see how difficult it can be to market a work, and are unable to sell the many copies you thought would fly off the shelf - well, that's when reality sets in, and you will look longingly at established publishing houses, and wish your work would be taken up by one of them.

Enter the Ebook

Now - quite suddenly, relatively speaking - all those barriers to getting one's work out there are gone. Vanished, as if they'd never existed. There's been a lot of discussion about how the publishing model has flipped around - not just from a business viewpoint but from the actual get-it-in-print viewpoint. It used to be that a lot was written, and specialists picked what they thought was marketable. This is what would see print. The new model is, everything plus the kitchen sink gets into print and is readily accessible everywhere (electronically): and out of this morass, the good stuff will (presumably) float to the top. This is also known as the "publish then curate" model, as opposed to its predecessor, "[curate then publish](#)."

Tons of Garbage

The first and most immediate effect of this new model is the fact that it pushes tons of garbage onto the market. When the price of entry is a word processor, minimal (and I do mean minimal) ability to string words together on a page, a free ebook conversion program and free distribution services: well, if you envision it, and take time to write it, then you can have it in print, for any value of "it".



Where does this leave the good stuff? If the good work can't find enough of a readership to elevate it from the muck at least by word of mouth, then it leaves that good stuff buried in the muck, lost in the noise of the absolute glut of cheap or free poorly written material that is flooding the market.

This is frustrating to anyone trying to get their stuff read. It is not only frustrating but I think a real tragedy when this is the fate of truly good writing that can't get the hearing it needs. But most fiction ebooks do not even fall into that "good writing" category: they sink even further to the bottom of the heap, the really bad writing buried under reams of merely mediocre writing, because there is simply so much STUFF coming out now in ebook form, and the sad fact is, most "authors" in this market are not producing any work that warrants that job description. They are writing at a 7th grade level with stilted craft abilities, and their work is being avidly consumed by an audience with 7th grade reading skills.

This is all well and good if you aspire to write dross for ill-educated masses who aren't especially particular about the execution of what they read. If, though, you want to write intelligent, insightful, entertaining things that intelligent, insightful readers can really appreciate and be entertained by, you have to up your game and write at a whole different level. This will not only elevate you out of the junk heap of ebook mediocrity, it will connect you with an audience that is the right audience for what you are trying to convey.

This brings me to my tip list of the three things to avoid like the plague if you want to successfully publish an ebook (in a way that distinguishes you from the dross, that is, and makes your work stand out for its merits).

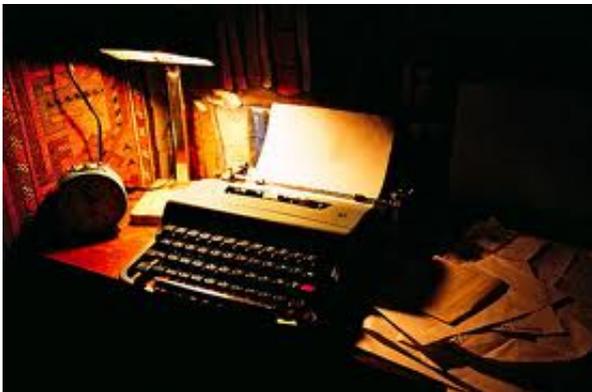
1. Don't Write Crap

Even the suckiest book will find some poor benighted soul who thinks it rocks. That one ignorant fool does not a market make. If you are writing, you have to be able to, well, WRITE. This

means technical skills like good grammar and spelling. It means proofreading skills like getting rid of redundancies and using the right turn of phrase instead of some bastardized thing that misses the mark. And most importantly, it means (if you're writing fiction) that you need to learn how to tell stories effectively. This means learning your craft. For every significantly flawed work you rush to market, you will lose readership: all those intelligent well-read readers who are potentially repeat book-buyers will trickle away and be almost impossible to win back, because they will have read your work and decided, "Hey. This is crap."

2. Don't Publish the First Book You Finish (or the Second, or the Third)

At the risk of being redundant, I'll say it again: Learn your craft. Practice. Write. Join critique groups and get critiqued. Don't think because you start here and end there you have told an effective story. Learn what an effective story is. Read voraciously, and listen to intelligent input about your writing. This does not mean asking for feedback from your favorite yaoi writing forum. It means finding constructive, detailed technical criticism and constructive input, ideally from other published authors. If not, then find a writing group populated by English Majors (Masters are even better). The kind of detailed critique skills they learn about writing in school is one of the only real-world uses that degree background will ever see. Work it for all it's worth. And write a million words. Seriously. If you haven't done that yet, you're still learning the ropes. What you write at the end of that journey will be vastly different than what you started out with. There are relevant discussion comments in [this thread here](#) and more easily found if you google around on "a million words."



If it takes potentially years to master any major skill, why do we think writing would be any different? People who say, "Well I decided to start writing last year, and now I have three books out at Smashwords" - well, ok, good for you for completing multiple projects. But what's the **quality** like? If you're not a natural genius with the written word, I'm betting you have some craft honing yet to do. Probably years worth of it. And you know what? That's ok, because it's par for the course - but be aware of that need, if you want to have quality work on the market.

NOTE: I know the above two points are similar, however: the first is about quality on the page, the second is about the author's learning process. I think these are two areas primarily responsible for all the drek posing as readable fiction right now, and so deserve being highlighted in this manner.

3. Don't Sit Back and Let Your Book (Try to) Sell Itself

This last point is not about craft, but about the issue I mentioned earlier: that in this (still accelerating!) ebook revolution we are in, there is a growing glut of books on the market. Just releasing it at Lulu, Smashwords, Booklocker or Amazon is not by itself sufficient to guarantee sales. You need to take additional steps to draw attention to your work. This is a really necessary thing to do, just as much (or more so!) as in the days of hard-copy vanity publishing, when someone with a 1000-print run had boxes in their living room, relatives saying "No more, thanks!", and yearning to sell the rest of their inventory so they could get their living room back.

**Buy
the
Book!**

The actual sales tactics have changed, in this day of the interwebz and social media connections, but the problem essentially remains the same: how can you draw people's eyeballs to your work, so they even realize it is there, much less want to pick it up and read it?

A discussion on marketing is waaay beyond the scope of this post, but this point is in this list because if your book is like 99.99% of those out there, you cannot simply leave it to chance that your book will "catch on" somewhere, or magically stand out in a publisher's listing compared to all the other hundreds of books in their catalog. Give some thought to this challenge, and understand that when you choose to publish an ebook, you are also making a commitment to market your work - if, that is, you want to stand out from the trash heap and create a market for your work.

That's it for now - some quick thoughts on big problems I see in today's fiction ebook marketplace. Good luck to everyone aspiring to write, and **LEARN YOUR CRAFT**. You don't just owe it to your readers: you owe it to yourself, to tell the best story you can.

Here's a little disclaimer: this is a not-so-disguised rant as well as cautionary "points to watch out for" commentary. I've been a professional editor and publisher since I was 24, so I've been at this for a while. My experience spans old-style print media from journalism to journals, including newspaper and magazine layout with galley proofs and a handy exacto knife for trimming layout edges, to web content, book editing, and *.mobi conversions for Kindle ebooks today. Still mastering that last, but my point is simply: I've seen a lot of styles of media production and distribution, and the content they purvey. Edited a lot of it, and written a lot of it as well. It is from that viewpoint that I share these observations, as well as from my deep

Notes From the Lizard Lair

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dismay at the sheer mass of unreadable garbage on the ebook market today. Don't ask me to review your ebook unless you have zero doubts about the quality of your writing, because if it is not up to professional standards that is the first and (if you're lucky) the last thing I will note about it in my review.