

One Writer's Adventure in Internet Publishing

Washington writer Charlie Clark worked intermittently for the better part of the past two decades on a comic novel about high school life in the late 1960s and early '70s. When he finally had a finished draft, a succession of literary agents shopped it around to publishing houses.

Clark got positive feedback, constructive suggestions for reworking the novel and even a nibble from a small publisher in Colorado. But no sale.

Today, however, Clark is a published novelist — though not in the traditional sense. His 18-year labor of love, *Finish High School at Home*, was published this spring by the Internet publisher iUniverse.com — not as an electronic book, but as a conventional paperback that is printed “on demand” whenever someone orders it from the iUniverse Web site (\$14.95 plus shipping).

“This came along at the right time,” says Clark, an editor at a higher-education association in Washington. His ambitions are modest: a few thousand readers would make him supremely satisfied. But Clark also says the Internet gives his work a far greater potential reach than first-time novelists could ever have expected in the past.

Clark, a former staff writer for *The CQ Researcher*, joins a small but growing number of authors who are discovering the benefits of Internet publishing. I publishing gives aspiring authors advantages over self-publishing. So-called vanity presses charge several thousand dollars or more to publish an author's book and typically provide little marketing help. “Basically, you get a crate of books,” Clark says. Self-publishing is less expensive, but authors still have to cover some printing costs and figure out how to sell the book on their own.

The costs for Internet publishing are minimal. Clark's \$99 fee to iUniverse included a simple cover design; another company, Xlibris, will publish a book with a standard text cover for free. I publishers typically help with Web selling. “You have this company working with you to get the

book on databases,” Clark explains. And the author gets a bigger royalty — 20 percent in iUniverse's case — than the 10 to 15 percent under standard publishing contracts.

Authors are not the only beneficiaries of print-on-demand publishing. Publishers and booksellers may be able to save the cost of printing, shipping and returning unsold books. And out-of-print books can be brought back to life once they have been digitized.

“It's a way to bring many more books to the consumer,” says Ashley Gordon of Atlanta-based Sprout Books-on-Demand. Big names in the industry are interested: Barnes & Noble bought 49 percent of iUniverse in November; the biggest book wholesaler, Nashville, Tenn.-based Ingram Distributing Co., has started a print-on-demand subsidiary, Lightning Source Inc.¹

For the moment, print-on-demand economics favor printing from a centralized facility: The high-speed printer and binder cost about \$35,000. But if costs come down, big bookstores or even some smaller outlets might be able to provide print-on-demand on-site — allowing customers to order a book and watch it printed right before their eyes. Richard Howorth, owner of Square Books in Oxford, Miss., and president of the American Booksellers Association, forecasts that print-on-demand will come into widespread use “within five years certainly, maybe within two or three.”

I publishing may be superfluous for bestselling authors and their readers, but aspiring authors and backlist readers may find it makes the difference between publishing and not publishing or finding an obscure title or not. Clark has no sales figures yet, but he has received some “gratifying” feedback. “I'm enjoying the adventure of getting the work to friends and strangers of discerning taste,” he says. “It was a worthy topic and meaningful to me to write about.”

¹ For background, see Paul Hilts, “Brave E World? Dosing Up on O-D,” *Publishers Weekly*, Dec. 20, 1999.



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sold for \$98. Within no time, it forced the venerable Encyclopaedia Britannica to develop its own CD-ROM product and eventually to eliminate its door-to-door sales staff. The other biggest sellers as of 1993, though, were in the adventure and science fiction genre. As Professor

Greco wryly noted, “CD-ROM versions of *Remembrance of Things Past* and *Moby Dick* somehow failed to make this list.”²²

On-line bookselling came next. Jeff Bezos, a one-time Wall Street executive, launched Amazon.com in July 1995. He promised “the world's larg-

est bookstore,” with discounted prices and shipment within two or three days — or 24 hours for best-sellers. Within a couple of years, Amazon caught on, along with other on-line emporia. Barnes & Noble, the biggest bookstore chain, launched its answer to Amazon.com in May 1997 — prom-