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Self-publishing, small press soar in children's lit

Nancy Bauer

State of the Art

I've been impressed by the number of children's books being published in the province either by the writers themselves or by small local presses.

Self-publishing used to be frowned upon, and I'm still of two minds about the practice. But I see its virtue in children's literature. The writers go into our schools to read and to give workshops, they hold festivities and launches that children attend, and they even entertain at birthday parties. The writers' friends buy the autographed books for their kids and grandkids, giving the work a special significance.

Zach Hapeman has tried it both ways. His first two children's books were published by Utmost Christian Poets, his third book, *A Crack in the Door*, by himself. He doesn't need a publisher's illustrator because he also draws. Because for the first two he had to do all the promotion himself, he figured he might as well do the whole thing. He likes the idea of having full control over his work.

This method can feature the local--one of his poems is titled "Poutine Ma Belle." Hapeman has the dark but lively vision of Grimm's Fairy Tales: "Trina didn't like the way/Her nose sat on her head,/So she took it off and put it/In a drawer beside her bed."

He used Amazon's CreateSpace to publish it. I know others who've used this electronic tool and proclaim it user-friendly. Hapeman says its customer service is "amazing." It did turn out a professional-looking book with a handsome cover.

Some writers get their book printed by a local company. My friend had hers printed by Taylor Printing. My mother created a much treasured one-of-a-kind book. I've saved several "books" created by my kids as school projects.

Paul McAllister formed his own company, Monster House Publishing, to produce his first book, *There and Back Again, A Herman Tale*, about a lovable monster. This successful book is being turned into a play to be produced by Theatre New Brunswick. Monster House has also published Ron Caldwell's *The River Fiddler* set on the Tobique River.

The rap against self-publishing is that no editor has said this book is worth paying good money for. Having the book vetted can be a good thing—publishers have to be selective to make money for supporting their establishments. They hire tried-and-true illustrators because they have to appeal to grandmothers buying a birthday present. It's sometimes said that the self-published book has not been properly edited and so has bad grammar, typos, lousy covers. But on the other hand self-published books don't have to be commercial, can be daring and original, can contain revolutionary ideas, and can even shock gift-buying grandmothers.

Some writers of books for children go with small local publishers. Chocolate River Publishing out of Riverview has issued a series of books about the Tantramar Marsh, *Follow the Goose Butt, Camelia*

Airheart, even with a French translation. Three writers teamed up on this series: Odette Barr, Colleen Landry, and Beth Weatherbee. Chocolate River has also published *Henrietta's Nightlight* by Alice Whitney. The publisher, Kate Merlin Hanson, works like a dog on these projects because she believes in them.

Chapel Street Publishing in Woodstock has put out *Kit and the Calico Cat* by Brigitte Marsden, a "chapter book". I haven't seen it yet, but it was launched at several cool events. Chapel Street also reprinted *Jimmy-Why & Noël Polchies: Their Adventures in the Great Woods* by George Frederick Clark, first written sixty years ago. Jimmy-Why is a fictional young boy, but his guide, Noël, was a real person, Clark's friend. My son, a collector of children's books, tells me that it's "a great read for young readers interested in outdoor adventures that take place in New Brunswick. It has a wonderful relationship between a First Nations elder and a young boy who wants to learn as much as he can from him."

Allison Calvern published poetry books using her printer and sewing the pages together by hand.

Such publishing is truly a labour of love. The publishers possibly might not break even. I once ran a tiny publishing company, The New Brunswick Chapbooks, so I know whereof I speak. I also know how soul-satisfying the activity is.

A success story of a local publishing house is Goose Lane Editions--although it doesn't do children's books. I was in on its founding in 1982, and I'm delighted with the company's subsequent achievement. It was the child of Peter Thomas--the name coming from the street he lived on. Although it began small, under the inspired leadership of Susanne Alexander and Julie Scriver it has become one of the most prestigious national companies. This shows you what wisdom and hard work will do.

An advocate of wisdom and hard work, the writer Ecclesiastes, says "of making many books there is no end"; it's hard to figure out if he thought this was a good thing or not.

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