

The AI Author: Write, Publish, and Sell Books in the AI Era

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Introduction: Anyone Can Publish. Almost Nobody Sells.

Fifteen years ago, becoming a published author meant convincing a gatekeeper. You wrote a manuscript, drafted a query letter, and mailed it into a slush pile where an overworked agent or acquisitions editor decided, in about ninety seconds, whether your life's work deserved a second look. Most got a form rejection. A lucky few got representation, then a publisher, then a modest advance, then a place on a shelf in a store that might carry the title for three weeks before returning the unsold copies. The gate was narrow, the odds were long, and the power sat entirely with the people holding the keys.

That gate is gone. Today you can write a book this month, upload it to Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing tonight, and have it for sale to hundreds of millions of shoppers in more than a dozen countries by tomorrow morning. No agent. No advance. No permission. You keep the rights, you set the price, and you earn a royalty on every copy that sells. The same is true across Apple Books, Kobo, Google Play Books, Barnes & Noble Press, and a handful of other storefronts. This is one of the most genuinely democratizing shifts in the history of the written word, and it is not hype. The opportunity is completely real.

Here is the flip side, and I am going to be blunt with you from the first page because this entire book depends on it: the exact thing that makes self-publishing so wonderful — that anyone can do it — is the exact thing that makes it so hard. When the gate disappears, everyone walks through it. Millions of titles are uploaded every year. The store is not a quiet shelf waiting for readers to discover you; it is an ocean, and most books that go into it sink without a trace. Publishing is now easy. Selling is as hard as it has ever been. Possibly harder.

I want you to hold both of those truths in your head at the same time, because most people who fail at self-publishing fail because they only believed the first one. They heard "anyone can publish" and quietly translated it into "anyone can profit." Those are not the same sentence. They are not even close. You can absolutely build a real income as an independent author — people do it every single day — but you do it by

treating this as a business with a craft at its center, not as a lottery ticket you buy with a weekend of effort.

What AI Actually Changes

You picked up a book called *The AI Author*, so let me address the elephant in the room immediately and honestly. Artificial intelligence — the large language models that can draft paragraphs, brainstorm outlines, summarize research, suggest edits, and rephrase clumsy sentences — is a genuinely powerful tool for a writer. I am not going to pretend otherwise, and I am not going to sneer at it. Used well, AI can take a competent author and make them faster, more organized, and more prolific. It can flatten the blank-page terror that stops so many people before they start. It can act as a tireless brainstorming partner at two in the morning, a first-pass proofreader, a research assistant that helps you find the questions you didn't know to ask, and a structural editor that spots when your chapter three is doing the job chapter one should have done.

Those are real gains. A working author who learns to use these tools skillfully can produce more, and produce it more cleanly, than they could alone. That advantage compounds over a career, especially in this business where, as you'll see, a *backlist* — a growing shelf of titles — is one of the strongest predictors of who actually earns money. Anything that helps a real author write more good books, faster, is worth taking seriously.

The Hard Line You Cannot Cross

Now the part that matters more than anything else in this introduction. AI is a tool. It is not the author. It cannot be, and if you let it try, you will fail — commercially, and possibly in violation of the rules of the very platforms you're trying to sell on.

A book is not just words in a plausible order. It is judgment: knowing which of the ten thousand things you could say are the three things worth saying. It is voice: the specific human texture that makes a reader feel they are in the company of a particular mind rather than a smooth, average, agreeable nobody. It is expertise: actually knowing the subject, having lived it or studied it deeply enough to catch the errors a language model will confidently invent. And it is accountability: your name is

on the cover, and when a reader trusts you, you owe them the truth. A language model has no judgment, no lived voice, no expertise it can vouch for, and no accountability whatsoever. It predicts the next likely word. That is a marvelous thing for it to do *in service* of an author, and a disastrous thing to mistake *for* an author.

This isn't just my opinion or an aesthetic preference. It is now the practical reality of the marketplace. Amazon's KDP requires you to disclose when content is AI-generated during the publishing process — that is a stated platform rule, not a suggestion. Amazon has also imposed limits on how many titles an account can publish in a day and has been actively removing low-quality, mass-produced content. The stores are being flooded with cheap, auto-generated "books" — thin, repetitive, error-riddled text that someone pushed a button to create — and the platforms are cracking down on it because readers hate it and it poisons the well for everyone. If your plan is to have a machine spit out a manuscript and quietly sell it as your own careful work, you are not early to a gold rush. You are late to a flood that the people running the stores are actively draining, and you risk getting your account suspended or your titles pulled in the process.

