

Why Self-Publish a Family History or Memoir Online?

(Based on Hazel Edwards' responses to questions posed by 'Who Do You Think You Are?' magazine)

I'm not mainly a self-publisher. I have over 200 books published with major publishers like PenguinRandomHouse, and a decade ago moved into selective e-versions or digital-publishing of certain rights-reverted titles.

'Writing a Non Boring Family History' is commercially print published by ghr press (Hale & Iremonger) but I do have an arrangement to sell the e-book from my website.

However I am aware of the challenges for those wishing to publish their family histories. I run workshops on 'Writing Non Boring Family Histories' and 'Complete Your Book in a Year'. My major role is not as a genealogist nor publisher, but mainly in the crafting of their stories, so the content will appeal to prospective readers in their families and beyond. This is an area many tend not to consider, as they just list everything in chronological order and put in all dates. I suggest ways of using anecdotes and themes to structure these important stories but also to consider the reader first. So if writing for children, choose examples to which they can relate e.g. contrast then and now in area such as what it was like to go to school or 'a day in the life of...'

[Hazel's answers:](#)

[Why do you feel that self-publishing is so important?](#)

Many family stories and memoirs are of extra-ordinary, so called ordinary people whose lives should be told. Often they have migrant or refugee backgrounds. The advances in computers and e-publishing mean limited runs for specialised readerships are viable, especially for a 'How To' book.

My 'Writing a Non Boring Family History' title is a viable e-book because there are linked workshops & talks and a niche market of international genealogists. The Mormon lady author in the USA, who is a fan of my book, tells me the family history market is eternal for her but I'm an atheist.

The real issue is 'marketing' and distribution. Are there enough readers interested in that subject, is it well written enough and can they buy the book easily?

Some family histories are best givers rather than best sellers.

[What does self-publishing offer compared to traditional publishing?](#)

It depends what you mean by self publishing: whether print, digital or audio book and whether you will sell via your own web site or via one of the Amazon, Kindle, Apple or other commercial sites.

Generally self-publishing means you are the publisher (and pay for all costs) as well as being the author and paying for editorial help. Don't edit your own work. You read

what you think is there.

Self publishing your family history can take a lot of time, but some really enjoy it as a retirement hobby, which involves purposeful international travel with the research.

The chapter in my book on 'What will it cost and who will pay?' covers all of this.

[Are there any downsides to self-publishing?](#)

Be wary of 'vanity publishers' who offer to edit and convert your manuscript to a book at considerable cost, and then the book is not quality controlled, reviewed nor distributed. But there are reputable 'packagers' who offer these services at reasonable fees. Check with your local library who publishes local histories in the area. Always have your book properly edited. Contact the professional editors' association for referrals.

My website has a link to the Australian Society of Authors who provide much information free on their website.

Quality is an issue. It can be so embarrassing if the final version has mistakes or is not well produced. Legal issues like copyright of photos and maps and letters may need checking.

[Do you feel that self-publishing has special significance to writers of memoirs or family history?](#)

Generally they have only a family audience/readership unless they broaden the appeal by a fascinating style or are set in a context which is of interest to others from that industry, geographic area or is an insight into a little known period. e.g. pacifist family during wartime.

The reason many families write and publish is that they want to find out for medical reasons, whose genes they are carrying, families have split or have many extra twigs and branches and it is an explanation for the newcomers, or some people discover they are not who they thought they were. i.e. their mother is not their mother.etc

Or it maybe that the writer becomes aware of being the oldest, and the only one who knows certain facts which need to be passed on.

So it is not a commercial 'costing' decision but rather an emotional or psychological decision to record the past.

But there are other issues such as ' two versions ' of the one event. Revenge is NOT a good motive.

[How did you begin self-publishing and why?](#)

As a professional author of 200 books by mainstream publishers and best known for the children's classic picture book 'There's a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake'

which was 40 this year, I have had an author website for a long time

I'm also an Australian National Reading Ambassador and keen on encouraging families to read and write together, across generations.

I wanted to e-publish some of my popular but rights reverted children's literacy mysteries and also some of my Antarctic writings (I was in an expedition with the Australian Antarctic Division in 2001) Initially, I set up an online bookstore for only my own e-books and a few print books to which I had rights reverted. E-books are easy to send internationally (no postage) and since I have an international readership for these topics, and for the Writing a Non Boring Family History' I knew there was a market.

My daughter is my marketing manager (which is her day job elsewhere) and she has helped me in the design of the original online store and revamped website.

Although I wanted to concentrate my titles on the one site, I found having my own bookshop was not viable as schools and libraries prefer to buy from an aggregator site. And schools were no longer buying 'sets' of print books. Some 'new' adult buyers of digital books were confused by the process or the format and required too much administration.

However, other people may wish to sell their books through the various self-publishing companies offering online, but be aware of the need to check on the quality of production and design and accountability for sales.

Often family historians want only a few copies, and e- format is easier for photographs and accessibility internationally.

Publishing can be expensive, so get quotes and check with others beforehand. Circumstances vary in different geographic areas, but wise to check with the local library who usually hold locally published histories.

[Do you have anything else that you would like to say about self-publishing in general?](#)

Suggest that you 'buy' digital books online so you will be aware of the importance of issues like cover, title and layout.

I write a story for each of my grandson's birthdays and this is often a great way for families to pass down their history in a format which will be read at the appropriate age.

PS I have NOT written my family history but last year I did write an article for Inside History on unsuccessfully researching my mysterious Scottish grandmother Agnes Muir Moir who brought up 7 children as a widow.

Now she would be a great subject for Who Do You Think You Are!

My digital book of 'Writing a Non Boring Family History' is a revised edition of a book which has been popular for 30 years, and used in workshops nationally. It was originally based on the 20 most common questions and answers. The new edition has extra chapters on writing for grandkids and military history tourism of visiting war-graves and writing about ancestors.

www.hazeledwards.com