

The Joys and Pitfalls of Running a Small Press

Keith Stevenson

As you might imagine, there are many joys associated with running a small press. One of the most obvious is the feeling you get when you burst open the first box of books from the printer and hold the thing you've been toiling over for literally months, sometimes years, in your hands. Other joys, I suspect, will be more personal. For me it's the satisfaction of adding to the body of work available in the public domain in my own special area of interest: Australian speculative fiction. If you love a thing enough, you want to be a part of it, and owning and running a small press is one of the best ways to do that in a very direct way.

Of course the bulk of this article will be devoted to the pitfalls; there are many of those and if you are insane enough to consider starting your own small press, then it's those you'll want to know most about. I'm sure you can imagine the joys easily enough for yourself.

One pitfall that you may not have anticipated is that you have to be prepared to lose money (though hopefully not more than you can afford). There are no quick wins in this game. No JK Rowlings waiting to press their undiscovered manuscript into your hands so you can both make a squillion. The good news is that with the advent of the internet, online marketing and selling, and the rise and rise of the ebook, running a small press is getting cheaper every day. Our next book, for example, *Anywhere But Earth*, will have a small print run with the bulk of sales – hopefully – being in the ebook arena. And even printing paper books is getting cheaper, especially if you decide to go 'print-on-demand' (more of that later though, right now we're talking about the money).

In order to minimise the cost impact of running a small press you should get yourself an Australian Business Number and, if necessary, register for GST (though you have to toss up whether the amount of sales you'll generate will offset the need to lodge a Business Activity Statement with the ATO every other Thursday – it hasn't so far for me). Next, get yourself a good accountant and keep every receipt. While the business of publishing may be costly, if you're legitimately set up there's lots of stuff you can claim come tax time, and that rebate you get can offset the cost of your next venture.

There's a lot to learn about editing and publishing and if you're new to the field I'd recommend you enrol in an editing and publishing course. Most unis run a Graduate Certificate or Diploma in Editing and Publishing and you may be able to claim the education cost as a business expense. These courses are great for giving you the basics on editing, grammar, book production and marketing and help you 'not look like an idiot' when you're starting out. They're also fun. While you're at it, think about joining the Australian Publishers Association, they offer lots of development courses, and your own State-based editing association (for Queensland, that's the Society of Editors (Qld) www.editorsqld.com). Oh and there's the Small Press Underground Networking Community (www.spunc.com.au), which is also worth getting in touch with.

Marketing is another pitfall. There's no point having an awesome book if no-one knows about it, and running ads on TV, radio or the side of a bus are out of the question for most people. Luckily, there's a heap of tools out there to help. If you haven't got your own website and domain name, get one. Get a free customizable blog (I use WordPress), get a Facebook account and create a Group, start tweeting, and link up with other small presses that occupy the same 'space' as you (in my own area there are a heap of Australian Speculative Fiction presses). Not only are these people happy to cross-promote, but small

press operators – being a friendly bunch – are usually happy to share their knowledge and experience if you ask them nicely. Of course it would be great if you could get a deal with an actual distributor to put your books in shops, but many will not look sideways at small presses and I know some small presses who wish they hadn't bothered getting a distributor for all the good it actually does. Besides, the 'marketing landscape' is changing these days. It's all about social media, tapping into and being part of a community. So as well as electronic means, try to find out where your target market congregate. For me it's fairly straightforward. There are lots of spec fic conventions up and down the country to go along to, meet people at and spruik, spruik, spruik. If you specialise in Tibetan poetry, it may not be so easy, but if you are creative enough you will connect with your target readership.

Finding stuff to publish won't be too hard. Contact your local writers' centre, run an ad, go along and talk to writing groups and wait for the avalanche. Finding good stuff will be a bit harder.

Probably the most important thing you need to engage with is the new way of publishing. Epublishing is the obvious one and Alan Baxter's article in this magazine will give you a good insight into that. Ebooks have obvious advantages: instant delivery, no postage charges and they cost very little to produce. But paper book production is, as I indicated, getting ridiculously cheap and a company called Lightning Source, which I hear will be opening a branch in Melbourne soon, is offering a very interesting service indeed. They'll take your title and specifications and produce a paper copy of your book that is indistinguishable in quality from a mass market paperback or hardback even. The set up cost is vanishingly small when compared with a reasonable sized offset or digital print run, and as it's a print-on-demand model, you only pay for the books that they print and they only print the books when they have a firm order from a customer. The cost of printing is then deducted from the sale price and you get the remainder. The other cool thing for small press publishers in Australia is that because Lightning Source has offices in the US and UK, your books are produced in those countries for US and UK customers (Lightning Source also 'markets' your book through Amazon, Barnes and Noble etc. and takes orders from those sites on your behalf). Needless to say our next book will be published via Lightning Source as it takes the majority of 'up front' costs out of the equation, and that's a big deal when you're a small press publisher.

Another pitfall to avoid is having your product look like it comes from a small press. At coeur de lion, we've always been intent on making sure our books don't look out of place sitting next to mass produced books. That's why we go with industry printers like Griffin Press and now Lightning Source. We go for perfect binding, and industry standard sizes such as A, B and C format, not A5 which just looks bad. The other thing you need to think about is cover design. A crappy photoshop cover is going to put people off, no matter how good the contents of the book is. It's really money well spent if you can find a designer who will do this for you. Every book coeur de lion has done so far has been professionally designed, and you can check out how good they look at our website. And if you buy a copy you can also see just how much like a 'real' book they feel.

Okay, I've saved the best for last. The biggest pitfall of all is that you need to be prepared to put in the time to do this properly. What with marketing, selling, going to cons, not to mention reading submissions, editing work, laying it out and proofing it, you are looking at a fair number of hours per week. I read over 300 submissions for our next anthology over the space of twelve months. I'm now editing, which will take me another three months minimum, working a couple of hours a day. I don't mind, because I love what I do and I think it's important. But it's not all author lunches and launches that's for sure.

So think twice before you decide to be infected with this particular disease because, as far as I can see, there isn't a cure.

Keith Stevenson is the publisher with award-winning Australian independent press coeur de lion publishing (www.coeurdelion.com.au)