Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

E-Book Success Stories

Levi Asher · Thursday, November 17th, 2011

I tried not to show it, but I was absolutely terrified seven months ago when I launched my first Kindle book, *Why Ayn Rand Is Wrong (and Why It Matters)*. What was I afraid of, exactly? Embarrassment, I suppose. The lingering shame of innocent hope followed by predictable failure. The apathy of my readers, the disappointment of my loved ones and friends: *Levi doesn't know how to do this right.*

I wasn't sure how to measure success in my first venture as an e-book publisher, but I'm always keenly aware of what failure looks like. I sent out press releases and personal notes about the book, and was pleased to see my book occupy and hold a mid-level position on the Amazon Philosophy and Politics/Ideology charts. I sold dozens of copies, then hundreds of copies. Sales never took off like a shot, but they grew at a slow and steady pace, and a variety of chatty positive/negative reviews began appearing on my Amazon page.

Why Ayn Rand is Wrong is not a success by the metrics of any major publisher. It still hasn't sold a thousand copies, though at this point I'm sure it'll reach that number soon. The best positive indication for me that the book may be a success after all is that I sold more copies in October than any month before, and that the book now comes up in the very first page — the very first page! — of search results when you search for "Ayn Rand" on your Kindle.

I'm very happy about this. I'm especially happy that all the other books on the first "Ayn Rand" Kindle search results page were written by Ayn Rand. I am currently the only author who is managing to compete with Ayn Rand herself for a position on her top 5 Kindle chart.

What this means to me is that the book has found its readership, and that it has been received as a serious entry into the (highly relevant, today) public debate over the ethical and political philosophy of Ayn Rand. I'm very proud and happy about this. Maybe this is what success looks like.

Who's buying my book? I gather from the Amazon reviews and email feedback that my average buyer has never heard of Literary Kicks, nor of Levi Asher. They are finding my book by searching on "Ayn Rand", and something — the bold title? the promo text? the cover illustration? the reader reviews? — is inspiring them to make a purchase decision. I feel great about the fact that my readers are finding me through Amazon search rankings, rather than through my blog. It means my e-book venture has not only allowed me to present something new to my regular loyal Litkicks

readership, but has also allowed me to find new readers who might never visit my blog. That's what it's all about.

The checks I get from Amazon each month are hardly gigantic, but I sure do feel good when I get them. I've also finally launched the paperback version of *Why Ayn Rand is Wrong*, and I've already sold a nice number of these too. Can you tell that I'm psyched? Please stay tuned for more news from Literary Kicks Publications soon, including the re-issue (a newly improved second edition) of another one of the four titles I've published. This success stuff is starting to feel addictive.

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Elsewhere, other literary bloggers are also creating innovative e-books, and I think this is a powerful trend. *Lady Chatterley's Brother* by Scott Esposito and Barrett Hathcock is a production of Scott's Quarterly Conversation journal and Conversational Reading blog, and it's a really thrilling debut.

This $2.99 e-book contains two related essays examining treatments of sexuality in popular postmodern fiction, and is assembled with the bold binary structure of a black-and-white cookie, offering one strongly negative example (Nicholson Baker) followed by a strongly positive one (Javier Marias). First, Barrett Hathcock puzzles over why Nicholson Baker, one of the wittiest and most creative authors on the scene today, produces such depressing and sexually off-putting prose whenever he attempts an erotic novel. Hathcock is an admirer of Baker (as I am) and his critique, focused on the extreme new novel *House of Holes*, reminds me of my own recent commentary on this strange new work (except that Hathcock clearly put more thought and time into his essay than I put into my blog post, and says what I was trying to say with much more skill and substance).

Following this piece, Esposito examines the element of sexual desire and anticipation in the novels of Javier Marias and concludes that this Spanish novelist, whose dignified male characters find sexual ecstasy in the act of yearning rather than in the moment of orgasm, is a great example of a writer who can do "sexy". The key, Esposito emphasizes, is the restraint, the subtlety. This essay is also itself a subtle work:

> Marias may not necessarily understand women, but he gets the spaces around them: he knows why men like women, knows more than most guys about why women like men, and best of all, he's an expert observer of how the genders interact.

Later:

> For these men who spend so much time thinking about the superstructure of manners that exists around the action of daily life, seduction is not a clear and final orgasm. It is an indefinite play of signs.

I'm really glad that Quarterly Conversation/Conversational Reading is getting into the blog-to-book trend, as is Three Percent, the renowned blog on translated literature, which has published *The Three Percent Problem: Rants and Responses on Publishing, Translation, and the Future of Reading*. Michael Orthofer's *The Complete Review: Eleven Years, 2500 Reviews* must also be mentioned here; I believe this was the first litblog e-book of all. If you run a literary blog, I hope you're also thinking of moving into the e-book arena with your best evergreen content. It's a no-brainer that the combination of literary blogging and e-book publishing has a lot of potential.

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Let's also look for success stories among the more established indie publishers, like Red Lemonade, the innovative and community-oriented publishing startup that launched last year. Guy LeCharles Gonzales caught a revelatory presentation by Red Lemonade's publisher Richard Nash at a recent Books in Browsers conference in which Nash spoke quite frankly about the frustrations he's encountered in launching this new venture. There are big lessons to learn here, and there's some valuable group therapy to be had when a publisher admits in front of an audience that he has courted failure. But, of course, Red Lemonade is undoubtedly a success — after all, it published one of the very very best novels of 2011, Vanessa Veselka's *Zazen*, a novel for the ages, and it has turned out a few other fine books as well. Success is simply a protean thing, and this is the lesson I've been learning as a publisher myself.

Every publisher needs to focus on sales, but needs to keep an eye on technological trends as well. I'm still mostly mystified by the production/distribution options currently available for small-scale e-book/paperback publishers. It's clear to me that Amazon's Kindle and CreateSpace are the best toolkits out there, and it's a sad fact that many of the non-Amazon options on the market today are truly horrid. Here are some thoughts by Hugh McGuire of PressBooks on The Beauty of Web-First Workflows, which was presented at the same Books in Browsers conference as Richard Nash's speech above.

I don't necessarily agree with Hugh McGuire that "ebooks are just a special kind of website, designed to be read in a special kind of browser". That doesn't seem to connect with my feelings as a reader — when I read a book, I am doing something other than browsing. But I see what Hugh is getting at, and I know that I'm still learning about the business and don't really know anything yet for sure. I bet every publisher mentioned on this page would say the same thing — we're all still searching out our paths. It's too early for anything but an open mind, so let's see what the future brings.

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