Chapter 6.

What You Need to Know About Data and Distribution

Data and distribution may not seem intimately connected, but they are. Understanding your data and what choices you're making impacts your book's distribution and discoverability (the topic of Chapter 8). I want to preface this chapter with a request, which is that you hang with me through this chapter. We've covered a lot already, and this chapter is the densest and most information-packed chapter of the book, but data and distribution are likely the aspects of book publishing that most authors least understand. Authors who unlock the power of data and distribution are light-years ahead of authors who don't, and knowing what this stuff is all about is empowering, because you'll be able to troubleshoot problems, experiment with your data to garner better search results, and know how to talk to key industry decision-makers about carrying your book.

The goal of this chapter is to make data and distribution accessible. We're going to wonk out a little, but I promise to make it worth your while. By the end, you will likely be surprised by how much data you have connected to a given book project. If you're a self-published author, you're responsible for managing your own data, but if you're publishing with a press that has its own distribution, the press is responsible for uploading your data. This is an important distinction, and it's another area where distribution and data are connected. Any publisher with a traditional distribution system will manage its authors' data, and authors who try to manage it on their own will be working at cross-purposes with their publisher. So you also want to understand your distribution relationship before you start going crazy making data changes. I'm also going to explain why distribution is a game-changer—and why in today's book publishing climate, the single biggest thing that sets authors apart from one another is not whether they're self-published or traditionally published but whether they have access to traditional distribution.

The Power of Good Data

The book publishing industry is built on data. This includes everything you can possibly think of that defines or qualifies your book: your trim size, price point, categories, keywords, descriptive content, cover image, and on and on. We're talking about any bit of data you see when you look at a book listing on Amazon.

You might have come across the word "metadata" in your research about book publishing. Metadata simply means "data about data," and it's a way of referring to the collective data *about*

a book, not the data or information that's *in* a book. Data is easy enough to gather and organize in itself, but between the amount of information attached to each book and the huge number of distribution channels responsible for picking up that data, the probability that your data will contain an error or an inconsistency is basically 100 percent. The metadata spreadsheets She Writes Press submits to Ingram for our titles have sixty-two columns of data points! We don't fill out every column for every book we publish, but the point is that that's a whole lotta data for any given title.

The reason metadata is misunderstood has more to do with writers' discounting its importance or failing to understand how the industry uses it than anything else. If you do a Google search on the topic, you'll see that every expert on the topic says the same thing: it matters—a lot. Plus—added bonus—Googling the word "metadata" is an experiment in interacting with metadata, as you'll witness firsthand how search engines use metadata to help you find what you're looking for. In a blog post on Joel Friedlander's TheBookDesigner.com, Betty Kelly Sargent writes about the advent of computers and their impact on metadata:

> "We had to help [computers] by figuring out a way that electronic data could be structured and transmitted in a consistent manner so that it could be easily received, interpreted, displayed, and stored without much interference from us humans. Hence, modern metadata. Since we humans give the computers the information they need to create the metadata, we are ultimately responsible for its quality."

The quality of metadata is both what matters and what often gets compromised. Authors often rush their metadata, treating it like a dreaded homework assignment, rather than what it actually is: a wand that enables them to more deeply penetrate the vast sea of data that lives out there on the Interwebs. The more data you can attach to your book, the more likely you are to be found. It's kind of like sending out a positive SOS signal online: *I'm here! Find my book!*

You want to treat your book data more like an online dating profile than like a homework assignment. Think about the kind of person you want to read your book. Imagine creating content around your book that will attract that person. Spend time with this exercise, and also don't worry about everything needing to be perfect, because you can always make changes later. The great thing about data is that it's constantly in flux and it's updatable. The only downside is that it's not always updatable overnight. For most publishers who are required to update their data through their distributor, changes generally take up to ten days. So this gives you incentive to get it as right as you can the first time.

Your metadata includes but is not limited to:

Title
Subtitle
Author
ISBN
Price (in multiple currencies)
Trim size
Format
Cover image

Page count

BISAC/Category

Keywords

Long description

Short description

Audience

Blurbs

Now, some of this data is more straightforward, while other data sends authors through the roof as they try to wrap their mind around what they're supposed to do. In my experience, authors struggle the most with BISAC/category and keywords. The reason the BISAC/category data stumps people is that this is a piece of data that differs depending on whether you're self-published or published on a press that's working with a distributor. If you're self-published, you choose categories through the platforms you're using to get published (like CreateSpace or IngramSpark). If you're working with a publishing company that has a distributor, you will be forced to choose BISACs, which are limiting to the point of being frustrating yet are so critical to a book's success that the marketing director at Seal Press once told me that a book's BISAC categories are as important as a person's gender. In short, you don't want to get it wrong. That's a lot of pressure!

