

Indie Poet Rock Star
The Poet's Guide to Ebooks, Marketing and the Self-Publishing Revolution

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Introduction

Since you've probably never heard of me, you're probably wondering who I am.

Here's my story and why I wrote this book.

My name is Michael La Ronn, but I write poetry under the pen name, Elliott Parker.

Until 2012, I was primarily a poet. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis on creative writing, and my goal was to apply for an MFA program. I wanted to pay down my student loans after graduation, so I took a full-time job in the insurance industry and wrote poetry at night.

I studied the craft like a madman and submitted my work to literary magazines several times a year. My poems were published in several small journals. Awesome, right? Well, those magazines are now defunct, and those publishing credits are worthless.

I could never get published in the big magazines like Poetry or The New Yorker. It seemed like everyone else was writing better poetry than me, and no matter how good my poems were, I could never gain any traction.

I spent a lot of money entering poetry contests, too. I hoped that an award judge would read my poems and discover my talent. I didn't win a single contest, and I lost all of that money.

I assumed I would never be a real poet, but I held onto my dream of applying to an MFA program. I thought that the rigorous coursework and workshops that these programs offered would help me hone my skills, get me in front of the right people, and make it easier to publish my work.

I had my top three schools picked out: University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, University of Nevada-Las Vegas, and the Iowa Writer's Workshop.

As I researched the pros and cons of each program, I found more and more MFA graduates who expressed frustration that their degrees didn't help them in their writing careers. The only thing an MFA qualified them to do was teach, not make money or find readers.

I figured these alumni were just complaining because their poetry wasn't good enough. Like any naive poet, I thought "My work is good enough and I'll be successful," but in the back of my mind, I started having doubts.

I knew that I wanted to pursue a writing career, but I had no clear vision of what that career would look like. Most importantly, I knew that I didn't want to teach, which made that future even more difficult to discern.

At this point, I was established in my day job and making a nice paycheck. It would have been hard to give up the money, especially if I failed as a full-time student writer. So I compromised and decided to look for a low-residency MFA program.

Unfortunately, none of the low-residency programs met my needs, and I didn't have enough vacation time at work to attend them.

Basically, nothing was working out. **Combined with continued failure to get my poems published, I felt inadequate.** After all, so many people were going to MFA programs, getting published, and getting teaching jobs. I felt like I would be at a serious disadvantage if I didn't.

So I quit writing.

Six months passed, and I was absolutely miserable. I had no choice but to start writing again. But I didn't want to think about poetry—it brought back too many wounds.

I jumped into fiction. For a while, I tried to submit my work to fiction magazines, but that didn't work, either.

I thought—it must be me. *My work must not be good, I don't know enough about the craft, my work is crappy, I'm not revising enough.* **I bought into the common advice that you have to start from the bottom and "work your way up" into reputable magazines, even if it meant that you were gray-haired when your success happened.**

I kept getting rejected, but this time I didn't give up. I kept writing, honing my craft, and strove to write the best stories I could. I gave up on publishing and I planned to write in secrecy for the rest of my life.

Then, two life-changing things happened.

In 2011, I bought a Kindle. I discovered that writers were writing books and publishing them on their own, without the assistance of publishers or magazines.

Now, I'm going to make a confession: I scoffed at those writers. My literary upbringing taught me that there was literary fiction and commercial fiction, and if you wanted to create work that lasted, you couldn't write for the masses. Doing that cheapened your work. I thought self-publishers were crappy writers who went to vanity presses, had books in their garages, and were generally unaware of the finesse it took to write a book. I believed they were foolish to throw their work on Amazon without editing or validation. I assumed that their work would go into a black hole and never be taken seriously by historians.

I downloaded a few indie books to see what they were really like. A bunch of them were crappy, filled with errors and bad writing. I'll admit that. But others were really good!

Furthermore, I listened to podcasts and read blogs by indie writers such as Joanna Penn and the guys at The Self-Publishing Podcast who totally changed my mind about self-publishing.

I discovered that it was possible to create a high-quality book, market it directly to readers, and actually make money doing it. It wasn't an easy path, though. It took a lot of work, but if you were diligent, approached your writing like a businessperson and a craftsman, you had a decent chance of making money, whatever the amount.

Then, another thing happened. In 2012, I was hospitalized after eating some contaminated food. I contracted a serious illness and could have died. Lying on the hospital bed made me realize how important writing was in my life, and I didn't want to die without publishing something; maybe people would love it, maybe they would hate it, but at least I would know how people truly felt about me without having to go through a publisher to find validation.

I stopped caring whether people liked my work. I decided to write the work I wanted to, and if I didn't succeed, at least I wouldn't have any regrets.

I studied everything I could about self-publishing, and I published my first book in January 2014.

My first month's royalty was \$5.79 that consisted of three sales: one from me because I bought my own book on Amazon, one from a good friend, and one from (wait for it) my mom. Yeah, I was "that" writer.

However, my sales increased. They continue to increase as I release new books and find new readers to read my work. Within the next few years, I expect that I'll be making at least several hundred dollars a month, probably a lot more if my current series takes off. That number will

only increase as I create more products.

How much money would I have made trying to send my books to magazines and publishers?

None, because I was paying them to reject me.

At the time of this book's publication, I have released eleven books, including a poetry collection. My books are available in ebook, print, and audiobook formats. Two of my books has been translated into foreign languages. While my income isn't even close to replacing my day job income, I'm well on my way to getting there.

I spend most of my time writing. I write a book, self-edit it, send it to beta readers, incorporate their feedback, send it to a professional copyeditor who makes it shine, and finally, I send it to a proofreader who checks for spelling/grammatical errors. I also take care of the cover design. Sometimes I can find a professional-looking pre-made book cover; other times, I hire a professional designer who reads the product description for my book and then creates something awesome.

Then I publish the book on all the major retailers. After that, I'm done, aside from occasional marketing every now and then. **Most of my books sell, even my poetry collection!**

I did all of this myself, without help. No vanity presses. No scams. All me. And what I could not do, I either hired someone or engaged in a joint venture to get it done.

You can do this, too, and you can probably get better results than me.

Ask yourself: how many poets do you know who receive any royalties each month from their poetry books? Sure, I know that there are published poets who do make money. However, unless you're a rock star, you're a mere mortal like the rest of us.

My point is this: I know at least ten poets that would *kill* to make money every month from their writing.

As it is, poetry is a hard-working business, but it's terribly inefficient. You have to spend all your time submitting to literary magazines and journals, and you're lucky if they accept your work. And make no mistake—it's luck. Can you imagine how much work it would take to have a poem published in a magazine every month? And even if you could do this, how much would you really make when you consider that most magazines pay contributor's copies? And, most important of all, how can you make money if your work isn't widely available for readers to buy?

That's my story. My narrative is constantly evolving, and my career is absolutely crazy

sometimes. But I love it because I'm in control. As an indie writer, I have more control than I ever would have had on the traditional publishing route.

Is it possible that I gave up on the literary scene too soon? Possibly. But I've decided to be the steward of my own success.

The biggest difference is my mindset. **I choose myself instead of asking for others' permission.** While it might not sound like much, it's a huge change, and now that I've experienced what the possibilities are, I won't turn back.

It's scary out here, but what's scarier is that I placed my entire life, career, and mental well-being in the hands of a small group of strangers who probably never would have accepted me.

My path is harder, but mentally, it's easier.

If any part of my journey has resonated with you, then this path might be for you, too.

How to Use This Book

There are a lot of books about self-publishing, but this book is different because all of the advice is tailored specifically to poets.

This book is for you if:

- * you want more exposure for your work.
- * you want to earn money from your work.
- * you're willing to take control of your destiny, and willing to work hard and make sacrifices along the way.

However, if you dislike the idea of self-publishing, the demands indie publishing makes on authors, self-promotion, the ebook revolution, marketing, email marketing, social media, or if you don't believe that a writer should live at the intersection between art and commerce, this book is *not* for you. Either I can't help you or you're not ready for this book yet (if you have to ask the question, then you're not ready). Do me a favor and return this book for a full refund wherever you purchased it. I wish you the best of luck in your writing endeavors.

If you're still reading, I hope that means you're willing to take a leap.

Here's an overview of what you'll find in this book:

Part I: The New Poetry Landscape explains the current publishing landscape and why it's working against you. It also covers the biggest myths about poetry writing and why they're hurting poets and not helping them. This section will prepare you for the rest of the book, so

don't skip it.

Part II: The Foundations of a 21st Century Poet lays the foundations that every poet needs in the digital era. It covers everything that poets need to be familiar with when working online.

Part III: Your Poet Platform covers the essential but often overlooked components that every poet needs: a website, a mailing list, social media, and press kits.

Part IV: The Business of Being a Poet covers how to approach your poetry like a businessperson. Few poets understand business, so this will give you a basic overview of what you need to be doing to ensure that your writing career lasts for a long time.

Part V: Marketing and Promotion covers marketing basics, book covers, book descriptions, reviews, pricing, sampling, and the most important tool of them all: promotion. This is probably the most important section in the book.

Part VI: The Future of Poetry explains my vision of what the landscape will look like when most poets follow the advice in Parts I-III. It also covers what publishers, literary magazines, and MFA programs can do to survive in the 21st century as well as help to cement poetry's legacy for years to come.

While I make an occasional comment on the craft, I don't teach that here. You have to learn that on your own. But I *will* teach you the business of being a poet in today's publishing market.

My goal is for this book to be evergreen, meaning that the advice here will be just as true today as it will be ten years from now. The techniques in this book are strategies, which are always true. Write a good book, find readers, market to them—those are strategies. Strategies differ from tactics, which are short-term and change from time to time. Publishing in KDP Select, pricing your book at \$0.99, or using a brand new social media network—those are tactics.

They support your strategies, but things change and they may not always be effective.

As you read this book, always think of the bigger picture. Think strategy. Think long-term. Think business.

If you've published a book with a traditional publisher and don't think that this book is for you, fear not. You especially need this book! You can apply the techniques here to your next collection.

I'll be honest and upfront with you: I prefer indie publishing, so this book will lean that way.

If you feel stuck in traditional publishing, you're not trapped. You'll need to review your contract(s) and determine what you can and can't do. There are some nasty publishing contracts out there, and if your books aren't selling, you may want to get your rights back. Consider talking to an intellectual property attorney to see what they can do for you.

That being said, only you can make the best decisions for your career. I'll teach you everything I know, but at the end of the day, you have to be the one to call the shots.

Wherever you are in your career, I hope that this book helps you on your writing journey, and that it helps you develop a career that you're proud of.

PART I: The New Poetry Landscape

What Type of Poet Are You?

I don't know who you are, but I can make some assumptions. One of these likely applies to you.

You like poetry and would like to publish a book, but don't know how.

You write poetry but can't find anyone to accept your work.

You have a stack of unpublished poems that you don't know what to do with.

You attended, are attending, or are considering attending an MFA program.

You have publication credits to your name (no matter how big or small the venue).

You have a full-time job that isn't writing related, and you have a hard time balancing your writing, your job, and your family.

You find it (mentally) difficult to keep writing at all.

You quit writing poems a long time ago for a number of reasons.

You have a full-length poetry collection published by a small press or traditional publisher.

You have *several* full-length poetry collections published.

You're unhappy with your sales and don't know what to do about it.

You're happy with your sales, but wish they could be better (but don't know what to do about it).

You're a popular poet and well-loved.

You're a poetry rock star and are always looking for ways to maximize your income.

You're an indie poet trying to navigate this new landscape.

Was I close? I imagine that most poets fall somewhere on this list.

This book will be just as helpful for you if you're unknown or if you're a Poet Laureate. **The principles are the same, and anyone can do them.**

Regardless of who you are, this book can help you develop a career that will make other poets

envious. Just by reading this, you're a pioneer—you're on the frontier of something truly great that will change the way books are consumed forever. By being early to the game, you're giving yourself an advantage that other poets will wish they had several years from now.

I applaud you, but I also tell you that this isn't an easy path.

You're going to close doors, burn bridges, jeopardize relationships, and disqualify yourself for awards. You'll be stigmatized. You'll be seen as inferior (for a time).

But, if you're fearless and hard-working, you'll soon find that those doors that closed would have never opened for you anyway, those relationships you jeopardized weren't helpful for your writer ego, and those awards you disqualified yourself for will no longer be relevant. The stigma that surrounds you will turn into respect, and the whole idea of superior/inferior won't matter anymore.

What *will* matter is that you will have an audience of readers, be respected as a *writer*, find validation that the work you're doing is good and not “always in need of improvement.” Best of all, you'll be making money from your work, possibly more than you would have made otherwise.

I can't guarantee that you're going to be the next poetry superstar, but I *can* guarantee that you'll be putting yourself on the path to artistic satisfaction, and you'll be doing it on your own terms.

If I am right about any of the assumptions I made above, you've got nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Why Doesn't Poetry Sell?

A few things happened to me recently that forced me to think very deeply about this book.

The first was that I self-published my own poetry collection. I published it on Amazon, and within hours it became a bestseller. I hit #2 on the Hot New Releases Chart for Poetry, and #8 on American Poetry, and #16 on Poetry Anthologies and American Poetry. It wasn't a fluke, either—during the first two months after the book's launch, I hit the bestseller lists approximately ten times.

Now, let me dispel any illusions: I sold about 10-15 copies overall. **I hit the bestseller list because, well, I was the only one selling.**

I'm a member of a handful of poets who have self-published, and I know that I am a black sheep. I don't care about that.

I care about creating quality books, reaching readers and selling my books directly to them. Life's too short to focus on anything else.

But I also care deeply about the future of poetry.

Recently, I looked for some new poetry to read on Amazon, and I was disappointed. It bothered me how many contemporary poets' collections were out of print. For those collections that *were* in print, few were available in ebook format—my preferred method of reading.

I've all but abandoned print books, and I do most of my reading on my Kindle Fire and/or iPhone these days. Unless I'm crazy about a poet, I'm just not going to pay for a paperback. It overcomplicates my reading process. Paperbacks don't suit my busy lifestyle. It's sad but true.

Reading has shifted and will continue to shift toward mobile devices. Mobile is the future, and that future is here. I can't be the only avid reader of poetry who has also made this transition, and I know that I'm not the only poetry lover who is disappointed with the dismal selection of titles in ebook format.

There's money on the table and no one's taking it!

This got me thinking about:

- * why more publishers haven't released collections from their backlist.
- * why more contemporary poets haven't self-published their collections.

I felt that by wrestling with this topic, I could figure out the status quo of the poetry landscape and possibly find a reason why poetry doesn't sell. I hoped that figuring this out would help me sell more copies of my own work, too.

As an indie author who has successfully self-published several novels, I can't understand why the ebook revolution and self-publishing can't apply to poetry.

And just by saying that, boy did I get some vitriol.

When I posted a thread for this topic on a message board that shall not be named, I received some pushback from another poetry lover who completely disagreed with everything I had to say—and vehemently, too. It was eye-opening, and I suspect that she won't be the last to disagree with me.

I did some digging online to see what others were saying—there aren't many articles on the topic of self-publishing poetry and why poetry doesn't sell. You can probably read them all yourself in an afternoon.

Most of the arguments against ebooks and self-publishing in the poetry community are based on the following statements:

- * Poetry in ebook form is inferior to the paperback experience.
- * Poetry readers don't want ebooks / don't look for new reads at places like the Amazon Kindle Store or Barnes & Noble.com.
- * Poetry is obscure.
- * Poetry has never been commercial.

But these statements are often made without any further explanation. Why can't we make poetry more commercial? Why can't we find ways for poets to monetize, or, dare I say it, make a living from their work? Why can't we figure out ways to make poetry less obscure and more accessible to a wider audience without compromising its integrity?

The first answer is availability. Poetry will never sell if it is not made as widely

available as possible.

It sounds so simple, right?

As it stands, if you want a contemporary poetry collection, you have to:

- * Pray that it's available at the Kindle Store (probably not).

- * Go to your local chain bookstore and hope they have it.

- * Go to a local indie bookstore.

- * Order a paper copy from Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble and hope that the Look Inside sample is representative of the whole book.

- * Go to your local library and order the book via interlibrary loan.

These aren't *bad* options. Between 2011-2013, I used interlibrary loans to check out a lot of poetry collections. I used to love buying poetry books, too.

But my point is that readers are less likely to buy a collection if it isn't available how they want it. The options above require multiple steps that don't always yield success.

A collection of poetry is also less likely to sell if it isn't available in multiple formats.

Reading habits have changed. People aren't going to bookstores like they used to, especially for poetry collections. Instead, they're shopping on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and other retailers for their next reads, which are increasingly becoming ebooks.

Poetry lovers are no different. There is an entire segment of the poetry readership who own Kindles, smartphones and tablets, but they can't read (much) poetry on them because there's virtually nothing for them to read. Is it fair to ignore them, especially when they will soon be the majority?

I wrote this book because I'm in the minority. I want to read awesome collections from contemporary poets, but I want to read their works on my terms: on my ereader, phone or tablet, without the inconvenience of a paperback.

The poetry world is still rooted in tradition. Print is king, and the ebook revolution is still just a whisper. Self-publishing is still stigmatized.

It's not going to be this way forever. As the readership transitions to ebooks, poets will need to do the same thing. Poets also need to learn how to meet readers' demands by offering their books as widely as possible (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Apple, local bookstores, libraries, on their

author websites, etc.) and in as many formats as possible (paperback, ebook, audio, MOBI, EPUB, PDF).

These are the first two things that every poet needs to understand before moving forward.

A wider net means more readers. More readers means more sales and reviews. Take advantage of the opportunity now.

What Does the Poetry Market Really Look Like?

There's a common myth among poets: there isn't a market for poetry.

I hear this a lot. The truth is that while there aren't nearly as many poetry readers as there are, say, romance or science fiction readers, that doesn't mean there isn't a market. It just means that the market is small.

A small market can be a good thing. It means:

- * readers are more devoted readers.
- * it's easier to market your work.
- * less competition.
- * you have more creative freedom.
- * growth over time.
- * lower market share incentivizes writers to write unique works.

To show you exactly what the potential is for poetry in today's market, I went to Amazon and searched for "poetry". (I'm using Amazon for the sake of this example because it has the largest market for poetry, but you could just as easily do this experiment on Kobo, Apple, or Barnes & Noble).

Warning: there is a lot of raw data here, but I interpret it at the end of this section if you want to skip to that.

On September 14, 2014, I typed in "poetry" and dialed down to the general poetry category. I went through the first 3 pages of the results, and this is what I found:

The Numbers

(All numbers are rounded up to the nearest percentage.)

BASICS

Total # of Books: 48

Public domain poetry collections (including anthologies): 18 (37%)

Traditionally published collections (including anthologies): 12 (25%)

Indie collections: 15 (31%)

Mis-categorized: 3 (6%)

PRICING

Free: 9 (18%)

Paid: 39 (81%)

PAID PRICE BREAKDOWNS

\$0.99: 16 (33%)

\$1.00-\$4.99: 8 (16%)

\$5.00-\$9.99: 8 (16%)

\$9.99 and above: 7 (14%)

*TRADITIONAL VS. INDIE*For Traditional Titles:

Highest price: \$11.84

Lowest price: \$7.99

Average number of reviews: 74

Review average: 3.3 (a few didn't have reviews which brought the overall average down)

Notes: Mary Oliver dominated this chart with the staggering number of her reviews, skewing the results. But this is just raw data. The book with the lowest actual review average was 4.0.

For the Traditional Titles priced over \$9.99:

Average number of reviews: 65

For Indie Titles:

Highest price: \$6.00

Lowest price: \$0.00

Average number of reviews: 63

Review average: 2.7

Notes: A good number of the indie collections didn't have reviews. The lowest collection review was a 3.5. So this isn't an accurate sampling, either. The real average is probably around 4.0.

For Indie Free Titles

Average number of reviews: 27

What It All Means

This data is very, very interesting. I didn't use any advanced methods here. Just basic math.

Statistically speaking, traditionally published titles and indie titles are in the same ballpark in terms of the number of titles, number of reviews, and review average. This is surprising given:

- * traditionally published titles generally had more professional covers.
- * traditionally published titles were priced higher.
- * traditionally published titles had more total reviews.
- * traditionally published titles had more name recognition (Billy Collins, Mary Oliver, Robert Frost, etc).

Even when the existing market is small, indie poets are in the charts, and doing quite well. Maybe not sales-wise, but exposure-wise. **This means you can do it, too.**

Let's look at some more numbers.

Dissecting an Indie Poetry Collection

Let's take *Travelling Light* by Vickie Johnstone which is available on Amazon. For a poetry collection, it has **110 reviews** at the time of this writing—an excellent number for any indie book. I haven't read this collection, but I'm using it as an example.

