

Washington Book Publishers

Entrepreneurial Publishing: Insights from Four Startups,

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Program presented at, and meeting space donated by, CQ Press, Washington, DC

Panel:

Sallie Lowenstein, Lionstone Books

William Boik, DBM Press

Daniel Kohan, Ruka Press

Sandy Pugh and Dana Clerkin, We the Peepers, LLC

Moderator: Jack Bruggeman, President, Washington Book Publishers

Jack Bruggeman: Introduction of the panel

Lowenstein: I began illustrating professionally when I was 19. Then, I got my start as a publisher by making my own children's books about 15 years ago. Since then, I've seen "self-publishing" become "small press" publishing. Whatever it's called, my goal has always been to produce beautiful, imaginative books.

Pugh: We are self-publishers. I'm an elementary school teacher, and a few years ago I created a character that I thought was too good not to do something with, and that's when I started making these books.

Clerkin: You have to believe in what you're doing. I never would have thought that at 55 I'd be sitting at my computer trying to figure out how to format documents into pdfs and into iBooks.

Boik: We publish five titles, focused on quality nonfiction and scholarly books—only in paperback, for now.

Kohan: I've got a graphic design business, and for a few years I've thought I'd like to be a publisher. I don't want to write books, but I do want to create great, beautiful books that nobody else is doing. I've now got two books published, with one more in the editing stage now.

JB: What was the moment when it struck you that you wanted to be a publisher? What made you take that leap?

Lowenstein: I'd done one book with a friend, and it sold out. Then I was offered a contract for another, but they wanted to find another illustrator. I wanted to illustrate my own stories, and that's what made me decide to do it myself.

Pugh: I created these characters, "the Peepers," at an art camp. I spent all this time writing and illustrating the book the old-fashioned way with pen, paper, and colored pencils. Then it seemed like it would take even longer, years maybe, to find a publisher, so Dana and I decided we could do it ourselves.

Boik: My wife and I had both written books, but nobody wanted to publish them. I'd sold used books online for a while and realized that we could probably do it ourselves. Since then we've published our own books and two other authors' as well.

Kohan: I had some free time, thanks to the economy, and I asked a friend whom I'd worked with at Kiplinger if she wanted to do a book, with me as publisher.

JB: What was the first thing you did?

Boik: I found a name for which I could get a website, then I registered as an LLC in Virginia.

JB: What were the mistakes you made?

Pugh: We tried to branch out into other products before realizing we should stick with books. If anyone wants any baby clothes with the Peepers on them, let me know!

Boik: We printed too many copies, usually around 2,500, which gave us better pricing, but storing the books was expensive. It's better to print fewer copies and reprint sooner. It was a mistake to think it would be simple.

JB: Was financing an issue?

All were self-financed, so financing was not an issue.

JB: Was there anything that surprised you?

Kohan: My wife (who works on this with me) and I were surprised by how much fun it is.

Boik: It turns out it's really resource intensive, and the margins are so low compared to selling used books. I've got a full-time job, so this is all extra work. The marketing especially takes a huge amount of time.

Clerkin: Marketing is hard and very time consuming, and we're getting to the point where I don't want to do it. I'm doing the accounting and all these other things, and there are some things I think would be best left to people who are experts.

Lowenstein: I don't love the marketing. I do this for the creative end. Even before e-books, around 150,000 books were published each year. Now with even more, it makes it even harder to get your book noticed. In this time of changes, how do we make sure to keep our books out there?

JB: How much time do you spend on this every week?

Boik: Every weekday evening and around one-third of each weekend. The great thing is that I can do the work from anywhere.

Kohan: I usually spend two hours per day, sometimes more, depending on the project.

Clerkin: Some aspects ebb and flow, so they'll take more or less time depending on the stage of the work. Others are fairly constant. I spend about two full days each week on this.

Lowenstein: I spend lots of time on publishing, between writing, art, design, production, and then marketing.

JB: What is your acquisitions model? How will you find the next book?

Kohan: That part is hard, because I don't have time to go to places where potential authors are and say, "Hey, I'm a publisher." Most things that come over the transom are terrible, so that's a problem. I try to do two books a year, so if it takes me six months to find the next, it's okay.

Boik: It's definitely hard. We go to book fairs and things, and people come up to us with manuscripts. Most aren't very good, some are, but few fit with our subject matter. I try to find books that I think have a market for 5,000 copies.

