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Suw Charman-Anderson, Contributor
I'm a geek & author covering self-publishing & crowdfunding

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Joanna Penn on Self-Publishing and Hybrid Authors

Joanna Penn, author and writer of the [The Creative Penn](#) writing and publishing advice website, spoke to a meeting of [Women In Publishing](#) recently about her experiences of self-publishing. Penn first self-published in 2008, a time when the Kindle was only available in the US and the infrastructure that we now take for granted wasn't yet in place. Although her first book was a non-fiction title, she has since written three novels which have sold 60,000 copies, mostly in America.



"Amazon picked up [Pentecost] for a daily deal," Penn said. "Sales sky-rocketed and from that point on I could see my future, which is write more novels."

Penn isn't solely dependent on Amazon to access potential readers as her own reach is sizeable, with 100,000 people visiting her blog each month, 8,000 subscribers to her podcast on iTunes, 35,000 followers on Twitter, not to mention her mailing list subscribers. Many a pixel has been spilt on the importance of creating an 'author platform', but authors shouldn't feel the need to do everything.

"I'm not going to say you need to blog or use Twitter," Penn said, "but you do need to do something. Authors are told they need to do all of these things but, for most people, you just have to pick one. But you do need to get out there and become known."

Penn emphasises that authors also need to have more than one product. The more books you write, the easier it is to build your numbers, particularly if you're writing a series.

After her success self-publishing, Penn says that she has now signed with an agent who is looking for a more traditional contract her fourth novel, a thriller. In part this is so that she can get her books into bricks and mortar bookstores, which is very difficult for self-published authors. And having such a strong sales record should help.

"If my agent gets a deal that sounds good," said Penn, "then I will go into it with full knowledge of what I bring to a publisher — I can sell my own books."

Penn could, like Hugh Howey, end up with a hybrid deal where the author retains the ebook rights and sells only those rights that they can't immediately exploit themselves, such as print rights. Indeed, Howey has become the poster child for hybrid authors. Off the back of 500,000 in ebook sales for his post-apocalyptic thriller *Wool*, he signed a print-only deal with Simon & Schuster while retaining the ebook rights. He has even sold the film rights to producer Ridley Scott. [Wrote the Wall Street Journal](#):

“ Last year, [Howey] turned down multiple seven-figure offers from publishers before reaching a mid-six-figure, print-only deal with Simon & Schuster.

"I had made seven figures on my own, so it was easy to walk away," says Mr. Howey, 37, a college dropout who worked as a yacht captain, a roofer and a bookseller before he started self-publishing. "I thought, 'How are you guys going to sell six times what I'm selling now?'"

"Hybrid is the way forward," said Penn, "I'm a fan of publishers who want to be creative and do exciting things, and there are lots of things I'd like to do, so I think hybrid is the best way, allowing authors to do some projects with publishers and others that they self-publish.

"[Thriller writer] CJ Lyons has books with New York publishers and she self-publishes, though she makes more money each month self-publishing than she does in a year through traditional publishing."

Penn has already sold the audiobook rights to Pentecost, which, she joked, means she doesn't have to do it herself. It also means that she could join the [Crime Writers Association](#) because her audiobook contract made her eligible. And her sales allowed her to join [International Thriller Writers](#), as it now takes people based on volume rather than publication route.

But it's not just a matter of writing a book, throwing it up on Amazon and waiting for the opportunities to roll in. The downside is that you have to learn new skills such as marketing, as well as the craft of writing.

“You are both author and publisher,” Penn said, “and it’s a big learning curve. Back in 2008, I piled a load of money in, but got no return. I had to learn the business, but we all have to learn, in any job in any situation.

“The idea that if I sign with a traditional publisher I only have to write, that has never been true. Authors have always had to do festivals, readings etc. People moan about the need for marketing, but more and more authors are asked to do marketing.”

The publishing industry is changing and authors are becoming empowered, not just because of their ability to self-publish, but also because of the free flow of information and easier networking, Penn said. Authors can easily learn how to interpret the [niggling details of book contracts](#), and it’s much easier now to meet and stay in touch with professionals in the industry.

“The point is that we have an ecosystem. It used to be that there was a veil drawn around the industry, it was secret. Now we all share, we recommend people to each other, people put contracts online, and by sharing stuff we can get around a lot of problems. I think of the future as more balanced, as about partnerships. How do we help each other make more money?”