Why is it this important? Because data identifies what your book is to its intended audience. Data is what directs your book to particular shelves—virtual and brick-and-mortar. If you get your BISACs/categories wrong, people coming to find a book on the topic you've written about may well overlook your title because it's not properly listed. This happens all the time!

For publishing houses, BISACs also determine which book buyers a given title goes to. If you're in the wrong category, it can be confusing to the buyer and can result in a pass.

After BISACs/category, keywords are the next-least-understood piece of data. You are trying to identify the keywords that people would enter into their search engine if they were looking for the topics or issues your book covers but didn't know your book exists. You want to try to think broadly, globally, and like your audience when considering what words or combination of words such people might use. Every book has up to seven keywords specifically associated with it, but keywords can also be embedded in your descriptive content and blurbs as well. Keywords are just words people are using to search. It's simple but also profound.

Amazon has an article you can Google called "Make Your Book More Discoverable with Keywords," a kind of best-practices approach to this particular metadata point. The article specifically notes that "relevant keywords can boost your placement in search results on Amazon.com." Google has a keyword tool you might want to play around with here: www.googlekeywordtool.com.

If you end up with a publishing house, your metadata will be collated into something called a tip sheet that your sales team will use to sell your book to accounts. The same metadata populates your Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, iTunes, and iBookstore pages. If it's pushed out through a large feed (which it will be if you are with a publisher that has a traditional distribution process), your data will go international, to hundreds of distribution partners, including places like Target, Fred Meyer, Walmart, and other superstores that simply make available

books that are listed online. Getting this kind of far-reaching access is a great thing for most authors, but it's also where metadata starts to get messy. Even with one point of entry, metadata has a high probability of errors. Some retailers mess up data links in translation and fail to pick up changes; many have problems with their own systems or codes that result in broken links or bad characters. If you have more than one point of access or more than one person making changes to your metadata, mistakes are inevitable. Because metadata is often hand-entered as HTML code, human error is the biggest issue. Metadata can be a real thorn in the side of publishers and authors alike, who want it to be perfect and who run up against the limitations of perfection across hundreds of retailer access points.

Keeping your data up to date and error-free can be a full-time job, and that brings me back to my broader point to do it as right as possible the first time. Take time. Don't be hasty. Hire someone to proofread your content and double-check all your data points. I can't tell you how common it is to input varying price points across two different platforms—$15.99 one place and $16.00 somewhere else—or to inadvertently enter variations on a subtitle, or to forget to update a cover file when a change has been made. The list goes on and on. Have a master document where you keep all the specifics of your book's metadata and update it when things change. This should act like a password. It's specific and case sensitive and should be consistent wherever your book data can be found online. And when you find errors—and you will—don't freak out. Just get 'em fixed and keep monitoring.

Distribution Defined

Now let's turn to distribution, the method by which your book gets to wholesalers and retailers. Because there are so many channels, and because the line between distribution and fulfillment is blurry to a lot of newbie publishers and authors alike, people are often misinformed about what type of distribution they have or what it's actually doing for them. Another complication has to do with Ingram itself, a massive wholesaler that also happens to be a distributor.

When I started She Writes Press in 2012, my own understanding of distribution was based exclusively on traditional publishing. After all, I'd only ever worked for traditional publishers, so I took distribution for granted. When you work with a traditional distributor, a third-party company with a sales force and a title management system, it's kind of like having a machine at your fingertips; all you have to do is keep feeding it. Books are made available everywhere books are sold, and you don't have to track multiple systems to discover the root of a problem. It's all handled through your distributor, your central command. It's not a perfect system, but it's effective and streamlined.

As a new publisher of a fledgling company, I signed on with a company whose CEO told me they were a distributor. Still not fully understanding the difference between distribution and fulfillment myself, I didn't ask clarifying questions. I didn't go into this relationship fully expecting the kind of services I'd known and experienced with Publishers Group West, the distributor I'd worked with for my entire thirteen years in publishing to date. I understood that we wouldn't have a sales force and that all of our books were going to be print-on-demand and therefore not warehoused. I did not expect, however, nor could

I have foreseen, all of the holes in the system, until we had a few books in print. Our "distributor" (which was really a fulfillment company) made mistakes here and there with our data, but that was not as big a problem as the fallout from She Writes Press not having traditional distribution. Our books were often out of stock on Amazon because we had no streamlined system for restocking them in a timely manner. There was no preordering function, so books weren't even available for purchase until publication day. Because we were doing exclusively print-on-demand through Lightning Source, our books were showing up as available only in a Tennessee warehouse, so bookstores in other US regions simply refused to order our titles. We were cutting consignment deals with bookstores and handling shipping and returns. It was a complete and immediate nightmare for me, having come from a world where someone else had always handled all these matters. I had started a publishing company to acquire great books, to focus on their editorial quality and design, and to provide an alternative publishing option for women authors. Now, all of a sudden, I was stuck in these ghastly details, spending way too much time on logistical issues and fielding freak-outs from authors.