Let's also make some conservative assumptions about readers for a moment.

If we assume that the number of reviews reflects a smaller number of people who actually read the book (1-5% is the standard, but we'll use 5%), we can estimate that roughly **2200 people read the book.**

If we also assume that the number of people who read the book is a smaller percentage of people who actually bought the book (say, 10%), then we can estimate that roughly **22,000 people downloaded the book.** We'll never know for sure, but with the level of success that Johnstone has achieved with this collection, I'd argue that it's a safe bet.

No one knows how many page views the book receives, so those **22,000 readers are a percentage of a larger, unknown number that only Amazon knows.** These people were *interested* in the collection.

Now, 22,000 people isn't a large number of readers compared to romance or science fiction, but keep in mind that this figure doesn't include:

- * people who weren't interested in the book and didn't click on it.
- * people who aren't reading poetry ebooks yet. Since we know that digital readers still make up a minority of poetry readers overall, the number of readers who prefer print is probably exponentially larger.

Also keep in mind the following things:

- * this is a FREE poetry collection.
- * many of the reviews on Johnstone's book are from people who don't "normally read" poetry (i.e. they're casual poetry readers).
- * more seasoned poetry readers might not buy the book because the cover *looks* indie (I'm not passing any judgment on the collection, but it's true).

As ebooks catch on in the poetry, academic, and literary communities, the readership is going to grow. Johnstone has positioned herself for when this happens. It's hard to ignore a book with over 100 reviews and a four-star average. She already has a readership, and when promotional opportunities start to appear, she'll have a tactical advantage that other poets won't.

It's funny how history repeats itself, because this is exactly what the fiction lists looked like in 2011 before the self-publishing revolution hit. There was a proliferation of public domain titles, books with poor covers, books priced way too high (and too low), and not much selection.

I don't believe that history will repeat itself in exactly the same way, but most of it will probably be the same:

- 1) There will be a self-publishing lightning strike (i.e. Amanda Hocking or Hugh Howey).
- 2) More poets will realize the viability of the market and enter; readers will also follow their favorite poets, exposing them to new poets in the process.
- 3) The market will grow radically over the next 2-5 years until it's thoroughly saturated.
- 4) There will be major success stories about a few poets who turn into 21st century rock stars.
- 5) The overall quality of ebook collections will increase as poets and publishers get savvier about what it really takes to sell books.
- 6) It will get harder to sell books, with no sure-fire solutions.

The last stage is where fiction is right now, but nothing stays the same in this industry for long. By the time poetry catches up, things will probably be different.

Early movers will benefit the most if they publish before #1 happens. This way, they have the longest possible time to build their audience and will have an easier time marketing their work. The poets who come late will have a more difficult time establishing a readership because discoverability will be harder. It won't be impossible—just harder.

This is exactly what happened in the fiction market, and I expect that the same thing will happen with poetry.

What will a mature market look like once the majority of the readership goes digital? I don't know, and I don't think anyone really knows. It definitely won't be on the same level as fiction, but that's not really a fair comparison because poetry has never really been able to compete with fiction sales-wise. But, for the poetry world, it'll be a huge deal, and that's what matters.

Based on the information above, here are my immediate recommendations for everyone in the industry.

For Traditional Publishers:

Consider dropping prices. The fiction market tends to run between \$2.99-\$9.99. However, it's possible that poetry collections could reside on the higher end of this spectrum because of a higher perceived value. But as the market stands right now, readers probably aren't going to pay more than \$9.99 for a collection—*unless* it's a new & selected or collected works.

Make better covers. Fiction writers have to brand their covers to genre, but poetry can be more abstract. If there's any market where you can get away with stunning, beautiful works of art on a cover, it's poetry. Most poetry book covers are blah, even the traditionally published ones.

Publish the most accessible collections from your catalogues first. The digital market right now skews toward casual readers, and they're more receptive to accessible poets (ie. Billy Collins over John Ashbery).

For Traditionally Published Poets

Ask your publisher to do the above action items. If they won't, try to get the rights back to your books so you can do them.

Consider indie publishing your next collection. Nothing is stopping you except certain clauses in your contract called do not compete clauses. These clauses limit the amount of work you can publish during the contract period. If this applies to you, hire an intellectual property attorney to help you fight back if your publisher tries to enforce the contract. And whatever you do, don't *ever* sign another publishing contract without having your attorney look it over first.

Read the rest of this book. If you have a good relationship with your publisher, and your books are selling well, focus on Parts III and IV of this book so you can start building your platform.

For Indie Poets:

Experiment with free. Permanently free (“permafree”) titles tended to have more reviews than some paid titles, with a good review average, too. Permafree doesn’t work for everyone, but I recommend trying it for a short run. I won’t go into how to make your book free here. A simple Google search will help you find the information.

KDP Select and Kindle Unlimited may be a good way to gain exposure. It’s hard to say for sure, but it’s worth trying because Amazon is the largest digital market for poetry right now.

Make better covers, for the love of Pete. The ones I saw were poor at best.

Price higher. Free isn’t sustainable long-term, and neither is anything under \$2.99. The market might be the same as fiction, with \$2.99-\$4.99 maximizing the most revenue for indies. But it could also be higher, so experiment.

Create paperback editions. It makes your ebooks look cheaper in comparison.

Consider audio and foreign editions. They are growing markets and they’re cheap to break into right now.

Metadata, metadata, metadata. Your title, subtitle, author name, book description, keywords and categories are incredibly important. Don’t waste them, or you’ll have a harder time getting discovered.

For Ebook Retailers:

Categories, categories, categories. Poetry sections in most ebook retailers are pretty disorganized. When the only applicable categories for a poet’s collection are “General Poetry,” regional/ethnic (“American,” Latin-American,” etc.), and themes like “nature” or “love”, discoverability is impossible. I recommend creating more categories based on the different schools of poetry, as well as categories based more on themes and moods. That’s a good starting point. Readers and poets can both benefit from this type of categorization.

Crack down on public domain titles as the market gets bigger. It’s impossible for contemporary poets to get noticed when they’re living in the shadow of Shakespeare, Poe, and

Whitman. This isn't to say that the greats shouldn't be read, but they need to be in their proper place. Adding more (and better) categories will help.

For Bookstores

Open up to indie authors and stock books from those poets who do a good job with covers and quality writing. You'll discover that readers won't know the difference. You win, the poet wins, and the readers win.

Summary

The numbers don't lie. There *is* a market for poetry right now, and it skews toward casual readers. That will change as the market grows, but if you're looking for a way to start selling in today's environment, I would do all of the above things.

99 Reasons Why It's A Great Time to Be An Author

I recently read [this post](#) about the status quo of the music industry.

As a former musician, wow. Just wow. Few articles have moved me like this one. While some of the claims are exaggerated and slightly misinformed, most of it is pretty accurate.

The most interesting statement the writer makes is that “artists are worse off now than they were in the analog era.” That actually might be true, and as a lover of music, I hope the situation in the music industry changes soon.

However, I’m all about positivity. And as an author, that article got me thinking about how this is the best time in history to be an author. Other industries are struggling right now, but we in the writing world are quite fortunate.

Here are 99 reasons why it’s a great time to be an author.

1. It has never been easier for authors to monetize their work.

2. Ebook sales continue to grow every year.

3. Print sales, while declining, are still profitable.

4. Audiobook sales are exploding.

5. Foreign markets are burgeoning as the price of ereaders, tablets and smartphones decreases worldwide. As more international readers adopt them, ebook, print, and audio sales in those countries will increase, too.

6. Authors can make contracts with translators through joint ventures or through sites like Babelcube to create foreign rights translations of their books.

7. For the first time in history, authors can easily partner with artists to produce comics and graphic novel adaptations of their work.

8. For the first time in history, indie authors are being approached with film contracts.

9. Companies like Amazon continue to integrate book formats (such as Kindle Whispersync)

that make consuming books easier than ever before.

10. The advent of ereaders means that readers are reading faster, which means that they are reading more books.

11. Ebook subscription services are starting to take hold. While there are fears that they will cannibalize paid books and put the industry on the same path as the music industry, I believe otherwise.

12. Indie authors can bundle their books into box sets that provide immense value for readers *and* command higher royalties.

13. Indie authors can create multi-author box sets, leveraging the power of their collective platforms to cross-promote each other, provide value to readers, and, in some cases, hit bestseller lists such as the New York Times and USA Today.

14. Unlike with music, readers are willing to pay for books and gladly do so.

15. Readers are especially willing to pay for indie books.

16. DRM is no longer the standard, and even so, piracy is still less of an issue than it is for the film and music industries.

17. Ebook prices are low because of consumer demand, but despite this, authors are actually maximizing their revenue at lower price points.

18. Print books, while they sell less than ebooks, still tend to pay higher royalties than ebooks, which only adds to an author's bottom line.

19. A meaty audiobook can potentially pay the best royalties of all.

20. Authors can sell directly to their readers and net a higher royalty percentage.

21. Authors can engage in royalty-share agreements with other industry professionals such as translators and audiobook narrators.

22. Authors have instant access to their sales reports. At best, places like Amazon allow them to see their sales in almost real-time. At worst, aggregators like Smashwords deliver sales reports for the previous month approximately every 30 days.

23. Most ebook retailers pay monthly or quarterly, giving authors quick access to funds.

24. Royalty statements are strikingly simple to read and understand.

25. Royalty payments are automated, so authors literally get paid while they sleep.

26. Authors can upload and publish their books at any major retailer relatively quickly, and the process is straightforward (with the cringeworthy exception being Google Play).

27. Writing a book has never been easier with programs like Scrivener.

28. There are hundreds of resources dedicated to helping authors improve their craft.

29. Memo apps like Evernote allow writers to capture their ideas no matter where they are. Whether you're at your desk, in the checkout line at the grocery store, or even on the toilet, there's no excuse to let ideas slip away.

30. Productivity apps like OmniFocus and Asana help authors develop goals and take meaningful steps to achieve them.

31. There are literally hundreds of blogs, courses, seminars, podcasts, videos, books, social media groups, and forums dedicated to writing, publishing, and marketing. If an author ever has a problem with anything, an answer is simply a click away.

32. The writing community is so incredibly warm, generous, supportive, and respectful of its members compared to other industries. No indie author is ever too busy to help another author, and aspiring and new authors are comfortable in seeking help.

33. Traditional publishing, while it often gets bad press, is still a viable way to publish a book. Publishers don't shy away from self-published authors; in fact, they're pursuing the most successful self-published authors with lucrative contracts.

34. Authors can *choose* to publish traditionally, self-publish, or do both—whatever is best for them and their circumstances. Regardless of what they do, it's okay.

35. Authors have complete artistic control over their work.

36. Authors have control over their pricing.

37. Authors have control over their cover designs.

38. Authors have the final say on their editing.

39. Authors decide what is best for their books, and not anyone else.

40. Authors can easily back up their works in case of a catastrophic event.

41. Authors have a number of ways to monetize their work, and these streams of revenue don't just include books. Sites like Patreon and Kickstarter offer crowdfunding solutions.

Experienced authors can develop lucrative speaking and consulting careers (like Joanna Penn).

42. Marketing has never been harder, but the prospect of connecting with readers personally

makes it worth the effort.

43. Word of mouth marketing is just as powerful as it has always been. Those authors who write well and create good products always seem to find their audience. It's harder than ever for authors to get noticed, but in some ways, it's easier, too.

44. Discoverability remains a constant issue for indie authors, but it's also an issue for ebook retailers, and it's possible that solutions are on the horizon.

45. Ebook and print formatting is simple and most authors can learn how to do it. If they cannot do it, they can hire a formatter to do it at an affordable cost.

46. The amount of talented cover artists, editors, and other industry professionals available is staggering, and they all make their living from working directly with authors. There are definitely predators out there, but it's also easy to vet industry professionals, too.

47. Advocacy groups like the Alliance of Independent Authors have lobbied and been successful in making the industry more accepting of indies. Bookstores and industry conferences have started to open up to indies as a result.

48. Goodreads is a community dedicated to readers, and its members are one of the most engaged memberships in all of social media.

49. Authors don't need to spend large amounts of money to promote their books.

50. Authors can post jobs on sites like Upwork and get bids for work in just a few hours.

51. A staggering number of authors are making a living from their works, more than any other time in history. These authors are able to use their work to support their families and live their dreams.

52. An author's time is best spent writing, and for those who can afford it, they can hire virtual assistants to offload some of the most time-consuming tasks.

53. The cost of editing and cover design ranges from cheap to affordable for most authors.

54. Giving away books for free leads to higher sales in many cases.

55. Few authors ever have to worry about copyright infringement, unlike musicians.

56. No indie author ever has to worry about their book being leaked.

57. Copyright expenses are crazy cheap (at least in the United States).

58. Readers are overstimulated with all the choices out there, but permission-based email marketing makes it easy for authors to cut through the noise and connect with them.

59. Mailing lists are easy to setup and maintain. They continue to be an author's best asset.

60. Indie authors can get their books into bookstores.

61. Indie authors can get their books into libraries, too.

62. Traditional publishers haven't adapted to this new landscape yet, a misstep that continues to create a constant, renewable source of opportunity for indies until they do.

63. Indie authors have to incur some economic risk in producing their books, but it's a long-term game. Authors have their entire life plus 70 years to recoup their investments (to quote Dean Wesley Smith).

64. Younger people live on their phones and tablets, cementing books' place in society for generations to come.

65. Indies are always innovating.

66. Authors who dare to innovate always have a chance at reaping success.

67. The market is always changing, for better or worse.

68. Ebook retailer sites' bestseller lists are fluid and always changing, giving authors who sell a decent number of copies on a given day a chance to get prime exposure.

69. Ebook retailer websites such as Amazon have algorithms that actively promote certain titles whose books are selling well, boosting their exposure.

70. Every day there is a success story about an indie author quitting their job, getting a good advance, or finding a tool that has helped them sell more books. There are also failures, to be sure, but indie authors have access to tools and resources that can help mitigate their risks. Their spirit of hard work will always serve them well.

71. Authors don't need MFA degrees to be published writers.

72. Authors can approach their writing like entrepreneurs and reap the same benefits as entrepreneurs.

73. Writers can pursue their dreams, make money, and find meaning in their lives—while in their pajamas.

74. Writers can write anywhere and publish from the comfort of their own homes.

75. Research for a writer has never been easier with the help of Google.

76. Every author's career is different, and every author must find their own individual path to success and spiritual gratification, which encourages authenticity.

77. Readers vote with their wallets, rewarding authentic writers over those looking to cash in on a fad.

78. Authors who practice social karma and generosity will always find someone willing to help them in times of need.

79. Fewer writers have to hide the fact that they're writers.

80. More writers can tell their children about what they do with pride.

81. Being a self-published author is actually a viable career choice for young people graduating high school and college.

82. Authors can learn to be businesspeople and marketers, and benefit greatly from doing so.

83. Authors can do almost everything a publisher can do, and in some cases, do it better.

84. With tools like Canva, authors can become designers, too.

85. Setting up a clean, professional-looking website is cheap and easy, and any author can do it.

86. "Write the next book" is not only sound advice, but it's also a sustainable business model.

87. Concepts like metadata, keyword research, and SEO used to be difficult to understand. Now anyone can learn them and use them with good results.

88. Authors have access to more data than ever before, as evidenced by the Author Earnings Report. And they can use that data to make informed decisions about their careers.

89. Indie authors are accessible to their fans, and it's easy for their fans to send them fan mail. The opposite is also true. With just one click, authors can instantly connect with their readers.

90. Social media makes it easy to connect with readers as well as other authors.

91. The Internet makes it easy to befriend other authors.

92. There's always a new tool that indie authors can use to help build their platforms.

93. Readers don't necessarily care who publishes a book. Indies with good products have just as much of a chance at selling a book as a traditional publisher.

94. To quote J.A. Konrath, ebooks have a million lives. Every book is brand new to someone who discovers it for the first time.

95. Though it may not seem like it, the self-publishing revolution has just begun.

96. Diversity among writers is growing, increasing the number of unique voices that reflect the changing world we live in.

97. Women writers are making more from their books than ever before—something unthinkable just 50 years ago.

98. Despite all of these changes, readers are still readers, and they are always looking for the next great read.

99. Despite all of these changes, the important things are the same: write good books, find the people that want to read them, don't be a jerk, and have fun. This will always be true.

We're living in a golden age. Sure, there's room for improvement, and things could always be better. One hundred years from now, authors will be talking about *us* and what a great time this was.

It has never been a better time to self-publish your work, and if you still have doubts, read this list again!

PART II: The Foundations of a 21st Century Poet

An Indie Poet's Manifesto

As someone who loves poetry, I want to see it succeed. I want it to be read by future generations.

This is my call to action, my manifesto, my vision of what will need to happen if poetry is going to survive in the 21st century.

Every poet should read this manifesto and make up their own mind about it. Maybe it's not for you, but if you want to find new ways to expand your career, this is worth reading.

The Manifesto

#1: Poets and publishers should be trying to find ways to reach out to the growing minority of poetry readers who are going digital.

They need to overcome their reservations and release their poetry collections in ebook format. Soon (within the next five years or sooner), digital readers will be the majority, and that's where the money is and will be.

An encouraging article in the [New York Times](#) came out recently advising that many of the well-known publishers are doing this, which is great. Here's an enlightening paragraph from that article:

"In 2013, publishers released about 2,050 poetry e-books, up from about 200 in 2007, the year the first Kindle came out, according to Bowker, which tracks releases. Last year, e-books accounted for roughly 20 percent of the nearly 10,000 poetry books published, compared with around 10 percent in 2012."

200 to 2,000 is a huge increase, and it's only going to go up. The numbers don't lie.

#2: Poets should push for their collections to be digitized. If their publishers refuse, then they should negotiate for their rights back and self-publish.

What do they have to lose? The collection has already been edited so there's not a quality problem. All the poet needs to do is educate him/herself on how to self-publish, market the work directly to readers, and invest in a quality cover. These things are easy to learn.

#3: Poets and publishers should also publish their books wherever books are sold. This means Amazon, Barnes & Noble/Nook, Kobo, Smashwords, iBooks, Scribd, Oyster, Google Play, and every retailer that pops up between now and forever. It also means bookstores (both chain and indie) and libraries, too. Consumers will always benefit from having as many choices as possible, with as many formats as possible to buy. Short-term exclusivity deals such as KDP Select can be used to help get initial exposure, but long-term, poets will benefit from being in as many places as possible for a long period of time.

#4: Poetry collections should also be available in audiobook format, whenever possible. Again, this is an issue of rights that the poet should aggressively negotiate. Audiobooks are booming business right now, and poetry can and should create a place for itself in this market. Collections narrated by the poets themselves would be a great selling point because many poets intrinsically understand the nature of performance and how to read their poems effectively.

This would open their work up to the commuting audience, who is always looking for something new to listen to. In addition, it also opens up the work to the blind, who aren't being serviced at all and are forced to buy from a limited collection of books in Braille and a less-than-stellar voice navigation system on smart-phones and tablets.

#5: Poets themselves can also pursue foreign language rights by themselves now without the assistance of an agent. There is a burgeoning market of translators

looking to translate English works into other languages in order to capitalize on the growing ebook market outside of the U.S. and the U.K. Translators are usually picky about the works that they take on because if the work doesn't sell, they don't get paid. But many poets can produce a list of publication credits, which are social proof and increase their chances of being translated. This would open up English poetry to an even wider range of readers.

I recognize that this one is a long-shot for most poets, but it could potentially work for established poets. You never know until you try.

#6: Literary magazines should also be available in digital format. Not online in the form of a website page, but in the form of an ebook, available for subscription and purchase on all the major ebook retailers.

Poetry readers still prefer print, but it's not going to be that way forever. They need choices. They also need avenues of discovery, a function that magazines do well. And, publishing online exposes the magazine to a larger audience that they never would have had otherwise. Literary magazines can use metadata to help poets gain visibility on retailers by including poets as contributors. This way, whenever someone searches for the magazine, the poet's name appears. This is also true in reverse. It's free exposure for both the poet and the magazine. I know that there are some issues with magazine subscriptions that might make this option less lucrative, but magazines can still offer ebook subscriptions on their websites for their existing readership. At the end of the day, it's about convenience. We have to make it easier for readers to find *and* consume poetry, and who better to take up this mantle than litmags?

Imagine what a poetry lover's life would be like if they could subscribe to their favorite literary magazine on their tablet, find a great poem by a great poet, search for the poet in the online retailer of their choice, and see an intriguing collection of poems that they can purchase with one click and start reading instantly without having to leave their couch? Wouldn't that be nice?

