

A
SELF-PUBLISHING
MANIFESTO

by Allison Moon

plus

Self-Publishing as a Feminist Act

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First, a few caveats:

THIS MANIFESTO IS FOR WRITERS, namely creative ones. Though, the model of patronage is taken from the art world, I believe it translates well as a way to view the publishing industry. And while I speak directly to writers, I believe much of this information will be useful for artists across all media (in fact, I use the words “artist” and “writer” fairly interchangeably).

1) In this manifesto, I employ the singular “they.” While I appreciate that the singular they isn’t well-loved by many style guides, it is regularly used in the vernacular, and that’s good enough for me. Furthermore, I’m interested in including everyone in this manifesto, including those people who don’t use gendered pronouns at all.

2) The internet is not yet considered a human right like electricity, but I believe it soon will be. While we wait for this to happen, there are many people who are not granted easy access to the internet and the tools therein. So in the manifesto when I speak of the democratization of publishing tools, I speak in the ideal, while acknowledging the reality. Art production is a democracy in which all people have theoretical access to tools and power, but that access is still ultimately stratified, the lower strata lacking the access that the rest of us take for granted.

3) Finally, this manifesto is a compendium of my thinking about current publishing trends and how I arrived at my choice to self-publish. I’d like to emphasize choice, because don’t see anything inherently wrong with either self-publishing or traditional publishing. My thoughts here contained are about strategy, not values.

IT STARTS WITH THE ARTIST

THERE IS AN ARTIST. The artist creates art. This is, after all, what makes the artist an artist. If the artist wishes to continue making art, the artist must find a way to make money from this art.

To do this, the artist must achieve three things with the art:

1) Reach

The art has to have legs. It has to be able to get to people who will like it, share it and buy it.

2) Reputation

Artists want to be known for their art. Their art should speak for them, but it should also be associated with the artist in name. A good reputation will increase the artist's reach, which in turn increases their reputation, and so on.

3) Influence

The artist wants to add to the conversation. Influence plus reputation equals clout, which increases reach. And the cycle continues.

None of these things are money, in themselves. However,

$$\text{Reach} + \text{Reputation} + \text{Influence} = \text{Money.}$$

The difficulty with this formula is that it takes time. One book or painting won't pay the artist's mortgage. The artist needs to create a sustainable system for creating art over time, to build their body of work. For a long time even getting started as an artist meant getting outside support.

ENTER THE PATRON

A PATRON IS AN IMPASSIONED AMATEUR who offers money to support the artist on their quest to make art.

Just as businesses have investors, artists have patrons. Few people have the necessary resources to launch something entirely on their own. Both entrepreneurs and artists look to likeminded people who care about what they're doing to offer financial support to get them up and running. However, investors and patrons are dissimilar in what they expect in return. Investors generally want to get paid back with interest at the end of a certain time period. Whether this happens or not is generally a good marker of business success.

Patrons generally do not expect to get their money back. Instead, what they often want is reputation, a sense of righteousness and good-will, tax-deductions, social standing, and the emotional boost from knowing they contributed to a more art-full world.

Patronage created the publishing industry.

THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY IS a group of impassioned amateurs turned pro. This turned patronage from a labor of love into an industry. Businesses being businesses, the publishing industry has goals of its own:

1) Money

Money makes art happen. Without money, there can either be no art, or the art is unable to reach the people. The publishing industry is professional patrons, and it's their job to give the money to the artists so the artists can produce.

2) Reputation

Publishers want to earn a reputation among artists and consumers of producing a quality product. It keeps artists coming to them (instead of competitors) with the best quality art and it keeps consumers purchasing the art, knowing it to be of a certain caliber.

3) Influence

Publishers want to dictate market trends. Acting as a market leader begets more money, which begets more reputation, and so on, cycling from #1 to #3.

A well respected author who was the guest of honor at a recent writers conference, when asked if they would do anything differently in their career, said, “When I was starting out 20-odd years ago, I was told to follow a very specific path and do things a certain way. I did, and here I am today. Was it the right path, though? I don’t know.”

Until recently, the artist needed the industry because reach is not free. To achieve the artist’s #1 goal, the artist had to align with the industry.

Likewise, the artist’s second and third goals, reputation and influence, were also met by the industry. The artist benefited by being associated with a publishing house. The reputation of the house became the reputation of the artist.

