

Fool's gold?

Alison Flood investigates controversies surrounding self-publishing service companies such as Author Solutions

This article will shortly be appearing in the summer 2014 issue of the Society of Authors' journal, *The Author*.

It's easy, when you start digging, to find a plethora of angry self-publishers online. The sector is certainly booming. According to statistics from Bowker, around 390,000 books were self-published in the US in 2012, a 422% increase on five years earlier. In the UK, Nielsen's new Books & Consumers has revealed that an astonishing 20% of the 80 million ebooks bought last year were self-published. But not everyone is enjoying their DIY experience.

As author and literary scam expert Victoria Strauss has put it in the past, 'there are sharks out there in the literary waters'. She runs the website *Writer Beware*, which is sponsored by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America (www.sfga.org and click on *resources*). She warns that 'literary deceptions abound, from fee-charging agents to dishonest editors to fraudulent vanity publishers to fake contests.'

Search for 'self-publishing' and there's an overwhelming range of options. One quick way to choose between them is to consider cost. There are the free or low-cost services, such as Lulu, Amazon's Create Space, Kobo's self-publishing service and the no-frills companies who advertise in the back pages of this journal. Or there are the paid-for options, in the main those offered by the huge firm Author Solutions – acquired in 2012 by Penguin for \$116m – and its array of imprints. These include AuthorHouse, iUniverse, Trafford and Xlibris, with packages ranging from a half-page *New York Review of Books* ad for \$21,199, to a 'Book to Hollywood' deal ('an industry-standard synopsis crafted professionally for you') for \$1,599. Author Solutions also runs self-publishing ventures for traditional publishers such as Harlequin (Dellarte Press) and Simon & Schuster (Archway).

Complaints about the firm are rife across the internet. Strauss's *Writer Beware*, the site *Preditors and Editors* (pred-ed.com), and a number of bloggers all lay into Author Solutions on a regular basis, accusing them of aggressive upselling, deliberate moves to confuse with a plethora of imprints and overcharging for marketing. The Society of Authors' own Kate Pool told the *Guardian*, at the time of the Penguin purchase, that 'what worries me is the fact that Penguin's name associated with it gives it a lustre of credibility it does not deserve.' *The Bookseller* recently announced it wouldn't be taking advertising from Author Solutions any more.

'I would caution people to be wary in general of Author Solutions imprints,' Strauss advises; 'they overstate the benefits of the services they offer, and in particular they have a number of websites with titles like findyourpublisher.com, which purport to be independent websites that enable authors to plug in facts and find an

appropriate publisher when, in reality, all of the results lead back to Author Solutions brands.' Strauss says she has received over 100 complaints about the firm from writers. 'The other thing which is really objectionable is the relentless upselling – they really want people to buy more and more expensive services.'

Three authors decided last year that they'd had enough, and launched a class-action lawsuit in the US. The law firm representing the case, Giskan Solotaroff Anderson & Stewart, says that authors using Author Solutions 'have complained of deceptive practices, including enticing authors to purchase promotional services that are not provided or are worthless, and failing to pay royalties'. Oren Giskan says he has been contacted by a 'few hundred' authors interested in joining the suit, although as yet there are still just three named class representatives.

Some of those contacting the firm have been from the UK. One of them is Timothy Brown, who says he is 'very angry' about his experience with Author Solutions. A senior lecturer in law at the University of Glamorgan, Brown decided to publish his novel *Civil Partnership*, about two gay men entering a civil partnership, through the firm.

'They told me they were very happy to take on a book with such a progressive view, and I thought "OK then, it's not so much money up front – £1,500 – and it'll be nice to get it published..." but I now think they just wanted to get the money off me. After that they cut me loose, and the only time I ever hear from them is "do I want to publish another book with them?", or they want more money from me for marketing this one,' says Brown.

He claims the book has sold much more than the royalties he has received indicate, and that Author Solutions attempted to sell him marketing packages. 'They say they will include certain marketing strategies but the reality is they phone and phone you and their only strategy for me was to ask for £5,000 to put me in *Reader's Digest*. With the greatest respect, the people who read *Reader's Digest* aren't going to want to read about a gay couple in their 40s.'

