

Publishing Paths Panel: Pros and Cons of Big Publishers, Small Ones, and Self-Publishing

Panelists: Dave Butler, Kami Hancock, Rob Wells, and Annette Lyon

This is a transcript of a presentation given on September 24–26, 2020, at the annual conference of the Latter-day Saint Publishing and Media Association (LDSPMA). You may not reproduce or publish this material without prior written consent from LDSPMA.

Annette Lyon: Alrighty. Welcome to the publishing path panel. So we've had our introductions. My understanding, and so everyone can just mention who they are. So we could have faces with names. I am Annette Lyon.

Kami Hancock: I'm Kami Hancock, I'm from Covenant Communications.

Robison Wells: I'm Robison Wells. I started with Covenant, went to Harper. Went to a little bit of self publishing. Done a lot of co-writing and ghostwriting.

David Butler: I'm Dave Butler. I've been an editor with WordFire Press and Immortal Works. I'm published by both those publishers, but also by Random House and Baen Books and others.

Annette Lyon: Good stuff. Alright, so some of the big questions. I think between the four of us we have quite a good background on all kinds of different paths and experiences, pros and cons. And so, Kami, I'll start with you, since you work with, you know, a traditional publisher, but one of the smaller ones. It's not like one of the big five in New York. And so, what would you say are what a writer should expect? What are some of the pros with going with a traditional publisher?

Kami Hancock: So one of the pros is that we can usually get books through the evaluation process pretty quickly. I think it takes between two and four months, depending on how much is in the slush pile, and it can take a lot longer elsewhere. One of the other things is that we can get the actual production process done pretty quickly. We are hoping to kind of take more time

in the future, gradually have earlier submission dates, so that we can have better marketing opportunities. So that's kind of one of the things we're hoping to improve later down the line, too.

We also are always willing to talk to authors about any concerns they might have about contracts and try and work through any of those concerns, and we've been a lot more flexible, I think, than has been in the past about having others able to do both indie- and traditional publishing through us. So those are some of the highlights, I think.

Annette Lyon: So for a small publisher versus one of the big ones?

Kami Hancock: Yeah.

Annette Lyon: So, speaking as an author who works with any kind of traditional publisher, so some of the pros—and then Rob and Dave can chime in on some of these as well—I would say that some of them is simply the production money and professional things that are required, because when you're on your own, you have to hire the editor and the proofreader and the cover designer. And you're paying for all of those expenses, while a publisher covers those. Marketing something, if you're doing it on your own.

But then on the other hand, you have more control. So you can pick the cover. But on the flip side, maybe you're not the best person to be picking the cover.

You have to hire someone who's a graphic designer, not just slap together something on Photoshop. So Rob, what are some of your thoughts as far as the pros of being with a publisher—and you've done national with large and small—versus the cons.

Robison Wells: I am very pro large publisher. Which, to be fair, I've published several books with large publishers, several books with small publishers, but I like the experience of publishing with a large publisher, and it's mainly because of the fact that I get to focus more on the writing craft and the story and the process.

I remember I was on a panel at Life the Universe and Everything, a convention down in Provo, and I was on the panel. It was a marketing panel, and it was me and two guys who are self published. And the question was asked, "What percentage of your time do you spend marketing?" And my answer was, "If you include all the time that I spend dorking around on social media, I spend about 10% of my time marketing." And both of the guys who are self publishing said they spend 50 to 60 percent of their time marketing. And I'm a marketing

professional! I have an MBA in marketing. I love marketing, but I don't want to spend my writing career doing business. I want to write books that I want to write, focus on the craft. Yes, you do get more say in a self-published situation, but I've done self published, and I missed having an editor that was really, really good, that I didn't have to pay for. I missed having a developmental editor who would go through and talk about theme and all the in-depth stuff. I missed having all of those good things that you get from a dedicated editor, rather than just a copy editor or a line editor.