So the line is simple to state and non-negotiable in this book: **AI can help you write. It cannot write instead of you.** You remain the author. You make the decisions, you supply the expertise, you own the voice, you verify every fact, you disclose what the platform asks you to disclose, and you take responsibility for the finished work as if — because it's true — your name and reputation depend on it.

What This Book Is

This book is a realistic, start-to-finish guide to building a self-publishing business the right way, with AI used as an honest tool and quality treated as the whole point. I'm going to walk you through choosing what to write and for whom, actually writing it well (with AI as an assistant, not a ghost), editing and formatting to a professional standard, covers and metadata, publishing across the major platforms, pricing, launching, and — the part nearly everyone underinvests in — marketing and building an author brand and a backlist over time. I'll be candid about money, including the fact that most self-published books earn very little and why, and what the disciplined minority do differently.

I'll also keep coming back to the guardrails, because in this particular corner of the internet they matter enormously: disclosure of AI use where platforms require it, staying on the right side of copyright and plagiarism law, never buying or trading fake reviews (which is illegal, not merely frowned upon — the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's rule at 16 CFR Part 465 specifically prohibits fake and deceptive reviews), and generally refusing to participate in the race to the bottom that is making this business harder for the honest people in it.

What This Book Is Not

This is not a push-button money machine, and I will not insult you by pretending it could be. There is a whole genre of course and "system" that promises you'll generate a hundred AI books, upload them all, and wake up to passive royalties. Those systems flood the stores with slop, sell almost nothing, frequently get accounts banned, and burn the people who buy into them. Every time one of those schemes runs, it makes the marketplace worse for the writers doing real work. If that is what you came here for, I'd genuinely rather you close the book now and get a refund than waste your time and money on a promise I have no intention of making.

I also want to be clear, in the plainest possible terms, so it carries through every chapter that follows: **this book is education, not financial or legal advice.** I'll share ranges, patterns, and industry realities, but I will not invent income figures or feed you a fabricated "here's how I made \$12,000 on KDP last month" case study, because those numbers are almost always either made up or wildly unrepresentative, and they set you up for exactly the wrong expectations. When I give examples, I'll label them as illustrative. Your results will depend on your genre, your quality, your marketing, your persistence, and a fair amount of luck. For anything touching taxes, business structure, contracts, or your specific legal situation, talk to a qualified professional. I'm here to teach you the craft and the business; I am not your accountant or your attorney.

Who This Book Is For — and Who Should Close It

This book is for you if you have something to say and are willing to do the work of saying it well. Maybe you're an expert in a field and you want to turn that knowledge

into nonfiction that actually helps people. Maybe you're a storyteller with novels in you and you're tired of waiting for permission. Maybe you already write and you want to publish smarter, use modern tools without compromising your integrity, and build something that pays over years rather than weeks. If you're ready to treat writing as a craft, publishing as a business, and readers as people who deserve your best, you're in exactly the right place, and I'm glad you're here.

This book is also for the working professional who has spent a career accumulating hard-won expertise — the nurse, the electrician, the small-business owner, the coach, the retired engineer — and who suspects, correctly, that somewhere in that experience is a book real people would pay to read. You are exactly who nonfiction self-publishing rewards, because you have the one thing a language model can never supply: you actually know the thing. And it's for the lifelong reader who has quietly wanted to write fiction for years and finally has the tools and the open door to try. What every one of these people shares is a willingness to learn a craft and respect a reader. If that's you, the rest of the book is yours.

Close this book, with my blessing, if what you actually want is a shortcut that skips the writing. If you were hoping I'd show you how to have a machine produce books you don't read, in genres you don't understand, to sell to readers you don't respect — I can't help you, and honestly, I wouldn't want to. That path doesn't lead where you think it does. But if you're still with me, let's get to work, because the opportunity in front of you is real, the tools have never been better, and the field is wide open for anyone willing to do it right.

Chapter 1: The Self-Publishing Reality — The Opportunity and the Honest Odds

Before we talk about writing a single word, you need an accurate map of the territory. Most people who wander into self-publishing are working from a fantasy version of it — some blend of half-remembered success stories, breathless YouTube thumbnails, and wishful thinking. Building a real business on top of a fantasy is how you end up frustrated, broke, and convinced the whole thing is a scam. It isn't a scam. But it also isn't what most of the loudest voices tell you it is. So let's get the map right.

