



Library podcast

Seattle Writes - 5 Things You Need to Know Before You Self Publish With Beth Jusino

[00:00:05] Welcome to the Seattle Writes podcast produced by the Seattle Public Library with support from the Seattle Public Library Foundation and Amazon Literary Partnership. Seattle Writes supports local writers through programs, workshops and write-ins, and by providing space to work throughout the city. To see upcoming classes and additional information about Seattle Writes, visit our website at www.spl.org/seattlewrites.

[00:00:39] Beth Jusino is a freelance writer, editor and publishing consultant with almost 20 years of experience teaching the crafts of writing and marketing. Her book *The Author's Guide to Marketing* won a 2015 Independent Publishers Award for Writing Publishing. Over the past three years, Beth has taught numerous classes for Seattle Writes including, Choose Your Path to Publication, Self Publishing Versus Traditional Publishing, Self Editing Tips for the Self Publishing Writer, Self Publishing Basics, How to Turn Your Manuscript Into a Book, Marketing Tips for Self Publishing Authors and Self Publishing Nuts and Bolts. We're pleased to welcome Beth to talk about Five Things You Need to Know Before You Self Publish.

[00:01:21] So you've heard the success stories: the writers who took their future into their own hands, self published their own work, and immediately shot to the top of the bestseller charts. Fame, fortune and Hollywood movies followed. And you've maybe seen media reports about just how popular self publishing is now. And how easy it is. Just a few clicks of a button, they say, and your book is available to readers around the world. Well, hey, you've written a book. Is this self publishing thing for you? I can absolutely tell you, maybe. I've worked on the business side of book publishing for almost 20 years. And in that time, I've worked with hundreds of authors who have self published, and I've even self published a book myself. I've seen a lot of success. But I've also met a lot of writers who came to self publishing unprepared or with not enough information, and their experiences were more disappointing. In those cases, it generally came down to one of five things that the writer didn't know or didn't think enough about. So here, for you, are those five things. If you're thinking about self publishing, consider how these will affect your plans. And then you'll be more ready to make a decision about your own best future for your book. The first thing is this. Publishing is a business and a self publishing author is the CEO of that business. If you've written a book, you've invested a lot of time in a craft. Writing takes focus and dedication like an artist.

[00:02:58] It's a personal experience. Just you and the page in front of you. But when you decide to publish your work, your book stops being that singular work of art and it starts being a product. Products are produced and sold. And so a self publishing author has to take off their artist hat and put on their business hat. Whether you're ready for it or not, if you want to sell your book to readers, you're going to have to be responsible for the things that businesses do, like production and distribution and accounting and hiring contractors and even marketing. I don't say that to scare you. People have been making and selling books for hundreds of years. And thousands of self publishers have gone before you. There are great resources written by experienced authors that can help you through every step of the process. You know, one of the great things about self publishing is that this is really a community of people and we like to help each other. We like to share our experience. And since I'm doing this for the library, this is also a good time to mention that your local library is a good source of information like this. Ask librarians to help you find the most up-to-date, comprehensive, and responsible guides to self publishing.

[00:04:18] Now, when I say you need to educate yourself, I don't mean you have to go learn computer programming so that you can write the code for your own e-book. What I do mean is that if you're going to sell e-books, you should understand what they are. You should think about how people buy them and use them and why they're different than print. You should be able to open and review your own e-book before you publish it and recognize if there are something like a formatting issue that's going to make it hard to read. If you're going to self publish, it's always a good idea to understand the competition. What other books are out there that appeal to the same readers that your book does? What do you notice about those cover designs, and prices and content? What do you need to do to make your book competitive with those? That seems like a lot of questions and it's intimidating for some people. Even if you think your entire self publishing plan is to hire somebody else to handle all of those details for you, it's still important that you take the time to educate yourself and understand what's happening to you and your book. Remember, like they said, the buck stops with you. Your biggest decision is going to be what company to hire. Look into those companies. Consider their previous work. Google the names and look at what other websites say about them, not just their own site.

[00:05:46] Do you like what you see? Do you trust them? Now, that's a lot of questions to throw at you in the first five minutes of our conversation. And I need to tell you, learning the business of publishing takes time. There are a lot of decisions to consider. But consider this. It took you a long time to master the craft of writing. So don't rush this part. As I like to tell people, probably too often, publishing is a marathon, not a sprint. And if you do this right, people will be reading your book for many years to come. Speaking of doing it right, let's move on to lesson number two. Almost every self published book is released too soon. Ah, this one breaks my heart, but you see it happen all the time. If you've read other people's self published books, you've probably noticed it too. There's a lot of good content. There's a good story. There's helpful information from somebody who's really passionate about their topic. But there's also something else. The books aren't great. Maybe it's something as blatant as poor grammar or spelling mistakes that distract you. And maybe you can't quite put your finger on what's wrong with the book. It's subtle. It's a novel where the characters never quite seem to connect or it's not clear what's happening or why.

