

THE IMPACT OF PLATFORMIZATION ON SELF-PUBLISHING: GRANTING
AUTHORIAL AGENCY TO FEMALE PROFESSIONAL AUTHORS THROUGH A
CONNECTION TO READERS

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Abstract

The self-publisher is often viewed as a disturber of the publishing industry through bypassing traditional book production methods and professional ecosystems (Skains 2019; Laquintano 2016). My dissertation argues that the process of self-publishing is an alternative book production method, which signals that the traditional publishing industry is not being disrupted but innovated. The practice of self-publishing was specifically propelled by the introduction of Web 2.0. I argue that the process of contemporary self-publishing facilitates a direct connection between female authors and their readers, which is made possible by the development of platformization. Through the transformation of the web from a static entity into interactive platforms, readers and authors can network with each other. Arguably, the reader is no longer just a consumer but provides the self-publisher with the opportunity to gain different forms of capital (as conceived by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu), which grants self-publishers authorial agency and the ability to produce diverse and culturally significant content in the romance, mystery, and poetry genres.

My project investigates (i) how mainstream publishers, female authors, and readers perceive the practice of self-publishing; and (ii) what makes self-publication an appealing alternative to conventional publishing practices. I conducted interviews with self-publishers and workers in traditional publishing to obtain perspectives from both sides of the publishing field. Additionally, I employed content analysis to evaluate the comments left under self-published books, which revealed that the online environment is viewed as a safe space by women who share their work with their supportive readers.

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Chapter One: Topic Overview, Methods, and Literature Review

The phenomenon of self-publishing has gained significant popularity in the last decade. US-based self-publishing platforms, such as Smashwords and Lulu, experienced increased sales, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lulu, 2021; Smashwords, 2021). However, this is not just a North American phenomenon—it is a global one. In India, for example, the number of authors who self-published through Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) doubled in 2020 compared to 2019 (The Hindu Business Line, 2021). The number of self-published books continues to grow each year. Bowker, a company that compiles data on books, reported a 7.2% increase in self-published titles in 2023 compared to 2022. This totaled 2.6 million ISBNs registered to self-published books (Albanese and Milliot, 2024).

Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, Smashwords, and IngramSpark allow authors to publish eBooks from home. These platforms serve as digital storefronts, attracting readers and offering authors tools like formatting guidelines previously unavailable before Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2007). This contrasts with the earlier, static web, which limited user engagement and content creation (Rudman and Bruwer, 2016). The current digital environment enables rapid, global book distribution.

Self-publishing has become a buzzword as authors gain worldwide attention. For example, E.L. James wrote *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), and Colleen Hoover wrote *Slammed* (2011). Despite this, stigma persists. Many authors avoid labeling their books as self-published to avoid appearing amateur (S. Anderson, 2004). Johnson (2017) contends that, even with the rise of self-publishing, traditionally published authors are still

seen as superior and continue to seek to sign with presses. The association with vanity publishing further undermines the validity of self-publishing (Laquintano, 2016; Young, 2014).

In contrast to equating self-publishers with amateurs (Keen, 2007), my study maintains that a self-publisher is a professional author. The definition of an author is not static. Foucault (1998) and Barthes (2010) both discuss its changing meaning. For example, Barthes (2010) notes that “the author is a modern figure” (p. 142). Foucault (1998) questions the malleable role of the author, who is “consecrated” by readers (p. 206). As Barthes and Foucault argue, the definition is closely tied to whether readers recognize someone as an author. Society deems the individual an author. Being an author is a social position (Burke, 1961). Arguably, this means an author cannot exist without recognition from society.

This dissertation argues that the relationship between the author and the reader validates the self-published author's work. This relationship provides agency to create diverse, culturally significant content. My study aims to fill a gap in existing research by focusing on female Canadian self-published authors who have built international online followings. Women authors create online spaces recognized as safe environments (Johnson, 2022). They can reach audiences that the Canadian publishing industry cannot. This is due to its smaller size compared to the US and UK markets (Boggs, 2010). Canadian female self-publishers build personal relationships with readers. This enables them to produce stories they are passionate about.

