

SARA STAMEY : www.BookViewCafé.com Blog Feb 21, 2015

My Path to Coop Publishing

Anyone who's publishing or considering publishing books today is facing a confusing chaos of choices—traditional print publishing through the “Big 5” publishers or independent presses, agented or non, indie self-publishing, standard print runs, print on demand, ebooks.... It can make your head spin. The notion of creating or joining a cooperative publishing group had been running through my mind for some time before I happened into a discussion about Book View Café with member Judy Tarr, and I decided to apply for membership. As a relatively new member, I'm hoping the experiences of my first year and a half with BVC might be illuminating for readers.

Most of those visiting our bookstore/blogsite, and reading books by our authors, are familiar with our organization and mission: We're an author-owned cooperative of over 50 novelists, all of whom have been published by major traditional publishers, among us many bestsellers and award winners. Book View Café publishes members' ebooks, as well as print editions, in a variety of genres. Member Mindy Klasky published a terrific article about BVC in *Romance Writers Report*, Nov. 2013, for those who'd like a little more history and overview. (link)

My interest in coop publishing grew out of a desire to find a positive alternative to the increasingly frustrating and demoralizing world of traditional publishing. Most are aware that the publishing corporate mergers of the late 20th century created unfavorable conditions for many “midlist” and even bestselling authors. In my case, my (now part of the Big 5) publisher was being absorbed into a conglomerate just as my third novel was being released. Somehow in the reorganization, they neglected to place the novel into distribution, which meant bookstores weren't able to order and sell copies. Since many publishing decisions are now based on computerized sales records, you can guess what happened. Despite my strong reviews, respectable previous sales, and my editor's statement that my fourth novel was my best yet, I was refused a fourth contract, and even a new, high-level agent couldn't get me one with a different publisher.

I'm not alone – I've heard many similar stories. The disheartening part is that our beloved books are now considered “product,” and authors seemingly the least important part of the marketing machine. Finally, like many writers, I decided to take control of my career. As I was considering self-publishing options with print on demand, I was approached by two patrons of the arts who wanted to finance a regional press startup to publish “fusion fiction” that crossed genre boundaries. Just my cup of tea! So I attended Independent Book Publishers Association “Publishing University” at Book Expo, and we started Tarragon Books. My patrons wanted my novel *Islands* to be our first publication, and we opted for a

traditional publishing approach with a standard print run, selling through bookstores. (This was before ebooks took off.) The novel was a finalist in the *ForeWord* Book of the Year awards and received strong reviews, but I discovered it was a LOT of work marketing the book to keep sales going. Once we acquired and published a second novel from a new author, the workload became overwhelming, since I had to maintain a regular job for income. (My patrons stayed behind the scenes after providing basic production funding, so I was doing everything: reading submissions, editing the novels, proofreading, working with cover designers, arranging for distribution, handling marketing, etc.) That's when the light bulb went on: Most indie authors face the same overwhelming list of tasks. Why couldn't authors get together to form a cooperative and share their talents to publish wonderful books?

Looking into the possibility, I discovered that a few coops already existed, and when I connected with Judy about Book View Café, it sounded like exactly the solution I was seeking. When I applied for membership, I described my available backlist (luckily I had gotten rights back from my former publisher) and new projects I hoped to publish. The entire membership then voted on my application, and I was in. What followed was about a five-month period in which I came under the guidance of a mentor member, Dave Smeds, and a small group of advisors who helped me learn the complex system that keeps such a large and ambitious group running.

I was immediately impressed by the professionalism and dedication of everyone I encountered (all through email and online forum) in this far-flung group. All members volunteer work, offering their expertise in editing, manuscript and ebook formatting, cover design, marketing, management, accounting, website design and maintenance, and a myriad of other detailed tasks that keep the books flowing to readers.

The best part: I felt I had found a home among like-minded authors who were supportive of each other! The value of no longer struggling alone as an author can't be overstated.

I continue to be impressed with the organization of tasks built by the early founders as well as newer members. Different aspects of book production, marketing, and sales are divided into topics on Forum boards, where members can add new information to help each other. A volunteer coordinator maintains lists of tasks that need to be accomplished for individual book projects and for general purposes, as well as lists of member experts available for such tasks. Each book to be published has a Project Manager who establishes a list of tasks, using a BVC template, and a detailed timeline for production. Volunteers are slotted and scheduled to do Beta reading of manuscripts, line editing and proofing, ebook and POD formatting, cover design, and more. Other volunteers handle social media, bookstore entries, sales, accounting, and much more.

And it works! My launch title, a new ebook edition of my *Islands* novel, was released in March of 2014, and my new novel *The Ariadne Connection* will be released next month. Book View Café has also arranged multiple member contracts with Audible, so my backlist novels will soon be released as audiobooks, and I'm planning ebook editions with BVC.

As member Jennifer Stevenson says: "We are each good at half a dozen things...and we each learn half a dozen more things as we build Book View Café. Multiply that by [now 50 plus] authors, add synergy and cross-training, teamwork, and the all-important 'when life happens' mutual support, and you have a powerhouse that makes the lonely author feel empowered, informed, and fearless in the face of the new publishing world."

Soon I'll talk more about the nuts and bolts of working, and learning, as a new Book View Café member. Stay tuned!

Sara's newest from Book View Cafe will be released in print and ebook in March: THE ARIADNE CONNECTION. It's a near-future thriller set in the Greek islands. "*Technology triggers a deadly new plague. Can a healer find the cure?*" The novel has received the CYGNUS Speculative Fiction Award.