[00:07:16] Maybe the non-fiction book is full of the author's passionate opinions, but it never really makes the case for why you, the reader, should care or what you should do about it. I think the biggest mistake a writer makes in self publishing is hitting the publish button on a book that's not yet great. There's no fancy cover design and no expensive marketing campaign that's going to make up for writing that's just not polished. There are too many other great books out there just waiting to steal all of your readers' attention. And why would they recommend a book that's anything less than great? Look, I get it. I've written half a dozen books by now, and there's always, always a point where I just want to be done. No more rewrites. No more reading that same sentence over and over. No more notes from editors that make me go back and look at it all again. But you know what? I'm tired of this is never a reason to publish. If you've been getting rejection letters from agents or publishers, or if your early readers tell you that this still needs work, it's important to pay attention to that. There's a reason you're getting that kind of feedback. Your book is good, but it might not be great yet. I want to make this clear. Before you publish, before you even get close to publishing, someone who is not your family, your friends or anyone with a personal interest in your well-being should review your book and give you tangible, specific feedback and support. It might be a great group of beta readers who are familiar with your genre and know how to read critically. Self publishing success Martin Weir, replied on a dedicated group of his blog followers who loved science fiction, and they're the ones who guided him through the writing and revisions of *The Martian*. But it's also important to point out that that process took years.

[00:09:22] For most writers, a more efficient, effective way is to hire a professional editor, preferably someone with experience, working with books like yours. That means it's not a good idea to hire someone who'd been a business editor to edit your novel for children, even if they are affordable or if you went to college with them. I know, professional editing can seem like an expensive investment. But if this book is important enough for you to share with the world, and it's important enough for you to invest years of your life, and it's worth putting your name out there forever as an author, then it's important enough to invest in making it the best it can be. Make a great book. If this is your first book or your first time working with an editor, be prepared. Not all editors do the same kinds of work. Know what you're asking for and find the right person to work with you. There are developmental editors which we sometimes call content or substantive editors. Those are the people who help you see the big picture. They refine the organization and the pacing of your story. They deepen the conflict. They show you the holes that you're too close to see. When the structure is done and that dev editor is done, a copy editor helps you tighten your sentences and fix your grammar and avoid those pesky consistency issues. Do not rush this. It's better to take the time you need working with a team who will help you bring out the most polished, can't-put-down piece.

[00:11:08] And speaking of the right time to publish, let's talk about publishing tip number three. Unless you write romance, you probably should publish more than an e-book. I talk to a lot of writers who consider self publishing. Sometimes they think that they can only put out an e-book, an electronic book. That was the popular message for awhile. The rise of the e-book specifically was the key to self publishing. But in the last 10 years print technology really took off, too. And the e-book market didn't actually take over the world. So now there are benefits to having both a print and an

electronic version of your book. And those often outweigh the additional costs. Here's why. The e-book market grew like crazy for a few years after the Kindle was released in 2007. There were headlines all over about the death of print's and the future of e-reading. But then e-book sales plateaued. Today, e-books make up about 30 percent of what's sold every year. Now those numbers are heavily skewed. According to one report I read not long ago, up to 90 percent of all romance books sales are digital. So if you're writing romance, then it makes sense for you to plan to only release your titles as e-books. Or if you're thinking about publishing a short story or a non-fiction article - something that's too short to make into a really viable print book. Going e-book only makes sense. But for everyone else, you might be leaving sales and opportunities on the table.


[00:12:55] There are real world connections that can only be made if you have a physical book. There are people who want to hold a book and have an author sign it. There are opportunities to sell print books at events and conferences. And if you have the right track record and platform, you may even be able to get that book into some brick and mortar bookstores. And now there are print on demand, what we call POD, businesses that will print and distribute your work for free or for just a few dollars a year. Now, this is important. You don't need to pay a company thousands of dollars or even hundreds of dollars for them to print a copy of your book and ship it to someone who orders it. You also don't need to sign a contract or agree to order hundreds of copies yourself if you don't need them. I want you to go back to that first point we talked about and be sure you're doing your homework about the vendors you choose. Self publishing a book now is just as easy and inexpensive as self publishing an e-book. You create an account on a website, you upload a file with your finished print layout, and the printer automatically adds it to their list of available titles. Those lists are then picked up and listed by all of the online bookstores. Then, when someone orders a copy of your book, the order goes straight to the printer.

