

## **Fences Schmences—Why Going Indie Was Easy** by D.V. Berkom *(originally written for Indies Unlimited)*

Lately I've seen several comments in other forums where an unpublished writer mentions they're not sure if they should self-publish or go the traditional route. As an indie writer who has friends in both camps, I realized that their indecision was due to a lack of knowledge of each process.

Now, before all you experienced indie (and traditional) authors excoriate me with your "How the heck can a writer STILL be on the fence about this?" I want to remind everyone that they were newbies once and there's a whole lotta information out there, some good, and some that smell worse than crab guts left in the garbage for longer than five minutes on a hot day (yes, I left them in the house overnight and yes, we almost had to move).

In an effort to help make this decision easier, I've listed some important considerations when contemplating whether you should go indie or try the trad route.

### STARTING OUT:

- **TRAD:** To be traditionally published, you will need to become a synopsis and query-writing ninja. Indeed, I've been told that these two elements are THE most important skills in the trad-pubbed writer's toolkit. Now, certainly they can be learned, but I will tell you that before I went indie, my head nearly exploded from the different 'rules' spouted by reputable sources on how long a synopsis should be, how to format both documents, and how to write them. I attended three different classes and all three told me something different. Then you have to send them out and wait for a response which may or may not come. As a person who has issues in the impatience department, I would rather undergo having my toenails extracted with a Dremel than wait for a reply from an overworked agent or editor.
- **INDIE:** If you're just starting out, you have a huge learning curve to overcome. There are several good blogs and other sources of information out there for you to peruse, IU being one of them. You need to like making your own decisions and trying new things and even (gasp) failing on occasion, so be completely honest with yourself on that score. Are you resilient? Can you learn from your mistakes and move on? One of the best things about going indie is that most of us are notoriously helpful to newbies, so if you don't know something, ASK.

### TIME FACTOR:

- **INDIE:** You can publish whenever you think the book is ready to roll, and it is relatively easy and inexpensive to do yourself. Always a good thing if you're not fond of waiting for other people to make up their minds. Conversely, this is not a good thing if your manuscript isn't ready for prime time and you don't realize it.

- TRAD: Publication tends to take a bit longer. As a general rule, once your book has been acquired by a publishing house, you will wait a minimum of 12-18 months until it's released, often longer. During which time, of course, you will not earn anything except possibly an advance (see below).

#### MONEY:

- TRAD: When you are traditionally published, **sometimes** the publishing house will give you what's called an advance against earnings. This is a loan on your book's future royalties. Further payment is delayed until your book 'earns out' the advance, which, for debut authors happens about as often as the IU staff receives extra rations of gruel.

Here's the link to a post by romance writer [Brenda Hiatt](#) that lists actual advances and percentages from publishing houses. Yes, the list is romance-specific, but it will give you some insight as to what to expect if you're picked up by one of the trad houses. (Remember, subsequent advances are only if the house offers you another contract, which isn't a given, especially if your previous title didn't earn out.) Percentages are a LOT lower than what an indie earns from the big etailers like Amazon or Barnes and Noble. A LOT. Remember that the percentages listed are generally NET, which means you receive a percentage of what the book earns AFTER expenses. Another consideration: many publishing houses only accept agented submissions, which means another step in the process (securing an agent), and another percentage taken from your earnings (typically 15%).

- INDIE: Realize that as an indie you will not earn a dime if people 1) don't know about your book, and 2) don't think it's any good. If you do it right and have other people read it other than your family or BFF and incorporate their feedback, get it professionally edited, take the time to research your genre, get a fabulous cover, tweak your description until it's the bee's knees, and basically work your behind off to promote it, then you have a chance to earn the big buck\$ (and yes, I'm being facetious). Yes, there is the potential that your work will earn money from day one. It happens, but don't count on it. The percentages paid by etailers vary from 35 to 75 percent of the book's list price.

Ka-ching.

#### COVER/TITLE:

- INDIE: You get to pick your cover and your title. If you have experience in graphic design, try doing your own. DO NOT use just any ol' picture off the interwebz. Make sure it is ROYALTY FREE. If graphic design's not your strong suit, hire it out. The cost can range anywhere from \$45-\$2000 and up.
- TRAD: Normally, as a debut author you won't get a say in your cover. Many times you don't get a say in your title if the sales department doesn't think it will sell.

## CONTENT:

- **INDIE:** You are responsible for your content. You need to make sure it's grammatically correct, free of typos, formatted correctly, etc. At the very least you will need to hire a copy editor unless you're lucky and have a good relationship with one already. You are also responsible for any and all legal ramifications. (Especially if you 'borrow' or quote someone else's prose, lyrics, etc.)
- **TRAD:** Yes, you're responsible for your book's content, but here's where the publishing houses earn their keep—in editing. They have staff editors but also out-source depending on workload. Most likely they'll run your manuscript through a content editor as well as a copy editor.

**NOTE:** Keep in mind that if you decide to go indie and think your book needs a content edit, it is fairly expensive and can be out of reach of the typical indie author.

## PROMOTION/PUBLICITY:

- **TRAD:** Debut authors get some push from the big houses, but you'll still be doing a lot of it yourself if you want the book to have a chance at earning out.
- **INDIE:** It's all you, baby. Get used to the idea. The good news: there's a bunch of free ways to get your book front and center. The bad news: promotion is a huge time suck, and results are not guaranteed.

So there you have it. For me, it was an easy call to go indie. For others, being traditionally published will appeal. Either way, evaluate your strengths and weaknesses in a realistic light—then going indie or trad will be an easy choice.