And I know you can hire developmental editors to go through your self published stuff, and lots of people do. But that was one thing that I missed self publishing. I love my self published book, and it was a weird situation where it would never have been published. It was a very, very niche book. It never would have been published traditionally. So I'm glad that I got it out there and I got people to see it, and people read it and liked it. But all things being equal, I would have traded it for a bigger publisher.

Annette Lyon: Absolutely. And that's a good example of the type of book to do indie. Depending on your goals, of course. Every writer has their own goals. But that book: it was really fun and very different, but it was niche, and so if you want to get out there, that's the way to do it. But also clarifying, so you mentioned developmental editors, also sometimes called content editors, just for those who may not know those terms.

Those are the ones who look at the big picture, look, okay, well, the arc isn't working here, this character, that, and the big stuff.

They can get nitty gritty as well, but less on the language end. So the copy and line editors are the ones who make the language pretty. And then of course you have your proofreaders at the end to make sure you didn't have any mistakes along the way. So those are all different stages. So I'm just clarifying for anyone watching.

I've seen people say, "Oh, this book had a terrible editor. There were typos." And I'm thinking, "That's the proofreader's fault, not the editor's fault." So Dave, what are your experiences and thoughts on the pros and cons of being with a publisher? **David Butler:** So I think it may be worth it to step back a moment and kind of comment on some of the things we've said already, and put a little bit of context around them.

I think something that is deeply underappreciated by writers as they begin, and sometimes even writers as they've been at it for a while, is that writing a book is an entrepreneurial act. When you sit down to write a book, you are starting a business.

And you as a writer, whatever publisher you're approaching, you're not approaching a publisher like a supplicant for a job. Right? "I would like to come work in your book factory." You are approaching a publisher as a potential joint venture partner to your business.

And you as the CEO, and also the head of sales, and also the head of production, and also the shareholder, have to make a decision about, "Is this the right publisher for me?" So I think it's very helpful. And some of this has been implicit in what we said. But I think it's very helpful to think of a publisher as a bundle of services. And I think it's okay to talk to a publisher, especially when you're not dealing with a top-five publisher, and say, "Well, what of these things will you do?" Before you sign the contract. "Tell me about your editing process. That's interesting. Tell me about your sales process. Do you sell into libraries? Tell me what you do for marketing. Tell me what you expect or what you hope or what you would like your writers to do for marketing." Right? And especially in the indie space, the answers to those questions will vary pretty widely. Right? So I think it's important to be candid.

Annette Lyon: Just to clarify, when we say "Indie space," we mean the smaller publishers.

David Butler: If you're out of the traditional big five. Even if you're—

Annette Lyon: Some people, they translate "indie" as self published, so that's not how you're using the word.

David Butler: Well, if you're self published, that's all on you, that's it. You've just decided you're not taking on a joint venture partner, you're going to do everything in house. Right. Or you're going to contract out specific pieces.

But when you're dealing with a publisher and it's not a traditional publisher, I think it's important to have that conversation. And maybe even ask those kinds of questions of other writers who work for the publisher. And the publisher—it shouldn't be offensive. It shouldn't be a problem to ask those questions.

I really like my experience with big publishers, also. Something else that a big publisher provides, that I think is worth mentioning, is an advance on royalties is a very nice thing to get.

Even though it is increasingly the case that early in your publication career, those are not going to be enough to live on. So you're still going to have to have someone earning money in the

house, or you have a day job, or whatever. It's nice to get paid. It's nice to get paid up front, whether the book sells.

The I want to make another comment, though. It's on traditional publishers. I guess I want to tell a story. I want to tell a story. And I guess the point of the story is never assume. Okay.

