

# Making a debut

Brendon Lancaster shares his experiences of self-publishing *Hoodie*



It's hard for debut novelists without connections to get published. I'd almost consigned my (blood, sweat and tear-stained) manuscript of *Hoodie* to an early retirement in the loft, when I read a small article in a Sunday newspaper championing the concept of self-publishing.

Being a slightly cynical soul, I initially dismissed the idea as being too close to what used to be known as 'vanity publishing'. You know, the sort of publisher who'll publish any old rubbish just to get their hands on your money with no effort on their part. Besides, I had naively hoped a mainstream publisher would take on my raw manuscript, give it a polish, put a shiny cover on it and give it a big marketing push while I spent my days lounging around in a velvet smoking jacket quaffing wine, creating characters and plots for my next bestseller while the cheques ker-chinged their way to the bank. Self-publishing wasn't part of my plan.

But I also understand that all first novels, whoever they are written

by, often struggle to sell as readers shy away from trying new material and – rightly or wrongly – gravitate towards authors and publishers they know and trust. The paradox is that mainstream publishers are no longer the stamp of quality, yet equally we know that they say something: their books have been signed off by a professional literary agent, publishing director, copy editor and proof editor. Unfortunately, many a self-published title continues to let down and taint the reputation of a sector where many gems lie hidden.

As a reader, I struggle to find books that appeal to me. I'm not the slightest bit interested in reading bland mediocre novels that get published because of the author's name or connections. I write instead. I've always loved writing. Whether it is poems, articles, letters, short stories or a full-blown novel, writing provides a welcome escape into a pleasurable world of self-indulgent fantasy, where I can enhance, create and delete whatever thoughts and feelings I have – where no rules exist other than those I choose to follow.

'We've all got a book in us' is a often-used mantra and I had reached a point in life; not so much that I wanted to write a story, but that I had a story in me which needed telling. And so *Hoodie* was born.

Although not in any way biographical, it draws on my experience growing up in West London and tells the story of disempowered, disaffected teenager Ben and his struggles to come to terms with himself and the challenges in the world around him. It's a mix of contemporary realism, dream-like escapism, fast-paced, hard-hitting action, wistful musings, humour and tragedy, all while the story trips its way round a magical mystery tour of Ben's mind.

The first draft was completed in an obsessive three months of manic wide-eyed late night drafting, followed by a further six months of editing and redrafting. Many rejections and a couple of near misses from mainstream publishers later, I pitched my own belief in my material against the risk I was asking publishers to take and



decided to put *Hoodie* out there myself (if only to obtain a bound copy of it to shove in the loft). Also, the idea of total creative control of design, artwork, storyline, ownership of rights and not having to answer to anyone but myself appealed. It was going to be fun!

I saw having total editorial control as a double-edged sword though and used an independent proof-reader to pick up on those errors I was no longer capable of spotting. For publishing, I chose Authorhouse mainly because I was impressed with their production quality.

The fun kicked in when I came to create, with help, the cover design which I was able to ensure authentically conveyed precisely the old school image I had in mind. Similarly with my website, which includes photographs of the story's location. I consciously rejected established advice to blog or tweet simply because I think the random, inane self-obsessed posts I've seen from other authors (and celebrities)

can do more reputational harm than good. A vested corporate influence might not have allowed such creative freedom!

The most exciting moment was when my first proof copy of *Hoodie* arrived. At that point, I was so satisfied to hold a physical copy of my own book anything which followed would have been a bonus.

And the bonuses did follow... first in the form of positive coverage in *The Westminster and Paddington Times* (the area in which the novel is set) and in *The Enfield Advertiser* (my local rag). Next, a favourable review from 'Hot Gossip, Hot Reviews' who gave me four out of five 'hots' and said 'A flare of teenage realism mixed with slang, palpable dialogue and interesting characters' and 'Everyone will be able to relate to some aspect of the flawed personalities.'

Perhaps most rewarding were the numerous bits of unsolicited feedback and support I received from friends, old and new, who offered feedback such as

'Clockwork Orange with a twist', 'Compelling dialogue and impressive depth of character development... a slightly surreal rites-of-passage' and 'A great read and I loved working out all the local geography references'.

Having now gone through the whole self-publishing process, I would say the main drawback is the price. At £13.49 on Amazon and £8.99 from the publisher, *Hoodie* can't realistically compete against known authors in the £5.99–£7.99 range. But, with the arrival of Amazon Kindle in the UK, I'm about to see how *Hoodie* fares at an electronic £2.99 per copy (with greater profit margin!).

So, any regrets? Nope. Highlights? The great support received from friends. Riches? No, but it was worth every penny in fun. Would I do it again? I'm already writing my second novel – in my velvet smoking jacket and with a glass of wine in hand, of course!

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