This was the one path. One way. If you wanted to create art and have reach influence reputation, you needed to follow this specific path. If you didn’t, you were nobody.

Mediocrity has mass appeal, and mass appeal equals money. When the industry's #1 goal is money, mediocrity is rewarded. The publishing industry sells mediocre books to the masses so it can afford to patronize real art. It's a devil's wager, but it (theoretically) keeps them in the black. The industry is willing to sacrifice a little of its reputation in order to look out for #1: money. For every couple of new, innovative authors they publish, the large publishing companies often have to put out a book by a lousy politician or a reality TV star to pay the bills.

Yet, in order to stay relevant, the industry has to have the best quality artists. It's easy to do in a world with only one path. Naturally, all the artists will funnel through the publishing houses and the publishing houses will always have "first dibs" on the best artists.

BIDS NOT DIBS

TODAY, WITH MULTIPLE PATHS including small and micro presses and print on demand services, the publishing industry has to woo quality artists. They do this in a few ways:

- 1) **Scarcity.** The industry breeds competition. When a house declares “We only publish 35 new titles a year,” or when an agent says “I get thousands of queries and only take on 2 new clients a season,” they are creating a culture of scarcity. This scarcity breeds competition, and competition breeds resentment. It turns a community of authors into competitors. Instead of cheering on successes as evidence of a hearty and healthy reading community, we take it as evidence of our personal failings. When there’s competition, people naturally want to win, whether the prize is worth it in the end or not.
- 2) **Exclusivity.** It’s natural to want to be a member of a club. Even if the club offers you nothing more than the membership card. It feels good. The industry is riding its reputation for this very reason.
- 3) **Fear.** Uncertainty breeds fear. The party-line is that self-publishing is the kiss of death to an emerging author. “Do it at your own peril.” “Kiss your writing career goodbye.” Warnings upon warnings. Anxieties and uncertainties piled on top of each other.
- 4) **Toys.** Toys like advances. Book tours. Mailing lists. Swanky graphic design and pro editors. Typesetting and end caps and reviews in Booklist.

The toys offered by big publishers live in a locked chest, though they are very cool toys. They're shiny and new and brand-name. Everyone says how cool they are and how you can't really play without them.

The problem is, if you want them, you have to agree to play with them the way the publishing industry tells you. You can't even open the box until they tell you that you can. It could be 2 years before they let you into the box. The toys also cost a lot of money (even though the industry pretends they're free). You have to pay if you want to play.

But hey, look over here. There are more toys! And they're not locked in a box. They're right there in front of you, waiting for you to play with them. They may not be as shiny, and they may be off-brand. But you get to play with them however you want, whenever you want. Welcome to the world of New Media.

This is the second path.

MEET NEW MEDIA

THERE IS A LONG AND PASSIONATE HISTORY of radical attempts to democratize art. But the truth is, art has always been democratic. Anyone can create art. You don't need any special tools or materials to do it.

What was not democratic, was distribution. Until now.

New Media: affordable, digital tools used to create products
distributed primarily via the internet.*

*my definition. For a more detailed description, see the [Wikipedia page](#)

New Media has democratized reach. Like SD cameras, editing software and the festival circuit did for filmmaking, like Napster and eventually iTunes did for music, New Media is changing the way writers reach their audiences.

Money no longer equals reach. While it still doesn't hurt, an artist no longer needs lots of expensive advertising and PR to get their art to the consumers.

Distribution is still the biggest and shiniest toy of big publishers, but the playing field is slowly being leveled by what new media offers. Why?

The reason the second path of New Media works is because the consumer has become more informed, engaged and cynical than ever before.

The good news is the artist can reach the consumer directly now. There is no gatekeeper for New Media. The tools and toys are for everyone. Consumers can actively engage with the artistic process, and whole communities can form around art and affinities, instead it's a personal relationship.

The downside: There is no room for the docile artist anymore.

The media itself has become a gatekeeper of a new kind. The artist must make peace with the media. The consequences of ignoring the media are: your message will be declared inaccessible, indecipherable, and ultimately irrelevant.

Irrelevancy is death.

So what's an artist to do? How to reckon with New Media in a way that ensures we're relevant?

WE MUST ACT ON BEHALF OF OUR ART.

IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS, take a closer look at your art. Your art will tell you what it wants to do, where it wants to go, and who it wants to talk to.

