



Self-published lesbian author Kiki Archer

Doin' It for Themselves

Lesbian self-publishing comes into its own. **BY VICTORIA A. BROWNORTH**

What comes after the winter of our discontent? The summer of self-publishing—for great lesbian beach reading. Despite Oprah's best efforts, no one really wants to read *Anna Karenina* when it's 90° out. We want books that won't overheat our brains, but will entertain us and give us a little frisson—a different kind of heat.

The self-published lesbian novel is a new and growing trend. Authors looking to jump-start their careers are bypassing the traditional route, now that they have an alternative to submitting their work to established publishing houses. They're going directly to readers via Amazon and Kindle (and Nook and Kobo). It's relatively easy to self-publish through Amazon's CreateSpace, then set up a website and sell the book on Amazon.

The trend is so popular that Simon & Schuster has set up its own self-publishing business, Archway Publishing. While execs at S&S are clear that they are not promoting their Archway titles as S&S books, they are willing to take the money of wannabe authors.

Amazon is also happy with the self-publishing trend. CreateSpace is the world's largest self-publishing program, and some of its authors have taken off—notably, Amanda Hocking. Hocking, a 28-year-old group home worker from Austin, Minn., is the name everyone floats when they talk about the possibility of finding success as a self-published author.

Hocking wrote in her spare time. But no conventional publisher was interested in her 17 paranormal romances, so she went to Amazon and began self-publishing in April 2010. A year later, she'd published nine titles and sold more than a million books. That translated into \$2 million in sales. She was selling 9,000 books a day. In March 2011, Hocking moved to the Big Five, signing her first contract with St. Martin's Press for an advance of over \$2 million. St. Martin's bought the Trylle Trilogy, which she'd originally

published with Amazon, and now her name is legendary among the self-published. Amazon has promoted CreateSpace using her name as the lure.

Adding to the mix: As the *L.A. Times* reported in May, e-book sales soared to \$3 billion in 2012, nearly double what they were in 2011. While this only represents 20 percent of all book sales, the increasing interest in e-books, particularly among millennials, means that self-published writers, who start out selling inexpensive e-books for under \$5, have a better chance of finding an instant audience.

Kiki Archer, a lesbian mother of two in the UK, decided to go the self-publishing route. Her lesbian romance novels *Instigations* and *But She Is My Student* debuted to five-star acclaim on Amazon in February and have attracted a strong lesbian readership. Even the cover art, with two lovely lipstick lesbians, is provocative and alluring.

The stories aren't bad, either. Archer's *But She Is My Student* is a classic lesbian romance. Miss Katherine Spicer teaches at Coldfield Comprehensive. She's sexy and gorgeous, but, of course, a romance with a student could wreck her career.

Amazon describes the book as a cross between Zoe Heller's terrific *Notes on a Scandal* and the British writer Julie Burchill's *Sugar Rush*, which may be a stretch, but the novel has more importantly, readers posting reviews on Amazon found Archer's work "full of sexual tension," "intoxicating," and "thoroughly entertaining." They also found the book "totally lesbian"—which is clearly a key to Archer's sales.

As Archer told *Curve*, "I wrote *But She Is My Student* for an audience of one. I had no intention of getting it published, or even allowing anyone other than my partner to read it. I simply wrote it to have a go at writing a novel. They say 'Write what you know,' and I know about being a teacher and being a lesbian, so *But She Is My Student* was born!"

The sequel, *Instigations*, also catapulted to the top of the charts. Archer has just delivered yet another, *Binding Devotion*.

Other lesbian writers have taken the same route. Trin Denise has self-published her lesbian novels and her children's books, and her novels have hit the No. 1 spot

on Amazon. *She Left Me Breathless* was a Lambda Literary Award finalist for Lesbian Romance this year, one of the largest of the awards' categories.

Denise also writes children's books about bullying, and offers free signed copies through her website, along with info on rescue pets, another of her passions.

