

Publishing: If it's for money, don't do it

I turned publisher following the example of a dear friend, Anna Brown, who had done so when she found a sheaf of poems by her late husband, and determined to publish them. All it takes to register is to pay the New Publisher Registration fee to Nielsen Book Services (formerly Whitaker's), and send them the title page of your first proposed publication.

Registration brings you ten ISBNs (International Standard Book Numbers). Allotting one to a book means that the book is catalogued in the British Library database, and a copy archived in their Legal Deposit section (sent there free at the grumbling publisher's expense). After publishing her husband's poems, in 2002, Anna had nine remaining ISBNs, and used some to publish books by her friends.

My mother was an actress and playwright, specializing in plays with all-women casts for the drama groups of the Women's Institute and Townswomen's Guild, in the '40s and '50s. To keep her memory alive, I wrote a book on her career, *Kay Macaulife: Women Take the Stage*, quoting some of her articles and plays, with photographs of her various performances. I paid Anna for one of her spare ISBNs, produced CRC (camera-ready copy) of the book myself in a DTP (desktop publishing) program – these were the acronyms of the period, 2003, before pdfs, at least for me – and paid a printer to produce copies. I sent them to libraries (local and drama), and theatre museums, and feel I have memorialized my mother and her work.

I bought further ISBNs from Anna for booklets that I produced from my own computer, printing and stapling them myself: extracts from my teenage diaries of the '40s and '50s. Then, sadly, Anna died.

My second son is an actor, in musical theatre. On one of the many occasions when his career had placed me in a bizarre, thespian-related situation, it occurred to me that I had never read an account of bringing up an actor, and how that career may impinge on their mothers. Stage mothers are arch-typical ogre-figures, but I had never seen their viewpoint expressed. I decided to be the one to break the silence, to speak for us all, and wrote an account of how the rearing of an actor, and his adult career, had affected me and my own: *A Stage Mother's Story: We're not all Mrs Worthingtons!*

I submitted the book to 21 publishers, who all turned it down, often saying that my son was not famous enough to have his biography written – missing the point entirely; some saying they only considered work submitted by agents. I wrote to eleven agents; all said they were taking on no new clients.

Anna would have let me have an ISBN to publish it, I thought; then realized I could do what she did, and registered as a publisher myself: HKB Press, with my own stock of ISBNs. I had fun checking the dates of performances in old diaries and selecting photographs to illustrate the text, and designed a cover which showed my son's stages of development; paid to have the book printed, and sent out 39 review or complimentary copies.

Some marvellous reviews appeared: *The Amateur Stage* wrote, in its November issue: "... a fascinating and quite unique insight into the life of a young actor ... disarming and charming ... A perfect Christmas gift for any actor or parent of an actor." Glowing, I awaited sheaves of orders pouring through the letter-box. Alas, nary a one was there.

I took boxes of books to local bookshops: they would not take any stock themselves, theirs was all sent from Headquarters, who dealt only with the major publishers.

Still, the book was listed on Amazon, with extracts from its excellent reviews (put there by me). I still hoped to receive orders. A few arrived. In total, to date, since the book's publication in 2006, I have sold just 40 copies – one more than the number of complementaries sent off!

I did enjoy it, though; the production, and seeing the final product in print, even as a solitary pleasure. I went on to publish more books, including the memoirs of my great-aunt, who was born in 1908, totally deaf, but still enjoyed a varied career and a

happy marriage, eventually being appointed High Commissioner in the Cub Scout movement: *Not Hearing But Living*.

A commercial success, HKB Press has not been. It was quite humiliating to go over the figures for my tax returns, with the huge expenses – printing, postage, advertising, even without royalties for the authors – with an accountant friend. But I do enjoy it all, looking on it as an expensive hobby for retirement: no pay, no profit.

The editor asks for my advice for someone thinking of doing the same thing. I can only say, unless you're going to feel the same way about it, or have a valid marketing base – if you're in it for the money, as Mr Punch advised those about to get married: Don't.

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