It is worth noting that the Anglo-Canadian publishing industry faces distinct challenges compared to the French-language publishing industry. French language

publishing does not receive the same level of competition from the US and the UK as English language publishing. In this dissertation, I aim to highlight how Canadian English-language publishing must compete with the US and UK markets. Canadian authors recognize that it is difficult to find a readership that would sustain them financially solely in Canada (Friskney and Gerson, 2007).

Building on the work of Foucault and Barthes, I argue that the reader's power validates a person as an author. Readers arguably bestow the title on individuals. Barthes (2010) argues that the reader interprets the work independently: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (p. 148). The reader acknowledges the author's work by reading and rereading it. Foucault's (1998) concept of the "author function" shows the author's role in society: readers use the author's name to "group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts." (p. 210). Using Foucault's concept, my study explores how the author cannot be fully autonomous from readers. Authors must follow industry conventions, including genre tropes that audiences expect.

Drawing on Foucault's and Barthes's analyses, the author deliberately constructs a narrative to engage readers. Foucault (1998) inquires whether items such as "a workbook filled with aphorisms...a reference, the notation of a meeting or of an address, or a laundry list" should be included in an author's portfolio (p. 207). My research maintains that the answer is negative. A laundry bill does not have an author because its destination is inconsequential. It remains irrelevant whether more than one individual

examines the bill, as such documents do not invite multiple interpretations. Foucault (1969) further illustrates: “A private letter may well have a signatory - it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor – it does not have an author...” (p. 211). Foucault describes authors as “initiators of discursivity” (p. 219), which aptly encapsulates those who produce written, discursive works intended for an audience. Therefore, in this context, I define an author—including the self-publisher—as one who (1) possesses a readership and (2) intentionally produces written works for a general audience.

To expand on the definition of an author, I distinguish between amateurs and professional authors. The line between amateur and professional is no longer clear in the digital realm (Driscoll, 2019; Eichhorn, 2022). This blurring is due to falling production costs. Authors do not need to rely on the publishing industry's professional ecosystem to reach readers (Simon, 2016). Eichhorn (2022) states that there has been “a deskilling of the arts” and that “the line between Professional and Amateur has collapsed” (p. 96). Before the rise of digital self-publishing, anyone wanting to publish a book had to pitch it to a press or agent. They needed professionals for formatting, printing, and publishing. Now, with platforms like Amazon and Wattpad, and with online tutorials, anyone with digital access can publish a book online in one day.

In contrast to Eichhorn, I argue that authors who produce digital content are not deskilling but gaining a diverse skill set. Moreover, many content creators, this broader term encompasses authors who are producing work digitally, obtain a background in the industry before attempting to produce their content. For instance, “Bloggers are not necessarily neophyte content producers. Rather, some have exclusive access to the cultural circuit including professional experience and networks in fashion, publishing,

and/or digital marketing.” (Duffy, 2015, p. 58). Similarly, Driscoll (2019) notes that “the status of professional implies a belief that one can do something that others can’t, that one has particular experience or accreditation” (p. 301). Lee and Eastin (2021) also describe content creators as experts in a specific area, making them professionals.

Hence, gaining skills is a way for an author to become a professional. For instance, a fanfiction writer who posts stories on Wattpad without learning formatting and distribution is an amateur. By contrast, a professional author aims to advance in the industry by developing a range of skills. Therefore, the difference between an amateur and a professional lies in competency and skill. Throughout this study, I argue that an author accumulates different forms of capital, as conceived by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This capital shows they have the necessary skills to be recognized as a professional.

Drawing from Barthes (2010), Driscoll (2019), Eichhorn (2022), and Foucault (1998), I define a professional author as: (1) someone with a readership; (2) someone who purposefully creates written work for a general audience, and 3) someone who accumulates a variety of skills to meet industry competence. I propose that self-publishers are professional authors. They produce content with intent, have a readership, and acquire publishing skills. Going forward, when I use the term author, I refer to the professional author as defined here.

