

The Nuts and Bolts of Self-Publishing: The Good, the Bad and the Fabulous

Asian Festival of Children's Content (AFCC), 4th June 2015

Sarah Mounsey, Emma Nicholson and Hidayah Amin

Congratulations on creating a story and thinking about taking it further! We truly believe that every story deserves to be told but it is important to understand that publishing a book is no easy business. We have learnt so much since we embarked on this journey and we hope some of this helps you. However, do bear in mind that these are all our opinions and from our personal experiences of self-publishing in Singapore. Others may have different experiences.

Before you even think about self-publishing, make sure you know a lot about how to write. If you have just started, do lots and lots of reading in the genre you are writing. Also, find out about the business of print and publishing. These resources are useful, but there is so much out there!

- Buy The Children's Writers' & Artists' Yearbook
- Join the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) <http://www.scbwi.org>. Check out their book – <http://www.scbwi.org/online-resources/the-book/>

Why Self-Publish?

With more publishers closing their doors to new authors, it is a huge challenge to land a publishing contract. Bookstore shelves are already saturated with titles, and publishers aren't always keen to invest in unknown names. Every book they take on is a financial risk, as they have to cover the cost of editing your book, formatting and cover design, printing, distribution and marketing. There is no guarantee of return, so they will take on only the best submissions. Of course, new authors can (and do) get picked up by publishers, and we would encourage writers to research and approach publishers when embarking on their journey. However, if you decide to self-publish, the advantages and disadvantages over the page may be helpful.

Steps to Self-Publishing a Children's Book in Singapore

1. Set up publishing company through ACRA – <http://www.acra.gov.sg/>
2. Once approved, non-Singaporeans should apply for a LOC (letter of consent) from MOM.
3. Apply for an ISBN through the library – <http://deposit.nl.sg/LDNet-web/faces/about.jsp>
4. Ensure your work is very well edited. Use critique groups and/or pay for an editor.
5. Get quotes for printing. We suggest getting at least three quotes. We all printed in Singapore. Printing in China can be even cheaper but you need to find out the prices for customs clearance at your homeport. Also you will not be present to run press checks.
6. Find an illustrator. You could use SCBWI. Otherwise do a web search. Guru is a good site. www.guru.com/d/freelancers/q/book-illustration/. Find out if they do book design as well as illustration. If not, hire a book designer. Look at lots of portfolios before you approach anyone. Then ask for some sample sketches. Expect to pay for this.
7. Sign a contract with an illustrator.
8. Ensure your book has been edited extensively, including pagination. This could take months or years! Work with your illustrator. Work with graphic designer on final layout.
9. Final copy editing, checking the text and the illustrations extensively.
10. Printing – go to the printers for a press check, first a colour proof and then it goes to print.
11. Find a distributor. We have used Closetful of Books, PMS, Market Asia and APD Singapore. Most big bookstores will only stock your books through a distributor but smaller ones are happy to deal directly with authors/small publishers.
12. Sales and marketing – this takes up A LOT of time.
13. Sarah has used print on demand on Create Space (Amazon) but the print quality for picture books is not up to her standard. Obviously this is a viable option if you do not want the expense of printing and storing books and perhaps a better option for non-picture books. Some websites, for example, www.blurb.com, give advice on these areas.

Costs – Three Main Ones (all prices are in Singapore dollars)

A publisher would generally pay a royalty of 5% of the retail price (and 5% for the illustrator). When self-publishing you can earn more, but only once you pay off your costs.

1. Editing: Depending on the editor’s experience and the length of your text, minimum \$500
2. Illustration and book design: Many illustrators require full payment, rather than royalties. You must decide who owns the copyright. You may need to pay a book designer as well, if your illustrator is not a designer. Prices below are our suggestions.
 - Chapter book/novel without illustrations (design layout and colour cover) – min \$800
 - Illustrated chapter book in black and white plus full colour cover – min \$2000
 - 32 page picture books in full colour – min \$4000
3. Printing: The more copies you print at one time, the less each book will cost. Ask at least three printers for a quote – 1000 copies is a standard first print run. Price depends on paper, size, number of pages and black & white/colour. The pages should be in multiples of 8s.
 - 120 pages (A5 size) with colour cover: \$1800 – \$3500 for 1000 copies (\$1.80 – \$3.50/book)
 - 32-page picture book: \$3000 – \$4500 for 1000 copies (\$3 – \$4.50 per book)

There are other small costs – creating a website, stickers, banners, etc.

Note: Discounts for trade distribution: 60 – 70% of the retail price for a distributor, 40% for a bookshop. In Singapore, selling directly at events and schools will give you higher returns.

Advantages

Disadvantages

| | |
|---|--|
| It doesn’t require a huge investment. There are also crowd-funding options to pay for this. If you are Singaporean or a PR, you can apply for grants . | Financial investment and risk. You may end up with hundreds of unsold books. Self-publishing is more affordable for non-picture books as commissioning illustrations is costly and time-consuming. |
| The rate of production is much faster and you don’t have to wait and hope for a publisher to pick it up. | If you hurry into self-publishing, a substandard book may be produced. Take your time, and learn about the industry |
| The massive reward of taking your book to any audience you choose. You have created something you believe in where you have creative control and can stay true to your work . | If your book is not well received, it may feel more personal. |
| Printing in Asia is affordable and efficient. | Be prepared to work very hard if you want your books to sell - you do not have the sales and marketing teams from a publishing house to help you sell and get exposure. |
| You can decide how much you want to spend. You have financial control . You can also explore print-on-demand or e-books. | Storing printed books can be problematic (the Singapore climate makes this a bigger issue). |
| Self-publishing means relying on friends within the industry – writing friends, (SCBWI), critiquing friends, editors, teachers, and librarians – it is a collaborative effort . | Distributing books – you need to find a distributor. Also do not rely on them to promote your books because they will not do that. They will just get it into libraries and bookstores. Some of this you can do without a distributor. |
| Many opportunities can arise, for example: translations, new media (Amazon, Me Books, Apps) | There is a lot of competition with so many people choosing to self-publish. |
| Singapore is a small market so it is easier to make your presence known. However, this also leads to a disadvantage. | Trying to sell internationally. Singapore is a small market so how do you take your work out of Singapore? |
| You are now a published author. This could help with your credibility if you decide to submit other work to publishers. | The business side is time-consuming. You will wear many hats, and will have less time to write! |

Very best of luck from us all, and enjoy the ride!