[00:14:26] They can print a single copy and ship it directly to the customer. You, the author slash self publisher, don't have to do anything but collect a royalty check at the end of the month. Now, you are going to be responsible for making those files first, and depending on how comfortable you are with a computer and how much time you're willing to spend learning a new system, you may need to hire a professional to help you with that. Or you can learn how to do it yourself. But at that point, we're talking about an investment of a few hundred dollars, not thousands. And it's a one time cost. Oh, speaking of hiring people. Let's talk next about number four. Readers are going to judge your book by its cover. First impressions are everything. There are dozens of studies that show that a person browsing in a bookstore, whether that's a physical bookstore or online, look at the book cover first and they decide in less than five seconds if that cover is appealing to them. If so, and only if so, they'll pick up the book, turn it over and read the back cover copy, or what we call the product description if they're online. If that's not interesting to them, then they put it down without ever opening the book to see the writing itself. Do not skimp on these two pieces, and do not put them off until the last minute. It is incredibly important that a self published book has a professional looking cover, something that will catch the reader's attention on a crowded bookshelf or website, and it makes the right emotional connection.

[00:16:13] I should be able to look at your book cover and know if it's a mystery or a romance, or if your memoir is set in the 1960s or in 2016. Book cover design is tricky. It requires balance of art and marketing knowledge. It's about finding a great central image, yes. But it's also about color and font and space. It's about making multiple pieces work to convey the right emotion. It takes a long time to get good at this. So please take my word on it. Unless you are a professional graphic designer, do not try to illustrate and design your own cover. Do not hire someone who has never designed a book cover before, no matter how well you like them. If you genuinely can't afford to hire a professional cover designer, there are predesigned templates available for not much money, or with some print on demand houses, they're even available for free. Google book cover templates, for example. Once you have a design that you're proud of, turn the book over and then make sure those words reflect your project well to. A book browser spends 20 seconds reading that description. That's why a good book description is less than 200 words. That's not a lot of space, but if you're careful to cut the empty cliches and focus on what sets your story in motion, if it's fiction or on the problem you're solving with your nonfiction book,

[00:17:51] it's plenty of space. You can hire someone to write your back cover copy or you can tackle it yourself. If you're going to write your own copy, be assured you don't have to reinvent the wheel here. Go to a bookstore or your library. Find the shelf where you would want your book to be someday. Study the jackets of the most popular books there. There are patterns and popular language and you can pick those up and use them when you write your own text. Give what you write to a few friends or acquaintances, preferably people who haven't read your book already, but who really like to read. Ask if the description interests them, and why. Does it leave them wanting to know more? Is there anything that's confusing? Wanting to know more, hey, that brings us up to point number five. You do have to work to get noticed in this business. Yep, if we're going to talk about self publishing, we need to talk about the M word, Marketing. I know, this is probably not your favorite topic. Many writers approach self publishing thinking that the hard work will be done once the book is done. They want to just put it up on one of those websites and then sit back while people find it and buy it. Sorry, no. That maybe worked for a year or so when self publishing was new and not many people were doing it.

[00:19:25] And there are some great stories that we still like to share from those times because every new book was an event. But now, well, now there are literally millions of books for readers to choose from. And we're adding seven hundred and fifty thousand new self published books every year. Books are coming out so fast that even the most avid readers can't look at them all, let alone read them all. So if you want people to find your work and invest their time and resources in it, you have to do the work to help them find it. I wish I could tell you there's some magic formula to help you know how to market your book. Like, two hours a week on social media, plus one banner ad, plus a blog tour and three radio interviews equals lots of sales. Yeah, sorry again, but it's not that easy. Marketing looks different for every writer because it's based on the unique audience of your book and your own talents and strengths, and also a fair amount of timing and luck. I can't give you a formula for that, but I can tell you this: you're not going to make it work without a plan. A good marketing plan starts with knowing who you're writing for, who will be most excited to see your book. They're probably the



people who are already reading books like yours. So, if you write fantasy, they're the people who already read fantasy novels.

[00:21:03] If you write history, they're the people already browsing that section of the library. Beyond that, think about what those people do when they're not reading. Are they physically gathering somewhere like a church, or a parenting support group, or a professional conference? Are they spending a lot of time online? If they are online, are they on social media? Which sites? Pinterest draws a different crowd than Twitter, and so it's not enough to say, I'm going to go do a social media piece. You have to know where you're going and how to use it. Think about whether your audience watches videos or reads magazines. Think about where they shop. Whatever you identify as being the unique factor for your audience, that's where you think about marketing. Set yourself up with unique, specific, measurable projects that build connections with your readers and then tell them about your book. Don't spend a lot of money on anything unless you understand what you're going to get from it. Which brings us back to number one. Do your homework. Learn about the business. Study other success stories and connect with other self publishing authors. I hope that all of this has been encouraging to you as you listen. We really do live in a golden age for writers and readers, and you have an unprecedented opportunity to connect and share through self publishing. Wherever you are, whatever you write, this is your chance. Here's to your great adventure. I'm Beth Jusino, publishing consultant here in Seattle. Thanks for listening.