She Writes Press published its first book in September 2012, and by March 2013 I was actively looking for a new distribution partner. Given the volume of titles we were publishing and our authors' high expectations, we knew that without a solution—and a fast one, at that—we weren't going to make it. The solution for us was traditional distribution. And while traditional distribution is not for everyone, for She Writes Press it's opened doors. It's increased our visibility, decreased the stigma (somewhat) of being automatically perceived as a "POD publisher"

(more on this later as well), and legitimized our program within the industry.

The publishing industry is still very much an old boys' club, so when you green-light your own work, you need to understand what's going on with your distribution so that you can have conversations with bookstores and libraries and any other outlet where you want your book to be carried or made available. If you don't know what's happening behind the scenes, you will end up giving wrong or confusing information to the very people you're wanting to sell your book. I wrote earlier in this book about needing to treat publishing as more than a hobby if you want to do it right. At the very least, it should be a pursuit, if not a full-fledged business endeavor.

She Writes Press grew very fast, and within six months we had the kind of book inventory and quality that made us a good candidate to partner with a traditional distributor. Not every self-published author has that option. You typically can't get a traditional distribution deal unless you've published ten titles, or if your book is gaining so much traction that the distributor sees you as something of a sure bet—meaning that they can see that a lot of inventory is going to be flowing through. A traditional distributor will scrutinize your content and your presentation. If your covers and interiors aren't well designed, you may well never get a call back from a distributor you approach. It's not a shoo-in kind of situation, and there are few good alternatives, which is why distribution is a real pain point for self-published authors and is the biggest problem indie authors need to solve if we truly want to level the playing field.

I realized that for She Writes Press, traditional distribution was going to be a game-changer, and it has been—so much

so that I've come to believe that the divide between traditionally distributed authors and everyone else is a bigger gulf than the divide between traditionally published and self-published authors. Indie authors want visibility, access, and legitimacy, and they deserve that. Making sure your book is easy to get, set at the right industry discount (55 percent), and returnable is key, but that's often not enough for a bookstore to want to carry a self-published title. I believe that one of the reasons hybrid publishing is such a viable solution for independent authors is that so many of these presses have access to traditional distribution, which allows bookstores to simply say yes and to order through your distributor. You step aside and let things play out. It's a system that's been in place for years and years and that everyone along the food chain understands. If you've experienced the kind of headache I did with my She Writes Press titles before we got traditional distribution, then you know well the pain points I experienced. You want to consider what kind of importance distribution is going to play in your next publishing endeavor and add this question to the mix as you deliberate your publishing options.

IngramSpark or CreateSpace: What's the Difference?

IngramSpark and CreateSpace are platforms, owned by Ingram and Amazon, respectively, that allow authors to self-publish. IngramSpark is a relatively new platform, created to replace Lightning Source, which many consumers thought was not as user-friendly as it should be. It's important to note that both IngramSpark and CreateSpace are in the business of printing. You can hire CreateSpace directly to produce your book. They offer comprehensive design and editing services, but that is not their primary business. CreateSpace also offers you the option to use their company as your publisher. *Do not do this.* Create your own imprint and upload your own independently designed files. Showing up in catalogs as a CreateSpace book is the kiss of death for you, as far as a lot of buyers are concerned. There are enough anti-Amazon bookstores out there that you don't want to hitch your wagon to Amazon as your publisher.

That said, it's fine to use CreateSpace as your printer. IngramSpark and CreateSpace are both on-demand printers that can print a single copy at a time, or thousands. Their rates are competitive with offset printers for up to five hundred copies, after which point it's more cost-effective to use an offset printer to print your book. But the value of print-to-order technology cannot be overstated, and most self-published authors should be using IngramSpark or CreateSpace to print their books.

The two companies' offerings are comparable. They're on par with each other in terms of their setup fees and print costs. In my own experience, Ingram has superior print quality. CreateSpace's primary asset is its relationship with Amazon. When you hire an Amazon company, your book's availability on Amazon is seamless, and since it's the retail outlet most authors care about, this is worth a lot. But if you're an author who isn't putting all of your eggs in the Amazon basket, Ingram's reach is much more extensive. They have more publishing partners and a broader distribution network. They also own their own wholesale company, Ingram Wholesale, which is an effective distributor of titles across many hundreds of potential accounts.

