Self-Publishing and Libraries

By Brian R. Johnston

Presented at MLA Conference

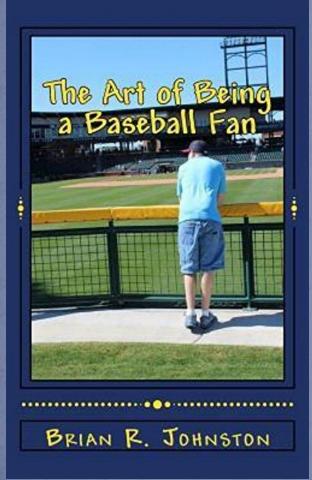*October 16, 2019*

About Me

- Adult Services Librarian at Lincoln Township Public Library
- Have worked there since 2012

My background as a writer

- Writer and book reviewer for several publications and websites
- Author of three self-published books:
  - *The Art of Being a Baseball Fan* (2016)
  - *Quiet Faith* (2018)
  - *It's Okay to Fail* (2018)

The Art of Being a Baseball Fan

BRIAN R. JOHNSTON

My survey on self-publishing

- Surveys took place in Spring of 2018.
- Librarian survey received 145 responses.
  - Asked for submissions through Michlib-L.
- Author survey received 51 responses.
  - Asked for submissions through Chicago Writers Association and Self-Publishing Yahoo! Groups.

Additional methods

- I have interviewed librarians around the country about things they are doing to help aspiring authors
- I have interviewed authors about what is successful getting into libraries
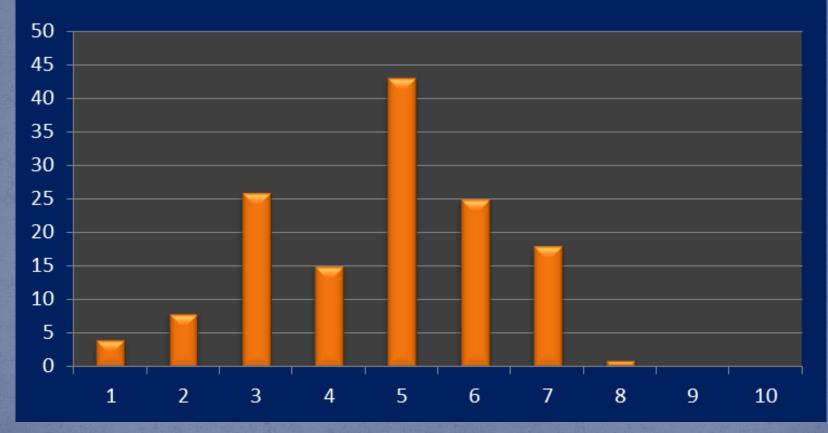- I have read articles from library publications on self-publishing

CONCLUSION #1:

The relationship between library professionals and self-published authors is not good.

My survey on self-publishing

- *"On a scale of 1 to 10 stars, with 1 being Poor and 10 being Great, how would you rate the current relationship between library professionals and self-published authors?"*
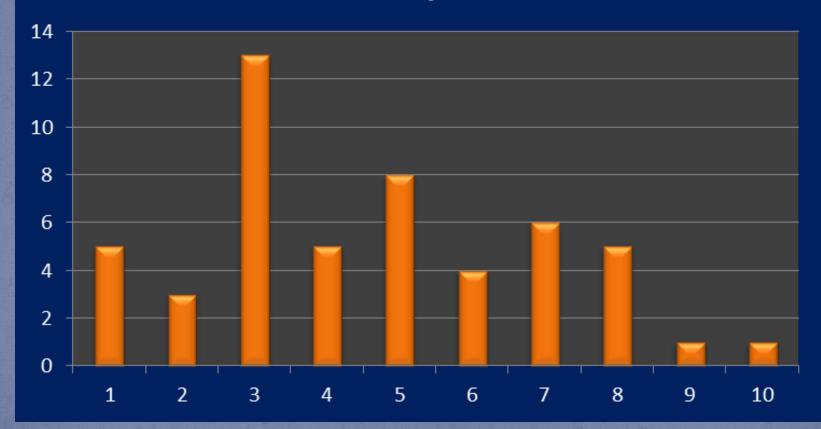
Librarians (Average: 4.72)

# of Responses

Comments from respondents

- Authors had both positive and negative comments about their experiences with libraries.
- Librarians in general tended to have more negative responses.
- This could be because it is more of a personal issue for authors.

CONCLUSION #2:

There still is a stigma in the library profession against self-published books.

Poorer Quality?