We must be our own patrons. We must be willing to invest time, money, and resources into giving the art the reach, reputation & influence it deserves.

We must act on behalf of our art precisely because the consumers are cynical and smart. As consumers, we don't trust behemoths anymore. Gone are the days of "Kraft, it's the brand we trust" marketing. No one trusts corporations anymore. What we do trust, is connection. As a reader, which do you prefer? Going to your favorite author's website, clicking "contact me" and seeing "For media inquiries, contact Agent X." and nothing more. Finding them not on twitter or facebook and no direct email. It feeds into the exclusive club- that those traditionally published authors are better than the rabble. It is the antithesis of modern marketing.

People can tell the difference between PR spin and quality product in a way they never have before. If you're a cynical artist, consumers can tell.

There is no room for the docile and passive artist. To be relevant, with all the chatter, you have to have both quality product and you have to be willing to represent it. You have to take action to deliver your art to those who want it. You cannot rely on corporations to do that for you anymore. The corporations don't do it for you. They may have used to, but check out Big Publishing's marketing departments these days. Meager to say the least. Corporations will never know your market better than you do. All the market research in the world can't compete with an earnest email from a reader telling you what they want. And you can't get those emails if you're redirecting them through your agent. Readers respect those who speak directly to them. Have the respect for your readers as they have for you.

The artist can no longer rely on the industry for reach, reputation and influence as any mid-listed author will tell you.

You cannot afford to let the art speak for itself. You must midwife your expression into the world. You must stand alongside it allow it to represent you.

We must act on behalf of our art, because our art is the only constant. Anyone who tells you they know the future of publishing is lying. No one knows. And uncertainty breeds fear. If you are afraid of the future, you are no longer acting on behalf of your art. You are acting on behalf of survival. The need for survival is the death of creation.

LEARNING TO LOVE THE FILTERS

THERE IS NO ROOM FOR THE DOCILE ARTIST ANYMORE. You can create your art but no one will listen to you. You have to make peace with the filters.

Some have artists have anxiety when dealing with the filters. Some underestimate their importance, while others are scared into a stupor by them.

The filters are impassioned amateurs. They are new patrons not yet turned pro. They may well not support the artist financially as in the past, but they do offer currency in the form of links and shares and trackbacks and traffic. Links are the currency of the internet, and the filters reward talent heartily.

This is a very special time in history. Some day soon the filters will be monetized just like brick and mortar media. Someday the entire internet may run like a corporation, with concomitant hierarchy and skewed pay structure and nearly impenetrable structures.

The artist must seize this moment. The internet is democratic. It, like the publishing industry, is a frontier. There is no government, no corporation buying our land to sell it back to us at a markup. No one is telling us what to build or who to form alliances with. This may change someday soon. But for now, the people rule this land.

Filters, in the form of bloggers, tweeters, sharers, and impassioned and connected consumers, act because they love. They share because they recognize greatness (or at least interestingness, funniness, or touchingness). Let the filters know of your worth, and you will be rewarded in kind.

Who are your filters? Trust your art to tell you. It knows. Look closer at your art. Look at the qualities of the people who respond strongest to it. Follow the trail.

Trust shifts ever closer towards personal relationships.

The artist knows their market better any industry can.

“Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but have never been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won. It exists, it is real, it is possible, it is yours.”

- Ayn Rand

MY EXPERIENCE

WRITING MY NOVEL was the most empowering experience of my life. I discovered new reserves of self-confidence, self-worth, strength, power and grace. It made me want to be a career author. Even the long slog of editing and refining felt extraordinary, even as it was painful. (As an acting teacher once told me about drinking whisky, "It burns, but it's a good burn.")

Everything that came after seemed designed to breed anxiety, fear, doubt and self-loathing. While I got lots of great feedback from some very nice people working for publishing houses, they all said the same thing: Their number one goal wasn't going to be met by my book. My book didn't have the mass appeal requisite for them to say "yes" to me. That is, my book wouldn't make enough money to support the salaries of the staff of a corporation. No matter how good my book is nor how personable I am, they cannot afford to take risks. They need to invest in sure things.

What I don't have is a sure thing. What I do have is ambition, talent, articulacy, energy and eagerness. These are great qualities for an entrepreneur, but they don't make much difference for an investment.

