

It's easy to publish a book these days

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One cherished American notion is that most people have a book inside them.

With the help of technology, more people are writing that book. And not only are titles being published in record numbers, entrepreneurs are launching companies to meet the skyrocketing needs of aspiring authors.

In the St. Louis area alone, several new publishers are preparing their first publications this summer, working out of their homes or existing offices.

Setting up shop as a publisher isn't new (Virginia and Leonard Woolf founded Hogarth Press in their London house in 1917).

But 21st-century business models seem more various: some are straight self-publishing, requiring a writer to finance the book. At least one publisher, however, offers stipends to authors. And others partner with nonprofits, companies or individuals.

"The ability to print a book has never been easier," said Dan Thompson, who has started Bluebird Publishing with Jeff Fister.

But publishing, Thompson said, is changing so fast that "the book business today is not the same business as two years ago."

Last year was a watershed year for U.S. books: More than 1 million books were published, with "nontraditional" titles counting more than double the commercial titles.

Bowker, which tracks industry statistics, says nontraditional titles numbered 764,448; traditional publishers, such as Random House, Simon & Schuster and university presses, offered 288,355 new titles.

The nontraditional count (which includes new self-published titles and print-on-demand titles no longer covered by copyright) grew 181 percent from 2008, Bowker says. The company counted more than 70,000 U.S. publishers in 2009, according to the Book Industry Study Group. Many have produced only a single title.

Some new publishers do have experience. At Bluebird Publishing, Fister has published nonfiction regional-interest books for about 20 years as owner of Virginia Publishing. Thompson, owner of Big River Distribution, has sold books and music for 30 years.

So many local authors asked them about publishing novels, memoirs and poetry, they decided to start a homegrown self-publishing company to offer an alternative to out-of-town entities such as CreateSpace, Lulu.com and AuthorHouse.

Fister's Virginia Publishing has already done well with regional history books. "I'm in the niche business. St. Louisans are obsessed with their own history," he said.

He and Thompson said they offer straight talk and experience, even if they have to squelch new novelists' dreams that they will become the next John Grisham or appear on "Oprah."

"We have to rain on their parade," Thompson said.

Self-publishing companies like Bluebird resemble building contractors who use subcontractors. Those subcontractors may help with copy editing, cover design and proofreading. The author decides what services it wants to buy and will pay \$4-\$6 for each copy of a 1,000-book order.

For writers content with paying to publish and a small print run, self-publishing has become a more accepted model. This

year, a respected commercial writer, John Edgar Wideman, made news when he self-published through Lulu.

But some new publishers actively avoid the self-publishing model.

Kristina Blank Makansi wants to nurture up-and-coming writers for Blank Slate Press.

The press recently chose two manuscripts for its first books, novels that it hopes to publish by Christmas.

"We will pay authors stipends, promote their stories and help them get started with blogs. ... Our idea is to be a writer's advocate from the get-go."

She and her partners, Jamey Stegmaier and husband Jason Makansi, are writers themselves.

"We are looking at it from the point of view of aspiring novelists. We talk to a lot of other writers, follow writers' blogs, go to writers workshops. So much of the frustration of being a writer is getting someone to pay attention to your work."

Blank Slate Press' partners pay the authors out of their own pockets, but Makansi hopes other individuals will invest in the press.

She said, "We're like a new tech start-up with the idea that if a book becomes a best-seller, or is picked up by a commercial press, investors might make some money."

'A great match'

One writer they signed, Anene Tressler-Hauschultz of Kirkwood, took the book contract to a lawyer, who assured her that having the publisher in town is helpful: "There are times you need to do a face-to-face."

She likes that Blank Slate is new and energetic: "They are starting out as am I. It felt like a great match. ... The scale was right. I wasn't going to be one of 200 people coming on board."

Makansi knows publishing is a difficult business. "We're not out to build an empire. We don't think we'll get rich doing this."

Josh Stevens agrees. "It's a very tough business."

In 2004, he and Matt Heidenry started Reedy Press with a two-book catalog: "St. Louis German Catholics" and "Unending Struggle." Now, they publish 30-35 books a year, usually partnering with schools, museums or even cities. Burbank, Calif., recently contracted for a history of itself.

Stevens said the "partner" pays up front for an order of books to get the deal rolling. But Reedy Press also must market and sell the books to make money.

"It's difficult to maintain publishing. If you publish in a niche category, your sales volume has limitations." A big success would be sales of 6,000 books.

For publishers who are bringing out more than a single book or two, an appealing "backlist" of titles can help the publisher remain a viable business, Stevens said. Reedy Press recently hired a book publicist to help sell titles to a wider market than just the St. Louis area.

Most new publishers here focus on local authors. Walrus Publishing published its first book in July. "Flood Stage," an anthology of St. Louis writers, has sold about 100 of its initial 400-copy printing. Owned by Lisa Miller, its next books, two novels, are scheduled for next year.

Some publishers are 'so micro they are one person,' according to Christine Frank, a book "coach" and membership coordinator of the St. Louis Publishers Association. She cannot give exact numbers on regional publishers because not all join her organization.

'You're a publisher'

As niche publishing grows, any embarrassment regarding who pays seems to be lessening, she said. (Most established book contests still don't accept self-published nominees, however.)

The St. Louis Publishers Association supports self-publishing and tells authors who form their own press: "You are a small business and you're a publisher," Frank said.

The group also gives authors advice on understanding self-publishing (see accompanying box).

The increase in publishers and authors also affects booksellers.

Vicki Erwin, who owns Main Street Books in St. Charles, acknowledged the rise in local publishers and requests by authors that her store stock their books.

One local author who sells well in her shop is Karen Tripp, who writes inspirational Christian titles such as "God Is Bigger Than Your Cancer."

Many publishers and authors hope that their small-press or self-published books might be picked up by a commercial publisher who can give a book more exposure. But other publishers just have a love of books. PenUltimate Press became a nonprofit in 2006 and obtains grants from the Missouri Arts Council.

For director Winnie Sullivan, "It's a passion. Books transform the world."