Both companies offer you what they call "extended distribution," which is, unfortunately, less effective than it sounds. Ironically, CreateSpace uses Ingram to distribute its own books beyond Amazon. That said, all "extended distribution" means is that your book is technically "available" to bookstores; it does not mean it's for sale or that it's easy to get. And if you have not done your due diligence and marked your book as 1) being at a 55 percent discount to the trade and 2) returnable, you can't even have extended distribution. These two things are deal-breakers for bookstores. Consider up front how valuable bookstores are in your sales-and-exposure equation. If the answer is "very," use IngramSpark and follow all its discounting and returnability rules. If the answer is "not very," then use CreateSpace, go ahead and set a lower discount (maybe 30 percent), and go full bore for Amazon sales above all else.

One side note here is that I've known authors who've uploaded to both platforms—to use Ingram for their distribution and higher-quality paper, and CreateSpace for their efficacy with Amazon. This seemed to work fine. CreateSpace fulfilled the Amazon orders, and Ingram everything else. The only downside here would be that you'd have print variations from platform to platform, and you'd have to pay two separate setup fees, and work with your designer to prepare your design templates as specified by each platform. But this might be something you want to experiment with, especially if you're torn over which company to print with.

A Deeper Look at Traditional Distribution

In this book, I've been using the term "traditional distribution" to describe the kind of distribution a publisher has when they sign on with a third-party distribution company as a publisher client. This is different from everything else, including fulfillment services and extended distribution through self-publishing houses, both of which are ineffective at getting bookstores and libraries to carry titles but fine for fulfilling retailer orders.

Distribution, like a lot of words in book publishing, is used to describe a process: the process by which books go from the printing plant to the retailer (in the case of print-on-demand) or from the warehouse to the retailer (in the event that inventory is being stored). But, as we all know, not all processes function the same way. Distribution channels exist to get books to customers, but the effectiveness of the systems built to make

that happen varies a lot. The rise of self-publishing is responsible for the aforementioned confusion about distribution, because, as more and more self-published authors publish, "distributors" are springing up to meet the demand. The "distributor" (really a fulfillment company) that She Writes Press signed with during our first year of existence had nothing more than an account with Lightning Source. They were using extended distribution, just like any other self-published author, and had no reach into the marketplace with their own sales force or relationships. Once I stood back and realized what their role was—that of a middleman—I saw how much more effective it would be just to cut them out. The services they were offering were helpful, but we could have hired a single employee to do the same thing: enter metadata, upload files, and order books.

Had we not made the jump to Ingram Publisher Services (the traditional distribution arm of Ingram), we would have been better off having our own direct relationship with Lightning Source. This is a possibility for all self-published authors to consider. If you have or are thinking about having a middleman, why? What are they offering you that you can't do yourself, and are their services worth it? Are they taking a cut of your royalties to do finite and measurable work? If so, you might want to consider cutting them loose.

Traditional distributors do charge a fair amount for the privilege of distributing your books. They take a base, and a commission on top of that. For most authors looking to greenlight their own work and publish independently, the only way to get traditional distribution is to partner with a press that already has it. There are many deals to be made with publishers everywhere, by the way, so keep that in mind. It's not outside

the realm of possibility that you would identify a publisher you think is a good fit for your book and then reach out to them and ask them if they'd be interested in a distribution relationship—where you pay them for their access. You have to know what you're asking for, of course. But I've coached authors through requesting a formal meeting with a publisher and talking over the possibility of cutting a hybrid deal with that publisher—paying for certain services in exchange for their distribution. You approach this like the business proposition it is, but it's important to know that these deals are happening all over the place. And, as I said earlier, if you really think your book has a chance of breaking out, you're going to need this relationship.

Here's what traditional distributors do for their publisher clients:

• **They presell publishers' books into major and small accounts.** They have a sales force that has relationships with book buyers. Those reps go out on monthly sales calls and individually sell titles to buyers. It's competitive, yes, but they get face time with buyers.

• **They collate, organize, and output metadata.** All traditional distribution companies have major platforms in place to collect data and then release it, via daily feeds, to retail channels like Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, iBookstore, IndieBound, etc.

• **They maintain relationships with major accounts.** Again, they have access to all the major retail outlets where you might otherwise find it impossible to reach an actual human.