For the purpose of my research, it is also important to define the digital self-publisher as a subset of the broader category of authors, as they assume different responsibilities than traditionally published authors. My project explores the process of self-publishing in the digital age, a phenomenon distinct from self-publishing before the

widespread adoption of digital platforms. Self-publishing before platformization is outside the scope of my research.

With the advent of online publishing tools (e.g., Amazon's KDP program) and distribution platforms (e.g., IngramSpark), many scholars view self-publishing as an independent process that allows the author to assume all the responsibilities and risks throughout the production and distribution cycle. For instance, Adam Thomlison and Pierre Belanger (2015) contend that self-publishing is: "the act by authors of paying for the production, marketing, and distribution of their own books, rather than submitting manuscripts to third-party houses to publish" (p. 309). Similarly, Baverstock and Steinitz (2013) also highlight the independent nature of self-publishing, which "implies the taking of personal responsibility for the management and production of content" (p. 220). On the other hand, Rowland (2014) flags that many authors who retain their copyright but outsource the editing, layout, etc., are excluded from the definition of a self-publisher.

In contrast to the individual model of self-publishing, Larson (2024) links self-publishing to the process of self-organization; it is an alternative form of organizing among authors who support one another by sharing information about publishing practices. Similarly, Laquintano (2016) also emphasizes the interactive nature of self-publishing and develops the concept of "sustained authorship," which "conceptualizes authorship as sustained interaction among authors and reader/writer as the work of publishing becomes absorbed into online networks as literate activity" (p. 471). Laquintano flags the interaction between the author and the reader, which my dissertation aims to further develop. As a "demotic author," self-publishers are not isolated agents in the publishing industry; they interact with other content creators and readers to produce popular and culturally

significant content (Skains, 2019, p. 2). My dissertation aims to refine existing definitions to account for developments in the digital publishing industry that enable authors to outsource certain parts of the self-publishing process while still maintaining control over the final product.

Many scholars begin the conversation about self-publishing by framing it as the process of bypassing gatekeepers (Schroff, 2024; Sinche, 2024; Stinson, 2022). However, the reason behind authors bypassing gatekeepers can be multiple. There could be financial reasons (Larson, 2024), the lack of diversity in the traditional publishing industry (Sinche, 2024), and the possibility of producing niche content for a specific audience (Laquintano, 2016; Skains, 2019). Hence, boiling the definition of self-publishing as the process of bypassing gatekeepers can be reductionist. I propose that the process of self-publishing offers authors the chance to connect directly with readers, who help them generate different forms of capital (as conceived by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, 1983).

The retention of copyright while self-publishing is a significant bonus for contemporary authors. Sheridan (2022) highlights that “commercial publishing house... typically buy the copyright of a creative work in return for royalties paid to the author.” (p. 1470). Even though “copyright has in the twentieth century really been about the rights of publishers first, authors second, and the public a distant third” (Vaidhyathan, 2001, p. 11), this is no longer the case. By introducing eBooks and online platforms, authors can sell the print book copyright and retain the eBook copyright to earn higher royalties (Kenneally, 2018). Self-published authors retain the copyright to their work, granting them authorial agency in the publishing industry.

Similarly, many scholars link self-publishing to the concept of control (Baverstock and Steinitz 2013; Rowland 2014; Sinche 2024). For instance, authors can produce work in a timely manner for a specific audience (Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013; Laquintano, 2016; Sinche, 2024). Laquintano (2016) points out that self-publishing serves specific niche groups. I equate the term 'control' with the process of authorial agency that the self-publishing process offers contemporary authors. Authorial agency allows authors to decide how much time and energy to spend on a book, a decision the authors in my study discussed extensively during the interviews.