Why should we have to imagine that? Fiction lovers can already do this, and have been doing it for several years.

I believe that literary magazines have an important function in the poetry industry in helping readers find new work, more so than in fiction. But personally, I refuse to subscribe to another magazine because getting them in the mail is a pain. I want to read them on my tablet, the place where I already do 99% of my reading. But I can't, so I find something else.

What I Know For Sure

The landscape is changing. Some publishers are starting to release digital poetry collections, but many publishers are still hesitant to go digital, and many poets are hesitant to self-publish.

Ebooks are not as mysterious or destructive as some would have you believe. They are quite simple, and a joy to read.

Self-publishing is not the haunted house of indies it used to be. Vanity publishers are, for the most part, universally scorned and avoided by self-published authors.

Today, the self-publishing movement is populated by a savvy group of writers who are reaching readers directly and not going through gatekeepers to get their work accepted. They're not just writing books and "throwing them online." They're working with beta readers, investing in quality editing and cover design, and always improving their craft. They're fearless, too.

I'm not arguing for the abolition of publishers. Far from it. I think poetry publishers are unsung heroes, especially small presses. But poets should be realistic about what they want from their careers and what the reality is. The current publishing environment rewards writers who take initiative over those who wait for others to do things for them. It's nothing personal. It's business.

There's a Hugh Howey and Amanda Hocking of poetry among us. It's going to happen. And when it does, everything is going to change overnight. You can embrace the change now before it happens, or you can embrace it later and wish you had embraced it today.

These ideas are not new—fiction authors have been doing all of these things for the last few years, with incredible results. I am starting to experience these results with my own fiction.

But for poets, this is new.

I'm already exploring this new world whether others follow me or not. But if others do follow, things will get better for everyone.

A Poet's Work Ethic

I need to take some time to talk about the craft of writing, because it's important to understand where I'm coming from before moving forward.

The point of this chapter isn't to teach you how to write. You've got to do that on your own, and every writer has to find his/her own way.

But a writer's work ethic is critical to success.

The status quo right now is to work on poems constantly, and there's the belief that "a poem is never finished." As a result, there are legions of poets out there continuously tinkering with their poems in the pursuit of perfection.

I disagree with this process because it does more harm than good.

My Truths About Poetry Writing

I DO believe that poets should write the best work they possibly can.

I DO believe in the muse, but I believe that hard work, consistency, and persistency serve a writer better than any muse can.

I DO believe that poets should subject their work to the editorial process. This means:

- * Write the work to get it on paper
- * Let it rest
- * Revise it to say what you mean
- * Send it to beta readers and other poets who can provide feedback
- * Implement that feedback where it makes sense (without letting it paralyze you), and then revise the poem to make it shine
- * Send it to an editor (not a magazine editor, but an objective editor you pay to copyedit and/

or proofread your work)

- * Implement the editor's recommendations

- * Review, finalize, and then publish (or, if you're so inclined, submit to literary magazines/publishers)

Every book should be subjected to this process. Don't rush it, but don't buy into the idea that a poem/collection has to simmer for years before it's ready.

I do NOT believe that a poem is a constant work in progress. After you've followed the steps above, it's ready. If you're still not happy with it, ask yourself why.

If you're hesitant to publish because you still can't get your point across, that's acceptable. The collection may benefit from distance and time.

If you're hesitant to publish because the work isn't perfect, ask yourself why. Is it because you're still learning the craft, or because you're aiming for a work of art? **If either of those is the answer, then publish your work anyway.**

I get a lot of pushback when I tell people this. After all, I'm telling you to ignore common wisdom.

It's true that poems take their time. Is it possible that twenty drafts and several years will make a poem better? Maybe. But not every poem. And not when you consider that the longer you edit a work, the more paralyzed you can become. The work suffers as a result.

The more time that passes between the time that you write your poem and the time you publish it, the more you change. The more you get better as a writer. I wasn't the same writer in 2012 as I was in 2014. So, when I look back on my 2012 work, of course I'm going to cringe.

But that doesn't mean that my 2012 work is bad. Could it have been better? Sure. **But I would rather invest my time and effort in new poems that showcase my improved writing skills.**

An artist's work will never be perfect, no matter how hard he/she revises, workshops, or agonizes over it. Poets need to write the best poems they can, but not stress over them so much. If you follow all the steps above and write poems you believe in, chances are good that readers will still enjoy your work.

It's About Connections

In this digital age, readers want to make connections with writers. **In a category like poetry, brand new readers need to be interested in a poet as a person before they'll be compelled to buy.** This is because things like book covers and book descriptions aren't as effective with poetry.

This means that you have to market yourself.

How does one do that? **Let readers join you on your journey. Let them see you grow.** This means laying yourself bare, and it can be scary. But poets who create bonds with their readers will always have a better chance of winning new readers over poets who don't. I'll talk more about this later, but for now just remember that poetry is a reflection of who you are, and that needs to be your brand. That brand doesn't have to be sterling—you have the rest of your life to get there.

Few poets write perfect collections the first time. When I read a poet's collected works, I enjoy seeing their transformation. I also find that I enjoy many of a poet's earlier poems because I can see them trying to find themselves and their voice. Readers enjoy this.

Let's remember the most important thing: the reason we write, the reason we love poetry, the reason we want to publish is because of readers. Without them, we have nothing. Let *them* be the ones to judge your work. Not you. Not an editor or publisher. Not other poets in your inner circles, but instead, random strangers. You'll learn far more from reader reviews than ten extraneous drafts that you probably didn't need in the first place.

Consider that we're in a digital age where readers want everything now, yesterday. Writers who spend years between collections run the risk of being forgotten.

It's About Consistency

At the very least, aim for consistency. 1-2 collections per year is a great start. My goal is 1 collection per year, and I think that's slow. But I write fiction, short stories, and nonfiction too, so poetry is only a small part of my portfolio. A poet who writes nothing but poetry could probably work much faster than me.

Imagine your work from a reader's perspective. What if your ideal reader finds your collection, loves it, and eagerly awaits your next work but there's nothing available? The longer they wait, the easier it is for them to forget about you. (And if you don't have a good website and a mailing list, you're screwed.) If you form connections with them and are consistent with your new releases, you will stay on their radar.

Right now, there is someone who is willing to give you their hard-earned money if you let them. They'll keep giving you money if you give them good stuff in return.

If you haven't done it already, take stock of yourself:

- * How many traditionally published collections do you have? How are they performing, and can you get the rights back for the poorest performing titles?

- * How much good unpublished work do you have? Which poems are ready for publication, and which ones need the most work? Can you develop a timeline to finish them?

- * How long does it take you to write a collection that you're happy with?

- * Can you write your next collection faster? Say, 10% faster the first time, and 20% faster the next time?

- * How fast is *too fast* for you?

- * How many collections can you release in a year? Five years? Ten years?

- * When you die, what do you want your body of work to look like? What do you want your bibliography page on Wikipedia to look like? What do you want readers to say about you? What steps can you take today to reach that legacy?

Write the best work you can, submit it to the editorial process without agonizing over it, publish it, move on, and learn as you go. You might be surprised at what happens.

To Publish or Self-Publish

Poets have two choices when it's time to publish. They can publish traditionally through a magazine or a publisher, or they can self-publish. While I am an advocate of self-publishing, every poet has to make his/her own decision. Both ways are perfectly valid, but you have to figure out what works best with your goals.

Publishing Traditionally

There's not much to say here that most poets don't already know. To publish a poem or a series of poems in a literary magazine or journal, you have to format a manuscript with your selected poems, format each one in accordance to each magazine's standards, submit it the magazine (via US Mail or electronically through a submission system), and wait several weeks to several months to determine if they accept your work. If they accept your work, you can expect your poems to go live anywhere from several days to several months after acceptance.

For a poetry collection, you have to query a publisher with a sample from your collection, and if they accept you, the process is the same as above.

Financially, there's little risk for the poet on the traditional route. The most significant expense a poet incurs is submission and postage fees. The publisher usually takes care of the cover and editing. Magazine editors may or may not provide editing services for accepted poems.

For a collection, you may receive an advance, but for a poetry collection, it probably won't be much. For sales that surpass your advance, the publisher will send you royalties, usually monthly, quarterly, or twice a year. The standard royalty rate is around 12-20% of net sales. So, if the royalties are 17%, and if a publisher sells a poetry collection for \$9.99, and the retailer takes 45%, which leaves \$5.50 left over. From that amount, the publisher makes \$4.56 and the poet makes \$0.93.

That being said, contracts and royalty situations vary, and every poet's situation will be different. It depends on their platforms, their past book performance, and the reputation of the publisher.

The publisher takes the lion's share of the royalties because they're taking all the risk.

If you're published in a magazine, you'll likely be paid in contributor's copies (or a monetary sum if the magazine has the capital, but most don't).

If you publish a collection with a traditional publisher, they will likely attempt to get your book into local bookstores in your area, or in regions where they have existing relationships with booksellers. They may also do some limited promotion in literary magazines and other places where poetry readers frequent. They may continue to promote you over time, but their business model depends on constantly finding new poetry collections to publish, and despite how good your title is, it has a shelf life. **Ultimately, it will be your responsibility to market your work because your publisher won't promote you forever.**

The pros of publishing traditionally:

- * little financial risk
- * it feels good to have a publisher behind you
- * publishers have a larger reach than most poets
- * publishers take care of the process, freeing up time for you to continue writing

The cons:

- * royalties are lower
- * no guarantee of acceptance
- * fierce competition
- * the publication process takes a very, very long time
- * publishing contracts can stifle a writer's output and tie up their copyrights

Self-Publishing

Self-publishing is easier, but it's not.

Instead of submitting a poem to a publisher, a poet can take on the costs of editing, formatting, and cover design themselves in order to create a professional book. Poets can find freelancers on places like 99 Designs and Upwork, or through referrals from other poets.

Despite what some may say, these costs range from cheap to affordable in most cases as long as the poet does his/her homework. Print on-demand services allow a writer to order books only when they are needed. For ebooks, the inventory is digital.

The poet is responsible for creating a professional-looking collection. Once it's ready, it can be published on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Apple, etc. Poets can also develop relationships with indie bookstores and libraries to make the collection available there as well.

Upon publication, a poet is responsible for his/her marketing. Right now, there aren't many promotional opportunities that poets can use to promote their work, but the existing opportunities are fairly inexpensive. The best marketing opportunities right now are using free pricing as a loss leader, networking on social media poetry groups, querying book bloggers, and building relationships with other poets. As the market grows, the number of promotional opportunities will increase.

Self-publishing royalties tend to be much higher than the traditional route. If a book is priced \$9.99, the author makes anywhere from 60-70% of the retail value depending on the retailer. For \$9.99 title, a self-published poet would make \$6.99 for every collection sold.

So, the pros:

- * author retains artistic control over their work
- * author controls every aspect of the process, which can be gratifying
- * higher royalties
- * poets can publish good work freely without worrying about acceptance
- * self-publishers are continuing to extend their reach, rivaling that of publishers
- * little competition on retailers like Amazon
- * the number of resources available is staggering

The cons:

- * poets have to incur financial risk
- * some readers and fellow colleagues won't take you seriously

- * your self-published works are ineligible for most literary magazines and traditional publishers
- * poets not only have to learn how to write—they have to learn basics of cover design, editing, marketing and promotion (I argue that this is more of a pro, though)
- * it's hard to break into the print market, and the digital poetry market is very small right now

What's Your Choice?

Those are both paths. Obviously, I prefer self-publishing. I prefer to get my works to market faster and keep control over my rights.

You have to make your decision based on what's right for you, but I remind you:

- * self-publishing is losing its stigma
- * the market is going digital, and self-published works rule the digital realm because publishers can't offer the same advantages as they can with print
- * more contemporary poets are going to self-publish in the future, whether you do it or not

As more poets jump into the market, promotional opportunities will grow. It will also be harder to market your work once more poets enter the market, so the best time to self-publish is now.

But there's another option, too.

No one says you have to exclusively publish with a publisher or self-publish. You can do both!

My Recommendations

Here is my personal poetry strategy.

I'll write my poetry collections with a specific theme in mind. Then as I write poems, I will submit them to magazines and see what acceptances I can get. After a period of about four months from the last poem submission, I wait for the acceptances and rejections to roll in, withdraw from markets that haven't responded, then compile the poems into a collection.

I'll self-publish my poetry collections. Each collection will include a call to action requesting a review and to join my mailing list. As I release more collections, readers can get my next collection and/or an audiobook version of the collection for free if they leave a review.

I'll submit the stronger poems in my published collections to litmags that accept previously published work (if I haven't submitted to them already). Publication serves as cheap advertising for the collection; on the day of publication, I'll discount my collection for readers who are interested in my work.

Readers who join my mailing list will get a series of original poems delivered to their inbox. It will also steer them toward my fiction, giving me time to breathe during collections without worrying about being forgotten.

Every quarter, I'll keep a small but strong list of previously unpublished poems to submit to the rest of the litmags out there. After 1-2 rejections, those poems either go into the next collection or get added to my mailing list autoresponders for subscribers. If they get accepted, I'll use publication in the magazine as advertising, though it won't be as effective. The published poems will eventually make it into either my autoresponders or future collections. I don't spend much time on this part, because it requires a lot of time to write, submit, and recycle previously unpublished work. But I recognize that this is the market preference right now, and it would be foolish of me not to compete. Ultimately though, my time is better spent writing and self-publishing my collections, and using magazines for marketing.

My strategy mixes traditional and self-publishing. This style works for me. Maybe it'll work for you. Maybe it won't. But it's worth a shot. Just don't forget that landscape is changing—you have to be able to pivot on a moment's notice, even if it's inconvenient. Being flexible is a skill that every writer must have in order to succeed in today's rapidly changing market.

A Word on Accessibility

A few chapters ago, I wrote about how poets can use the current market to their advantage. This chapter is about growing that market.

Poetry has a reputation for being notoriously difficult. It's perceived as a highly intellectual field populated by intellectuals, most of whom reside in academia.

Academia is where you'll find most contemporary poets because it's one of the few places where poets are encouraged to perfect their craft. My views on academia are mixed, so I won't go into them here. But academia can be a sheltered place, and poetry's isolation has done it more harm than good.

If you ask people why they don't read poetry, you'll probably hear the following reasons:

"I don't get it."

"I read it in high school and hated it."

"It's too pretentious."

"It's too difficult to understand."

"It's too esoteric."

I believe that a lot of contemporary poetry *is* too introspective, esoteric, pretentious, and presumptuous. It alienates all but the most devout poetry lovers and relegates poetry to the status of an obscure category when its potential is so much greater.

Whether you agree with me, poetry has an accessibility problem. In fact, accessibility is the most important challenge that poetry faces in the 21st century. If we don't fix this, poetry will have a hard time surviving outside the walls of academia.

What does accessibility mean, and who exactly are we talking about when we talk about it?

Accessibility is the ability for a casual reader to read, understand, and enjoy a poem.

For the sake of this chapter, we're not going to talk about devoted poetry readers, because they're going to stick with us no matter what we do. We need to focus on growing the existing readership.

There have been many discussions about whether making poetry accessible “dumbs it down” or devalues more literary work. I don't believe that accessible poetry hurts anyone. The more people who read poetry, the better. We as poets and publishers should always be looking for ways to find new readers, but the sad truth is that most readers just aren't interested because of the reasons I mentioned above.

Yet poets like Billy Collins, Ted Kooser, Maya Angelou, and Mary Oliver are considered to be “accessible” and respected by both casual readers and the literary community.

What are they doing that other poets aren't, and what can we learn from them as we advance poetry into the 21st century where time is limited, attention spans are short, and everything is digital? What can *we* do to make poetry more accessible without compromising its integrity?

I'll make a bold prediction: poets who can crack the accessibility problem will succeed in the digital era. This may require some poets to make changes. Change is good, and we have to keep evolving in order to thrive, and so does poetry.

My advice to poets is to pay more attention to accessibility than you have in the past. Maybe your existing work is fine. Maybe your future work can be adjusted slightly without any major sacrifice from your part. Maybe you need to make some major changes. Just as fiction writers have to know their market, poets also have to learn to write accessibly.

Three Ways to Think About Accessibility

Poets can improve accessibility in three ways:

- * Content
- * Language
- * Form

If your traditionally-published work doesn't sell, if you have trouble reaching readers, if you have bad reviews, if your publisher can't sell your book, if you can't sell your books after poetry

readings—you might have an accessibility problem. I recommend starting with one of the categories above and just giving the methods below a try. Maybe they won't work for you, but maybe they will.

(1) Content

The easiest way to approach accessibility is through content. If you think in terms of themes and interests, your marketing will take care of itself.

Poetry is unique in that every poem is content marketing. If done correctly, every poem you write has a target audience, and you can micro-market those poems to that audience. A great example is Mary Oliver's "Dog Songs." What a great gift to give to the dog lover in your life!

The term "content marketing" might make some people squirm. Sometimes it feels scammy because it's not organic—it's a tactic that some marketers use to take your money.

But when content marketing is organic and authentic, it's a beautiful thing.

Let me give you some examples:

* You're from Brooklyn, and you love your hometown. You write a collection of poems that tie into the most famous parts of the city. People love this type of thing.

* You like to fish. You write a poem about reflections you've had while you were fishing over the years. Now, people can read *your* book while they're fishing, and maybe you'll give them new things to think about, creating a bond with them.

* You're a World of Warcraft fan, so you write a collection of poems that tie into the WOW experience.

* You're a parent of an autistic child, so you write a collection of poems about you and your child's unique observations.

That's a wide range of ideas. **Every poet has at least 2-3 interests that readers also share.**

If you can make the content of your poems relatable, you'll position yourself for exposure. You'll probably find, as I have, that people want to appreciate poetry, but they want it to speak to them. If you appeal to their interests, you'll gain their respect, new readers and/or positive word

of mouth. Write enough about that subject matter and you'll develop a platform.

(2) Language

Avoid confusing and esoteric language. Speak to readers on their level without making them work too hard to understand what you're saying.

Don't:

- * use difficult words because they're difficult, interesting, or fun.
- * name drop (i.e. insert names of plants, people, flowers, animals, or other obscure terms that 80% of readers won't understand. Poets are notorious for this.)
- * write about things that only a small group of people will understand (unless you are specifically marketing that poem to them).

Do:

- * use familiar words in new and unique ways.
- * use interesting words that may not be familiar but make sense contextually (nothing wrong with having to reach for a dictionary; just make it sparingly)
- * keep the reader in mind at all times.

There's a famous story about Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon. In a board meeting, he left an empty chair at the table. When someone asked him why, he said that the chair is for the customer—the people who matter most to the company.

I love that story.

As poets, it's easy to get so wrapped up in language that we forget the people we're writing for. I'm definitely guilty of that. But we have to remember our readers.

Create an ideal reader and make them feel real. Print a photo of a random person off the internet and put it on your desk. Imagine that person when you write.

I went to Goodreads and downloaded a random picture of a typical reader. I gave her a personality, a biography, interests, favorite books, and most-hated books. I made her feel real. I put her profile and photo in all of my book projects, so every time I load up the file, I see her name. It sounds silly, but it keeps me honest.

(3) Form

Many poets complain that ereaders and tablets don't replicate poems the same way that the poet intended. It's true that ereaders don't reproduce poems the same way they appear on the page, but that's not a bad thing.

Readers choose how they want to consume content in this digital age. Print, ebook, or audio—it's their choice, and we have to honor that. We can keep making futile attempts to assert control over our work, or we can stop worrying about it and focus on the content of our poems, which is the only thing that readers actually care about.

Readers today read fiction and poetry for entertainment and for a message. They're reading on their phones and tablets. They're reading on the bus, in the car, in the checkout line at the grocery store. In the digital age where text is reflowable and fluid, content trumps form.

Does that mean that we should abolish formal, metered, or adventurous free form poetry? No. We just have to evolve.

Sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, and other formal poems will probably appear just fine on ereaders. As will lyrical poems.

Formatting poetry is relatively easy, I'm fine with how my poems look, even if Uncle Joe blows up the text to suit his poor eyesight. I respect Uncle Joe's right to read how he chooses, and more importantly, I appreciate the fact that he bought my book. Had it not been for ereaders, he might not have purchased it. And maybe as a result of the purchase, he'll tell a few of his friends.

That's how we have to think.

An Accessibility Checklist

The next time you write a poem, ask yourself these four questions:

- * Is the language clear, concise, and easy to understand?
- * Did you write it with the reader in mind?
- * Can the reader relate to it? Is it about something familiar to them, like their dogs, nature, video games, fishing, or parenting? Could they tell a friend what the poem is about and how it made them feel?