• **They streamline processes.** This is way bigger than it sounds. The point here is that if a traditional publisher warehouses your book, there is a steady, stable pipeline from their warehouse to wholesalers and retail partners. They're shipping massive quantities of books every day. There will never be a delay in your order, and your book will never show up as being out of print—unless it really is. For anyone who's self-published and wondered why their book is showing up as low stock or temporarily unavailable on Amazon or any other retailer's website, it's because this pipeline has to be well oiled. My observation is that only traditional distributors have the right oil.

• **They have access to special sales accounts and libraries.** There are certain markets that self-published authors simply cannot penetrate—and these markets are among them. You cannot get your book into airport bookstores, Costco or Target, or libraries without traditional distribution. (Okay, yes, you might be able to get your book into a couple libraries, where you have connections, but this is not the same as being picked up broadly by the library system.) This happens partly because these buyers want certain guarantees—on pricing, on returns (though library sales are nonreturnable). They don't want any headaches, and they're unlikely to partner with self-published authors because it's too much of a gamble. You could say that it's a case of not wanting to deal with an unknown quantity, but that's their prerogative.

Now let's look at what you get with extended distribution, by comparison. There is no preselling. There is no collating or organizing of metadata. You do that yourself, although the platform

you're working with (usually IngramSpark or CreateSpace) will indicate what fields you need to enter. They do output the data for you. With extended distribution, you will forge your own relationships with retailers. Some of those retailers are helpful, like Amazon. They'll answer the phone when you call. There are other retailers you will not have a chance in hell of talking to. With extended distribution, your experience is not streamlined, it's decentralized, but since most authors care only about Amazon, we can at least thank Amazon for being receptive to individual authors' concerns. Finally, extended distribution means you have no need for specific or special sales relationships. It's possible that libraries would order your book, but libraries aren't looking specifically to order independently published books.

The bottom line is that indie authors without traditional distribution are limited. It behooves you to figure this out before you publish. This information may even change your mind about how you were intending to publish. If you want real bookstore and library results, you need traditional distribution. CreateSpace's and Ingram's extended distribution is a start, but it's not a solution.

The Potential Fallout of Controlling Your Amazon Data Directly

Many authors I work with seem to care only about Amazon. It's the only account they consistently check, though sometimes to their detriment. If you are a self-published author, you manage your own metadata through your Author Central account, which you want to set up as soon as your book becomes available on Amazon.com. You need to "claim" your book, and then you have access to a control panel of sorts where you can enter in all sorts of data about it.

Be forewarned, however, that if you have a publisher or are partnering in any way with a publisher, your data entry will override theirs. This is a point of frustration for many publishers, because authors sometimes cannot help themselves. They get impatient and want to make their own changes directly. For She Writes Press authors, this urge has resulted in duplicate entries and lost data.

Before She Writes Press was traditionally distributed by Ingram, we had no way to make metadata changes on our authors' behalf; only the authors could make those changes. It was great for authors who wanted to control their own data, but as a publisher we felt impotent, unable to help our authors and further contributing to a lack of systems.

A friend and ex-colleague told me over lunch one day, "Amazon is author-friendly; they're not publisher-friendly." It dawned on me for the first time that day that Amazon actually

has an incentive to bar new publishing models from having easy ways to make changes to their metadata. After all, CreateSpace is a direct competitor to many indie publishing solutions. And Amazon is king, no doubt about it. Love 'em or hate 'em, you need them. Amazon, meanwhile, does not need publishers and in fact sometimes undermines them by being indispensible to indie authors.

Tend to your Author Central account as you wish, but consider your publisher before you make changes directly or call Amazon directly. And if your publisher tells you it will take ten days, give them the benefit of the doubt. On day ten, call your publisher if the data isn't updated. Going to Amazon at that point is like going to Daddy after Mommy told you to be patient. I understand the impulse, but remember Amazon's motivation for being so author-friendly, and know that you might have some metadata consequences as a result of your desire to work with them directly.

BOOKSTORES

If you don't have traditional distribution on your radar and you're going to publish through CreateSpace or IngramSpark, note these few things about being carried in bookstores. You're opting into extended distribution because of its promise to make your book *available* to retailers. But the problem is that this availability exists only in theory, and you have to play by the bookstores' rules. First, you must set the discount for your book as the standard 55 percent off. Then you must set your book to

be "returnable." You then have the option to choose whether you want returned books to be delivered or destroyed. If you want them delivered, you will pay a processing fee and end up with returned books coming to your house. While destruction of inventory is a sad part of the business, it's a less expensive and less complicated alternative for most self-published authors.

