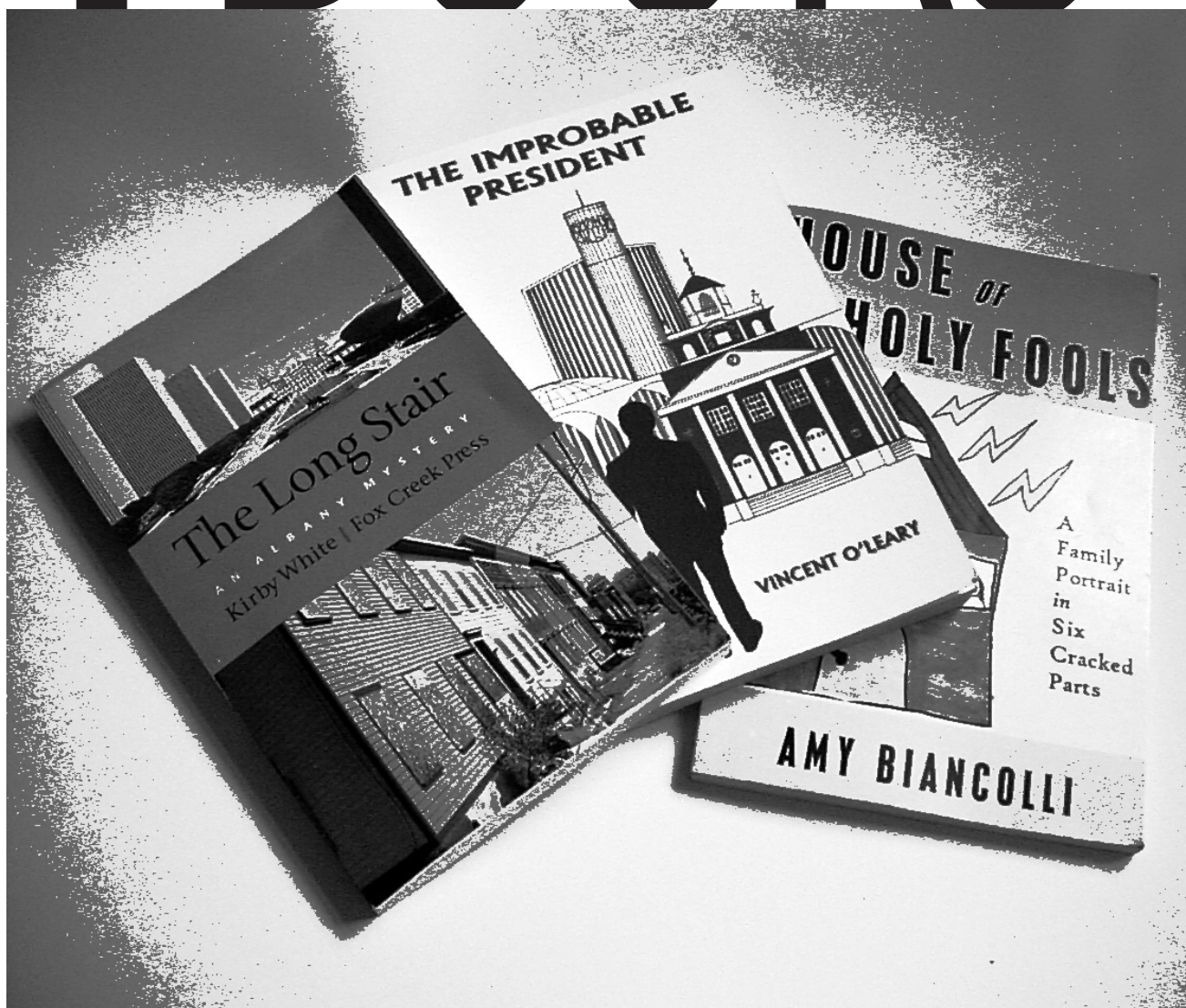


DIY BOOKS



Putting out your own book is still considered far more tacky than putting out your own CD—but self-published authors are betting that's going to change

BY MIRIAM AXEL-LUTE

In early October, an e-mail message went around the region from someone “gathering information for the *Times Union* on books published by local writers in 2005.” The next sentence of the message is in bold type. It reads “This DOES NOT include self-published books.” In case that message got missed, it’s repeated again a scant two lines later.