Brown is hoping the 'there will be overspill to the rest of us and we can do something in the UK' if the class action suit goes against Author Solutions, but the net effect the whole situation has had on him as a writer is 'that I'm not going to do that any more. I've published in the academic community for 20 years – I know I can be articulate. But this has really made me feel I don't want to bother again.'

Author Solutions has moved to dismiss the complaint on a series of counts – many of which counts were in turn dismissed by the judge in April. AS President and chief executive Andrew Phillips won't comment directly on the case, but says that the firm will 'correct the false and

misleading claims made about Author Solutions in the appropriate legal forum and establish the truth.'

Paying royalties 'in an accurate and timely manner is a priority for us,' he continues; 'all our marketing is permission based,' and 'our website is very clear that we offer a range of imprints so we are not trying to deliberately confuse anyone.' Phillips says that each complaint made about the company online is monitored and taken seriously, but 'many who comment online have never used our services. In fact, they offer competing services.'

'When you look at the number of complaints relative to the number of customer transactions we have, it is far less than one tenth of a percent of all we serve,' he says. 'Finally, very shortly we will be announcing the release of our 225,000th title, which is evidence that we continue to serve a segment of the author population who value our supported self-publishing services to help them achieve their publishing goals.'

Phillips says that there have been 'a number' of Author Solutions writers 'picked up by traditional publishers because of their sales velocity', and points to a range of deals struck, including Xlibris author Timothy Pynchyl's with Penguin imprint Tarcher, and Hay House's signing of Fabienne Frederickson. 'We have helped more than 180,000 authors bring to market 225,000 titles and the reason it has been a great option for those authors [is] because we offer the most complete and comprehensive range of services and price points (including free) in the supported self-publishing space,' he says.

But Author Solutions also comes under fire over the self-publishing arms it powers for traditional presses such as Simon & Schuster's Archway. 'They specifically say on these websites that publishing with the imprint could bring you to the attention of a traditional publisher – they do hold it out as a carrot in that situation,' says Strauss. James Rennoldson from Bloomsbury's *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook*, which recently launched the website selfpubcompare.com, agrees that there is a 'possible' issue around publisher-owned self-publishing, in that it might confuse authors, intentionally or otherwise, into thinking they are going with a traditional press. 'The authors must do their research – and that's what we're trying to assist with – but greater transparency from any publisher that has a self-publishing arm would obviously be the ideal scenario,' he says.

Author Solutions is not the only self-publishing firm to be wary of, says Strauss, naming Outskirts Press as another firm she has received complaints about from writers, 'as well as a lot of little mom and pop services'. (For \$109 writers can, from Outskirts, purchase the 'celebrity endorsement' package: 'Imagine having a fast, convenient way to request endorsements, testimonials, or cover blurbs for your published book from your favourite five celebrities! Now you can.') Writers have also reported issues with competitions which ask for money to enter – Writer Beware cites scams from 'contests ... run by questionable or fee-charging publishers' to 'fee-charging [agencies advertising] a contest where the prize is agency representation.'

The bottom line, say the experts, is to research all possible avenues before handing over money, whether

to a competition or a publisher or an agent – and to be as cautious as possible. Hugh Howey, self-publishing's poster boy in America, might be telling us that 53% of titles on Amazon's ebook genre charts are self-published, but there is no guarantee of bestsellerdom. Even services such as Authonomy, HarperCollins' writing community, where the publisher promises to read some of the most popular manuscripts each month, aren't a sure-fire route to success. 'I think they can be useful for the peer critique and community element, but I don't think authors should use them in hopes of getting discovered by agents and editors (one of the things these kinds of websites advertise as a benefit). It does happen sometimes, but not that often,' says Strauss.

Kate Pool at the Society of Authors urges members to get contract terms checked by the Society before they sign up to anything. James Rennoldson encourages authors 'to research every provider before entering into an agreement. The self-publishing community is such a strong one, so there are lots of avenues to do this. Contacting writers who access our site, or looking at blogs and forums will likely prove a huge help. This part of the process proves so critical to the reputation of a provider. The movement within the self-publishing community against Author Solutions indicates the need for them to make changes if they're to become a well-respected self-publishing option for authors.'

There might be gold in them thar hills, but it would pay to tread carefully.

Alison Flood is a reporter covering books for the *Guardian*. She also reviews thrillers and other genre fiction for publications including the *Observer* and *Sunday Times*.