Now let's consider bookstores and what incentive they have to order your book. The only reason they'll usually stock your book is if you're a local author, or maybe because you have local connections. You can walk into a bookstore and show the buyer there a copy of your book. If it's well done and you promise to drive people to their store, it's possible that they'll carry your book on consignment (and will generally pay you 50–60 percent of your list price on books they actually sell). Some bookstores, like Book Passage in Marin, California, and Elliott Bay in Seattle, are known to support indie authors; others simply don't have the interest or the bandwidth to do so.

Bookstore owners have a tough job. The margins on books are abysmal, online retailers are running them out of business, and books, because they're heavy, are more expensive to ship than a lot of other products. Bookstores have deals with distributors where they get free shipping, which gives them incentive to order. If they get free shipping and get to return inventory for free as well, they can find themselves in a fairly low-risk situation where inventory is concerned. I've had plenty of experiences with bookstore owners who flat-out refused to order books they couldn't get free shipping for, and while it's frustrating, it's economics and I'm not going to begrudge a small-business owner their frugality. So, as an author, you have to be nimble, whether you have books housed in a warehouse or not. You need to be

prepared to sell your books directly on consignment and to eat the cost of shipping, both ways, if necessary. This is what it takes today to have independent bookstores carry and sell your book.

Some bookstores may ask you to pay a co-op fee, a charge for the privilege of having an event in their store. This usually runs around $50–200. Not all bookstores ask for that, but don't be surprised if they do. I once heard a joke at a publishing event that went, "If you want to make a million dollars in publishing, then spend $2 million." A bookseller is not your friend until you make their store money. Don't take it personally. Just show up, bring lots of people, and urge your audience to buy your book and support their indie bookstore. Part of thriving as an author is forging relationships, so knock the socks off your indie bookstore and you'll make a friend for life.

LIBRARIES

Libraries are like the holy grail of book sales. First, they're non-returnable sales, so that alone makes them a coveted sales channel. But for many authors—particularly literary novelists and memoirists—library sales also represent another form of legitimacy. To have a book that's good enough for libraries to carry it says something about what you've written. It will be in the stacks forever, available to the reading public. For many, this is a values issue. Many writers grew up going to libraries, and there's something nostalgic and special about the idea that your book might be carried there, especially in a major city library or system of libraries that might order multiple copies of your book to carry at all their sites.

Library sales happen through Baker & Taylor, a wholesaler that supplies libraries, among other accounts. As an indie author, you do have the possibility of getting your book into libraries, but, again, it's not going to happen on its own, solely because you published a book. As an indie author, you have to hustle all the time. If you want libraries to carry your book, you need to do the legwork yourself. You can send free sample copies (either advance reader copies or final printed copies) to librarians. It's possible to buy a list of librarians' names. You can take out ads in *Booklist* and/or *Library Journal*, though getting reviewed by those outlets is really what would trigger doing an ad in the first place. You can also try to go to the American Library Association's (ALA's) annual conference, which is touted as having superseded Book Expo of America in terms of its relevance and impact within the industry. But most self-published authors don't have the wherewithal or the finances to attend trade shows, which is another reason traditional distribution starts to look like such an advantage, since all these coveted relationships and ordering mechanisms are already in place.

What About E-books?

It's important to note that the main benefit of traditional distribution, truly, is for print books. Where e-books are concerned, you can set up direct relationships with e-tailers, like Kindle, Kobo, Nook, and iTunes. Authors who are focused on e-book publishing really don't need to worry about traditional distribution. Hugh Howey famously signed a "print-only" publishing deal with Simon & Schuster, retaining his digital rights. He did this because he knew that Simon & Schuster's print distribution was unrivaled but that by keeping his digital rights, he would make a lot more money and manage those retailer relationships directly.

At She Writes Press, we use Ingram Publisher Services for both print and e-book distribution because of the ease of having all of our metadata entered in one central database. Other publishers feel adamant about having direct relationships with e-tailers. Both systems work, and there are absolute advantages to the direct relationship. Working directly with e-tailers affords you more flexibility and speedier changes to metadata, but if you want to get your book on multiple e-platforms—like Kindle, Kobo, Nook, iBookstore, LibraryThing, etc.—consider hiring a data management company to streamline your metadata for you. A reputable company in the industry is Firebrand Technologies, which allows you to experience a single point of entry for metadata, like traditional distributors have. They have over two hundred trading partners, and if you're serious about self-publishing, this company can and will up your game.

Traditional Distribution's Achilles' Heel: Returns

The fact that books are returnable is cause for frustration among publishers and authors, and it should be cause for broader concern—from both a financial and an environmental standpoint. I know I've just spent this whole chapter convincing you that traditional distribution is better, but there's a dark underbelly to the entire process that authors need to understand, especially if they're the ones footing the bill.