So my first traditionally published book was Random House. And I got this six-figure deal. Whoo-hoo! Right? And I thought, "Boom. This is over. I won." Right? From here, it's all golden sunsets and barbecue. And so I thought I'd be proactive. So I put together a little marketing plan, and I emailed the editor. And I said, "Here's some stuff I could do. I have day-job travel, I'd like to go ahead and leverage that to make school visits and bookstore visits. And here's other stuff I was thinking about." And she said, "Okay, wait, just wait. We're going to have the marketing conversation in due time." So I waited. Six months later I emailed her again. "Hey, you know, we're a year and a half out. Can we have the marketing conversation?" Not yet. We're a year out. "Can we have the marketing conversation?" Not yet.

Finally, less than a month before the publication date, I get a call, with very short notice, with the editor and the VP of marketing.

And she says—and this is Random House. This is the editor of Christopher Paolini's Eragon books, right? These are people who are big, professionally accomplished, credentialed people at a very big publisher. They said, "We're going to have the marketing conversation now." I said, "Great, what are you going to do?" And they said, "Well, we're going to do library reach-out." And I said, "Oh, what is that?" And they said, "Well, you know, I'm not really sure. We'll get back to you." And I said, "Okay, well, what else are you going to do?" And they said, "That's it, we're doing library reach-out." So look.

Here's a hard truth for you.

You shouldn't assume, even when you get a big publisher, that they're going to give you a good marketing launch or even potentially any marketing launch. So although I would very much like to do no marketing at all—it is not the thing I would enjoy—I think you as an entrepreneur, creating your fiction, I think it behooves you to not assume that your joint venture partner will always do what they say they will, much less that they will always do what you imagine or hope that they will.

Annette Lyon: And part of that, I would say, completely in agreement, that oftentimes, especially the really big publishers, they'll have a couple of books that are their A one, their A

list, that those are the ones that they'll put the marketing dollars behind. And if you're not one of them, then you know, you can sink or swim and just kind of hope that your book doesn't fade. So, Rob, tell us a little bit about your experience with some of that. Because you had a big, you had a three-book deal, almost a six-figure deal, but it's not like you're being paid all of that all at once. And then you also had an experience with—because you get your different chunks of advance payments—And then your James Patterson experience, where you got the extra delightful bonus. How delightful you were to work with.

David Butler: Right.

Annette Lyon: Which is kind of fun. But also, just clarifying for anyone who doesn't know. An advance, literally is an advanced on royalties, what royalties you earn. So if you're—just for easy round numbers—if you're given a \$10,000 advance, then you're paid nothing more until the book sells as much that you would have gotten that much in royalties. And that means earning out.

And once you hit whatever your advanced was, then you can start earning royalties, and not all books earn out. But Rob, tell us your experience with both your three-book deal and then with the Patterson experience.

Robison Wells: OK. So the three-book deal, it turned into a five-book deal. It was a six-figure deal. It . . . I thought I had it made, in the shade like Dave was saying. I thought, "This is it. I've made it. This is all I have to do." I published—

Annette Lyon: Your thought was like, "Ooh, overnight success."

Robison Wells: Right, right. But I published my first two books with them, varying in feedback, and they were major successes, published in 11 languages, sold all over the place and did really, really well.

I published my third book, and there was a dramatic drop off in readership. They then signed me on for another two-book deal, and the advances were a little bit smaller. It's still six figures, but the advances were a little smaller. So it ended up being a five-book deal, but by the time that the fifth book of the deal came out, I was so back-burner to them that—and it was because the market had changed. I rode, I hit my first book in 2010, my first national book,

Annette Lyon: Did you have a book with Covenant? I can't remember.

Robison Wells: I had three books with Covenant, 2004, 2005, 2006. Then I took some time off. And then in 2010 I sold the book to Harper Collins, and it was riding the dystopia wave. And that was what I was writing, was young adult science fiction thrillers, not really dystopian, but that's how they were marketed. But it was the tail-end of the wave. So by the time that the fifth book in my contract was coming up, and I was still writing dystopian, the market had sailed, and my fifth book—before it was even released—had already been considered a flop. And so they invested nothing in it.