* Did you enjoy writing it?

If it passes all those checks, then you're well on your way.

If not, start with one of the above categories and consider making some small changes.

Figure out what works for you. You can probably make some changes in one area that will do wonders for you without sacrificing your message or artistic sensibility.

Poetry isn't about poets. It's about readers. Readers are ruthless when selecting what they read, so we have to constantly make sure that we're writing poems that have value and speak to them, even if that means evolving the way we write.

Freelancers and Why You Need Them

For poets who publish traditionally, the publisher usually takes care of all the publishing tasks, but poets who self-publish will have to work with freelancers to create professional collections. This chapter is about the different people you will work with over the course of your career.

Cover Designers

Cover designers create the most important part of your book—the cover. They can create a cover for your ebook, paperback, and audiobook.

You have two options when choosing an artist:

- * You can work with a single artist.
- * You can crowdsource your design.

If you work with a single artist, you'll need to ask around for a good artist. Your best bet is somewhere like Elance, where you can post what you're looking for and get bids from willing designers. If you don't have much money, you can also spring for a pre-made book cover. If you're *really* on a budget, you can even find a cover designer on Fiverr. The latter is not really recommended, but there are some good designers just starting out who are willing to work cheaply to build a portfolio.

You should expect to pay anywhere from \$5-\$500 for a book cover. If you want a premium designer, you can expect to pay up to \$1000. Since we're talking about poetry here, aim for the middle of the spectrum. Think like a businessperson and control your costs.

If you want to crowdsource your design, you can use a website like 99 Designs. For \$299, you can post a brief and get designs from multiple designers. You pick the design you like, and you

get your money back if you don't like any of the submissions. You can't lose, really. I haven't used 99 Designs, but I know a lot of people who are happy with their covers.

I should also mention that you can also design your own book cover. Unless you have a lot of experience in design, I don't recommend this. Your cover will probably look amateurish and hurt your sales. However, there are a number of resources available to help you design your own book cover if you want to do it.

Editors

As more poets self-publish, more editors will enter the marketplace who have expertise in poetry, so the cost estimates I give below may fluctuate.

There are three types of editors: developmental editors, copyeditors, and proofreaders. Poets should focus on the last two.

Before I proceed, I need to stress the importance of good beta readers. You want a few readers to read your work first and offer feedback so that your manuscript is as good as you can make it before sending it to a professional. Beta readers are relatively easy to find. Make sure you find someone who can give you objective feedback on your work. In my opinion, beta readers serve the function of developmental editors (for poetry at least—not the case with fiction), giving you critical feedback at the early stage when your work needs it the most. Don't abuse your beta readers by giving them crappy manuscripts, though.

Copyeditors

Copyeditors review your poems line by line to make sure that 1.) there aren't any spelling or grammatical errors and 2.) your usage is correct.

Some poets squirm at the thought of their precious poems being copyedited, but I believe it's necessary. Poems don't always follow conventional grammar or language conventions, but having an editor will force you to think about your choices, and most importantly, be able to justify them. If you can find a copyeditor who has experience with poetry, that will make the editing process easier, too.

I'll give you an example of how important a copyeditor is: for my poem, "Salsa Dancing," here is one of my original lines:

the space around our bodies
becomes a psychotic blur

My editor took issue with the word "psychotic" because it has some negative connotations. She understood the poem, the context, and what I was trying to say, and she suggest a better word: kinetic. I had never thought of kinetic, and it was perfect. I changed it immediately.

Now some readers might read psychotic and not think twice about it, but some would. Kinetic is neutral but still creates the image that I was going for.

Copyeditors charge by the hour, but you can probably expect to pay anywhere from \$100-\$350 for a poetry collection, maybe more depending on the editor's expertise.

Proofreaders

Proofreaders check your manuscript for spelling errors. After your copyeditor picks your poems apart and you put them back together again, you'll always have a few errors. Remember, every error a proofreader catches is one that readers will never know about. Readers can be unforgiving when it comes to typos, so spend the money upfront to eliminate as many of them as humanly possible.

You can expect to pay a proofreader anywhere from \$50-\$200 depending on your manuscript. Proofreading is the easiest of all the editing tasks, so if you're going to skimp in any category, you can do it here. Hire a few people on Fiverr to comb through the book for any glaring errors, or send the book back to your beta readers for a final pass. I have a relationship with my editors so I prefer to use them for every book I publish, but the choice is yours.

Formatters

Formatters take your manuscript and make it look good for print and ebook versions. They

may or may not have to use HTML, though the best formatters offer to hand-code your book in HTML for the best results. If you have a collection that requires complicated formatting, a formatter is probably worth your money, but most poets don't need one.

You can learn the basics of formatting by yourself and save yourself some money. I format all of my own books. It took me several hours to learn, but now I spend almost no time on formatting.

For an ebook, you'll probably pay between \$75-100 for a formatter. For a paperback, expect to pay \$100-\$150. If for some reason you want to produce a hard cover version of your work, formatters will charge you at least \$150, maybe more depending on the complexity of your poems.

If you have a Mac, can bypass everything I just said and buy [Vellum](#) for all your formatting needs.

Audiobook Narrators

If you want to produce an audiobook version of your poetry, you can work with a narrator. Again, this is something I specifically recommend that poets do themselves, but not everyone has the time, resources, or energy to devote to audio production.

A narrator can take your poems and breathe life into them that you never knew they had.

You can pay a narrator by the finished production hour, usually anywhere from \$250-\$500 for the good narrators. But that's expensive, and most authors use a platform like the Audible Creation Exchange (ACX) to engage in a royalty-share for every book sold. Audible pays 40% of each sale, and you and the narrator each get 50% of that amount.

Shorter books don't do as well in audio format, and most narrators probably won't be interested in poetry though, so you're better off learning to narrate your collections yourself and compiling them into a New & Selected or Collected collection to beef up the book's length.

You can purchase the necessary equipment from Audible's Wishlist on Amazon.com. If you're really on a budget, you only need four things: a quiet space, a microphone, a preamp, and something to dampen the sound, whether it be a blanket, isolation box, or acoustic foam.

Translators

In some cases, you may work with a translator to have your poems translated into another language. Translation is an art all its own, which is why it's so expensive. You can either pay someone up-front or engage in a joint venture with a translator to get a work translated. Unless you're selling a lot of books, you may never work with a translator, but foreign markets are growing and anything could happen in the next decade. If you write fiction, your chances of working with a translator are much higher.

Virtual Assistant

A virtual assistant handles your affairs online and any other tasks you may need. I've seen some people use them to manage email, and I've seen other writers use them to manage virtually every aspect of the writing business except writing. Here is a short list of the many things a virtual assistant can do:

- * Screen emails
- * Query agents, publishers, and book bloggers
- * Organize your schedule
- * Website maintenance
- * Social media account management
- * Proofreading
- * Book formatting
- * Scheduling promotions

I've even seen virtual assistants help writers with accounting, calculating their royalties and creating easy-to-read analytics.

VAs can be cheap or expensive, depending on what you need them to do. They can help you with behind-the-scenes, nuts and bolts tasks that you don't always have time for while you focus on writing.

When you're just starting out, you won't need a virtual assistant. In fact, I recommend that

you learn how to do every aspect of the business yourself. This way, as you develop your business, you can slowly outsource as you grow, and you'll know when your VA is doing a good job.

Personally, I'm getting to the point where I'm going to need a VA soon, probably in the next year or two. It hit me after book #7. I spend so much time on behind-the-scenes stuff that it's actually losing me money. As I make more from my books, it will make business sense for me to outsource some things—namely website maintenance, review requests, and promotion scheduling.

I won't even give a price estimate for VAs because they vary widely. If you want to hire one, do your homework and ask around. Look for VAs who have experience working with writers.

But as always, there's a caveat. Remember, control your costs. Don't:

- * hire a VA because it will make you “look” important
- * hire a VA because you're not willing to do the work yourself (because you'll overpay them when you could just as easily do the same things yourself)
- * hire a VA because you don't want to talk to people (nothing worse than emailing a friend and getting a response from their VA)
- * hire a VA without a specific business need for them. The more specific, the better.
- * give control to a VA that you're not comfortable with. Don't be silly and give them access to your bank account information (I know someone who did this).

A VA can be a wonderful asset. Just make sure that if you hire one, it makes business sense.

Scammers

Finally, there are the people you don't want to work with. There is an industry of scammers who love to take advantage of newbie and unsuspecting writers. Scammers come in many forms, including the categories of freelancers I mentioned above.

Here are the folks you really need to watch out for.

Vanity Publishers

The difference between a vanity publisher and a print-on demand publisher is that vanity publishers require you to pay upfront for a print run. You'll have to pay several thousand dollars to get X number of your books to sell on your own. The publisher will help you with a cover design, but very seldom with editing. The end product almost always looks bad. Please don't do this—this is why self-publishing used to have a bad name. In contrast, a print on-demand publisher like Amazon's CreateSpace only prints books when the author requests it, and there are no up-front payments, so the publisher (and author) only incur costs when they actually sell a book. Big difference.

Publicists/Marketers

No one can promise sales in the digital environment. Not even bestsellers can always explain why their books sell. There's no magic bullet here, and any marketer who tells you that they can guarantee sales will probably just take your money and do you a complete disservice. Unless you're a bestselling author, I would steer clear of marketers and publicists.

Writing Coaches

A lot of people will offer “writing” services to you. There's nothing wrong with this in and of itself (I also offer consulting services), but it's important to be realistic about what you're looking for. A coach can help you get farther faster, but they can also take your money. Here are the signs of a good writing coach:

- * They have an active blog, social media, or website presence.
- * They have multiple books out (and therefore understand the process that they're teaching you).
- * They offer a money-back guarantee.
- * They focus on your needs, not their own.

Always do your homework, and as long as you exercise common sense, you won't have to worry about predators.

That's a lot of people to work with, but it's rewarding because you'll form relationships with great people who can help you do more than you can by yourself.

Self-publishing definitely has its costs and expenses, but I can guarantee you that I'm a smarter writer and businessperson after having worked with talented freelancers.

PART III: Your Poet Platform

Your Website

A website is the most important part of a writer's platform, yet few writers pay much attention to it. Some writers don't even have websites at all, poets especially.

In the digital age, a website is required. It's not negotiable.

There are plenty of resources on the internet about how to create a good website, so there's no excuse for ignorance. With platforms like WordPress and Weebly, setting up a website is easy.

Fiction writers understand the importance of a website, and it's hard to find a fiction writer who doesn't have one.

For those poets who do have websites, I can count on one hand the number of good ones I've seen. Google your favorite contemporary poet and pay attention to what you see.

As I said before, a website is non-negotiable. Readers need to be able to learn about you, your books, and connect with you. A website is your home base, where your readers' journey with you begins.

In my opinion, if I read a collection that I love, my natural instinct is to learn more about the poet who wrote it. If there's no website, I feel let down. I almost feel as if the poet doesn't care about me as a reader. Maybe that's not true, but it's my gut reaction.

If I go to a poet's website and it looks like it was made in 1998, that's not good, either. This signifies someone who is behind the times. I'll browse the site and get as much info as I can, but I probably won't be back.

If I go to a poet's website and it has gimmicks on it like interactive pop-ups or Flash intros, or music that plays when you land on the homepage, that just makes me mad. Really mad.

Be unique with your poetry but not your website.

Website Must-Dos

Here a few things that every website should do well:

- * It should be clean, elegant, with lots of space for your text to breathe.
- * The text should be clear, easy to read, and in a web-based font.
- * The site should be speedy. You want readers to find the information they're looking for quickly, without having to worry about big images loading.
- * The content should be lean. Don't overload your site with tons of pages. Keep it simple.
- * It should be focused. If you write poetry, keep it to poetry. Don't include other things you're interested in such as hobbies unless they tie into your poetry. And even then, make sure that the focus of the site is on you and your work.

If you do the above, you'll have a good, functional website. Start with those, and then see what else could use work. It doesn't have to be perfect, just functional. You can add stuff and perfect it slowly over time.

Required Pages

Here are the page elements that every website needs to have:

The Homepage is the first impression, so it needs to be good. I recommend featuring a photo of your newest release's book cover above the fold. Others put photos of themselves in prominent view. It doesn't matter what you do—just make it clear to readers that they're in the right place, and don't clutter the page.

The About page is the most important page on your site. A good about page communicates to the reader who you are, what you stand for, and what you write about. Your bio should be thorough but brief. I recommend 250-750 words. Anything longer than that is a chore to read, unless you break up the page with photos, video, section breaks, and/or bulleted lists. Remember that most people browse the internet these days on their phones and tablets, so give them what they need to know. You can give more information in your media kit. [Michael Hyatt](#) has the best About page I've ever seen.

The Books page features your books. It's the most straightforward page, but it's the place where many writers go wrong. At a minimum, your book page needs to have all your books featured prominently, with big cover images, book descriptions, and buy links to every retailer

where your books are available.

The Contact page is where readers and/or the media can contact you via a listed email address or a contact form. I do not recommend pasting your email address in plain text because you will be spammed until the end of time. If you're going to include your email address, use a JavaScript code (it's easy—just Google how to do it). Or, easiest of all, use a contact form. WordPress has a standard form built in, and there are easy-to-use plugins that let you build your own customizable forms.

I recommend that every poet have a contact page. Avoid language that defers people to someone else, such as "For inquiries, contact my agent." It's okay to have your agent's info on this page for the purpose of discussing rights, but for everything else, you'll win points with readers for putting your personal info here. If you don't do that, you'll look out of touch. A famous writer can get away with this, but most of us can't. Being accessible, personable, and available should be an important part of any writer's platform.

I monitor my email religiously and I personally respond to every email I receive. This will be harder to do as my writing business grows, so I'm enjoying this while I can. I love connecting with fans. I love receiving fan mail, too—it's the most gratifying thing you can receive as a writer, far more than any royalties. You can't get fan mail if you don't provide a way for fans to send it to you!

A signup form for your mailing list. This is different from the contact page. Whereas the contact page is for readers to connect with you, your mailing list is how you maintain that connection. I'll talk about that in the next chapter.

A Press/Media page is optional, but if you make public appearances, it's essential. This is where bloggers, podcasters, interviewers, and other media personnel can go to learn more about you.

Some might ask, what's the difference between the About page and the Press page? The Press page is where you communicate your brand. Your About page summarizes your brand by giving readers what they need to know. But if someone wants to interview you on their website, they will need more information. I'll cover the specifics of building your Press page later.

A Speaking page is also optional, but if you plan to do public speaking, it's nice to have. It's a good idea to include photos and video of yourself speaking, and compelling copy that explains

your speaking experience, your topics, and what you can bring to an event. I recommend having a separate, optimized contact form on this page so that clients can put information about their event in their inquiry.

As my career grows, I intend to do more public speaking on writer-oriented events, so a Speaking page is a must for me. For a great book that covers this topic in greater detail, check out [Public Speaking for Authors by Joanna Penn](#).

A Blog is also optional. You don't need to blog to grow a platform, though it can help. Blogging is easy to start but hard to maintain. If you're going to do it, you'll need to figure out what your content will be, and you'll have to keep it going. There's nothing worse than seeing a blog that hasn't been updated in months. Blogging is a delicate art form, and there are hundreds of resources online to help you.

That's it. You don't need anything else. None of these pages require any special formatting or code. If you use a platform like WordPress, it's as simple as typing in what you want and rearranging the content how you want it to appear.

What Not to Do

Here's what you should NOT include on your website.

A Calendar page, unless you maintain an active speaking schedule, which most writers don't. 99% of the time, this page just ends up neglected.

Anything on your site that does not directly relate to your poetry, writing, or writing career. Your readers might be interested, but not here. If you really want to share something non-writer related, use social media. For example, I'm a former musician and used to write music. I would love to share that with my fans, but my website isn't the place because it confuses my brand. I posted my music to YouTube and SoundCloud instead.

Anything weird or creepy. I shouldn't have to say this, but I've seen some strange stuff.

A Tale of Two Poet Websites

I'm going to dissect two poet websites so you can see exactly what I'm talking about. I'm not

going to call out any bad websites; in fact, I'm going to do the opposite--I'm going to show you an example of a great one and an example of a good one that could be even better.

(1) Ted Kooser

A poet who has a good website is [Ted Kooser](#), former United States Poet Laureate. While the design could be much better, I like Kooser's site because all the elements are there.

Also, Kooser's legacy in the poetry world is cemented, so I think it's fair to critique his website because he can do whatever the heck he wants and probably get away with it. And, I think that this examination will be instructive for other poets.

Here's what I like about Kooser's site:

- * When you search for his name in Google, his website is the first search result. Also, photos and excerpts from his Wikipedia profile also appear that help validate the search.

- * The website loads quickly.

- * There are pictures of him on the homepage. Right away, you know that you're in the right place.

- * He has samples of his work right on the homepage. In fact, there's embedded video so you can see him reading his poems. That's a fantastic idea. He's an eloquent speaker, too. The video widget is a bit awkward, but it works.

- * His About page is thorough and lists everything you need to know about him in one place.

- * On his Book page, all of his books are showcased, with links to purchase from his publisher.

- * His Press page contains all of his media appearances for anyone who is interested.

- * His Audio/Video page contains a vast amount of multimedia—something incredibly rare among poets.

- * He has several of his best poems on his website for free so you can get a sense of whether you would like his work or not.

- * He has all of his personal contact info so readers can contact him—even his personal address. If I ever wanted to contact him, I would feel comfortable doing it.

Here's what could be better:

- * The resolution of the website. You can tell that it was created many years ago or by someone inexperienced because it doesn't take up the entire browser window.

- * Better photos with better resolutions. The photos are pixelated, he's too far away, and his face could be more prominent.

- * Better page design. They're awfully text-heavy and could be broken up into chunks (with section breaks) for easier scanning.

- * Easier buy links. I understand the need to link to his publisher, but it would be much easier for readers to be able to get direct buy links from Kooser's site. If the publisher really wants to be included, they could give Kooser affiliate links so that if readers click the buy links on Kooser's site, the publisher gets a commission from each purchase.

Those are big criticisms, but the website is still functional. You could certainly do much worse.

(2) Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie has a great website. I like his work a lot, and he does a good job of staying with current trends. While his novels are more well-known than his poetry, I still consider him a poet (and a good one).

His website is www.shermanalexie.com

Here's what Alexie does right:

- * When you search for his name, his website is the first search result. Also, photos and excerpts from his Wikipedia profile also appear that help validate the search.

- * The homepage, while it could use some color, is simple.

- * The navigation is simple, and at a second's glance, it's immediate what kind of writer he is: he writes novels, short stories, poetry, and his books are available in ebook format.

- * His book page is warm and inviting, with large photos of his covers that go directly to his publisher's website, where all of the buy links are located.

- * His ebooks page is perfect. His covers are beautiful, and he has links to every major retailer so that readers can choose where to buy his work, and in their preferred format.

- * He has a place where readers can see videos of him doing media interviews and reading his work.

- * He has a mailing list. He's one of the only poets out there I've seen who has one.

Here's what could be better:

- * He has a blog, though it hasn't been updated in a while (as of September 2014).

- * The Calendar page is blank and hasn't been updated.

- * He has several points of contact regarding different rights. I wouldn't expect a writer at his level to have a personal contact form, but unless you're in the same camp as Alexie, *you* should.

So those are two examples of poet websites that you can use as starting points. Both are good, but with the existing tools out there, you can do much better.

Make your site good. Make it modern. The investment will pay for itself.

Your Mailing List

A mailing list is how you keep in touch with your readers and notify them about new work. In exchange for an email address, you send them email updates about you and your work.

In the digital age, a mailing list separates serious writers from amateurs. If you don't have one, you're losing money. It's that powerful.

Here are two examples that show the power of the mailing list.

Poet A has a decent-sized platform of readers who like his work. He releases a new collection, one that he considers his best work. He publishes his book, and his sales are dismal, but he can't figure out why because his readers liked his last collection.

Poet B has a mailing list on her website, and she has been growing her list for the last few years. She has several hundred people on the list who eagerly await her new collection. She keeps them updated throughout the life of the collection, and when it's ready, she sends them an email when the book is available with buy links. A large percentage of the people on her list buy the book, giving her a huge boost in sales on launch day, catapulting her up the bestseller and popularity charts, giving her book additional exposure (and a few more sales).

New readers who buy her book then sign up for her mailing list, so the next time she releases a book, the launch will be bigger and more sustained.

See the difference?

