

## To self-publish or not?

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I had just about finished my creative writing course at Sheffield University when I felt I had composed such an abundance of poetry that it would be well worth having a go at publication. My tutor seemed impressed by my work, friends and family liked it, and my only sincere critic (my boyfriend) didn't know what he was talking about; in my view anyway. I uploaded a selection of my work as a project onto Lulu.com, a platform for authors, poets, visual artists and anyone else who wants to have a go at self-publishing. It is fast, easy to use, and affordable.

I selected the layout, size, cover art; and after a few mouse clicks I was a published poet! There it was; my very own book, with my name on it. In black and red, a tasteful black and white photograph on the front and back, a blurb, a title, and now listed in the Lulu online shop.

I ordered a few copies for myself and friends and family and was ever so excited when they finally arrived in the post. I was a little disappointed at first, because the cover was quite blurred, the white typeface a bit yellowish, and it was more of a pamphlet than a "real book". However, my parents were delighted and I was dead proud to have my poems bound and on a bookshelf, even if it was my own. However, the novelty soon petered out, because, needless to say, my book remained entirely unnoticed. A mention in the newsletter of my company resulted in a few "Ooohs" and "Aahs", but that was about it.

I had learnt the most important lesson of self-publishing: No sale without shameless promotion!

There are gazillions of self-published poets out there and they all want to sell their work and be noticed, but the chances are slim if you're on sales rank 36,786. So here is what you can or should do if you want to bear the fruits of long hours of writing (unless you've had a change of mind like me and regard the whole process of writing as rewarding in itself):

- - on Lulu, you can purchase an ISBN, which will allow you to get your work listed on Amazon and make it available to retailers, if you're willing to fork out for it.
- - Set up your own website and promote your book on there. Make sure you're found.
- - Write a press release, if you know how to do it and where to send it.
- - Get some flyers and bookmarks printed and distribute them in your library or bookshop
- - Try and get your book reviewed by a fellow poet who has already made a name for themselves in the scene.

So, unless you do any of the above, your book will most likely just sit in your "storefront", and you'll never sell any copies to people not kin to you (just like me).

A year on, I am still a bit disillusioned by the whole idea of self-publishing, but I don't regret it at all, because it opened up some unexpected possibilities. For one, I had some really interesting exchanges with fellow writers on the Lulu forums, where - amongst a lot of complacent back-patting - I got some honest feedback on my pieces. I also had the book reviewed by Michael Ernest Sweet, a Canadian author and poet laureate, who, whilst being brutally honest about my immaturity in style, encouraged me to keep going and even went as far as suggesting that I had the potential to make a "lasting impression on the scene". I consequently had some more of my work reviewed by him and a fellow Canadian poet and professor of Creative Writing, which was extremely helpful and channelled me in the right direction as regards my writing style.

Don't get yourself into a crazy rush to see your poems and your name in print. Get an insight into the whole marketing aspect of it first, if you want to make some money from your words. But most importantly, give it some thought and let your work mature and ripen. In my view, a poem takes its time before it is completely finished. It may well be written in a day, but leave it for a while and chances are you will shorten it, add on to it, or re-write it completely before it's finally ready to go.