This is the traditional attitude toward self-published books: not legitimate, and probably not worth reading.

But as the publishing world gets more risk-averse, and new technologies like print-on-demand and Internet marketing make the financial prospects of niche books more promising, a number of experienced authors—ones who actually have published elsewhere, who have agents, who understand the need for editing—have taken a second look at the option.

AMY BIANCOLLI, A FORMER MOVIE REVIEWER FOR THE *TIMES UNION* whose first book, a biography of classical musician-composer Fritz Kreisler, was published by a traditional publisher, understands the stigma against self-published works. “Anybody can print anything and say ‘I wrote a book,’ and it might be good, or it might stink,” she says. “There’s no level of editing, no regulation, no barriers to the junk.”

But she also knows from experience that there can be reasons other than “It’s junk” that a book doesn’t get picked up by a traditional publisher. Her second book, the memoir *House of Holy Fools: A Family Portrait in Six Cracked Parts*, details her complex family history, including her sister’s struggle with mental illness. Biancolli worked with two agents, and kept getting responses from publishers that said things like “I love it, but I can’t publish it.”

“It’s a quirky book,” Biancolli says. She thinks the fact that it’s nonlinear, and that it’s openly religious, Catholic even, but in an “unorthodox way,” made it hard to pigeonhole. And, the general consensus is, publishers won’t publish what they don’t know how to categorize because that means they don’t know how to sell it.

Darryl McGrath, a freelance writer whose work often appears in these pages, learned that same lesson the hard way. Her first attempt at getting a book published was a non-fiction true-crime book based on a case she covered in her police-reporter days. Publishers liked it, but declined to publish it based on liability fears. One told her agent to come back if she ever tried fiction.

McGrath’s first novel, which she poured years of energy into, and revised extensively (she rewrote a single chapter five times) based on the advice of the same agent, ended up “being categorized variously as a women’s story, a thriller, a mystery, then it started getting some weird labels like literary mystery.” But it wouldn’t sell.

After three years of sending her manuscript to publishers, Biancolli was tired. “I know that [the book] connects with people who read it,” she says. “I just wanted it to be read.” The idea of not having it available wasn’t really an option—she calls the book “a compulsion”—so she chose a print-on-demand self-publishing company, Lulu.com, where she didn’t have to spend any money up front, though she did choose to pay for the optional service of having her book listed with major online retailers. (Lulu.com takes pains to note that it is not a publisher, but a technology company that enables self-publishing.)

Biancolli has sold maybe 400 copies of *House of Holy Fools* since it came out last year, and has already turned a profit on it. She admits to not being “good at selling myself,” so she figures it could have sold more perhaps, but overall it has been “so reassuring to hear from people who read it and loved it and couldn’t believe that a mainstream publisher didn’t pick it up.”

McGrath is earlier on the self-publishing path, having just made a decision to go that direction if her novel isn’t sold by the time her agent retires at the end of this year. As recently as a few months ago, she was a strong critic of self-publishing. “I thought it’s giving up,” she recalls. “I thought it was desperation. I had a very critical view of it. How did I come around to this? I got desperate.”

After someone suggested to her a new agent who would read the manuscript for a fee, McGrath decided enough was enough. “It’s going to have to be published as it is or it’s not going to be published,” she remembers thinking. “It had been edited, re-edited, revised [and] revised. This could go on for the rest of my life. I have three other novel ideas, but I can’t get past to them until I finish with this.”

McGrath is looking into a more traditional self-publishing arrangement than Lulu.com, with an initial run of 2,000 books and a detailed marketing plan for which she will do the lion’s share of the work—similar, she notes, to what she would have had to do anyway if the book had ended up with a very small press.

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SOME AUTHORS ARE TURNING TO SELF-publishing without even trying the traditional route. Vincent O'Leary, president of the University at Albany from 1977 to 1990, started his memoir *The Improbable President* after one of his daughters sent him a transcription she'd made of him telling some of the stories of his life. O'Leary has post-polio syndrome, and had a long and varied career in parole and corrections, including setting up Texas' first division of parole, before he came to Albany.