To maintain its edge, the publishing industry relies on exclusivity and scarcity. They've trained ambitious writers to believe that we're not really writers until we've been rejected hundreds of times. We're supposed to keep writing books that sit on our shelves until we're gray and then believe that a posthumous publication is a success story. Or that signing on for an advance that we'll never be able to pay back is a victory.

Act on behalf of your art, not on behalf of the salaries of people you've never met.

This isn't about gender.

EXCEPT IT KIND OF IS.

There is a noble history of women founding their own presses after having been shut out of traditional publishing. While things have shifted towards gender equality (kind of), the feminist presses that survived are now dealing with the same issues as Big Publishing: they need money to survive, to pay the healthcare for their staff, to pay the rent at their offices and all the other large costs of running a business. When money is #1, it forces them to make their own difficult choices of patronizing the arts they believe in, or that which they know will earn their keep.

I want to be part of the lineage of courageous women throughout history who believed what they had to say was important enough to merit the extra work necessary to get the word out, regardless of New York interest. They believed that there were people who cared about what they had to say, and would support their message, even if these people couldn't support million-dollar advances and rent on Broadway.

Being told to traditionally publish (as I have been told many, many times) is akin to being told to marry a nice, rich man.

A nice rich man will take care of you. A nice rich man is smart and sexy and doesn't ask for anything in return other than your docility. But a nice rich man also holds all the power. You are only ever as happy as he is happy with you. So you stop focusing on your own happiness and you begin to focus on how happy he is with you. And if you do this, you've stopped acting on behalf of your art.

I don't want to marry a nice, rich man and not have to work for a living. I don't want to marry a nice, rich man and not have to worry about myself for the rest of my life.

I want to create, I want to live, and I want to sweat under the burden of delivering my art to its audience.

So, no. I will not marry a nice, rich man. I will not traditionally publish my first novel. I will not ask for the benevolent giants to offer me theoretical money and theoretical toys and theoretical power and theoretical reach, reputation and influence. I have chosen to create my own reach and reputation and influence, because I believe I can.

SELF-PUBLISHING AS A FEMINIST ACT

NOW NOW, DON'T RUN AWAY. This is for everyone, not just the self-identified feminists. Let's look at some basic tenets that feminists and other social-justice activists share with artists.

Non-Conformity - Built into feminism is a distrust of the ruling class. After all, the ruling class exalts the wingtip-wearing suit while denigrating pretty much everyone else. It rewards docility and obedience.

Solidarity - Feminism teaches us to look to our peers for support. Women are not in competition, not really. The status quo likes it when people of any structurally oppressed group perceive themselves to be enemies rather than allies. By promoting infighting, the status quo keeps us busy deciding who is the "in crowd" rather than organizing against the power-holders.

Progress - Progress is good for oppressed groups. It offers opportunity for growth and power. It offers creative solutions to old problems. Progress is bad for those in power. Progress for them means the potential for overthrow, for loss, or for change. In the face of sea changes, the status quo tries to hold fast, to resist any sense of change or progress. When faced with potential shifts of power, the status quo legislates, adds addenda to contracts, and locks doors and windows. Examples of these fear-based reactions: anti-piracy lawsuits, copyright extensions, DRM, increasingly uneven contracts that support the producer more than the artist, and so on. While producers attempt to put a veneer of artistic support on these devices and tools, the research supports that these things rarely benefit the artists at all, and that often the artist would be better served by democratic access.

Decentralization - Monoliths are dangerous business. They lead to executives that don't understand the internet and publishers who don't understand the market. They lead to treating all representatives of certain communities as if they share one mind and will respond in one way. Segmentation of communities based on superficial traits leads to the idea that African Americans share nothing with White Lesbians and that all African Americans share all the same traits with one another. Treating people as monoliths makes for easy computations but bad politics and even worse art. Decentralization means people look to smaller communities for resources. Most artists don't need to go John Grisham-big to be happy. They just need enough people supporting them emotionally and monetarily to feel like they are making a difference in the world. They find these people by talking to them, by making personal connections, by asking what they like and why.

Personal Expertise - Big media seems to think that a man with a degree in sociology knows more about women than a woman does. They like to put white guys on CNN talking about Chicanos instead of Chicanos talking about their own experience. Most of the time this is rationalized as a combination of "accessibility" (as if white people are the only ones trying to "access" the information) and expertise. Feminism honors personal experience as a valid form of expertise. Self-publishing honors personal experience as a valid form of market research.