A mailing list isn't for spamming readers. They're giving you permission to contact them. In fact, they're expecting to hear from you. As long as you don't spam them or give them content they don't like, they'll stick with you.

Remember the old adage in business that says "It's easier to keep a customer than acquire a new one?" A mailing list is the writer's way of keeping a reader. It's hard work to find readers, so you want to keep as many of them around you as possible.

Setting up a mailing list is easy, and there are many mailing list programs you can use. I

recommend Aweber or Mailchimp.

Do NOT use your personal email client like Gmail or Yahoo to notify readers of new work. It's spam, and in some countries (like the United States), it's a violation of the CAN-SPAM Act. You can get into big trouble if you get caught spamming, so don't do that.

Mailchimp and Aweber are permission-based email clients, which means that readers have to enter their email address and opt-in to receive updates. Once they've opted in, you're free to send them emails without worrying about breaking spam laws. Also, emails from Mailchimp and Aweber are less likely to end up in junk folders.

Mailchimp is free for the first 2,000 email subscribers. Aweber starts at \$84/year. Both are great and highly recommended.

A mailing list is useful in other ways, too:

- * If your website goes down, you can communicate with your readers to let them know when it will be back up.

- * If your poem appears in a literary magazine, you can notify your readers so they can grab a copy.

- * If you need feedback on a book cover, a website design, or author photo, ask your list and get their opinion.

- * Send your readers free poems or stories from time to time, just because.

Readers love it when you provide value. Don't be afraid to do something different to show your appreciation for them. But always respect them, their privacy, and their time.

Growing Your List

Writers can use several strategies to grow their mailing list.

Readers want to hear from their favorite writers, but they may not join your list unless they have a reason to do so. The generic phrase "Join My List and Get Free Updates!" isn't always effective.

Here *is* an effective strategy that works for many writers: offer free content in exchange for

their email address.

Here is a method you can use to grow your list.

I offer any full-length ebook in my catalogue for free to anyone who joins my mailing list. My subscribers are called “Fearless Readers”.

In the back of my ebooks, I include a message that thanks the reader for reading the book, and I briefly explain the offer and include a link to my site (see the page titled “Thanks for reading” to see what it looks like).

When readers click on that link, it goes to a special landing page on my site with copy written specifically to entice them to join my mailing list. When readers get to the bottom of the page, they see a call to action where they can enter their email address and select their free book.

Immediately after the reader opts-in, they receive an automated email (called an autoresponder) that I created with their book attached. The email is personal, friendly, and short.

Two days after that, they receive another autoresponder from me that follows up to make sure they were able to open the book. This email is also intended to remind them about the book in case they forgot. If they’ve started reading the book, I also encourage them to hit reply and let me know what they think. The reply goes to my email address and I will respond personally, which usually starts a nice conversation.

One week after they sign up, they receive a special short story, attached as a PDF. This email is a bit longer, and it’s very personal, meant to connect with the reader. For example, for readers who select *Eaten*, they receive an auto responder that talks about my earlier beginnings as a writer, and how *Eaten* is my origin story in many ways. They get a free short story, “Vegetable Intervention,” which is the first story I wrote after becoming serious about writing, and it takes place in the *Eaten* universe.

If the reader signs up for any of my standalone novels, they receive a short story from my short story collection, *Reconciled People* (which also has the bonus of promoting that collection). If they sign up for my poetry collection, they’ll (eventually) receive a series of previously unpublished poems. I segment my list based on who downloads my books. So if I have *Eaten*-related news geared toward *Eaten* fans, I might send that update only to them, especially if my poetry readers aren’t interested.

They don't receive any more emails from me until it's time for an update. The autoresponder series is meant to get them comfortable with opening emails from me, and to give them something else to remember me by.

That was the strategy I used to use, perfected after months of trial and error. My process is a bit different now because I have so many books out, but you can take the above process and simplify it for your own needs. It works.

I don't spam my readers, and I leave them alone unless I have something to tell them. My open and click rates are in the 70s—much higher than the industry average—and I keep my readers happy.

Before I figured out the above workflow, my offer was “Join My Mailing List,” with no offer or incentive. My list was so small it was laughable, and I got a signup every few months.

When I implemented this strategy, my signups increased 100%, and my list grew every month. Soon, I'll be Poet B.

A great book on this topic is *Your First 1000 Copies* by Tim Grahl. This book changed my perspective on how powerful a mailing list can be. It's required reading, and it explores this topic in much greater detail.

Social Media

You don't have to use social media, but if you use it correctly, it can help you.

Social media is how you broadcast to people who aren't on your mailing list.

Imagine your writing career as an octopus. You and your books are the head. Your website, mailing list, promotions, and social media are your tentacles. They're meant to "grab" readers and deliver them to your home base.

There are a number of social media resources on the Internet. A simple Google search will help you find what you're looking for.

Here's a brief overview of the social media networks and how poets can use them.

Facebook

Everyone has Facebook. It's where writers can connect with their fans and other writers. People prefer to connect with people they know personally.

Twitter

This is where people go to get news. People who have a sense of humor and who aren't afraid to broadcast about their lives tend to do well on Twitter. The best use of for poets is to follow other writers or important people to get publishing news.

Google+

This unique network takes the best of Facebook and Twitter. You can follow your friends, but

you can also use hashtags á la Twitter. The most powerful part about Google+ is that it integrates with Google searches. If you use keywords in your content that relate to what people are looking for, they may stumble upon your post on Google+, which may lead them to your website. For example, this book exists as “The Future of Poetry” series on my blog, and each post is tied to specific keywords that I know that poets are searching for on Google. Every time I published a new post, I also posted a broadcast to Google+. When poets search for the keywords, my articles appear. This is how I built the audience for this book slowly over time.

Pinterest

Most writers don’t use Pinterest, but poets could probably do pretty well there. You have boards where you can “pin” things from the Internet—images, audio, video. You can share that board with the public, and people can like your pins and pin them on their own boards. If you link your pins back to your website, it’s free advertising. People who succeed on Pinterest usually have a great visual sense.

Social Media Etiquette

I recommend that you pick one or two networks and experiment with them. Learn how to get really good at them and see what kind of following you can obtain.

Don’t:

* **Spam.** People hate spam. If all you’re doing is posting about your books, you’re doing it wrong.

* **Cheat.** There are many ways to “gain followers” on every social network, but they never lead to new readers or sales.

* **Be a jerk.** Always maintain a positive attitude on social media, even if you’re in a bad mood. People may not always remember positive attitudes, but they never forget jerks.

* **Be a one-trick pony.** Post about interests other than writing. Connect with people.

* **Be weird.** I’ve followed a handful of people on social media over the years that I wish I had never met. Don’t develop a reputation as a “weird person.” What constitutes weird? If you have to ask, you’ll never know.

My social media strategy includes Facebook, Google+, and Pinterest. I've backed off from Twitter because I'm just not "sticky" there. I'm also starting to back away from Facebook because of the decreased visibility of posts. Pinterest is a lot of fun, and I think Google+ is the future.

Figure out what social network works best for you and then put your effort into it. If you are intentional about it and spend twenty minutes a day on your preferred network, you'll see results. If you don't develop followers right away, don't despair. It takes time to build a healthy following on social media networks. If you invest a lot of time and still don't get results, read some books and blogs on that particular network and try new techniques. If that doesn't work, try something else. Those who succeed do so because they're always trying something new.

Few of us are gifted enough to be social media masters, so we have to do the best we can. Just remember: if you don't have much time, you're always better off writing.

Press Kit

Developing press kits is fun, and it's one of the few times when it's okay to be a narcissist. Your press kit communicates your brand to the media and how you want them to portray you, so a healthy amount of self-inflating is required.

You're in control of your brand, and it's okay to tell the media how you want them to cover you. You need to make yourself look good.

Here is what I include in my press kit:

A full, one-page biography. My full bio covers everything you need to know about me. The best way to write this page is to imagine that you're writing a Wikipedia article about yourself.

A short, one paragraph bio. You'll need this for when bloggers and other websites feature you.

One-line bio. Write 3-4 of these. You'll need a few of them, and you'll use them most often. For example, if I'm writing a guest post on someone else's blog about fiction, I'll want a one-line bio at the end of the post that covers my novels. If I'm writing a guest post about poetry, I'll use a one bio that covers my poetry. If *I* am the feature of a guest post, I need one that broadly encompasses everything that I do.

High-resolution and low-resolution photographs. Sometimes the media will need photos of you. Make it easy for them. I have professional photos taken every year. I link to a page

on my site that contains the photos. A blogger will need a low-resolution photo that loads quickly. A print magazine will need a high-res photo. Make it easy for everyone.

List of recent appearances with links. This is optional, but if you write a guest post or do public speaking, list your credits here. If possible, put a link to the guest post or public speaking event so the media can review it if necessary. This is useful if they're writing a feature about you.

Contact links. Include your website URL, personal email, phone number (if applicable), fax, and social media links.

Bibliography. Include descriptions of your books and book covers. If you have a small portfolio, that's okay. Optimize the page accordingly. If you have a large portfolio, pick your most representative works and feature them.

Interview Topics. Few writers actually do this, and it's unfortunate. Interviewers are busy people, and they may not always have time to read your work. Help them look good by giving them questions you want them to ask.

I control my interviews. In other words, I know almost every question that I'm going to be asked. It makes me look good, it makes the interviewer look good, and it makes for a more comfortable experience.

If you take the time to put together a good, thorough press kit, you'll benefit later. Taking the time to do it now will save you time and effort in the future.

If you would like to see my press kit, it's at www.michaellaronn.com/press.

How to Think Like a Businessperson

Being a poet *is* a business, and those poets who can live comfortably with being a creative and a businessperson will have the greatest chance of success.

Many poets cringe at the notion of running their poetry as a business, and I get that.

But in the digital age, each of us is responsible for our own destiny. A successful destiny means approaching the industry like an entrepreneur—or a poetrypreneur if you will.

Poetrypreneurs live at the intersection between art and commerce. They're not afraid to take creative risks, but they're always looking at the bottom line.

Most discussions about “the business of poetry” so far always revolve around sending your work out to magazines, which, in my opinion isn't much of a business at all. It's effective marketing, but not business.

This chapter will offer some ideas that will get you thinking about what it really means to approach your poetry as a businessperson.

The Mindset of a Poetrypreneur

When you're an artist, it's tough to imagine yourself as a businessperson. At first, it made me feel icky because of preconceived notions I had about Internet marketing.

The truth is that running a writing business is difficult, but it's incredibly rewarding, especially when you're making money.

The first thing you need to learn is that it doesn't take an exorbitant amount of money to publish a poetry collection. It also doesn't take much to establish your business.

Every poet's path is different. Perhaps you want to start your own publishing company, maybe not.

Here is how I approach my business:

* I established a publishing company located in the state of Iowa (cost me a whopping \$7.00 and 10 minutes at the County Recorder's office). My company, Ursabrand Media, is listed as the publisher for every book I publish. This makes it harder for readers to tell that I'm a self-publisher.

* I opened up a bank account in my publisher's name. All of my operating expenses are paid from my checking account. My royalties go into a high-interest savings account, with 30% of them reserved for taxes. Don't forget that you have to pay taxes on your royalties and that you have to collect sales tax whenever you sell books in person.

* I track all of my expenses for tax purposes.

* I have professional business cards.

* I have an actual business plan, and I revisit it every quarter. My plan includes strategies for the next quarter, year, five years, ten years, and my entire career as a writer. I think long-term. I do a lot of course-correcting, and that's okay because it's important reflect on the past.

* I take risks when promoting my poetry collection in hopes for a future reward. This includes self-publishing my collection and marketing to readers directly.

You're probably thinking—all of this for poetry? Yes and no. Poetry is a small percentage of my overall portfolio. My personal creative strategy is to be a four-point author: novels, short stories, poetry, and nonfiction. I need a business plan just to keep each component straight because each one has different goals. Poetry tends to make up around 10-15% of my overall income.

From a business standpoint, this isn't necessarily the path you should emulate, but it works for me. I want to write everything, so I model my business around my needs. But at the end of the day, it's still a business, and I accept that my path is harder.

If you're focusing solely on poetry (or fiction), you'll have an easier time. Whatever you do, you have to treat your writing like a business. Being a poetrypreneur doesn't mean that you aren't a creative. I'm a creative first and a businessperson second. But it's a two-way street; business informs my marketing decisions, and my creative sense informs my marketing decisions.

For example, I believe that content marketing is a great way to market a collection, so my next collection is around a single theme that I can market to a specific target audience. That's an

example of marketing influencing what I write.

On the other end, I wrote this book because I'm a poet, and I identified a need in the self-publishing marketplace for poets. I never could have written this book if I wasn't a poet first, though. That's an example of how my creative spirit influences my marketing.

The key here is to be yourself. **Don't chase trends just because they're profitable, but don't completely ignore the market either.** The best place to be is in the middle. When you're writing your collection, be an artist. When you're done, be a business person.

Your books are assets that will appreciate over time. Failing to recognize that will sabotage everything you've worked so hard for. However, if you respect them, they'll respect you.

The Realities

Poetry is a smaller market than fiction, so it's not fair to claim that poets will be able to get rich from their collections.

Poetry hasn't truly entered the digital age yet, so we don't know what the landscape will look like when it does.

Regardless of what happens, it pays to treat your writing like a business. It makes the marketing easier, and it forces you to constantly evaluate yourself and determine what you want from your writing career.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Income

* How much have you made from your poetry in the last year? (Not how much you *think* you'll make)

* How much of your earnings are consistent (meaning, you get paid every month or every year)

Expenses

* How much do submissions cost you overall? In other words, how much per year are you spending on literary magazine and contest submissions?

* What is your yearly average acceptance rate?

A Simple Exercise

If the amount of money you are paying for literary magazines and contests exceeds your income, you need to take a hard look at where you're spending your money.

Let's do some math to show you why.

Let's pretend that you do diligent research and submit your poems to 30 literary magazines with an average of \$2/per submission, and you submit to these magazines four times a year. You also submit to 10 contests a year averaging \$25/per entry. Here are your estimated costs:

* Submission fees: \$240.00 (2 x 30 x 4)

* Contest fees: \$250.00 (25 x 10)

* Printer paper: \$30.00 (assuming that a ream of 500 sheets will last you all year)

* Printer ink: \$80.00 (assuming that you'll need to refill at least twice, especially if you don't use your printer for anything else).

Total: \$600.00 per year

If the money you're making doesn't offset this amount, it might be better spent elsewhere.

The current landscape is a winner-take-all atmosphere. If you don't get published or if you don't win a contest, you usually have nothing to show for it but the money you lost.

Also consider this: if you spend \$600 every year for 40 years trying to submit your work, you'll spend \$24,000 over your entire writing career. That's a lot of money, especially when you're not selling many collections. Chances are you're actually losing more money over time.

You want to avoid spending more money than you make. This sounds obvious, but I know a great deal of poets who pay a ton of money for submissions without really thinking about the long-term consequences. Sure, you're not going to get accepted into every magazine you

submit to, and you're going to have to spend *some* money, but magazine submissions is a marketing expense and you need to treat it accordingly. If you're only spending marketing money and not devoting your precious dollars to the other core fundamentals of your business, you'll never get anywhere.

If we consider that the \$600.00 is a marketing cost, and we look at it through the lens of business, how good is that investment?

The first thing we have to do is evaluate the return on the investment. Here are a few possible scenarios:

- * You get accepted into one magazine and make \$25.00. You recoup 4% of your costs.
- * You get accepted into three paying magazines, making approximately \$100.00. You recoup 16% of your costs.
- * You get accepted into three paying magazines and make \$100, and you win a contest for \$2500 as well as a book publication with a 12% royalty. The book sells 250 copies over two years before going out of print, making you \$2.00 per book, and \$500.00 total. You recoup 100% of your costs, with \$3000 profit. If you reinvest that money back into your business, it will pay for your submission fees for the next five years.

Any poet worth his or her salt would take the third scenario in a heartbeat, right? Let's say that you're fortunate enough to have this happen to you four times during your career—one of which include a fellowship for \$30,000.00.

$$\$3000 \times 4 = \$12,000$$

Add \$30,000 = **\$42,000** (\$1050 per year if we're using the 40 year career number)

See how the math gets better? But don't let the large number fool you. Remember, by the time you've reached this number, you're a graybeard. You might have one or two collections left in you, but that's if your health is good. Suddenly the \$42,000 doesn't look so good anymore, does it? It's technically excellent from an investment standpoint, but it's the equivalent of a CD Loan. It pays, but there are better options out there—riskier options, but better.

This model is based on luck and your ability to sustain the unsustainable. Worst of all, it's only one of the four scenarios I mentioned. Remember, in the other scenarios, you lost money.

Most of us aren't lucky enough to make the fourth scenario happen. You can't predict if or

when an editor or publisher will smile upon your work and write you a check, and if it does happen, you can't bank on the same thing happening next year.

You also can't depend on literary magazines for income. You can't expect that you'll be one of those poets who gets published everywhere, wins a bunch of contests, a lucrative fellowship, and a nice poet-in-residence gig.

It's nice to dream, but focus on what you can control. Trust me, it'll make you a better businessperson and you'll be much happier, too.

The math is better with self-publishing.

Let's say that you publish one poetry collection per year. Assuming that you have costs for cover design, editing, copyright and a small marketing budget, let's use the same figure above:

Total Costs: \$600.00

I'm keeping the costs simple for the sake of this example. It could probably cost you less to create your collection. But stick with me.

I can self-publish my collection on the major ebook retailers, price it at \$4.99 and make \$3.49 from every sale at a 70% royalty rate. I can also go through the proper channels to get my book into bookstores and libraries.

I only need to sell 184 copies over the book's lifetime to make a profit. Even if my collection only sells 250 copies over its lifetime, 69 of those sales will be pure profit—roughly \$240. But my collection will never go out of print, so it has a longer lifetime than a traditionally-published book. I can sell it as long as I'm alive, and my children can continue to sell it after I die. I can probably earn a hell of a lot more than \$600 over the book's lifetime.

Plus, after I publish the book, I'll be building an audience of readers who will want to read my next book.

When it's time to publish my next collection, I'll have a fan base of people ready to buy it. I'll gain new readers with the second book. If those new readers like it, they'll buy the collection that came before it. If I release another book, readers will keep buying backward. See the pattern?

If you write a collection every year for 40 years, and you sell 250 copies of each with a \$3.49

royalty, here is what you'll get:

- * 40 collections
- * 10,000 copies
- * \$34,900

It's less than the magazine scenario above, right? It's more work, too, so why would anyone in their right mind go the self-publishing route?

Keep the following things in mind:

* You can control the pace of your work. You can create a collection each year, and if you do your job, it will sell. Thus, the self-publishing route is more reliable and logical.

* If you market your work, your readership will grow with each new title. I'm simply assuming that you sell 250 copies of each book. If you write a lot of books, you'll probably sell many more of each.

* If you bundle your collections, charge a higher price point and make the bundle more attractive to readers, that can change the equation dramatically.

* If you produce print, ebook, and audio versions of your work, that can also change the equation (especially if you bundle them). Foreign translations also add to your bottom line.

* You can do all of this while *still* submitting to literary magazines and contests and doing poetry readings, netting you additional income whenever success happens.

* If you also write fiction or nonfiction and one of those books takes off, anything is possible.

When you follow the magazine route, your only source of income comes from litmags, contests, readings, and fellowships, all of which are unreliable sources of income at best.

If you published with a publisher, you'll make much, much less than 70% per sale, and you'll have to sell a higher number of books for your publisher to be profitable. If they don't make money from your book, they could drop you—and still keep the rights to your work so you can't do anything with them.

If you are with a traditional publisher, they may also have forced you into deadly contract agreements. A do not compete clause, for example, limits the amount of titles you can publish per year—that's death for an indie.

When you follow the self-publishing route, it can more difficult because there's more work involved, but you CAN develop a reliable stream of income over time. You'll also control your career and have a bigger and better body of work to show for it. You control your destiny. Your success and failure are up to you, but at least *something* is within your control. You also keep the rights to your work, and you can do whatever you want with it.

The true test of a successful poet will not be so much how much money they make, but how effectively they control their expenses and think long-term. A little planning and willingness to do things different can serve you well.

That's how you approach the business of poetry in the modern age. There's much, much more to learn, but it's worth taking the time to give yourself an education in business. It's the most important thing you can do if you want to make money from your books.

The next time you read an article by some poet about the business of submitting poems to magazines, don't just think about magazines. Think bigger. And be smart about it.

PART V: Marketing and Promotion

Your Product Page

Marketing: the dirty word. Promotion: the even dirtier word.

