



Umbach Consulting

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Publishing's Alternate Universe

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There is an alternate literary universe in which “authors” crow about having been “published” and tell of framing their \$1.00 advances. In that universe, one dollar is a symbolic nod toward the “tradition” of paying writers for their work. In error-filled prose they post of success marked by sales numbering in the single digits.

The advance was a mere token, they admit, but their books have been “published” for “free” (as if writers ordinarily pay to be published). Free, that is, in contrast to the netherworld of subsidy publishing comprising exploitive vanity presses to which the customer (the “author”) pays thousands or tens of thousands of dollars before the first copy is printed—and even then must pay for any further copies. The self-described subsidy publishers (they shun the term “vanity press”) at least inform their clients of the costs and the unlikelihood of ever recouping the investment. They do not admit the contempt with which their books, like essentially all books from the alternate publishing universe, are viewed by book reviewers, book stores, and libraries.

Publishing only *seems* to be free, and free of vanity, in the alternate universe. The proud “authors” appear to be unaware of this. In agreeing to alternate-universe publishing, they (often without even *suspecting*) can sign away copyright for years and agree that Parallel Publishing, Inc., is entitled to half of the proceeds if a book succeeds on its merit and is sold to a conventional publisher.¹ (A conventional publisher prints a run of books, not one book at a time, and serves the book-seller market with normal trade discounts and acceptance of returns of unsold copies.)

Parallel Publishing, Inc., expects the “author” to provide a list of friends and relatives, a virtual captive audience, at which to target sales solicitations, and will from time to time entice the “author” to buy a quantity of books himself or herself. This is not the hallmark of conventional—established, recognized—publishing.

The “authors” dream and they scheme. They dream of recognition and they scheme ways to inflate sales—perhaps into the double-digit range—through buying each other’s books and encouraging friends and relatives to buy copies. They conspire to give favorable reviews to each

¹ “Parallel Publishing, Inc., reflects aspects of some real companies, but it is not any of them. It is fictitious, a figment of this writer’s imagination and used as a narrative device.

other's books, and to post multiple favorable reviews of their own in hopes that someone will stumble across these deceptive endorsements and be impressed. Message board shells, missionaries within the alternate universe cult, encourage these methods in an environment protected from criticism by those outside the group and even from the insights of apostates within the group.

Some ask how they can have a Web page to publicize their books, and are led to sources of free Web space. Others point to their existing Web pages, unaware of the glaring faults of design that make the pages unreadable and of the spelling and grammar errors that render the pages pathetic.

A few post excerpts from their books, excerpts that through their wooden or outlandish writing and lack of an editor's touch show why the books have been "published" in the alternate universe rather than in the real world of books found on bookstore shelves, reviewed in newspapers and magazines, purchased by libraries, and recognized by major writers' organizations. ("Murphy's law infers," goes a fragment of one such excerpt, "if anything can go wrong it most likely will. This is especially true when it concerns human beings and this night was no exception.")

In the alternate literary universe, all that counts is the physical production of a printed, bound volume, one copy to hold and to show as the person's own work validated only by the covers, ISBN, bar code, and logo of Parallel Publishing, Inc., passing itself off as a "traditional publisher."

In the world of established publishing—the world of Random House, Basic Books, Wiley, Prentice-Hall, Viking, to name a few, and the university presses—to be published is an accomplishment. Far more manuscripts are rejected in that world than are accepted. Those that are accepted endure rigorous editing on several levels and a painstaking production process because conventional, established publishers seek to sell books to a wide audience, not primarily to the writer and his or her friends and family.

In the world of Parallel Publishing, Inc., virtually any manuscript, no matter how poorly conceived or written, no matter how lacking in literary merit or intellectual content, is accepted with a cheery letter offering to give the book "the chance it deserves." That, by the way, is a carefully crafted evasion. A very bad book may deserve the chance for ignominy.

Rarely, a manuscript submitted to an alternate-universe "publisher" might be rejected as hopelessly below some minimal standard of coherence. More often a manuscript might be too long to make print-on-demand printing technology feasible at a price anyone would pay.