And it's so good, too! Yeah, I love that book, but my first two books with them are still selling great. I still get royalties 10 years later, twice a year I get checks, but the other three books have never earned out their advances. And so that's been disappointing. And then I got roped into some ghostwriting for Full Fathom Five, if you guys are familiar with them. They are a disaster.

It was a total scam deal. They've made a lot of news for how they have mistreated their authors, like signing on a book and giving it a \$250 advance.

I got roped into a Full Fathom Five. Did three books with them, all ghostwritten, so my name was not on them, which is good, because I hated them. It was a miserable experience. They were not a book publisher, they were a book packager, which we could get into if people want to know the difference between a book publisher and a book packager, but they're a little bit different. And then I got the deal.

Annette Lyon: And with them you got like a "Work for hire" amount, if I'm not mistaken.

Robison Wells: Yeah, it was a work for hire. No royalties. And then I got the deal with James Patterson, which was a big deal.

But also a flat rate. And then I got a bonus on that deal, and the contract literally says, "The bonus is up to this percentage, you get a percentage of this amount, depending on how delightful you are to work with." And in the end, he found me 50% delightful, and I got 50% of the bonus. So that's pretty terrific.

But that was an interesting situation, where I went into that knowing, "This is the biggest-selling author in the world. If I publish a book with him, the money will not be good." Because the money wasn't good. It was decent. It wasn't bad. But it wasn't good, considering how much money he was making.

But I knew that the book would be a New York Times bestseller. And I wanted to have that label that I could use to launch my career into further greener pastures.

Annette Lyon: And you have that label now.

Robison Wells: And now I have that label. It was a New York Times bestseller. And so sometimes you accept deals because they have good advances, and sometimes you accept deals because you're desperate for money, which is what I did for the Full Fathom Five, and sometimes you do it more as career advancement than as financial success, and it's more of an investment into your career.

Annette Lyon: That makes perfect sense. I'm talking about just on the timing element. So you mentioned my World War II book. When I first started working on it, it was very much women's fiction. And at the time, you know, I had done romance, and I had done some women's fiction with Covenant, and I was getting the message that women's fiction was a little more riskier with Covenant, because they wanted to have the, more like the mystery, the romance, kind of thing.

Clear-cut genres. And so I was hearing into darker and darker territory, and this was going to be a darker book.

And I felt it needed a slightly different audience. Anyway, so I wanted to go national with it.

And at the time, when I was starting researching and drafting the book, there were very few agents representing women's fiction. It was like—this is when, you know, YA was massive, you know, because we had you know the Hunger Games and all of these things. So YA, everyone is repping YA, and no one is repping women's fiction.

Well, you fast-forward just a couple of years. By the time I finished researching and drafting and all my revisions and querying and all that fun stuff, and I get my agent, she absolutely love the book. And you know, she got what I was trying to do with it. We went through a couple rounds of revisions with her, went on submission. And again and again we were told, "Oh, you just missed the wave, because World War II was big. But now we've moved on." And there was nothing I could do about that. So I wasn't chasing any kind of publishing wave, but I still missed the "fad." So I did self-publish that book, specifically, because readers right now are still reading World War II, even though two years out in the publishing pipeline, you know, New York's done with World War II. If that makes sense.

So that was just a timing issue, it wasn't the quality issue. It was just a timing issue. And so I just jumped on that. So Kami, can you tell us a little bit about—

Robison Wells: Can I just insert one thing real quick? That is one thing to keep in mind with traditional publishers versus—what Kathy was saying earlier, with traditional publishers, you are working way out on the schedule. You're working two years to two and a half years ahead of time. Whereas with a small press or indie or self publishing, I mean, you could turn a book around in six months or less.

So that is one downside of national large presses, is that you are working a long way out. And you've got to anticipate the market. And I mean, depending on whether or not you believe in writing to the market at all, but that is one downside.

Annette Lyon: I know Covenant is extending lead times, which I think is great, so you can get more national reviews, and that kind of thing.

So, with my very first book with Covenant, that was unusually fast, even for Covenant, back in the day. I was accepted first week of February, and it came out in July.