"I don't know if you've ever read anything [you've said] that someone has transcribed," O'Leary, who has published other academic works in the "traditional" fashion, says. "I looked at it, and said 'My god, the sentences are not made, you know, all the facial gestures are gone.' So I started to clean it, and one thing led to another and I wrote the whole book."

O'Leary never had major ambitions for the book—he just wanted it available to people who might have an interest in some of the various aspects of his experience. So when he went to look into publishing options, he ruled out the traditional route quite quickly. "I said 'Oh my god, you have to get an agent. . . .' Look, I'm almost 80. I don't need to do all that."

O'Leary went through Authorhouse, hired one of their recommended copy editors, and let them handle the publicity. He admits to having no idea how many copies he's actually sold because it's all "tied up with Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Google, etc.," but he's figuring that in the end he'll break even. *The Improbable President* currently enjoys a higher sales ranking on Amazon than the only one of his academic works still available.

ALTHOUGH CHANGE IS SLOW, THE STIGMA against self-publishing may be lessening. Chris Anderson, in an article for *Wired* called "The Long Tail," describes how technology like Amazon and Netflix that give people access to a far wider range of options than are available in a typical store or cinema have shown that people's tastes are far more eclectic than our current hit-driven culture might lead us to believe. The "long tail" is the end of the graph of popularity, where sales drop from the heights of blockbusters to a steady low level.

What it lacks in height it makes up for in volume. Anderson notes, for example, that Amazon makes more money off the titles it sells that are below the 130,000 most popular than it does from the 130,000 most popular. The standard bookstore chain will carry only about 130,000 titles at any given time.

Anderson also posits an answer to the tricky question that faces anyone who wants to embrace what Biancolli calls the "anarchic" world of self-publishing: How do we sort the wheat from the inevitable mountains of chaff? Sophisticated algorithms that tell shoppers "people who bought this also bought this" can supplement the already existent word-of-mouth that drives readers to the books that are really worth their time.

Some self-published books have already risen to the top. Authorhouse's top-selling book on Amazon (perhaps not surprisingly, it's about male multiple orgasm) was published this August, and had hit sales rank No. 1,842 on Nov. 10. Fiction is harder—Authorhouse's top-selling fiction offering, a zombie novel called *Twilight of the Dead*, clocked in at No. 193,063. Still, out of millions of offerings, that's impressive, possibly a nod to Biancolli's observation that self-publishing allows authors to more profitably target niche audiences.

Despite the junk (and anyone who doubts that it exists in spades should get themselves on the press-release list for any self-publishing house), a world with more self-published books may open up our possibilities without being that much harder for discerning readers to find their way through. After all, notes McGrath, "I invite anybody who's as suspicious of it as I used to be, to walk through Borders and tell me there isn't a lot of slush that's legitimately published."

maxel-lute@metroland.net

SELF-PUBLISHING BY ANY OTHER NAME

In the music world, "starting your own label" carries some cachet—at least after you've been successful at it. A similar impulse drives some authors, who decided to self-publish not through one of the companies set up to make it easy, but entirely under their own control, and their own "press."

In the Capital Region, Hollis Palmer, known for his Derby Tours of Saratoga Springs, has done this with Deep Roots Publications, under which he has published a half-dozen true-crime accounts of unsolved mysteries from the bygone days of the region.

In a more unusual move, a collaborative of nonprofits working in Arbor Hill got together to form Fox Creek Press, which this year published *The Long Stair*, a mystery set in Sheridan Hollow, written by Kirby White, a founder of the Capital District Community Loan Fund. Fox Creek Press, named after one of the buried streams running through Albany, is selling *The Long Stair* as a fund-raiser.

Saving Troy author William Patrick [see page 16] actually started his own press for his latest book because he hoped to make *more* money than through traditional publishing. "I wanted to market this book properly," he explains. "My other books have been published mostly by BOA editions, and BOA is a terrific small press in Rochester which publishes great people . . . a long list of Pulitzer Prize winners, national prize winners. It's a very prestigious small press, but like a lot of small presses there isn't any money. They exist on grants, which is nice if you're making a living as a professor or some other way, because your name appears in this catalog with all these great other writers . . . but you don't sell any books because they don't market them. . . . So I just thought I'm already doing the marketing anyway, why don't I make some money off this book?"

—Miriam Axel-Lute and David King