Also among Amazon's top-selling self-published lesbian novels are Jennifer Lyndon's *An Infatuation*, about a married woman with two sons who meets her husband's new female boss. In Katja Michael's *She Came at Dawn*, Melissa is happily involved with a boyfriend until she meets her friend's new girlfriend. *Fracture*, by KL Hughes, has a compelling plot in which a young writer, whose novel about her affair with an older woman has been made into a film, finds love. Eliza Lentski's *Second Chances* brings two high school enemies together years later. Lentski has another novel, *Date-Night*, which reunites Dr. Sydney Brisbane and her former college roommate, Zabe Abazi. The cover shows the tangled legs of two women sprawled on a bed.

There are surprises to be found among the self-published, too. President Ronald Reagan's daughter, Patti Davis, self-published a lesbian novel, *Till Human Voices Wake Us*, through CreateSpace.

The novel, a deeply emotional story of a woman who loses her son and then falls in love with her sister-in-law, has climbed up the Amazon ratings ladder quickly and has gotten five-star reviews from readers.

On Amazon, Davis, who has published eight other books with Big Five publishers, wrote, "I am a published author, but find myself in the same situation many authors do these days. Getting publishers to say yes is really hard, particularly with fiction."

Davis explains that she's "dipped my toe into self-publishing with my new novel. It made the rounds of publishing houses, garnered a lot of interest, but no offers. I've written a lot about my famous family, the Reagans. Maybe this non-autobiographical novel was too much of a departure for publishers to wrap their heads around. But now there is KDP [Kindle Direct Prime] and the room to publish a book yourself."

Davis acknowledges what many writers struggling to get published have experi-

enced, and asserts, "It's exciting to me. A new era in publishing. Most writers have books they have labored over for years and long to put out into the world. *Till Human Voices Wake Us* is one of those books."

Davis's famous name has cache, and the stunner that she's written a lesbian novel should keep her poignant romance selling well. But Davis is not a standard bearer for the self-published and has done little to publicize the work. By contrast, Archer and Denise are exemplars. Their books

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are as good as many of the romances from established lesbian publishers like Bella Books and Bold Strokes Books, and their self-promotional skills are strong, which has propelled their books forward.

Self-publishing demands constant promotion, because you are your own publicist. Jamaican-American novelist Fiona Lewis, who also writes under the pen name Fiona Zedde, decided to try self-publishing last year, to have an instantaneous book and to see what the process was like.

An established author with Kensington Books, the Lambda Literary Award finalist had written several critically acclaimed novels with strong black women characters, thereby reaching a long-ignored audience. Lyrical, well-written, and deeply erotic, Lewis's books had broad appeal. Her brief foray into self-publishing with *Nightshade: A Novella* should have been instantly successful. Yet, despite the strong writing, the

book hasn't been a top-seller.

Lewis's new novel, *Broken in Soft Places*, was released May 14. It already had high numbers with Amazon due to advance sales—and advance publicity from Bold Strokes Books. Advance publicity is not part of the self-publishing parcel; that's the author's job, and it's a tough one, even for established writers. Lewis, the recipient of various awards and honors, admitted that the self-promotion is arduous, and that she probably wouldn't do it again, but found the experience "interesting."

Authors of Lewis's caliber aren't the norm, however, and one of the most problematic aspects of self-publishing is that few of these books have benefited from professional editing. *To Love a Woman or Butterflies... Butterflies... Butterflies*, from the Lithuanian author Fire de Ville, via Kindle Direct, is a lesbian romance that will no doubt gain an audience. De Ville says of her book, "It doesn't matter who you love as long as you love. We all deserve the happiness that being in love provides."

We also deserve better-written books, and one of the major pitfalls of self-publishing is that anyone can play.

Archer acknowledged that she needs an editor and the solid sales from her early books have allowed her to hire one. "I had no idea I used exclamation points all the time," she says, wryly. "And everyone is winking. Who does that in real life?"

Not all self-published writers are as self-critical as Archer, but as former Apple icon and self-published author Guy Kawasaki noted on Net Minds, when he turned his "perfect" manuscript over to a professional copy editor, there were 1,500 errors—and that was after he'd sent copies via email to more than 60 readers for critique.

The self-publishing world is a global democracy, and not everyone wants to read something that hasn't been vetted by a reputable publisher and worked on by an editor. But among the self-published there will always be standouts like Amanda Hocking—and other gems that needed discovering.

For lesbian writers, self-publishing offers the opportunity to tell our stories in our own unstifled voices. And among those stories, everyone will find one that resonates. ●