Yet both are crucial to your career. You'll need to learn how to do both if you want to sell more books.

This section will teach you basic marketing concepts. Once you understand how they work, you'll be able to make good marketing decisions that won't feel icky or spammy.

Remember, content is your best marketing. You've got to start with a well-written, edited, and engaging collection.

Once you've done that, it's time to figure out how to get that collection into the hands of readers.

We're going to start with your book's product page. Now, don't let the term "product page" scare you. It might sound like a scammy marketing term, but it's not.

You're already familiar with product pages.

If you've ever seen a book on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or Kobo, that's a product page.

Companies like Amazon have spent millions in research and development of their product pages, and there's science and psychology behind why the pages look like they do.

A product page has a few key elements, and knowing them is important so you can use them to your advantage.

Let's go through each one and explain how you can use them to succeed.

Book Covers

Book covers are the one of the most important yet most enigmatic parts of marketing. They're the first thing that readers notice, and the only chance to catch their attention.

If you have a great cover, it will practically sell your book. If you have a bad cover, your book will languish on the shelf.

All covers aren't created equal. There are bestsellers with poor covers (like the first edition of Dean Koontz's *Watchers*—good God), and unknown books with beautiful covers that don't sell. Yet book covers have an undeniable impact on sales.

Most poets have never had to worry about designing their own book covers or hiring a cover artist, so the concept of book covers may seem foreign.

People *do* judge a book by its cover, so it's important to know what makes a good one. Learning the elements of a good book cover are essential to your success.

The best book covers:

- * are eye-catching
- * are easy to read and understand
- * communicate the genre
- * hint at what the story is about

For poets, communicating the genre and hinting at the story present a problem, but not a devastating one.

Communicating Genre

How can a cover communicate that the work is poetry? With fiction, it's easier to do. For example, a spaceship represents science fiction, a gun represents mystery/crime, and a half-naked

couple represents romance/erotica.

Poetry is more abstract.

Here's the dirty little secret about book covers that poets can use that will make fiction writers jealous: your cover doesn't have to communicate genre. In fact, your cover can be a complete artistic choice. Whatever you want it to be. Just make sure it's eye-catching and easy to read and understand.

If fiction writers ignore genre, they can get themselves into trouble. But this is one area where poets don't have to worry as much.

A Tale of Three Covers

I didn't have much money to produce my novel, *How to Be Bad*, so I went with a pre-made cover. You can see the cover [here](#).

I love that cover. In my humble opinion, it's eye-catching and easy to read. Best of all, it hints at the story. Is the darkness swallowing my heroine, or is the sun rising on her? If you've read *How to Be Bad*, the cover matches the theme of the book perfectly.

However, it doesn't communicate the genre. Is it literary? Fantasy? Thriller?

How to Be Bad is an urban fantasy crossed with Choose Your Own Adventures. It's action-packed, witty, and philosophical, but the cover doesn't communicate any of those things.

Is the cover bad? No. It's absolutely beautiful, but perhaps it wasn't the best choice.

The funny thing is that *How to Be Bad* does pretty well. But I can't help but wonder about all the urban fantasy fans out there who aren't buying it because they don't know it's the right book for them.

I'll change the cover eventually, but my focus is on generating new titles, so it's less of a priority right now.

I learned my lesson with my second novel, *Festival of Shadows*. It's a fantasy adventure, and I describe it as Toy Story meets David Bowie's Labyrinth meets Choose Your Own Adventures. You can view the cover [here](#).

I found a designer who created an illustrated cover from scratch. I told him that I wanted my teddy bear hero on the cover with the boogie man trying to grab him. *Festival of Shadows* is

primarily fantasy so I wanted the genre to be clear.

The cover screams fantasy. Theo's sword and shield, the stone floor, the medieval-esque typography—those are all mainstays of fantasy covers. But it's different, too—whoever put a kickass teddy bear on the cover?

Compared to *How to Be Bad*, *Festival's* cover was a hit with readers. Mission accomplished!

When I released my poetry collection, however, I ignored all of the stuff I learned with my novels. [Here](#) is my cover for *Muse Poems*. It does two things well—it's beautiful and easy to read.

Genre? No. Any hints at what the book is about? Yes, a little.

My point is that poets don't have it nearly as hard as novelists do when it comes to book covers. But we have to pay more attention to beauty.

Your definition of beauty is different than mine. Essentially, you want something that readers won't forget. It can be simple, abstract, or intricate. It doesn't matter, as long as it looks good.

Now that you know what to *look* for in a cover, let's go over the main elements of a book cover and why they're important.

Elements of a Book Cover

The image is the most obvious part of a cover, and the part most people recognize right away. You want something that is eye-catching but not too eye-catching. Many indies err on many points of this spectrum. They either use a god awful image with bad Photoshop technique (like people transposed onto a background without a color wash), or they don't use an image at all.

Other indies try to tell too much with their image. For example, they want to communicate that the book is about aliens who come to Earth and befriend a scientist who has blonde hair and blue eyes and an affinity for nanotechnology and alcohol, and they decide to invade Washington, D.C., but not before going to Jupiter on a spaceship shaped like a French fry . . . Of course I'm being facetious, but you get my point.

The image should hint at the story—nothing more, nothing less. With a poetry collection, your job is to think simpler. Figure out how to convey the theme of your collection without the cover being silly or outrageous. At the very least, always aim for elegance.

The book title should be in an interesting but cover-friendly font. The trick is to find a good

font that doesn't overpower the image, but also fits in with your theme. Your title will make or break your cover, so be careful.

The author name is probably the least important of the elements, but don't overlook it. Consider using a simple font. Your name doesn't need to be big, either. Just make sure it's not too small. Let your title be the hero.

The color is important, too. You want a color palette that is aesthetically pleasing. You also want it to fit in with other collections.

Those are the elements of a book cover. Now that you know what they are and how you should think about them, you'll need to decide if you want to design your own cover or work with a cover designer.

Doing It Yourself

I don't recommend that authors do their own covers unless they have extensive design experience. I've seen many writers who claim that they have Photoshop expertise, but they still create crappy covers.

I know my strengths and weaknesses, and I simply don't have the time or patience to do my own book covers. I'm better off writing.

Know yourself.

The DIY method is for you if:

- * you have a knack for design.
- * you are willing to learn the fundamental, intermediate, and advanced techniques of cover design, and you're willing to give up writing time to learn it.
- * you respond well to feedback (because you'll have to ask people for their honest opinions).

I don't have an eye for design, but I am good at conceiving an idea, articulating it, and giving direction to designers to get the results I want. These are skills that you need to cultivate, too.

Be honest with yourself, and if you're not a designer type, don't waste your time designing your own cover. You can find an affordable cover artist almost anywhere these days, and you can always change your covers or get a better cover artist as your career progresses.

If you still won't listen to me and insist on doing your own cover . . . I recommend that you take some design classes and read a lot of design books. This is an investment, so if you don't want to spend the money on a cover artist, you need to spend the time and money on your own education.

Working with a Designer

Working with a designer is scary, but if things go right, it's a satisfying experience, especially when you're working with a good designer.

I've developed relationships with my cover designers, so they know me and what I prefer.

You can hire a designer for cheap at a place like Fiverr, or you can use a freelancer site like Elance or 99Designs.

Before you hire a designer, you need to be able to articulate what you're looking for so that you don't waste anyone's time.

Here are the things you'll want to consider:

- * What do you want the potential color scheme to be? Or, more importantly, what are the colors you *don't* want?

- * Do you want humans on the cover? If so, do you want stock photo models or illustrations? The latter will cost you.

- * If you don't want humans, what *do* you want on the cover? Can you distill this into 2-3 sentences?

- * Is there a theme in your content that you can use?

Learning How to Give Feedback to Your Designer

- * Pick a good designer and it'll make both of your lives easier. Trust your designer. You picked them to begin with, so let them do their work. If you find a good designer, they'll often know what types of covers sell, probably more than you (especially if you're just starting out).

- * Be brief, but specific. Know that your cover is never going to look exactly how you want it;

accept the designer's skills.

- * Break your criticisms into bite-size bullet lists for easier consumption.

- * Don't be afraid to start from scratch if you don't like what you see, but recognize that you're going to pay for it. No one works for free.

Once you've finished your cover, breathe a sigh of relief. If you've done a good job, you won't have to do any additional work for a while!

Book Description and Sampling

Let's assume you have a good cover. Then what?

The next thing readers check is your book description, and then your sample.

Book Descriptions

A poetry collection book description should be short and simple. Here's my description for *Muse Poems*:

In this imaginative collection of poems, Elliott Parker obeys his muse and creates colorful experiences of delicacy and wonder. They are fearless and leave nothing unexplored, no words wasted.

This diverse collection establishes Parker as an important poet of the millennial generation.

Some might argue that this is too short, but my philosophy is that it's better to leave the reader intrigued than expound on what's inside. **Your description should explain your content and your theme. It should not summarize your poems.**

My content is diverse and imaginative and not about just one thing. The theme is that the collection fearless and adventurous. That's all the reader needs to know, and all they probably care about.

Readers probably *don't* care about:

- * how many fellowships or awards you've won.
- * where your poems were previously published (because readers probably didn't and won't look for the issue with your poem).
- * why you wrote the collection (this belongs in another section of the product page, at least on Amazon).

On places like Amazon, Kobo, and Google Play, be sure to also take advantage of bolding,

underlining, and increasing the size of some of your text. Check out the product description for this book at any of those retailers to see what I'm talking about. Most authors don't optimize their product descriptions. If you do, you'll be in the minority, and you'll improve your chances of selling books.

However, you need to keep your book description short because you also need to put a sample poem in the description.

Sampling in Your Book Description

Poetry is unique in that it is often short enough that you can include a sample poem right on the product page. I highly recommend this because readers will appreciate it.

The accepted wisdom of book buying psychology is that most readers look at a book's product page in the following order before determining whether to buy:

- * Cover
- * Description
- * Reviews
- * Sample

In order for them to stay interested, each component has to pass the test. Notice that the sample is last.

Your book cover, description, and reviews are already on the same page, so why not make it easier on the reader and include your sample there, too? It's one-stop shopping.

I recommend a short, accessible, strong poem from the collection that will hook readers. If your poems are longer, then use a strong excerpt. Don't hold anything back.

My poem *Summoned* is one of the more accessible poems in my collection. It's about an alien abduction, a pop culture phenomenon that resonates with just about everyone. This poem is also one of the last poems in the collection and it doesn't appear within the first 10% of the book. I'm giving the reader more content in hopes that they will like it and maybe buy the collection impulsively.

In marketing, a strategy that always works is to be generous. I err on the side of giving away too much, because I know that if I can hook a reader with one of my collections, they'll probably like them all. They might even go on to try my fiction, too.

The Downloadable Sample

If readers are interested in your book, they'll read a sample. For print books, most retailers allow you to "Look Inside" at the first few pages. For ebooks, they'll download a sample to their ereader, phone, or tablet and then decide whether to buy. Ebook samples are the first 10% of the book.

Your sample needs to contain at least three poems to help the reader decide if they want to buy.

Why three?

If you don't give them any poems, you look like a jerk.

If you give them one poem, that's not enough for them to make a decision about whether they like you. If they like the poem, they'll be curious but scared of getting burned if the rest of the collection sucks. If they don't like the poem, you've lost them forever—even if they might like the collection overall. Think about it: I've read a lot of poetry collections where the first few poems are weak, but then the collection grows on me.

If you give them two poems, that's better, but still not enough.

Three is a great psychological number. Have you ever heard the term, "All things come in threes?" Our minds are hard-wired to expect things in threes. At a minimum, this is what you should aim for.

More than three poems is okay, too, as long as your sample doesn't consist of your entire collection. Since you want them to buy, this one instance where giving away too much will hurt you.

About 90% of publishers get this wrong. They stuff the front of the book with copyright pages, reader's notes, dedications, forewords, illustrations, and so many other things that some samples don't include any poems at all. If they do, it's one poem or half of one.

As a reader, this pisses me off.

Once someone downloads your sample, they're a qualified lead—this means that they liked your cover, description, and reviews enough to download a sample. The sample is the *only* objection left to overcome before they buy the book. The chances of them becoming a customer are insanely high. Don't blow it.

Since poetry collections tend to be short, put your copyright page and your front matter at the back of the book. Leave the title page and dedication at the front.

By putting the front matter at the back of the book, it pushes your content to the front, giving readers a very generous sample.

When I use the word “generous,” I really mean “required.” Readers demand good samples.

(Note: The paperback version of *Muse Poems* is structured differently, with the copyright page, dedication and table of contents in the front of the book—paperback readers expect this layout. It's all about knowing the market.)

Sampling is the most important and most under-utilized technique for poets. A good sample can mean the difference between a sale and a lost sale, especially if you're an unknown. If a reader is interested but has no way of trying your work, why should they take a risk on you? Most readers in the ebook market have been burned many times because they paid for a crappy book that initially showed promise. There are a *lot* of crappy books out there—use this opportunity to show readers that yours isn't.

Pricing

As an indie author, you have complete control over your price.

You can give your collection away for free, or you can sell it for \$2500. The choice is yours.

Our choices are dictated by the marketplace. For paperback titles, poetry readers have grown accustomed to paying anywhere from \$12 to \$20 for a poetry collection, more for a new & selected or collected works. That's fine—for a paperback.

But the price point for ebooks is considerably lower—few ebooks are turning a substantial profit at those price points.

Pricing discussions often lead to long debates, but the truth is that the ebook market runs \$2.99-\$4.99 for self-published works, and \$7.99-\$14.99 for traditionally published titles. Genre and an author's reputation can also play an important part in pricing.

Amazon states that titles priced at \$2.99 actually move the most copies. It's a lower price point, but the sheer volume of sales make up for the lower royalty.

If that's the case, then how should we price poetry?

Anything less than \$2.99 is not sustainable for a poetry ebook, and neither is anything over \$9.99. I believe readers are willing to pay between \$2.99-\$9.99. Is it possible that they're willing to pay more for a poetry collection than a novel? Definitely, but the data doesn't support that yet.

The sweet spot is probably \$3.99-\$4.99. Experiment with this price range first, and then go higher and lower to see what your sweet spot is.

Free: A Double-Edged Sword?

Free is a powerful promotional tool, but it's not a pricing strategy. I have seen quite a few poetry collections listed as permafree, mostly by indie poets as a way to get reviews. Many of the

people who download permafrees are casual readers, as evidenced by many of the reviews left on these collections. This is a double-edged sword—free can lead to reviews, but people don't treat free books the same as they do paid books, and they often leave harsher reviews. So using free is a good idea for a promotional run, but I don't recommend it long-term.

\$0.99-\$1.99: The Bargain Price Points

\$0.99 is just a dollar more, but readers who purchase at this price point are *paying* readers, and that makes a big difference. People who pay for books have more of a vested interest in reading it, and people only pay for the books they are interested in, which usually leads to better reviews.

\$0.99 readers are usually looking for a bargain.

However, the royalties at \$0.99 are poor. On Amazon.com, the royalty is 35%, which yields \$0.35. If you participate in KDP Select during a Kindle Countdown, you'll get 70%, or \$0.70, which is a bit better, but not much. Retailers such as Barnes & Noble, Smashwords and Kobo offer anywhere from 60-65% royalties at \$0.99, which is better, but most authors have fewer sales on these platforms because they have a smaller readership.

In short, \$0.99 is also a good promotional tool, but I'm not so sure that avid poetry readers will be keen on paying \$0.99 for a poetry collection. Readers want a perceived value, and \$0.99 doesn't offer that. Neither does \$1.99, which is also a bargain price point.

\$2.99-\$4.99: The Safe Zone

\$2.99-\$4.99 and above is probably safe. Most readers are accustomed to paying this for an ebook, and you can't go wrong pricing your book in this range.

\$5.99 and beyond: The Danger Zone

Anything over \$4.99 is risky.

Traditional publishers like to price their collections between \$7.99 and \$12.99, but I've only seen the big-name poets (Billy Collins, Mary Oliver, etc.) do well at this price point.

Anything over \$9.99 is too expensive, unless it's a new and selected or collected works.

I know that it sounds unfair that readers want to pay so little for an ebook, but keep this in mind: authors who sell between \$2.99 and \$4.99 are actually making more money at these price points because they're maximizing their revenue by selling more copies. They know their books won't sell at \$12.99, so they listen to the market. You should do the same.

There's a caveat: no one knows for sure what poetry readers are willing to pay for an ebook yet, so feel free to experiment. Is it possible that the sweet spot for your collection is \$5.99 or \$9.99? Maybe. But don't be surprised if no one buys your collection at those prices.

Bundling

Bundling is an insanely effective tool. Most traditional publishers do it with print books, but not ebooks.

For example, if I want to read everything by my favorite poet, how would I do it? What if that poet has five collections? Is it reasonable to ask me to pay \$9.99 for every collection (\$50)?

Most readers won't do that.

Most readers want to know they're getting value for what they're buying. A bundle such as a new and selected works or collected works is the perfect alternative to this problem. Plus, since all of the poems are written and edited already, production expenses are low—all you have to do is get a new cover and select the order of the poems. For this reason, it's much easier to profit from a bundle.

I recommend that indie poets and publishers release more New & Selected and Collected Works at higher price points. I would be willing to pay more money for a wider swath of a poet's work. I suspect that most readers agree.

Will publishers listen? Probably not. I'm just a random guy who has no clout in the traditional publishing industry.

However, you can learn from publishers' mistakes and reap the benefits.

Here's how you can use pricing as a deadly weapon.

- 1) Write a stellar collection.
- 2) Invest in a good cover, write a good book description, and include a sample on the product

page and a generous downloadable sample.

3) Launch the book at a discount for your fans, then raise the price to \$2.99-\$4.99.

4) After a few weeks, consider making the book permafrees for a few weeks to pick up some new readers and some new reviews.

5) Return to the regular price (except for when you run promotions).

6) After you release three or four collections, make your first book permafrees. Then, compile those three collections into a New & Selected Works and don't charge more than \$9.99. See if you can get a testimonial and/or a foreword by a fellow poet with name recognition, include some strong previously unpublished poems, write a good afterword, and offer more free content to readers if they go to your website and join your mailing list.

7) After three New & Selected editions are published, revert your very first poetry collection back to paid and make the strongest collection you've released to date permafrees in its place. Or, keep them both permafrees if you want. Then, compile all of the books you've written so far into a Collected Works, but put a date on it (i.e. 2012-2014). Price it at \$9.99 and drop the price of your New & Selected Works by a dollar or two to make the Collected Works more appealing.

8) Start all over again, and as you progress, keep revising the Collected Works edition every few years to encompass all of your work to date. You may find that you need multiple Collected Works titles. Do some pruning and get rid of some of your New & Selected books along the way. You want two price points to be most attractive—the permafrees titles and the Collected Works title. Your permafrees titles, if the calls to action are written correctly, should funnel your readers to your Collected Works, giving them a tremendous value and you a higher royalty.

If you can build a large platform of true fans, you'll have some success with this model. I also guarantee you that publishers *won't* be doing this any time soon, so you have an opportunity to be a trendsetter.

The one certain thing about pricing is that it's always in flux. What works today may not work tomorrow. What works for one poet may not work for you. It's your job to pay attention to the market and price your collection accordingly. Also pay attention to your own buying habits because you're a reader, too.

The great thing about being an indie poet is that you can change prices quickly, so there's no excuse not to experiment.

Reviews

Reviews. Authors live and die by them. They're extremely hard to get, too, especially if you're a new writer.

Reviews matter more than most people realize, but it's not the quality of the reviews that matter. It's the quantity.

For example, if I find a book that interests me but it has no reviews, I'm going to think twice before buying it. If it has a lot of reviews, that will affect my decision. People like to follow the wisdom of the crowd, so a book that has ten thousand reviews is going to catch people's attention, and they're going to buy it just to see what everyone else is raving (or ranting) about.

But here's the secret about reviews: readers don't read every review. If you have one review, they *are* going to read it. If you have ten, they're probably going to read all of those, too. But what about one hundred? Two thousand? No one has time for that. Instead, readers will look at the quantity of reviews, and then the review average to make their decision.

You want a lot of reviews and a high review average, anywhere from 4.0 to 4.5 stars.

Here's how you get reviews.

Permafree. Making a collection permafree somehow opens it up to a secret market of people looking for free books. Every time I've made a book free, it starts to sell immediately, in high volumes. I have no idea where these readers are coming from, but I can't deny their power. You have to give away a lot of copies before the reviews come in, so an extended period of permafree tends to work best.

