

Trad vs. Indie: A Tale of Two Publishing Paths by Veronica Sloane

For as long as I've been a reader, I've been an aspiring author. I love being creative and dream of sharing stories of my own to other bookworms. As I approach graduation, it is time to put my dreams into motion. I am currently working on a novel, *Birds of Paradise*, that will be the first book in the series, *The Ash & Bloom Duology*. The sequel is not yet written but is titled *Lilies of the Valley*. As I write these adult fantasy novels and prepare to get them out into the world, I am faced with the question of how I want to do that. Do I want to publish them myself or do I want to get them traditionally published? Based on what I've gleaned from my research and interviews with authors, I've decided it would be ideal for me to get traditionally published. However, it is not as easy as writing a book and sending it out. The publishing industry is always evolving, and there are also many other writers out there who share the same goals as I do. With that being said, independently publishing my books is a real option that I could do permanently, but is also a good jumping-off point for me to acquire readers before pursuing traditional publication. While I would love to be picked up by a big publishing house right away, I have compromised my desires and have decided that I want to pursue being a hybrid author.

From the first printing press to today's multimedia conglomerates, traditional publishing has functioned as somewhat of a gatekeeping system that filters manuscripts through agents, editors and marketers before a book ever reaches readers. Throughout most of the twentieth century, authors followed a linear path: secure an agent, sell the manuscript to a major or mid-size house, then rely on that house for production, distribution and publicity. The digital revolution of the early 2000s disrupted that model. Self-publishing platforms such as Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) and IngramSpark eliminated many of the logistical barriers to printing and global distribution. Paired with print-on-demand technology, an author can now

upload a manuscript on Monday and see it for sale worldwide by Friday. Industry commentators often frame this shift as democratization, but it also transfers risk, cost, and workload from publisher to writer (Rich 31).

Pursuing a contract with one of the “Big Five” or an established independent press still begins with literary representation. The start of this process includes reaching out to literary agents, asking them to give your book a chance and represent it in trying to get publishing houses to give it a deal. I interviewed a good friend and author, Brooke Marley Jones, who explained, “About 1 in 1,000 queries results in an offer of representation.” She refers to this statistic as “a whopping 0.1 percent chance.” The *Writer’s Market* is a book I acquired to help me in this process because it provides an annually updated listing of agencies and detailed submission guidelines. These listings let you tailor each query letter to the specific agent.

Making it through this bottleneck reaps great rewards like professional development, line editing, in-house cover design, commercial print runs with guaranteed bookstore placements, and access to industry reviews. These traditional contracts often take away creative control for that support however. Cover art, trim size, pricing, sometimes final title choices, may be at the publisher's discretion. Royalty structures underscore the imbalance: debut contracts typically offer about 8 percent of the paperback’s list price (Authors Guild, sec. 5[b]) and 25 percent of the publisher’s net receipts on e-books (Authors Guild, sec. 5[c]), figures that leave far less per-copy profit than the up-to-70-percent royalties available to self-publishers (Pop). These numbers seem to lend towards self-publishing being the better choice, but as previously mentioned, it comes with its own set of pros and cons.

Independent publishing allows for complete authority. This includes editorial hires and cover art. With great power comes great responsibility, however. Jason R. Rich outlines a

self-publisher's checklist that spans manuscript preparation, professional editing, administrative design, platform selection, distribution, and long-term marketing (Rich 11-22). My interviewee, Brooke Marley Jones's journey illustrates how much of a learning curve this can be. After more than one hundred agent rejections, she invested roughly \$10,000 in editors, an illustrator that she found on Instagram, and a formatter all before launching her fantasy debut via KDP and IngramSpark.