Which was super fast. The problem with that too was then, like, "Okay, quick submit something else, so we don't have too big of a gap between books." But at least back then, that was 2002 and my last book with Covenant came out in—I'm trying to remember—2013 maybe? But there weren't advances at that point. So Kami, can you speak a little bit to some of that? So does Covenant do advances ever now, or is it by book by book, or author?

Kami Hancock: It's very rare. There are, I think I only know of two authors who have an advance, and that comes partially because they are some of the A-level authors who have kind of earned that spot. They've worked up their audience. Their books always sell really well. They have a bigger budget, because of that, for marketing and everything else for production. And so that's kind of rare, but you know, it's always, like Rob was saying earlier, it's always worth—or sorry, Dave was saying earlier—it's always worth not assuming.

It's good to ask questions when you have questions, and we, like I said, we're always willing to talk with authors about any concerns and talk through those things. So rare, but it does happen.

Annette Lyon: How, on the side of curiosity, what is your typical monthly submission amount do you usually get? Like acceptance percentage? I'm know that's kind of probably hard to ballpark it.

Kami Hancock: I know we have, I could probably look that up for you. I know we have that information in a chart, but since I'm not the submissions editor, I don't have it off the top of my head anymore. But I want to say we get maybe 400 submissions a year, like 30 to 40 a month. It kind of fluctuates, so some months are a lot slower and some aren't. Acceptances, I want to say it's more like . . .

It's a low percentage of that, very low, so many of those are returning authors. We do have new authors every year, who are accepted.

But I would guess around 8 to 10 percent acceptance rate, but again, I don't have the information right in front of me. I could probably look it up for you.

David Butler: Two to four a month? Something like two to four a month?

Kami Hancock: Yeah. And we probably publish three to four fiction books a month.

So, you know, we can get very few acceptances, but if they've built up, in a 12-month period we can only publish so much, so it's usually about three to four fiction books a month that we release.

Annette Lyon: I'm trying to get the hang of the question off my head, and it's fallen off.

David Butler: While you're doing that, I'm going to piggyback on what Rob said. I want to add sort of a second point of nuance to what he was saying, and connect it to a bigger point. So Rob was talking about how smaller presses may have more speed and nimbleness in terms of the ability to quickly chase a trend.

Right? And so you see this with all the trends: when vampires go out of style for the New York editors, people are still buying those novels. It's that the New York editors think that the end is coming, so they're stopping buying them. Right?

Annette Lyon: Like my World War II books, same idea.

David Butler: The small-published writers can still get in there and sell books if they can get them out quickly. A related point is that small presses have the flexibility and the lower cost structure to be able to chase smaller markets. And so one thing you see with small publishers is some weird genres will break—I say weird, feel the full judgmentalness of my voice, okay—

weird genres: harem, and LitRPG, and dungeon core, that New York publishers don't really have the speed or the flexibility to sort of go find and chase. They may accidentally kind of put a foot in it once in a while, but there are publishers out there who are chasing those all the time, right? The bigger point is, before you can really decide what publishers, what kind of publishers you want to work with, right, you really have to know what you want out of your writing career.

Is it just money? Right? Is it that I just have to express myself, and I don't care if anyone buys it? Is it that I really, you know, I've internalized so much love of J.R.R. Tolkien or Marion Zimmer Bradley, or whoever I have, to kind of keep regurgitating fanfiction. You know, that should really—the best fit for you will be the publisher that will help you, give you the right services, to be able to sustainably and enjoyably keep doing whatever it is the thing that you want to do in your career.

Annette Lyon: Yeah, I know one writer who started out nationally doing YA. I think it was kind of on the dystopian end of that tail as well.