- 100 (69%) of librarians said that they hesitate to buy self-published books because they are generally of poorer quality than traditionally published books are (most common answer).
- Only 11 (7.59%) said that they do not hesitate to buy self-published books.
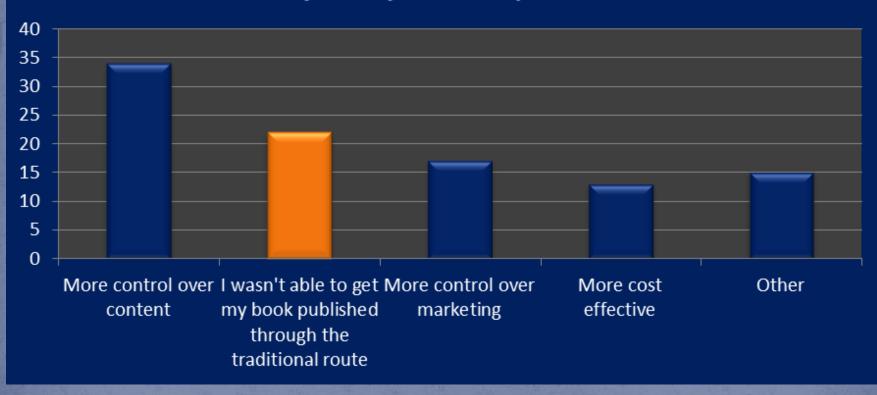
Poorer Quality?

- Not entirely without merit
  - More rigorous editing/marketing process
  - Writing didn't catch attention of agents (if they tried this route, which some don't)
- It's not reasonable to expect librarians to refuse to view self-published works in the same light as those that are traditionally published…

Poorer Quality?

- Yet it's also unfair to categorize all self-published books as poor.
- I believe my writing is good. Yet breaking into the industry is still difficult.
- About half of the authors (25) said that they have published through the traditional route.
- Fewer than half of the authors (22, 43%) said that they could not get published through the traditional route.

Question for authors

Why did you self-publish?

Response	Value
More control over content	34
I wasn't able to get my book published through the traditional route	22
More control over marketing	17
More cost effective	13
Other	15

Some of the other reasons

- Don't want to have to wait a long time to get it published
- Complex/difficult contracts
- "Incompetent agents"
- Publishers drop authors
- Wanting to try something new

Preferred method for those who have done both kinds of publishing

Publishing Preference

- Self-publishing
- Traditional publishing
- No preference

7
11
6

CONCLUSION #3:

Authors still have a lot to learn about the library process.

Authors need to learn more

- Many authors admitted that they don't know how to get into libraries. One even suggested a how-to manual.
- Some don't understand there's more to it than just writing (what is, at least in their opinion) a good book.

Reasons libraries hesitate

- Having a good title, quality writing, and professional looking cover are still important to make a good first impression. Yet there's more to it than that.

Other reasons libraries hesitate

- Limited budgets and space
- Books aren't available through main vendors that libraries use
- Authors are too pushy
- Too much time to catalog
- Trouble locating quality self-published materials
- Worry that patrons won't take them

CONCLUSION #4:

Libraries need to make an effort to tap into the self-published market.

Is it even important?

- Hint: Yes it is.
- Several authors commented that they don't see libraries as an important market for them.
- We should convince them that it is!

Why is this important?

- For authors
  - Libraries can help authors with book sales
  - Authors can reach new readers
  - Authors can build credibility by being on a library shelf
  - Authors can contribute to the well-being of the community

Why is this important?

- For libraries
  - More people are self-publishing
  - Having these books will build goodwill with some of the library's strongest supporters
  - Libraries can help more people have a voice – especially minorities
  - The library can create buzz in the community

Why is this important?

- Plus, aren't libraries supposed to be about more than just meeting simple patron demand?
- We have a responsibility to guide readers towards good books!

There is reason to be optimistic!

Being Optimistic

- There is at least a willingness among both library professionals and authors to make this relationship work.

Being Optimistic

- Some authors reported success getting into libraries and also participating in library programming.
- Many libraries are willing to host author and/or writing programs.

So, what can we do?

For authors

- Produce a quality book
- Explain why there is a demand for it (not just that it's good)
- Get a review (librarians don't have time to read every book)
- Build yourself up as a writer

For authors

- Start locally
- Rally patrons to request your book
- Form a relationship with your library (available for programs)
- Know how libraries work
  - Who does what
  - Collection development policies

For authors

- Know what libraries need from you
  - Objective reviews from credible sources
  - Availability from vendors
  - Make it easy to catalog
  - Be sure it's suitable for circulation

For authors

- Accept rejections gracefully
  - Assume it isn't out of malice.
  - You don't want to build a bad reputation in the library community.
  - Libraries simply can't carry everything. Don't take it personally.

For librarians

- Have a policy ahead of time
  - To be clear and consistent
  - Something you can point to
  - Authors will know in advance what is expected of them
  - Decide whether it will be purchase or donation-based

For librarians

- Start a local author collection
  - Books?
  - E-Books?
  - Music?
  - Have a policy in place ahead of time

For librarians

- Seek out book review sources
  - Blue Ink Review
    - BlueInkReview.com
  - Kirkus Indie Reviews
    - kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/indie/
  - Foreword Magazine
    - ForewordReviews.com

For librarians

- These sources are free to librarians, yet can be expensive for authors.
  - Look for local, less expensive sources
    - Example: Windy City Reviews (windycityreviews.org)
- Consider being a book reviewer

For librarians

- Have compassion for authors. Many are trying to make it in a brutal industry, so at least give them credit for that.
- (That being said, you don't have to tolerate those that are too pushy.)

For librarians – ways to help

- Host writing programs
- Self-publishing or writing webpage on your website
- Publishing services (larger libraries)

Thank you for listening!

Some sources to consider

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