KDP Select/Kindle Unlimited. By being a part of Kindle Unlimited, you can open the book up to borrows, which can lead to reviews. You can also run free promotions with the KDP Free days, and you can get some additional exposure through Kindle Countdowns.

Book Bloggers. There are a number of book bloggers who accept poetry titles for review. They usually don't get requests from indies, and they're usually pretty welcoming—if your collection is quality and appeals to them.

Fellow poets. You can ask for reviews on poetry communities online, in your local workshop, or writing group. Be sure to ask for an honest review, though.

Review trading programs. You can read another poet's work and review it in exchange for them doing the same to your work. This is perfectly legal, but it creates an ethical quandary—what if you read someone's work, they leave you a good review, and then you feel compelled to do the same? This works best if you can vet the other person before accepting their work.

Giveaways. You can facilitate giveaways at places like Goodreads and Library Thing.

Craigslist. If you're local, you can always post an ad and send the book to someone in your area in exchange for an honest review. People love to support local authors.

Local colleges near you. Colleges are full of English majors always looking for a good book to read. You can contact the faculty and ask them to send out an announcement that you're willing to send your book to anyone who agrees to leave you a review. Who knows, your book might end up being discussed in one of their term papers!

Calls to Action in the back of your book. I politely ask for reviews in the back of my books, and I offer to send the next book for free to readers who leave an honest review.

Literary Magazines. Exposure in magazines can lead to new readers who, if they buy your collection, may be more likely to leave a review (for better or worse).

Social media. Send out a broadcast that a free copy is available in exchange for a review. Don't spam your audience. Send out the broadcast during a high traffic time, like around lunchtime or just after dinner.

I'm using these techniques to garner reviews for my books. My goal is to get as many reviews as possible.

A quick note on paid reviews. Under no circumstances should you ever pay for a review. This is illegal, and it betrays your readers' trust. Plus, you'll get caught. If ebook retailers catch you, you'll be banned from publishing there. Always ask for honest reviews, and always politely ask your readers to disclose that they received a free copy in exchange for an honest

review. This will keep you out of trouble.

There is one final thing about reviews that you need to know. **Reviews are out of your control.** That's right. The only thing you can do is ask for them. Readers do what they're going to do, so don't stress over whether they leave you a review. Stress over things that are within your control. But make sure that you set yourself up for success.

And for Pete's sake, if you read your reviews, don't take them personally.

Promotion: Everything You Need to Know

A question I get often about self-publishing poetry is, "How do I promote my work?"

There are a lot of ways to promote your poetry, and you can do all of these without feeling uncomfortable. **The general rule of marketing is that if feels uncomfortable, don't do it.**

But you have to do *something* or you'll have a hard time gaining traction.

I wish I could share secrets or shortcuts that will help you sell books, but I can't. The truth is that I had to start from zero like everyone else, and I stumbled my way through promotion, not really understanding it. I wasted time and money on techniques that didn't help me at all.

Along the way, I found the real truths about marketing and promotion.

My Six Truths About Marketing

Truth #1: The best marketing tool is your content. Remember what I said about content marketing previously? That's because it works. Taking the time to plan the content and theme of your collection before you start writing it will make marketing easier.

Truth #2: More books help. It's hard to promote a single book, but when you have more than one, readers take you seriously. Always be writing the next book.

Truth #3: You need to follow the industry. I've found some great promotional opportunities by following blogs, podcasts, and forums, which leads me to the next truth...

Truth #4: It pays to be early. Finding an opportunity and taking advantage of it early can pay off. For example, the website Story Cartel used to be an excellent promotional tool. Authors bragged about getting 100+ reviews from using the service. By the time I found out about it, it wasn't nearly as effective because so many people were using it. My experiences with the platform were mixed at best. Had I tried it just 2-4 months earlier, I could have gotten a boatload of

reviews, which could have supercharged my career.

Truth #5: You have to keep trying. If something doesn't work, figure out why it didn't work.

Truth #6: Marketing doesn't have to cost a lot of money. In fact, most of the proven tools for authors are fairly inexpensive, especially for poets. If someone asks you for a lot of money, be skeptical. You won't be able to avoid expenses, but the more you spend, the more units you'll have to sell to recoup your costs, so guard your wallet.

If you accept those truths, you'll find that marketing isn't so bad.

What NOT To Do

Avoid the following techniques at all costs because they don't work. They will cost you money, yield poor results, and only make you frustrated.

Don't:

Spam social media. This includes but is not limited to:

- * Making every post about your books.
- * Friending an absurd amount of people on Goodreads and then recommending your book to them.
- * Following an absurd amount of people on Twitter in hopes that they will follow you back.
- * Participating in follow-for-follow schemes on Twitter and then promoting your book to those people.
- * Tweeting incessantly about your book.
- * Using the Auto-DM feature on Twitter to mention your book to people who follow you (or, using the Auto-DM feature, period).
- * Hijacking Twitter and Google+ hashtags and trends in hopes that people will click and buy your book.
- * Using clients like Gmail and Yahoo to maintain a mailing list and emailing people without their permission (it's illegal).
- * Tweeting, posting, or broadcasting every time you get a sale.
- * Tweeting, posting, or broadcasting every time someone leaves you a favorable review.
- * Tweeting, posting, or broadcasting every time your book hits a Top 100 Chart.

* Responding publicly to negative reviews.

I shouldn't have to talk about these things, but there are a bunch of idiot authors out there who do these things on a daily basis.

Don't do them. People will hate you, and rightly so. Your Internet reputation lasts forever. People may not remember your good content, but they'll never forget spam. It's okay to mention your work on social media, but observe the 95/5 rule: 95% of your posts should NOT be about yourself. This way, when you promote your work sparingly, people may pay attention. But don't fall for the myth that social media sells books—it doesn't. Not reliably.

Pay for reviews. Ever. The only thing you should offer in exchange for a review is a free copy of the book.

Participate in any service that even remotely looks like paying for reviews. This includes sites like Story Cartel. I used to love Story Cartel until I had a bad experience with a few of my reviewers. In short, Story Cartel is legal and provides a great service, but you're toeing the line, and any reviews you get from a promotion there can be taken away by Amazon overnight.

Participate in quid pro quo schemes in hopes of exposure. These usually involve two authors agreeing to read and review each other's work. While this is perfectly legal, it creates some ethical issues. What if someone leaves you a glowing review, but their book sucks? Do you leave an honest review, or do you reciprocate the five stars? If you leave anything less, it's possible that the other person will retaliate. I've been in this situation, and trust me—it's not a place you want to be.

Assume that what works for another author will work for you. This got me into trouble a lot during my first year. Everyone's path is different, and we each have to find our own way.

Invest in advertising that doesn't have a track record. I'll give you an example: I promoted my novel, *Festival of Shadows*, and I booked ads with a slew of promotional sites. I spent a lot of money. When the ads ran, I recovered 5% of my costs—a colossal failure, and the biggest failure of my career. You can read more about it in [this post](#). Don't invest your money with any company that doesn't have a track record of producing results. Ask other indies what their results have been. There aren't many advertising opportunities available for poets right now, so

fortunately, this is less of an issue in the poetry world.

Invest in pay-per-click advertising. This includes Facebook advertising, Goodreads advertising, Google Adwords, etc. I know you're probably curious about it, but I've tried it. It doesn't work.

Hire a publicist. Don't do it. Not for fiction, nonfiction, and especially poetry. Even if publicists mean well, the truth is that no one truly knows why books sell. Think about it: if publishers knew what sold, all of their books would be bestsellers. But even publishers don't break even on the majority of their titles—and they employ a lot of publicists. A publicist will just take your money, and you won't get any sales to show for it unless you're already a bestseller.

Worry so much. Your book may not sell every day, and that's okay. Your sales will rise, and then they will dip. It's natural. For a beginning writer, it's scary. When you get scared, you make decisions based on fear, and that's the worst thing you can do. Remember the truths above and don't stress over your sales. Be critical, but don't be too hard on yourself if a promotion doesn't meet your goals. Just have the foresight and diligence to only use promotional techniques that make sense for you, and you won't feel guilty if one fails.

That's a long list! But take a deep breath and sigh with relief, because if you avoid all of those things, it's a lot harder to fail.

Now that you know what NOT to do, let's talk about the techniques that actually work.

Advance Review Copies (ARCs)

Start with your existing readers and fans. If you have a mailing list, send out an announcement that you are offering an advance review copy of the book in exchange for a review. As your mailing list grows, this will be one of the most powerful tools in your arsenal. Who better to read your work than the people who already love your previous work?

You can also advertise your ARC on social media, though I would only do it once.

Book Bloggers and Reviewers

There are a number of book bloggers who accept poetry collections. They might be willing to

check out your book if your pitch is good. You can start with sites like IndieView and The Book Blogger Directory. You can also search the Amazon Top 1000 Reviewers and look for potential book reviewers on YouTube.

This method works, but it's time consuming. You have to search the blogger lists for several hours, and when you finally find a blogger:

- * the blog no longer exists
- * the blogger hasn't updated the blog in ages
- * the blogger is no longer accepting submissions
- * the blogger is accepting submissions, but isn't interested in your work

In many ways, it's like querying literary magazines, which is why I don't like this method very much. But it does work.

There aren't too many book bloggers who accept poetry right now, so you won't have to spend as much time searching as novelists do.

Critique Groups and Poetry Communities

There are many groups dedicated to poetry on Facebook, Google+, Goodreads, etc. Many of them welcome announcements of new books, but they often have strict rules about promotion, forcing writers to post in designated areas about new releases.

It's not a bad idea to post your book in these places, but it's a better idea to find a community that you like and be an active participant there.

Here are my rules for participating in a community:

- * Be friendly, positive, generous, and help people whenever you can.
- * Critique newbie's poems and give them constructive criticism.
- * Post poems from contemporary poets that you admire.
- * Share poetry-related stuff.
- * Don't be a jerk.
- * Put a link to your book(s) in your signature.

If you do those things, people will probably like you. And if they like you, they might check your book out. And if they like it, they may buy it and/or leave you a review.

Giveaways

One of the best ways to promote a book is to give it away. It sounds counterintuitive, but it works because people love free stuff.

You can facilitate a giveaway through websites like Goodreads and Library Thing. You can give away as many paperback copies of your book as you like, though I wouldn't recommend more than 3-5, as it gets expensive quickly.

Giveaways are good because while they don't directly lead to sales, they do lead to exposure, which is more valuable when you're just starting out.

As with book bloggers, giveaways are a numbers game. If you give away one copy, you probably won't get a review. But if you give away five copies, chances are higher that you'll get at least 1-2.

My advice is to control your costs and ship your copies directly from CreateSpace or Lightning Source if you're doing a paperback giveaway.

If you have an established audience, you can do a giveaway on your website, blog, or mailing list, too.

Price Promotions

As I mentioned in the Pricing chapter, you can use free or \$0.99 pricing to help drive your sales. Since poets don't have access to promotional sites like Bookbub, we have to be more creative.

Here are the best times for a \$0.99 promotion:

- * Book launch (for friends, family, and mailing list subscribers)
- * The day your poem goes live in a literary magazine (let the promotion run for at least a week or two)
- * The night of a poetry reading and the day after

* Any time you are featured on a website, magazine, or blog

Use these events to drive sales.

Don't give your book away for free for any of the above scenarios. Why? Because the people who are likely to participate in a promotion are willing to pay you—so take their money. Use free as a way to get exposure between paid promotions, and to find new readers who wouldn't have bought your books otherwise.

You can do a free promotion via KDP Select, or through Amazon price-matching. Most retailers allow you to set your book for free there, and Amazon will price-match it.

Permafree is also tactic that you shouldn't overlook. A number of indie poetry collections were able to garner a large number of reviews due to being permafree. It's not for everyone, though, so do the homework and determine if it makes sense for you.

Guest Posting

This *only* works if your poetry collection's content can be marketed. If your collection is about Brooklyn, see if you can book a guest post on a Brooklyn blogger's site. If your poems are about depression, reach out to a blog that covers depression. If it's about video games, reach out to game blogs. Offer something of value to the blogger's audience, and then include a photo of yourself, your book cover, and a link to the book. This can be a powerful tool.

If your collection cannot be targeted toward a specific interest-crowd, don't waste your time with this method.

Box Sets & Bundles

A great way to get new readers is to leverage the platforms of other poets. You can create a box set with other poets and offer it at \$0.99-\$4.99. It's a tremendous value for readers because they pay for several high quality poetry collections, and you get exposure. Each poet brings his or her audience to the box set, helping to cross-promote everyone involved.

One person has to take care of the administration, and they have to distribute the royalties

accordingly. Someone also has to format the collection and compile all the collections into a single ebook. The best way to do a box set run is to draw up a contract between all the parties outlining the responsibilities so everyone's on the same page. Then, make the set available for a limited amount of time, like 90 days. Then distribute the royalties and you're done.

This works best when all of the poets are roughly on the same level, with a few more successful and less successful added in. Each poet has to have their own platform for this to work.

In contrast, a bundle is slightly different. The group of poets puts together a box set, but they sell it through a site like Story Bundle, where each book remains separate. Story Bundle takes care of the administration and royalties, making this an easier option.

Literary Magazines & Awards

This is familiar to most poets, yet it's probably a new concept to think about having a poem in a literary magazine as "advertising". But that's what it is.

When your poem appears in print, you want people to read it, like it, and want to find more of your work. In essence, you should treat a published poem as an advertisement for your existing collections.

Yet poets don't see it this way, and they consistently get it wrong, missing promotional opportunities. They:

- * publish in a literary magazine without having any other work for sale, making readers quickly forget about them.

- * don't have a website, so people can't learn about them; alternatively, they don't use their website and platform to promote the magazine.

Here's what magazines get wrong:

- * they focus solely on previously unpublished work.

- * they don't do enough to treat their venue as an advertising space.

I'll be writing more about literary magazines later in Part VI. If magazines are part of your strategy, continue to use them, but use them to your advantage. The worst thing you can do is get

a poem published and not harness that opportunity.

Poetry Readings

Poetry readings are a unique. Fiction and nonfiction don't do well in a reading format.

But poetry readings can be fun, vibrant, and exciting. Use every reading as a way to promote your work. This sounds obvious, but it's surprising how many poets don't do it.

Here's what you should be doing before, during, and after every poetry reading.

At least two weeks before the reading, try to get a headcount from the venue emcee, and order print copies of your collection so that your author's copies will arrive well before the reading.

The night before the reading, discount your ebook version to \$2.99 or lower.

Bring a large poster with your name, website, and email address and if possible position it behind you during the event. Make it easy to read from the back of the room.

Give a great reading and record it (via audio or video).

After your reading, announce that you have paperbacks for sale in the back of the room. Then, announce that your ebooks are on sale wherever ebooks are sold. Make the ebooks the last part of your announcement, because people tend to remember what they heard last; they'll *see* that you're selling paperbacks, so you won't need to spend much time *talking* about that.

When you sell your paperbacks at the reading, accept cash and credit card (via Square or Amazon Register). Most people don't carry cash these days, especially college students.

If your audience consists of students, focus on exposure rather than sales. Offer to send them a book for free if they join your mailing list to get updates. Also pimp the ebook sale. Remember, they're on a budget and money's tight. You'll probably sell fewer paperbacks at a college reading unless you have a highly engaged group of students, so plan accordingly. Again, be sure to talk about the venue and audience with the emcee.

The day after your reading, upload photos and video of the event to social media and promote it.

Raise the price of the ebook again, but only after your sales drop.

This way, you're utilizing a price promotion, a poetry reading, video, and social media to give a local event wider exposure. If you do this with every poetry reading, hopefully you'll notice better results each time.

Not everyone has the opportunity to give readings, and you can only give so many readings per collection before the circuit dries up, so use each one wisely.

Use your first reading as practice. Do all of these things and figure out what works for you. That way, the next time around, you can execute perfectly.

Local Media

When I refer to local media, I mean local magazines, newspapers, and radio, not television or national newspapers.

The local media is always looking for hometown heroes and local success stories. Wait until you get a healthy number of reviews and then write a press release and send it to your local media. If your story is compelling enough, they may wish to feature you.

Poetry thrives locally and regionally, so this is a far more viable option for poets than it is for novelists.

As always, time a promotion around the time the feature goes live.

Radio is also a great way to get exposure as a poet. A lot of local radio stations like to insert poetry readings as bumpers between features. Poetry lends itself well to radio, so a good reading could help with exposure. Having a paperback, ebook, and audiobook are good selling points—especially audio.

I recommend that you try radio at least once--not so much for sales or exposure, but for the sheer experience of hearing yourself. It's humbling. You can learn about how to speak and read your work by re-listening to a broadcast. This will help you with future readings and events.

Advertising & Email Marketing

There are certain sites that have mailing lists full of readers looking for great deals. Writers can pay to advertise to those mailing lists and offer their titles at a discount to entice them to buy.

For fiction, sites like Bookbub, Ereader News Today, and Kindle Books & Tips have huge lists of readers and are proven to boost sales if your ad is accepted.

The problem is that there aren't many ad sites right now that book poetry. This will probably change as more poets enter the market and savvy businesspeople try to find ways to connect them to readers.

You can start your own poetry-related advertising site. Literary magazines can also provide this function as a value-added feature to their mailing list subscribers. So, the industry's not quite there yet, but there are opportunities for those willing to pursue them.

Unexplored Territory

Here's the fun section. To my knowledge, these things have never been done before. Try at least one of them.

Integrate your work with fiction. For example, my series of novels, *Eaten*, is about a group of vegetable terrorists. I am writing a poetry collection that is narrated by a vegetable poet. The collection promotes the series, and the series promotes the collection. I have an imaginative writing style and I'm a multi-genre author, so I can try this. If you don't write fiction, approach an indie author and see if they will let you write a series of poems that ties into one of their novels. Offer to help promote their series along with your collection. This has never been done before, so they might be flattered and accept!

Create an audiobook version of your work. An audiobook narrated by a poet is a great selling point. Having audio available opens your work up to a wider market, and it also provides some more promotional opportunities. There isn't much of a market for short audiobooks right now though, so save your audio for a New & Selected or Collected works instead. It's never been cheaper to create an audiobook. All you need is a good microphone, preamp, and an isolated place. If you're interested, a great place to start is the ACX Blog.

YouTube Poetry Readings. Almost no one is doing video, so if you do good readings, a lot of them, and tag your videos appropriately, you can develop a nice following that might convert to your books. You can also do readings just for YouTube. You can even arrange a YouTube Poetry Reading Hangout with a bunch of other poets, and people can watch from all over the

world. You could also do a video blog (vlog) about your life or things that dovetail with your poetry. For a good example of vloggers, check out Marques Brownlee, Garrett Robinson, and Amy Schmittaer.

Other things that I haven't thought of. There are many opportunities that poets haven't explored yet.

That's your guide to promotion. It's not easy. In fact, it's hard work. It can be discouraging, and it will take you a while to develop a sizable audience. But keep at it, always believe in yourself, and never stop writing.

PART VI: The Future of Poetry

The Future of Poetry

If you've reached this point, you know exactly what it will take to succeed as a digital poet in the 21st century. Congratulations! You're a digital fledgling! Now it's time to go into the world and make magic happen.

Remember when I told you how this would be a tough path? I wasn't kidding, was I?

It's still a tough path for *me*. Writing this book was my way of wrestling with it.

Now that your path is just beginning, you're going to stumble across some roadblocks, too.

Don't despair. This section offers my vision of what will need to change in the industry so that we won't have to struggle anymore. These ideas are actionable, too.

Spread them. Steal them. Build upon them. You're just as vested in poetry as I am, and so it will need your help, too.

I hope that this section will get you thinking about new ideas that you can use to help yourself and others, too.

The Future of MFAs

No degree in the writing community is more divisive than the MFA.

Is it helpful? Is it necessary? Does it help writers get jobs after graduation?

The questions are never-ending. I didn't attend an MFA program but I almost did. I got my start as an academic, though, so I'd like to offer some insights about MFAs, why they're going about most things completely wrong, and what they can do to survive and thrive.

Here's what I know for sure.

College tuition rates are rising, with no relief in sight. College undergrads and grads are having a hard time finding jobs upon graduation, let alone jobs in their fields.

Few areas of the job economy were spared after the Great Recession. Things are getting better, but they're getting better slowly and the overall problem of job placement has not been solved.

Colleges and universities are now under tremendous pressure to show accountability for the programs and degrees they offer. They're moving toward skill-based curriculums in hopes that their graduates will be able to find jobs more easily. As a result, math and science programs are being emphasized, and the humanities are in trouble. This has been happening for the last few decades, but the recent economic problems made it worse.