For her, her big goal was to have a full-time living as a writer. So she shifted to indie and self-publishing entirely, and she's doing what they call the rapid release thing. So she does these relatively short romances. She puts out—I mean she's, she's the first to admit that they're somewhat formulaic, but she can pump it out very quickly, and she does a lot of advertising on her own. She's really kind of [inaudible], and she's making very very good money. And she's like, "I'm not going to win literary awards, but that's not my goal either." I couldn't do what she does. That's not something that's part of my path or my goal or my perspective on things, but it is hers. So, you know, good for her.

Everyone's goals are maybe a little different. So I appreciate that, Dave. Any other comments? I think we're almost out of time as far as our discussion, and then we'll stop so that when it's live, we can have Q&A from attendees. So, any other comments before we close up?

Kami Hancock: I do want to mention: one of the things that I want to make clear is that it was mentioned earlier that with bigger publishers, you get more national market, which is true. But that's not to say that smaller publishers don't market nationally at all, because they do, and it does kind of depend on the budget for the book and all that.

So that's along with asking questions and finding out who is the right fit for you, and like you've all said, trying to figure out what your goal is as an author, and what's going to be the best fit. And sometimes it's more than one of those paths. You can do more than one.

Annette Lyon: Thank you for that.

Robison Wells: I was just going to add to that.

One of the most gratifying experiences I had as an author, probably more so than when my national book came out and I saw it in print, and whatever, was when my first book came out with Covenant, which is a regional press. So the majority of the books are sold in the Intermountain West: Idaho, Utah, Arizona.

And when the book came out, I went to the bookstore to see if they had it out, and they had it in a major display case—I mean a major display kiosk in the middle of the store. They had it on the new release shelf. They have it in a special display shelf by the cash register, and they had it on a book rack by the front door. There were hundreds of copies of my book in that bookstore.

Versus when Variant came out—which Variant is my big bestseller, that has made far more money—any given bookstore might have four copies of it, unless there's a special author event, where they order in copies.

And so yes, there are definitely benefits to going national, but there was nothing that I loved more than going in and seeing my book everywhere, and seeing the press that it was getting, because it was one of this small press's premier titles that they were pushing. And it was just My socks were blown off. And I went across the street to a Barnes and Noble, and they had two copies on the bookshelf. And they were spine out, so no one could see them, and it was just this big revelation to me that man, if you can get the right publisher with the right connections to the right distribution chains, you can have a very lucrative, enjoyable career.

Annette Lyon: And it feels good. I had those moments of seeing some of my Covenant books in big stacks and displays, and that was always really fun.

I guess we didn't touch too much on just self publishing by itself. And I probably have the most experience with that one. So I just wanted to say just a couple of quick things on that. One, you know, you can make a whole lot of money if you know what you're doing.

And I'm still trying to figure out a lot of that, as I'm trying to kind of do the hybrid thing, do both as much as I can. One thing that was helpful for me was I was part of an anthology on the USA Today list. So I was, I don't think I could have done that on my own. But now I can say I'm a USA Today bestseller, which was an exciting thing to happen.

And again, you can have more control over, you know, timelines, and you know, “Here’s something I want to write about, whether or not any publisher will want it, I can write it and I can put it out there.” So there are definitely a lot of pros with self publishing, but I am one of those who doesn’t want to abandon the pros of either side.

So I will be self publishing for some time. And also I want to mention: with Covenant, so Covenant’s really branched out since I first published with Covenant in 2002. There was pretty much zero national outreach. Whereas today, you’ll get submissions to get Kirkus Reviews and, you know, and more national distribution and that kind of thing.

So it’s worth asking questions to see, if a publisher used to be this way or that way, how maybe the contracts have changed, or maybe the marketing plans have changed. At least, I know Covenant has changed quite a lot in the last 10 years.

Anyway, that was my little spiel on that. So Rob, what’s the time looking like? Like how long we’ve been recording?

Robison Wells: We’ve been recording about 40 minutes.

Annette Lyon: And that’s what Angela said should be a perfect time. So I guess we will sign off, and we’ll have about 10 minutes of Q&A during the conference itself. Thanks, guys.

Robison Wells: Awesome. Thanks.