Publishing is a returns-based industry, a holdover from the Great Depression. The story makes sense in the context of the era: Book sales were falling. Publishers came up with a solution: consignment, which basically equals guaranteed sales. Booksellers had to pay only for what they could sell and then returned the rest. The problem is that we never dialed it back, and nothing about the industry has changed in almost a century. The fallout, of course, is that retailers have little incentive to order what they think they can *really* sell, and publishers rarely push back on what might be perceived as unrealistic orders because they're desperate for a shot at getting their product in a position where it *might* move.

As a small publisher, I'm extra-cautious about Barnes & Noble and outright against being carried in superstores like Target, Costco, and Walmart. I once worked on a book that got a big Target buy: thirty thousand books at a 60 percent discount, meaning the publisher got to divvy up 40 percent with the author. Of course, the publisher did not pay the author right away for those sales. They had to do what's called "holding money against returns" because of the likelihood that

Target would return inventory. Well, guess how many came back? Twenty-five thousand books. Those books were a write-off for the publisher. Pulped. Destroyed. This little scenario did not put this publisher out of business, because they could absorb that kind of loss, but twenty-five thousand books would have cost the publisher in the ballpark of $20,000–30,000. My company is not in a position to take that kind of hit, nor is any individual author we work with, which is why I avoid any possibility for this type of massive and steeply discounted order. It can sink a small publisher and be devastating to an author.

Barnes & Noble isn't quite as bad as a superstore, but they still mostly take buys that they can't or won't sell through. ("Sell through" is the industry term for books that actually sell through the register, meaning a real sale.) It's maddening, because most authors want their books to be in B&N, and it's good for a book to have that "chance," but B&N's returns of a given title are often higher than 50 percent, when the industry standard is 30 percent. They're also notorious for sending back damaged books. At a panel I attended at the Independent Book Publishers Association's Publisher University in Austin, one of the presenters joked that the guys packing up the pallets run over them with their forklifts for good measure, but the joke landed a little too bitterly. All the publishers in the room were frustrated by the lack of accountability from anyone anywhere—bookstores, wholesalers, distributors—when it comes to damaged books. The publisher eats it. End of story. And returns are only slightly less frustrating than damaged books. Yes, they go back into inventory, but publishers pay for that privilege, and often we're left with more inventory than we can sell, which eventually turns into excess inventory, which we have to pay to store.

Until we can change the industry's standard operating procedure—though I'm not sure what it's going to take to do that—publishers and authors need to pay to play. Saying that you will not accept returns, or marking your self-published book as "nonreturnable," is the kiss of death for your book, because no bookstore will touch it and you'll look like you don't know what you're doing. Yes, the returns are painful. Authors are generally dismayed by the hold against returns on their royalty statements and then outright flabbergasted by the sheer volume of books coming back from accounts that never needed to have ordered them in the first place. But this is all normal, unfortunately. Even best-selling authors have huge returns coming back to publisher warehouses.

For now, the problem of returns is a known quantity that we all complain about but seem to be powerless to change. One of my hopes is that the rise of independent authors will eventually shift the balance, because they're more likely to point out the madness for what it is. We need to make room for new ideas, and I will be right in line with the rallying masses who are saying, *This makes no sense!* Authors and new publishers need to continue to be disrupters and to come up with viable solutions to this outdated problem. Eventually our voices will be collective, and loud enough that we'll effect real change together.

How We Might Fix the Returns Problem

The traditional distribution process, as it exists, does work, despite the frustration that returns cause. An individual distributor's capacity to sell books into accounts and fulfill those orders

is the foundation of their business model, one that in itself is not broken. What *is* broken—and contributing to all those returns—is preordering. I'm not talking about individuals preordering on Amazon; I'm talking about retail accounts preordering quantities of individual titles, based ostensibly on what they think they can sell, and then returning what they don't.

What's disturbing about this way of doing business is that there is an alternative; it's called print-on-demand (POD). However, instead of rescuing the industry, POD has become synonymous with self-publishing and thus stigmatized to a nearly unshakeable extent, despite major improvements in POD technology. POD is a printing process, though not limited by any means to self-published authors. It's true only that most self-published authors don't start with offset printing (a process that uses a **photographic technique to transfer images from metal plates to paper)**, while most traditionally published authors do.