JB: Do you have a plan for your books/publishing program? How many books do you want to do?

Lowenstein: I've been approached by many people with manuscripts to publish, but so far I've only published my own books, mainly because I think that all books deserve something special, and these are the ones I want to put my energy into working on.

Pugh and Clerkin: We don't want to publish other people's work—we're not equipped to expand in that way yet. We want to expand our own products for now, at around one per year.

Pugh: There's pressure to publish more now, because frontlist shelf-life has become so short. It used to be 16 months, but now it's more like 6 months—or 6 weeks!

Boik: That's true—after a year, most libraries and "big box" bookstores aren't interested.

JB: How do you market your books?

Kohan: We've been to some book fairs, like BookExpo America and Gaithersburg Book Festival. My wife works on marketing for six to eight hours per week. Sometimes we have authors work on it too.

Boik The most effective thing is an author event. It's great to have a lot of people in one place who are interested in the subject. It also helps to have books in stock at Amazon—people see it higher in the results that way than if you're selling it as a third party through Amazon.

Pugh and Clerkin: Sandy goes to some events that are great. We also go to educators' meetings and do school visits (usually with presales). Those are great because a portion of the proceeds go to the PTA, so the school gets behind the sale with us.

Lowenstein: Being nominated for awards and getting prepress reviews are the biggest sellers for me—especially getting reviews in library resources and being listed with library wholesalers. Libraries are the single biggest market for books. One thing I learned is to never send a book out for review until it is listed with the wholesalers.

JB: You all have websites. Do you do any social/online marketing?

Kohan: We tweet, we're on Facebook, and we have a good WordPress website. But I'd say our web presence is much less potent than the author's web presence.

Boik: We have a website, and each author has a page with news, appearances, and links to buy their book directly.

Clerkin: It's all set up, but the hard part is the "care and feeding" of things like Twitter and Facebook. We get some coverage from "mommy blogs," but it's a trickle compared to what it could be because we don't have time to maintain the constant communication and stay current.

Lowenstein: True. I don't do it because I don't have time. If you're going to do social marketing, you really need someone to do it full-time.

JB: What has been your most successful book?

Kohan: My first book has been out for six months, and it's approaching breakeven. It has generated enough cash to print the second book. I'm really happy with it, because I thought that starting out without a lot of contacts, without a ton of experience, the first book would really tank.

Boik Two of our books have covered their printing costs (but not marketing expenses!). Our most successful book is the one with the most defined audience (it's about being Jewish in South Africa). Under our model, the author pays 70 percent of the first printing cost, and we pay 30 percent. Then we split the profits and rights the same way. Once the first printing is sold, the second transitions to a traditional publishing model with 15 percent royalties.

Pugh and Clerkin: A couple of our books have won awards, but it's hard to say which is the most successful.

Lowenstein: One of my books, *Waiting for Eugene*, got 29 national reviews and was on the New York–New Jersey school reading list. Otherwise, I don't know exactly how to define success for myself. Some

books sell out their print run of around 1,000–1,500. I guess the thing that pleases me best is longevity. I like when my books stay around for a while.

JB: What are your goals as a publisher?

Kohan: To publish two beautiful books each year that will generate a growing stream of income.

Boik: Our short-term goal is to sell international rights, print some out-of-copyright books, and publish one new book per year.

Pugh and Clerkin: We'd like a float in the Macy's parade!

Lowenstein: I want to keep having fun creating the books and receiving letters from my young readers.

JB: Starting out as a publisher, did you have a Plan B?

Pugh: We both have a day job, but as soon as we got the reactions from kids and their parents, we knew we were on the right track. If my livelihood relied on this, I definitely wouldn't give up, because I really believe in it.

Boik: I wanted to do this, but with a day job, it wasn't a big risk.

Kohan: The downside of failure wasn't so big. I knew I could design the books, which is a really important piece, and that would save me a lot of the costs. And I figured that if it didn't work out, I'd think of it as a hobby. Lots of people spend a few thousand dollars on a hobby.

Dana Clerkin kindly offered the following links to blogs relevant to startup or self-publishers.

<http://marketingfloozy.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.thebookdesigner.com/2010/11/52-great-blogs-for-self-publishers/>