My alma mater is no exception. It recently overhauled its curriculum, cutting the number of courses required for the humanities. Non-English degree students only have to take 1-2 English courses at best, and the courses are composition and western civilization-based. Alternatively, English majors are required to take fewer courses overall as a requirement for the major—a definite disadvantage.

That's just at the undergrad level. I imagine that grad programs are going through a similar turmoil, though probably not as bad yet. But grad school tuition rates are a lot higher, and that's another problem entirely.

A huge question that follows MFA programs is: “what will a writer do afterward?”

The only thing an MFA qualifies a writer to do is to teach writing. Salaried writing jobs are hard to find, and the pay sucks.

MFA programs claim to prepare students for the writing life, but they do a terrible job at preparing writers to succeed in today’s publishing industry. If you don’t believe me, look at the bestseller lists on Amazon and count how many of those authors have MFAs.

So what exactly is an MFA degree good for, then?

I’m on the fence. On the one hand, they’re such an incredible opportunity because they give writers time and space to perfect their craft, usually with generous financial assistance. When else in your life are you ever going to be able to write without having to worry about anything (unless you become an indie, sell a bunch of books, and quit your job)?

And the people you meet. You get exposure to a lot of great writers and interesting work that you never would have found otherwise.

On the other hand, MFA programs can’t create results for the majority of their students. You’ve already read about why traditional publishing isn’t such a good deal for most writers. The most that MFA programs can boast is that its graduates get book deals and win prestigious awards. But as I wrote previously, what good is winning a contest and a book contract if your book will go out of print in a few years, with no ebook edition available?

MFA programs are also dangerously isolated. There’s a huge revolution going on right now in the publishing industry, and yet I’ve seen few MFA programs even acknowledge it. It’s rare to see an MFA writer among the ranks of indies, and equally rare to see an indie self-publishing from the halls of academia.

They also promote gatekeeping culture, though probably not intentionally. All the books read in MFA programs tend to be traditionally published, and the faculty are traditionally published too. You can probably guess what their positions are. Not all of them. But many of them. Pardon the cliché, but old habits and mindsets die hard. I doubt a serious indie could practice the values of this book openly in an MFA program right now.

Next, they’re too expensive. Not everyone gets full-tuition rides. Some authors have to pay their way, and they take out loans in hopes that an MFA will help them figure out their future. Few of them will ever make enough money from their work to pay for that education, especially

if they don't participate in the self-publishing revolution. Combined with MFA isolation, they'll never know what the true possibilities of a writing career can be; or worse, they'll ridicule today's opportunities even though those opportunities could help them.

And we won't go into the racial/gender/ethnic bias of some curriculums.

Despite those cons, though, I don't believe that MFAs are destined for extinction.

I believe they can and should carve out a place for themselves in this new landscape. But it will require a serious mindset change. If they can't do this, then they will fail, and they will deserve it because the solutions are quite simple.

What MFA Programs Can Do

#1: Require MFA students to take business and marketing classes. A career in writing is more than writing—writers have to know about business, too. As an English major with an emphasis in creative writing, I really wish I had taken business, marketing, and psychology classes in college. But as a nineteen year-old, how was I to know that I would need them?

#2: Create classes that specifically address the business elements of the writing career. This includes but is not limited to: Book Marketing & Promotion, Websites, Writing Business 101, Publishing Contracts, Copyright, Social Media, etc. Find qualified faculty or hire professionals to teach them if you don't have the experience within your ranks. Now that we can host digital hangouts and host web seminars for free, there's no excuse not to hire talent from other places if you can't find someone local. There are plenty of freelance authors and speakers who would be happy to put together a course for a flat fee. They might even do it for cheaper than what schools pay adjuncts.

#3: Lift the ban on peer-review publishing requirements for faculty. This makes sense for academics in Masters' or PhD programs, but not with creative writing. It stifles professors' output and discourages them from taking advantage of everything the indie revolution has to offer. Professors and faculty should be allowed to publish their work freely, and the only requirement should be that they have their book editing and cover design performed by someone

who works in the industry, whether it be a freelancer or a vetted professional. We should expect high quality and professionalism from them. If professors can publish freely, they will figure out what methods help them sell their own books, and they can meaningfully impart that wisdom to their students.

There's nothing to like about peer-review publishing. Either your peers like your work or they don't, but it doesn't really matter because it probably won't sell anyway.

#4: Fair pay for faculty. They are the unsung heroes of any MFA program.

#5: Treat the program as an apprenticeship. This means less emphasis on workshopping and literary analysis, and a greater emphasis on actionable writing skills. This means practicing the craft, but it also means putting that practice into action while students are *still at school*. This means learning how to self-publish and find readers online, how to market books, how to build a business online, entrepreneurship, etc. This way, when students graduate, they'll already be steeped in the industry and won't have to worry about "breaking in." Young people are always at the forefront of new methods, and their abundant creativity will help the program in return.

#6: Invite indie authors to campus to participate in your activities. Invite traditional authors, too. Students benefit from having a dialogue and seeing authors succeeding at all points of the spectrum.

#7: Open up to genre fiction. MFA students can learn a great deal from genre authors.

#8: Encourage virtual internships with successful authors. Instead of working at the school litmag, encourage students to approach other successful authors who will let them work remotely in a virtual-assistant-like function. Some things students can do include: screening emails for an author, booking promotions, website maintenance, podcast administration, video editing, copywriting, proofreading, and basic formatting.

Why is this a good idea? A few reasons:

- * A virtual internship would give students the chance to put the skills they're learning into practice, in the stewardship of someone who is already doing them for a living.

- * Professional authors are insanely busy folks who would greatly appreciate the help (especially if the university is bankrolling the internship).

- * It encourages connections with the writing community so that the students' transition into the real world is easier.

- * If the internship goes well, the author will become your friend and help promote the school to prospective writers.

- * It's a selling point for admissions. Imagine this copy on admissions packets: "Our students have done internships with X bestselling author". Admissions departments and parents would be suckers for that!

#9: Embrace niche-reading and self-study. Respect that every student is different and will take a different path. Encourage self-study for whatever books students want to read in addition to a lighter curriculum.

#10: Include writing business books in your book curriculum. There's no shortage of great books about the writing business these days. Many of the best books right now are by indie authors who are making a living from their work.

#11: Encourage the school's literary magazine to go digital. So many magazines are distributed only on college campuses or to a limited list of subscribers. Producing an ebook version will help open the magazine up to a wider audience and potentially create additional revenue streams for the program.

#12: Create a publishing company in the name of the college and offer contracts to interested students who publish during their tenure at the university. Help them publish their book, distribute it, and make the contract terminate upon the student's graduation date so the rights revert back to the student to do as they please. During that time, take a 20-25% commission on sales in exchange for publication and guidance. If you really want

to up the ante, give them the option to apply their royalties toward their tuition, room & board, and book fees. That's a hell of an incentive to do well.

#13: Encourage students to be present online and engage in the writing community. This is their chance to venture out into the real world and learn from other writers exactly how things are.

#14: Convert the MFA into a BFA. Let's drop the notion that an MFA is akin to a Master's degree. Let's offer it as a career choice early-on to undergrads as a real alternative to an English degree for those who solely want to write. Encourage people of all ages to apply.

Let's also face the fact that older generations of writers starting with myself aren't going to apply to MFAs. The demographics of such a program would be better served at the undergrad level. If funding dries up as a result and students have to pay tuition, at least they only have to do it once. If the program is skills-based, they'll have a better chance of getting employed *somewhere* that pays a decent salary, especially for those who don't live in major cities and can't (or don't want to) find a job in the publishing industry. For those students who want to try to make a living from their work, they'll be better served if they understand copywriting, Internet marketing, and the publishing industry.

#15: Shorten programs. 1-2 years is a good enough time to learn everything you need to know before jumping out into the world. This keeps tuition costs lower, too.

Summary

Those are my solutions to create MFA programs that are lean, effective, and valuable while still being a worthwhile venture for the colleges that maintain them.

Sure, not all of these ideas may work, but *something* has to be done. Some schools might be doing some of these things already.

All it takes is one prestigious school to make a change and experience success, and the entire literary world will follow suit.

However, given the academic world's penchant for slowness, my guess is that it'll be a long time before any of this happens.

My recommendation is that you go out there and create a successful career, and maybe when things change, and if teaching is your thing, an MFA program will hire *you* to make changes. But honestly, you'll probably make more money as an indie author.

Me? I'd rather be writing.

The Future of Litmags

With the increasing number of books being released in the marketplace, discoverability is more important than ever, and it will continue to be the number one struggle that authors and publishers deal with in the digital era.

Literary magazines and journals can help.

Litmags were established as platforms for new writers to reach readers. Magazines such as *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Tin House* built their reputations on offering quality content to readers looking for the next great read.

Litmags *are* gatekeepers, but they don't have to be bad. But there's one flaw that will be hurting literary magazines right now: they only accept previously unpublished poems. This incentivizes poets to submit fresh work to magazines, and the magazine benefits because it is the "first" to print a story, much like how news outlets credit themselves with being the first to "break" a news story.

I argue that the "first to print" mentality is a holdover from a time when news didn't travel as fast as it does now. Today, it doesn't matter if one news outlet breaks a story first. With social media and the Internet, every outlet can learn about and produce news reports quickly. More importantly, viewers don't care who breaks a story first. When was the last time you ever thought, "I watch CNN/Fox News/MSNBC/Al-Jazeera because they always have the best news first?"

The reading industry is very different than the news industry, but the message is the same—readers don't necessarily care where they find good poems as long as the poems are good.

Magazines should focus less on unpublished poems, accept previously published work, and aggressively search for those previously published poems. They can play a crucial role in helping poets get discovered.

I know, I know, it sounds like sacrilege. But let me show you why this is the best way forward.

My Fictional Literary Magazine

If I were to start a literary magazine today, this is exactly how I would do it. (And feel free to steal these ideas. I have a daughter, and I don't have the time or energy to think about starting a magazine. But I'm confident that they will work.)

I would start a magazine with a good title—nothing with “quarterly” or “review” in it. And no weird names like some litmags are wont to do sometimes. Let's call my imaginary magazine Pegasus. Pegasus is modern, yet it has ties to the literary tradition. It's instantly memorable, too.

I would create a website (www.pegasusmag.com). See how the URL is easy to remember?

I would create a homepage with each issue that includes buy links as well links to all the major ebook retailers. I would also integrate a service like Payhip, Gumroad, eJunkie, or Selz to allow readers the ability to purchase the magazine from the website, and I'd offer the magazine in PDF, EPUB and MOBI formats, all delivered to the reader in a ZIP file for their convenience. Oh, and I'd include an about page for the magazine with photos and bios of all the editors.

That's it.

What about submissions, you ask? I wouldn't accept them. Instead, I would pay an assistant to scour existing literary magazines and published poetry collections, select his/her favorites, and submit them to me with the poet's name blacked out. I would read through these selections and pick my favorites. In addition to these selections, I would also do some separate reading myself and pick my favorite poems. Those would be the “Editor's Picks.” If I felt like it, I might open up for submissions for one or two weeks per year and mix some unsolicited poems in every now and again.

Once a roster of candidates has been selected (with some runner-ups reserved just in case), I would personally reach out to the poets whose poems I selected and pitch publication to them (or have the assistant do it). Here's how my email would read:

“Hi Mr. Poet,

I read your poem “Lovely” in X Magazine, and I loved it. I am the chief editor for Pegasus Magazine, and we publish poems that inspire us. We don't accept submissions—instead, we handpick our favorite poems and reprint them in our magazine. Think of us as more of a “curation” magazine, finding the best poems out there and bringing

them to a large audience of voracious poetry lovers. You can learn more about us at www.pegasusmag.com.

I would like to publish your poem “Lovely” in our Spring issue. I would also love to publish another poem by you, either from your poetry collections or previously unpublished.

We have a small but growing readership of avid poetry readers, and I believe that they’ll love your poems.

We can offer you \$50 for reprinting the poem. You keep the rights and we won’t place any restrictions on the piece. We’ll also promote the magazine on our Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ pages, as well as list your name as a contributor on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc. We hope you’ll find some new readers as a result.

We also have a section in the magazine for Notices, so if you publish with us, we’ll print any subsequent awards or poetry collections in our magazines for our readers to check out. Just let us know about your future successes!

We hope you are interested in this offer, so please let me know by the end of the week if you would like to proceed.

Thanks, and we look forward to helping you on your writing journey.

Why This Will Work

My strategy revolves around the following principles:

Assertiveness. A magazine should always be trying to find value for its readers. What says this more than the fact that the staff actively pursues their published poems rather than relying on an infinite slush pile?

Time management. Wading through the slush pile is exhausting, so why not eliminate it altogether? I argue that it would actually save time.

Profitability. With no slush pile, you don’t need a submission system. Selling through your website and on places like Amazon keeps your costs low. I would keep the magazine digital only, too. (News flash: no one is going to be reading litmags in print in a few years. They just take up space and are terribly inconvenient). Pass the savings onto readers and use the extra money to improve the quality of the magazine and acquire new customers. Most importantly, invest in paying poets decent prices for their work.

I would only feature 3-5 poets per magazine, with 2-4 poems each. Why? Most litmags feature too many poets. It’s impossible to get noticed when you’re published with 10-15 other

people. Focusing on fewer poets per issue helps the reader get more acquainted with them, and it lets the poet show a good range.

I would also allow selected poets to send 3-5 poems to me for consideration. They can be from a collection, a magazine, or previously unpublished, though I would prefer the former two over the latter. I would review them and pick my favorite one or two to go with the poem(s) I selected. This is the poet's chance to make their case to readers, so they would be best served by selecting a strong poem from an already published collection. This way, I would link to that collection so readers can have the option of purchasing it.

If you haven't figured it out yet, I don't like the idea of submitting previously unpublished work. Here's why: **there's no logical call to action.** Let's say that you pick up a magazine and you read a poem that you adore. The first thing you want to do is learn more about the poet, so you flip to the back of the magazine to the contributor bios. You go to the poet's website, but you're not sure where to start. You liked the poem you just read, but it's not available in any of the poets' collections (usually). Since every collection is different, you don't know which collection is most similar to the style of the poem you liked. What do you do? Which collection do you buy? What if you aren't happy with the purchase?

That's called analysis paralysis, and in today's market where we have an almost infinite amount of choices, it will kill your sales. If you give your readers too many options, they may not choose any of them. The above scenario has happened to me more times than I can count, and it's one of my biggest pet peeves.

Previously unpublished poems have a short shelf life, too. They're only fresh until the next issue of the magazine comes out. If they don't serve to help funnel readers onto your platform, then they won't be effective.

Don't get me wrong. I believe that previously unpublished works should have a place in a magazine's catalogue. But they shouldn't be the sole focus.

At least previously published works can be monetized. As a magazine editor, if I use an affiliate link to an existing collection, the magazine will get a small commission per sale, and the author will net anywhere from 60-70% of the sale. Talk about awesome!

Marketing & Metadata

I wouldn't pay to advertise Pegasus. I'd send out announcements to MFA programs, MFA graduates, and post in online communities where poets gather. That should be enough to get a baseline readership.

The real marketing would be in the metadata.

On the product page, here's what the collection would look like:

Cover: Compelling image with Poets' names listed visibly.

Title: Pegasus #1

Subtitle: Literary Fiction for Voracious Readers (or another more optimized subtitle)

Authors: Michael La Ronn (Editor), Poet 1 (Author), Poet 2 (Author), Poet 3 (Author), Poet 4 (Author)

Description: Compelling copy with the poets listed again.

Price: \$4.99 per issue, or \$9.99 for a year subscription

Series: Pegasus (so customers can click on this and see all the issues in one place)

Keywords: keywords based on the content of the magazine, linked to the Amazon/B&N/Google Play keyword search suggestions so that the book appears in relevancy searches.

Here's why I would do this.

Including poets in the metadata of the magazine serves two purposes: it properly lists them as contributors, and it also helps them with the search engines. Anytime someone searches for those poets, the magazine will appear in the search engine results. So, readers who search for that poet might check out the magazine if the cover is attractive enough.

This arrangement also makes the poet look good because it will add another title to their catalogue. As the magazine becomes more prestigious, this will serve as social proof for them.

Do you see where I'm going with this?

Readers search for the poets they already know. On a place like Amazon, they're searching to buy. If your magazine comes up once, they might not check it out. But if they keep seeing your magazine attached with poets they know and love, they're eventually going to check it out. And if they like it, you've got a new customer.

What does it cost you? Nothing, except art and what you pay your poets. If you invest your time and energy into accruing a diverse catalogue of poets, you'll acquire more subscribers over time and it'll keep your acquisition costs low.

On the day before an issue launch, I would also encourage poets to discount any collections that are featured in the magazine for at least a week (if possible). This way, readers who click through to the collection might be more compelled to buy. A lower price removes their sales objections. And if the poet has a good quality collection with a good call to action in the back, the reader might join the poet's mailing list or buy more of their books.

Speaking of mailing lists, I would also build a list of subscribers so that I could let them know when a new issue is out. I could even sell ad space in my emails and open up submissions for a weekly, exclusive poem to be delivered to readers' inboxes. This is one place where previously unpublished work could be featured—and monetized.

I could also sell ad space in the magazine related to self-publishing poetry, since many poetry lovers are also poets. I could book ads from editors, proofreaders, beta readers, cover design firms, Audible, etc. There are a lot of options.

I could also start a podcast about poetry and do interviews with poets. No one has done this yet—not successfully.

To further monetize my efforts, I could also create a separate service called Pegasus Deals. Readers could opt-in to get special weekly deals on poetry collections. I would sell ad space in these emails (much like Bookbub or Ereader News Today), and poets could pay to have their book advertised to a large audience of readers. As an added benefit to poets published in the magazine, I could also offer preferred ad space for free to contributors.

Everyone wins.

Do you see how this model works for poets while still making money for the magazine? That's how we have to think in the digital age.

Sustainability

I can hear people jumping up and down now. They're probably asking, how would the magazine be sustainable?

Well, if it's funded by a literary society or an academic campus, that's a start. I imagine that most schools would balk at this idea right now, but they balk at just about everything that is different from the status quo. That doesn't mean it won't work.

If the magazine is not funded, then the founder has to invest capital in it. That's why keeping costs down is so important. Maybe you can't pay contributors initially, but you can help promote their collections. Or maybe you can start with a small pool of money, and pay contributors more over time as your subscribers increase.

If a magazine can offer proven sales benefits to a poet, its prestige will increase. It will also create word of mouth, because poets will start dreaming of getting an email from Pegasus's editors.

After all, come on: how many magazines do you know actually provide a measured benefit for poets other than listing their name on the cover of the mag and printing the poem?

Literary magazines don't have to follow my business plan for Pegasus, but they do have to reframe their business model to work for authors and actually help them sell more books. Currently, magazines don't do that very well, and it's painfully easy.

My magazine would be founded on helping readers discover new voices. And when I say new, I don't mean debut. I mean voices that are *new to my audience*. Voices that are having a hard time getting discovered. Voices that matter. It wouldn't matter if the works were from 1970 or 2099. Ebooks are forever. As Joe Konrath famously states, a book is always new to a reader who discovers it for the first time.

In today's digital age where readers are increasingly buying ebooks, literary magazines need to focus on serving readers and authors in order to remain relevant. This requires a paradigm shift to be sure, but that's what it's going to take.

Conclusion

The poetry industry is changing.

Whether you like it or not, you'll have to adapt if you want to survive.

Many people are going to resist, but these changes are inevitable, and those people will have to adapt too if they want a career.

But guess what?

You're already ahead of 99% of poets just by reading this book.

You now have the tools to start building a satisfying career in poetry, one that will hopefully make you some money.

I believe that poetry's best days are yet to come, and you and I can make that happen. You and I will live in that era. Decades from now, there won't be any convincing—people will be talking about the things that are happening now.

Which side of history do you want to be on? For me, it's not even a choice.

The future belongs to writers. In order for us to claim it, though, we have to be the best possible versions of ourselves, write well, and learn how to be businesspeople, too. We have to be ambitious about our careers and take risks. Fortunately, it's easier than ever before.

I've taught you everything I know. Now go write, and don't stop!

WANT MORE RESOURCES?

Thanks for reading. I hope this book has helped you. Would you be willing to leave an honest review? It would really help me out.

I've also compiled a free list of 101 Publishing Resources for Poets on my website. It's the most comprehensive list I could find. Seriously. After you read this, you're going to be dangerous!

Get the FREE 101 Publishing Resources for Poets here:

www.michaellaronn.com/indiepoets

OTHER BOOKS BY MICHAEL LA RONN

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