Here are a few facts about POD:

1. It's used by self-published authors who don't want to spring for an offset print run of one thousand copies or more.
2. Traditional publishers use it for their backlists and to print emergency copies of titles that are selling better than expected and that therefore require a quick turnaround while the publisher waits for their next offset-print run.
3. The print quality of POD has improved significantly in the past few years, so much so as to make POD books indistinguishable from offset-printed books.

If retail accounts ordered more conservatively and/or publishers stopped taking returns, we would have a viable solution to our wastefulness. Instead of printing thousands of copies to cover preorders, publishers would print more modestly, based on conservative sales estimates from retailers. They could and would still do offset-print runs for quantities exceeding one thousand, but they would have real incentive to move a POD book more quickly than they currently do.

If the stigma associated with POD books went away, bookstores would not be so resistant to ordering them. Today, bookstores still ask whether a book is POD, as if that's a reason for them not to carry a title. It's simply not. But because POD has become a euphemism for self-publishing, when a bookstore asks that question, they're really trying to weed out self-published titles. Some book buyers don't even understand what they're asking for when they ask if a book is POD; all they know is that POD causes them ordering problems. But that doesn't have to be the case if the self-published author offers to do consignment and to foot the shipping costs. Meanwhile, the industry subtly and actively works to marginalize self-published authors in order to assert its superiority, and using POD as a measure of a book's status is an easy way to do this.

When B&N goes out of business, as it eventually must, I desperately hope that book publishers will rally together to say "no more" to returns. Being a returns-based business is bad from every angle, and the damage to the environment should not be understated. We're printing more than we need. While books sit in retailers' warehouses, not moving, inventory must be available at the distribution warehouses to fulfill actual orders that *are*

moving. This forces publishers to overprint, even publishers that are using POD technology.

Concerned publishers, authors, and readers can and should band together over this issue, but I fear that B&N would have to fall and Amazon would have to be reasonable (the prior an eventuality, the latter a near-impossibility) for us to make any headway in this area. Furthermore, traditional publishers would have to let go of their bias against POD. Certain bigger publishers could choose to be industry leaders on this point, trailblazing the way for others as we collectively try to reduce excess in this industry that relies on trees—a limited resource—to make its products.

Understandably, small bookstores will be upset by this shift, but they already order conservatively and their returns are already (generally) relatively low. Plus, they can do their part to reconceptualize the model. Independent bookstores and independent authors need to be forging better alliances, instead of acting as if they're cut from a different cloth.

Most indie authors will continue to use POD technology to print their books, and they should. I advise POD authors never to lead a conversation with how their books were printed. If you're talking to a book buyer, event venue, bookseller, conference organizer, or librarian, don't say anything unless they ask you. The book should speak for itself, so if you've hired a good design team, you should be able to present a product that you're proud of and that won't raise any eyebrows or set off any alarm bells (which can and will happen if your book "looks" self-published, meaning it has a subpar cover and/or interior design).

If you get into a conversation about POD, you can try to educate the person you're talking to, but this is uncomfortable

territory for many authors—understandably. Still, your book shouldn't be prevented from being carried in bookstores as long as it's returnable and priced with the correct discount. Yet many bookstores have policies in place that make it difficult for POD authors to get their books in—even though this sometimes happens because employees are misinformed or don't know any better.

New publishing models, including hybrid models, will begin to replace old models, and eventually the big houses will start to see the value in the flexibility and smart economics these models embody (shared costs, better royalty scales for authors, and POD print runs).

But mostly, it's authors who will effect the change. They'll stop standing for being treated like second-class citizens. Those who will feel most empowered at first will be the hybrid authors, those who publish both traditionally and independently, because they have one foot in each world. And plenty of these authors are speaking out already. Second to them will be those authors who have rejected traditional deals to pursue alternative options for reasons of control, flexibility, and economics. And it will trickle down from there. POD should be treated for what it is—a valuable technology that prevents authors from printing more stock than they can sell. It says nothing about a book's merit, and the industry needs to stop propagating the myth that it does.

To succeed in this industry as an independent author, you don't need to be part of the old boys' club, but you do need to be able to hold your own, to push back when things seem unreasonable or unfair. The green-light crowd needs a club of our own anyway, where what's valued is not necessarily how things have always been done, but the standards we want to adhere to. And since the only standard in publishing is the gold standard, we'll

continue to put out stellar metadata, created with tender loving care, and keep pushing on the distribution side until there are good and viable options for all authors.

The future of your book's success hinges on discoverability and availability, driven by data and distribution. As we reach the end of this chapter, you should be satisfied that you're in good shape with these two aspects of publishing, either because you have a handle on them or because you're working with a publisher who does. If not, I hope you have a fire in your belly to make some changes to give your current and future books a better chance at success.