The observer is on the horns of a dilemma in talking with those in the alternate publishing universe. It is like the dilemma of what to say to the proud parents of a homely baby. One could be truthful, and say, "Maybe you will do better next time," or "Perhaps he will grow into that nose." Or one can sidestep with, "She has a cheerful disposition," or the definitive workaround, "My, that IS a baby!"

"I see you have written a book! Oh, what a colorful cover it has, and such a nice photo of you on the back! You have sold eleven copies? How about that!"

Is the faux accomplishment of "publication" in the alternate universe to be handled with pity? (Eyes averted, the knowing nod, and a cautious "How nice.") With scorn? ("Couldn't get a real publisher to touch that dog, eh?") With indifference? ("Ah, I see. So, how is your garden

doing this year?") Or is it to be addressed with a noncommittal suggestion of approval? ("Congratulations—I am sure you must be proud of that!")

What does it gain anyone to be brutally honest? Who is harmed if the baby's face could curdle milk or the book is so unreadable as to serve only as a doorstop or as an object lesson in how not to write? Best to sidestep when possible.

More difficult is the case of a book that has real merit or that could have real merit with the care and attention of a competent editorial team focusing on content and on good writing. How does one avoid showing despair that a worthy—or potentially worthy—work was wasted in the alternate publishing universe, that it lost the opportunity for real editing and for recognition in the real world given by the imprint of an established publisher.

For some, of course, publishing in the alternate universe is merely a shortcut, a convenience to obtain printed and bound copies of a book without the investment required of self-publishing. The books might be used in support of a teacher's work or a consultant's practice or a professional's marketing. An accountant might wish to hand out *Fifty Tips on Financial Record-Keeping* to clients both to burnish reputation and educate the clients.

In those cases, if the author is willing to secure competent editing and design assistance—few people can successfully edit their own writing, and fewer also have skills in layout—the result may be satisfactory for the purpose, even if overpriced. Lack of an established publisher's imprint in those cases is irrelevant. Resort to the alternate publishing universe can avoid both the risks of publishers' rejection and the challenges and costs of self-publishing. It becomes only a matter of picking the best combination of cost and quality with a minimum of contractual intrusions and obligations.

Those pragmatic eyes-open choices require neither pity nor scorn. The choice is simply the result of a business calculation.

It is more difficult to avoid pity or scorn for those whose naiveté and need for recognition have led them into the hands of Parallel Publishing, Inc., portraying itself as a "traditional publisher" and its customers as "published authors" while wheedling those customers into buying their own books and into targeting their friends and relatives for solicitations. Most difficult is when those "authors" do not understand that they are not in the same category with writers whose work has been accepted, edited, designed, and published by recognized publishers whose imprint assures at least a measure of acceptance.

Indeed, the book might have been a very good one (some are), but it is cheek-by-jowl with countless others in the alternate universe that are pedestrian, error-laden, and patently amateurish. There is no escaping that taint—all the more so if the "author" has dealt away copyright for years in a Faustian bargain. (*I'll be "published," but you will own my copyrighted soul.*) In that case, even if an established publisher expresses interest the "author" has no control in the matter. At best, if a deal is struck, the "author" has lost half of the proceeds.

For those who have no intention of seeking an established publisher for their work and for whom self-publishing, with its technical and financial demands, is not a feasible choice, it may well be that "publication" in the alternate universe may be the best of all possible worlds. But even for them, the supportive and knowledgeable observer would encourage the use of a competent editor to assure that when that baby goes out into the world, it is clean and neatly dressed. Likewise, the observer would encourage only the reasonable expectation that the book will take tangible form and be available for purchase through some channel, not that it will be

accepted as on a par with the products of the of the recognized literary universe's established publishers. Why lead the "author" to expect recognition outside the alternate literary universe when none with be forthcoming?

At the end of the day, those who have been willing to take their creations and have them bound between covers—who have been willing to say, "I wrote this! Here it is!"—must be given a measure of acknowledgement for showing the world their dreams. But they cannot expect acceptance into the ranks of commercially or academically published writers. That acceptance comes through success in the established, editor-dependent publishing system, a system that—sometimes cruelly and sometimes capriciously to be sure—filters out most books before they see print, just as casting calls filter out all but the most attractive babies for print and broadcast commercials. This may be a harsh reality, but nonetheless it is reality.

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