Financial costs can vary widely for indie authors. There are tools like Atticus and Vellum, which when paired with KDP's free upload service means a book can reach market for only a few hundred dollars (Atticus; Vellum; "eBook Royalties"). Professional services can escalate costs. Reedsy's marketplace data compilation places substantive editing for an 80,000-word novel at roughly \$2,000-4,700, and a 2025 Reedsy cost survey notes that total self-publishing budgets often exceed \$5,000 once design and promotion are added (Reedsy, "How Much Does an Editor Cost?"; Reedsy, "How Much Does It Cost"). Paid visibility such as you can get with BookBub's Featured Deals, which can run from several hundred to several thousand dollars depending on genre, can push launch budgets into the tens of thousands (BookBub Partners). The trade-off is the proportionally higher royalties mentioned previously and full ownership of intellectual property rights. The actual choice between traditional and independent publishing comes down to the three intertwined factors of creative control, financial commitment, and market reach. Each path reshapes the author's role in the life of a book.

Creative control is the clearest differentiator. In the traditional model, once an author signs with a house, decisions about cover art, interior design, pricing, and sometimes even substantive edits move largely into the publisher's hands. For one writer, that professional input and polish might be worth giving up authority. For another, it might feel like surrendering the identity of the work. An indie author on the other hand retains full decision-making power from the jacket coloring to keywords for online discovery.

Jones underscored how essential that autonomy felt after “one hundred rejections” in the agent-query process. Choosing her own illustrator, formatter, and launch timeline felt like reclaiming the story she had revised so many times waiting for the gatekeepers of the industry to respond (Jones).

With regard to financial investment, the script flips. Traditional houses absorb the costs of professional editing, design, printing, and initial marketing. The author’s immediate out-of-pocket expense is essentially zero. The writer instead surrenders margin. Royalty rates can dip below 15 percent of net sales once agent commissions and discount structures are factored in (Writer’s Market 83-92). Indie publishing reverts this equation. As discussed previously, up-front costs can be limited to a few hundred dollars or they can climb into five figures for bespoke artwork, multiple editorial passes, and paid promotions. Once again though, authors who can shoulder these expenses can reap significantly higher royalties while retaining full ownership of subsidiary and translation rights that traditional contracts often lock up for years.

Market reach and legitimacy lead to fuzzier middle ground. Large traditional publishers still command the most extensive print distribution, institutional review coverage, and prize visibility. A debut placed with one of these imprints can land in national chain stores on day one. Self-published authors can match that footprint but with speed to market and direct reader engagement. Social-media book communities such as Facebook reading groups, Instagram’s “Bookstagram,” and TikTok’s #BookTok are all communities I partake in. They allow indie writers to cultivate grassroots fandoms without waiting for traditional publicity calendars (Writer’s Market 59-60). Jones credited Facebook groups and influencer partnerships for steady sales months after launch. She also conceded that paid Amazon ads delivered “less return than

hoped” (Jones). Conversely, traditionally published authors often benefit from coordinated national media outreach, but may wait many months between acquisition and release.

This comparison suggests no single superior route so much as two distinct career logics. Traditional publishing offers professional scaffolding and wider commercial exposure but demands patience, limited control, and lower royalties. Independent publishing demands career risk and labor, but provides autonomy, speed, and a potentially higher financial upside. A hybrid approach of building an audience through independent releases while continuing to query agents for future projects can blend these advantages and this is what I am ultimately planning to do for myself. Jessica Brody’s *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel* advocates for drafting a clear fifteen step outline she calls the “beat sheet” before committing to either route, ensuring the story itself can succeed irrespective of business model (Brody). Early indie success can create leverage when negotiating a later traditional contract, and conversely, rights-reverted backlists from traditional houses can be self-published to generate new revenue streams.

My own aspirations align with this hybrid philosophy. I will continue polishing *Birds of Paradise* using the structural tools that Jessica Brody suggests. While I query agents, I can simultaneously develop a marketing foundation as with an author website, a mailing list, and social media presence. These will serve me whether a publisher or I myself eventually release my novel to readers. We are in an era where boundaries between “traditional” and “indie” blur more and more each year. The most sustainable career appears to be one that remains flexible, informed, and above-all persistent. As Stephen King emphasizes through *On Writing*, successful authors rely on persistence, patience, and sustained hard work (King). Those qualities, rather than any single pathway, are what carry stories from imagination to bookshelves and it is what I plan to incorporate in my own career.

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