How Self-Publishing Actually Works

Strip away the jargon and the mechanics are refreshingly simple. You, the author, are responsible for producing a finished book: you write it, you get it edited, you format the interior so it reads cleanly on a screen or a page, and you commission or create a cover. Then you upload it to one or more retail platforms. The dominant one is Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), which handles both ebooks and print-on-demand paperbacks and hardcovers. There are others worth knowing — Apple Books, Kobo (which also powers a wide international library and subscription network), Google Play Books, Barnes & Noble Press, and distributors like Draft2Digital and IngramSpark that can push your book to many stores and even to physical bookshops and libraries at once.

The retailer's job is distribution and fulfillment. When a customer buys your ebook, the platform delivers the file. When someone orders a paperback through print-on-demand, the platform prints a single copy on demand and ships it — no garage full of boxes, no upfront print run, no inventory risk. In exchange for storefront access, payment processing, and delivery, the platform takes its cut, and you earn a *royalty* on each sale.

Those royalties are meaningful but not magical, and the exact rules vary by platform, format, price, and territory, so always check the current terms yourself rather than trusting a number you read somewhere. As a general shape of things on KDP ebooks, for example, authors can choose between royalty tiers, and there's a commonly used

higher tier that applies within a specific list-price range; go outside that range and you drop to a lower rate. Print books earn a royalty calculated after printing costs are deducted, which means longer books cost more to print and can eat into the margin. Enrolling an ebook in Amazon's Kindle Unlimited subscription program (via KDP Select) changes the math again — you earn from pages read rather than copies sold, and it typically requires exclusivity to Amazon for that title. None of this is complicated once you're in it, but the headline is this: **you can start with essentially no money, you keep your rights, and you get paid per sale.** That combination genuinely didn't exist for ordinary writers a generation ago.

The Costs Nobody Mentions in the Sales Pitch

"You can start with essentially no money" is true, and I stand by it — but "no money" is not the same as "free," and the honest version deserves a sentence or two before we go further. You can technically publish for zero dollars: KDP charges nothing to upload, and you can write in a free word processor and make a cover with free software. Plenty of authors have started exactly that way. But the books that actually sell tend to have had a little real investment behind them, and pretending otherwise sets you up to skim on the things that matter most.

The two costs worth taking seriously are editing and cover design. A professional editor — or at minimum a skilled proofreader and a couple of sharp beta readers — catches the errors and weaknesses you literally cannot see in your own work, because your brain fills in what it meant to write. A professional-looking cover, whether you commission one or learn to make a genuinely good one yourself, is not vanity; it's the single most important marketing asset your book has, because it's the first thing every potential reader sees. Beyond those two, the optional spend is advertising, and the right move there is to spend nothing until a book has proven it can convert browsers into buyers, then scale carefully. Everything else — your time, your learning, your persistence — is paid in effort rather than dollars, and that's the larger bill by far. Budget honestly, spend where it counts, and never let a shoestring become an excuse for amateur work.

The Income Distribution Nobody Frames Honestly

Here is the single most important thing in this chapter, and I want you to sit with it rather than skim past it, because getting this wrong is the number one reason new authors quit bitter. The income distribution in self-publishing is brutally lopsided.

The large majority of self-published books sell very few copies. Not "fewer than they hoped" — very few, as in single digits or low double digits over their lifetime, much of that to the author's own friends and family. This isn't a controversial claim among people who actually work in the industry; it's the plain reality of a marketplace where millions of titles compete for attention and most get essentially none. A meaningful chunk of published books never crack even a handful of sales. If you go in expecting your first book to change your finances, you are statistically almost certain to be disappointed, and that disappointment will feel like failure when it's actually just the baseline.

At the same time — and this is the part the doom-and-gloom crowd leaves out — a disciplined minority of independent authors earn real, sometimes life-changing money. Some earn a nice side income. Some replace a salary. A small number run genuine six- and seven-figure publishing businesses entirely on their own terms. These people are not luckier than everyone else, and they are not necessarily more talented in some mystical, unteachable way. They are doing specific, learnable things that the vast majority of self-published authors are not doing. The gap between the two groups is not random. It is the whole subject of this book.

Notice what I did *not* just do: I didn't tell you "the average self-published author earns \$X per month." I won't, because that number is close to meaningless — an "average" between a huge crowd earning almost nothing and a tiny group earning a great deal tells you nothing useful about what *you* will earn. Anyone quoting you a clean average or a seductive "typical" income is either careless or selling something. Your outcome depends on choices you haven't made yet.

What Separates the Authors Who Earn

So what are the earners actually doing? After you strip away the survivorship stories and the guru theater, it comes down to a short, unglamorous, and remarkably consistent list. None of it is a secret. All of it is work.