Passion - Feminists have an invested interest in making the world a more egalitarian place for all genders. Artists have an invested interest in making the world more accepting of all art forms and access points.

Social Justice Serves Everyone - Feminism is the belief in the social, economic and political equality of the sexes. Feminism is good for everyone, not just women. Social justice serves everyone too. Even competition, when it's honest competition, is good for the economy and society. It forces individuals to strive to be better, not just better than the person with the least advantage. Artists, too, benefit from a world in which there is more great art. There are limited publishing slots available at the big houses, but now there are not limited resources to publish books. Supporting a community by employing graphic designers, copy-editors, and publicists, especially freelancers, contributes to a more art-full and beautiful world.

Choice - Feminists believe that everyone has the right to choose their own destiny, that all people should be able to rise to the apex of their capabilities and potential. Choice also means that there are multiple paths that an individual can take, and all are equally valid as long as they are chosen with informed consent. Self-publishing offers an opportunity to take a different path, that will likely be far more fruitful for more people than traditional publishing could be.

I CHOOSE MY CHOICE

SO, WHY AM I SELF-PUBLISHING?

I want to support my community. I am surrounded by an extraordinary group of creative people who are constantly working on behalf of their art and their message. I want to add my voice of support to this community and support independent artists, to the best of my ability, by hiring them. I want to be a positive voice of solidarity, not another nay-sayer insisting that taking art into your own hands is career suicide.

I want to believe that creatives can survive in our society, that our culture believes enough in the value of art that they will support it financially and socially. I realize this may be naïve, but I'm willing to make my contribution to this culture of belief of art, particularly independent art.

The anxiety of doing it wrong is the anxiety of doing it first. New Media tools are too new to have any longitudinal studies of their efficacy. We have a couple of stars, but the plural of anecdotes don't equal data. I'm brave enough to join the few publishing pioneers that are participating in the decentralization of publishing might. I'm afraid, of course. On my small days, all the nay-sayers who tell me I'm committing career suicide can really get to me. But on better days I believe I'm part of something important, that is helping to decentralize and de-ghettoize the publishing industry.

I want to be a working author. The way to do this is to pay myself first. New Media allows artists to decide where the money goes: we create our own budgets and negotiating our own deals. While this may not be the self-expression of many authors, there are just as many who have the requisite entrepreneurial spirit for the self-publishing path.

THE POINT

I am ennobled and inspired by the current technologies and communities available to writers. I want to dig in and play, learning new skills of both writing and artistic midwifery, to walk my art through the process from conception through adulthood. Why not? The tools are there and so is my spirit. So is a community of warrior artists who have been producing their own stuff for ages, defying the monoliths and finding success on their own terms.

I want to count myself among these brave artists.

I believe I can.

I believe you can, too.

WHAT'S NEXT

Self-publishing isn't a game that everyone wants to, or should, play. It's a deeply personal choice that reflects an individual's aspirations for their career and their art. Self-publishing my first novel is my choice, and I encourage you to make your own choices based on your own values and desires.

If you chose the path of self-publishing and would like to share the details of your journey, please visit www.talesofthepack.com/manifesto and leave a comment. I believe we can all learn from each other's experiences, for better or for worse, so consider raising your voice.

If this manifesto moved you in anyway, feel free to [link](#) to me, so that we can both increase our reach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the large community of readers and viewers who have stopped by my website since I've started blogging and vlogging to lend their voices of support. We all know that the web is full of vitriol and crazies, but it's also full of intelligent, kind, inquisitive and enthusiastic folks. Thanks to all those who are part of the latter crowd.

Thanks to everyone who [links](#) to me, follows me on [Twitter](#), friends me on [Facebook](#), posts comments, shares links or any of the other ways we show respect for each other in these virtual times. You are why I do what I do, so thank you for being on the other side of the transmission.

Thank you to the brave and eager authors who have explored the frontier of self-publishing and lived to tell the tale. Your ambition is what gave me the courage to pursue this path myself. I can only hope to find the same successes you have on this noble path.

Finally, thanks to all those who I have yet to meet on my travels, in bookstores, community spaces, and private homes, as I pursue my dream of sharing my books with my ever-expanding community.