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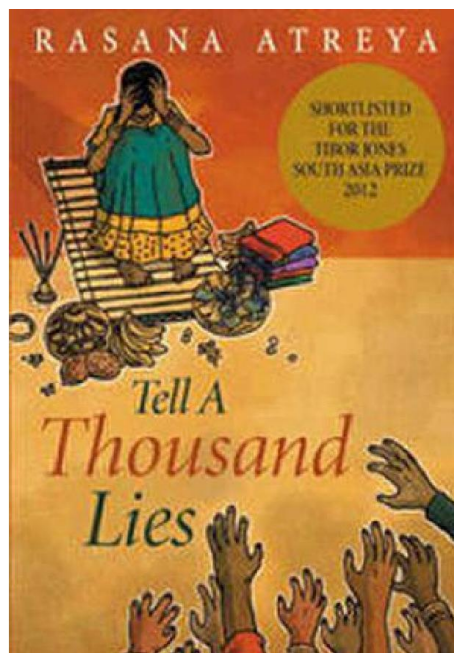
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My self-publishing journey

RASANA ATREYA

How to self-publish and market your book online and have the time of your life. RASANA ATREYA



Early this year the unpublished manuscript of my novel, *Tell a Thousand Lies*, was shortlisted for the 2012 Tibor Jones South Asia prize. I was ecstatic when I was offered a publishing contract soon after, by one of India's largest publishing houses. Yet, I declined the offer.

Let me explain.

I would have been happy enough to have my paperback published. What I wanted were the rights to my ebook (the electronically downloadable form of a book). I'd been following the career paths of Amanda Hocking and Joe Konrath, the two authors leading the self-publishing charge, and I wanted a chance to apply their marketing methods to my ebooks. The publisher wasn't agreeable though, so we parted ways, no hard feelings.

Breaking new ground

Giving up a publishing contract, the holy grail for any writer? — my friends thought I was a few neurons short in the brain. But the uncharted territory aspect of it — going where no Indian woman had gone before — appealed to me. I would have complete control over the final product; everything, from pricing to cover design to marketing, would be my responsibility. It was exhilarating. It was also scary.

I commissioned the book cover and had my manuscript edited professionally, paying a one-time fee for both, instead of a cut in the royalties. This is the sensible approach because both were one-time services (traditional publishers take cuts in royalties because of additional costs like distribution, warehousing etc). If you cannot afford

an editor, at least join an online critique group. I've been on one for seven years now, and it's been invaluable.

Back to my publishing journey — when everything was in place, I formatted the manuscript as an ebook, settled on a selling price, took a deep breath and uploaded it to *Amazon.com*. Twelve hours later, my book was published.

Though there are a lot of online retailers, I went with Amazon's KDP Select programme. In this programme you may not sell your book elsewhere; for this exclusivity, you are accorded the privilege of reducing the price of your ebook to zero any five days of your choice.

This isn't as crazy as it sounds. You pick the days you want the book free, inform as many people as possible, then wait for downloads of your ebook to begin.

The two days I did my free promotion, I posted to relevant Facebook groups, I tweeted, I blogged. I also talked a couple of big newsletters into listing my novel. The fact that it had been shortlisted for an award didn't hurt. That weekend 17,000 people across the world downloaded my ebook.

After the promotion was over, I checked my Amazon account obsessively to see if people were paying real money to buy my book. A trickle here, a trickle there. Quite disheartening. Then things started to pick up. By the end of the month, I had sold 900 copies at 70 per cent royalties (as opposed to traditional publishing royalties, which often are in the single digits).

Even a few months ago, my 17,000 downloads would have counted as 17,000 sales, resulting in huge visibility. But Amazon tweaked its algorithms recently, causing mine to be counted as approximately 1700 sales. So, was giving away that many copies worth it?

Absolutely. Prior to this promotion, I was selling maybe 20 books a month. Mostly to family and friends, let's be honest.

It works

Wasn't the free strategy akin to lost sales? I merely used the sales I wouldn't have had anyway, to help my book gain visibility. In the traditional world, publishers send out Advance Review Copies (ARC) to magazines and newspapers; free promotions are the e-world's ARC.

I've not been able to sustain the sales figures of the first month, but that's to be expected. Marketing online, with its myriad strategies, can be a full time job, and I need that time to work on my next novel. But that's okay. I am still selling much more than before, and I am in it for the long haul. The best way to sell more books is to write your next one, which I'm doing. I'm also writing a couple of cookbooks, an ebook on how to format ebooks and self-publish, and I'm having the time of my life.

With my 90-day contract with Amazon running out, I'm exploring *smashwords.com*, which acts as an ebook distributor for Barnes & Noble, Apple etc. Not a bad strategy, because B&N has captured about 30 per cent of the ebook market (Amazon is at 60 per cent). I will continue to be on Amazon, just not part of Select.

If you decide to self-publish, investigate your options carefully. It is easy to get scammed on the Internet. To confuse the issue, a lot of companies are calling themselves self-publishers. Self-publishing is when *you* upload the book, *you* set the price, *you* track the sales, *you* run the promotions. When someone else does it for you, *they* are the publisher of record. Horror stories abound about these so-called self-publishers; from manuscripts being stolen, to sales data being fudged, I've heard them all.

If this seems too intimidating, reputable sites like *bookbaby.com* can help for a one-time fee. If someone is charging you fees upfront *and* keeping a cut of your royalties, beware. Reputable publishers will never charge you for publication, which is why they take a cut in your royalties. A quick and dirty way to check if the publisher is legitimate is to look at their website. The focus of a legitimate publisher will be the reader. Their website will be in the business of selling books. A subsidy or vanity publisher's focus will be you — the gullible writer — and how many unneeded services they can sell to you.

I used CreateSpace to publish the paperback in the U.S. (LighteningSource and Lulu are the other options). I'm pleased to report my novel has started to catch the attention of book buyers for public libraries there. My novel shows up on *flipkart.com* etc. because I had it listed on Ingram's catalogue, but the international edition is too expensive for India. The time is ripe in India for someone to replicate CreateSpace's business model, offering printed copies of books for sale, perhaps even distribution to physical and online bookstores.

Does this mean I would rule out traditional publishers for my next book? Not at all. I am always open to new experiences.

Rasana Atreya blogs at <http://rasanaatreya.wordpress.com>

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