In addition, self-publishing offers psychological rewards (Sinche, 2024), which can be linked to cultural and symbolic capital. The self-publishing process allows the possibility to create content out of a “sheer desire to write” (Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013, p. 215). Moreover, self-publishing grants authors the agency to promote social change and innovation (Larson, 2024). For instance, the authorial agency can be linked to the process of creating a space for stories that did not exist before: “Self-publication was a widespread practice that aspiring authors used to shape their individual circumstances as well as the physical and intellectual spaces they inhabited.” (Sinche, 2024, p. 3). Hence, professional authors can produce diverse stories and share them with like-minded readers (e.g., niche groups) through self-publishing.

The definition of self-publishing needs to be expanded to account for the introduction of online platforms and the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s. Sheridan Burns (2022) conflates self-publishing with any online content, from Reddit posts to citizen journalism to personal blogs. However, I do not agree that everything posted online can be considered self-published content. As Foucault (1998)

noted, a receipt or a poster lacks an author. Digital platforms like Reddit can be used to produce literary content for sharing with an audience (e.g., a short story), but not every post qualifies as self-publishing. Self-publishing refers to producing and sharing a work with a general audience in mind; it is not used for limited communication. For instance, a post on a private social media account about going out to dinner cannot be considered self-publishing because the intent is only to share with friends. A post that directly addresses another person cannot be considered self-publishing because the recipients are limited and the posts are not intended for a general audience. On the other hand, if an author pursues sharing their work online with a general audience and with the intent to connect to new and existing readers, their work can be considered self-publishing. Specifically, in my study, I argue that Instapoets are self-publishers because they post their work on public social media pages with the intent to build a readership and eventually sell their digital and physical books.

Based on contemporary scholarship (Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013; Larson, 2024; Laquintano, 2016; Rowland 2014; Sinche, 2024; Skains, 2019; Sheridan, 2022), I will define self-publishing as the conscious creation of a literary work and a process that grants professional authors the possibility: 1) to self-organize; 2) retain the copyright to their work; 3) develop and sustain their authorial agency (control); 4) develop their skills in the industry through the accumulation of different capital; and 5) the possibility to connect to readers directly (i.e. personal communication between the reader and the author through social media posts, email lists, direct messages); communication goes both ways with authors reaching out to readers and readers reaching out to authors without a third-party intermediary like an agent or a traditional press.

Female authors, in particular, often choose to forego traditional publishing in favour of self-publishing. Going forward, when referring to the female gender, this category will include anyone who self-identifies as a woman (e.g., based on personal pronouns). Women are more prominent than male authors on key self-publishing platforms such as Smashwords and Wattpad (Cueto, 2015; Flood, 2015). Similarly, Jenkins (2006) observes that fan fiction is predominantly created by women, taking the form not only of written work but also of video creation; the fan fiction created by women explores underdeveloped characters or plot lines and includes an original interpretation of the text. Johnson (2022) notes that a potential reason for women actively participating in online writing culture and sharing their content is the supportive environment of the readers, who are also often female.

One prominent website that connects authors and readers is Goodreads, which has a predominantly female membership (Brown, 2011). I was unable to find recent membership statistics, but anecdotally, the traditional publishers in my study corroborated that their main buyers are women. This is not a surprise, since women are more likely than men to engage in social activities related to books (Thelwall and Kousha, 2017). Moreover, this can be linked to the area of interest and majors in university that women tend to choose. For instance, Kugler, Tinsley, and Ukhaneva (2021) note that humanities, education, and social sciences are women-dominated majors, which are all reading-heavy. With such an overwhelming number of female readers, female authors are at an advantage since “for most common book genres, reviewers give higher ratings to books authored by their own gender” (Thelwall, 2019, p. 403).

Goodreads also offers its own awards, which feature more female winners, creating an inclusive and supportive environment for women for over a decade. For instance, 16 out of 23 awards were won by women in the 2010 Goodreads Choice Awards, including Favourite Book of 2010, Best Fiction, and Best Non-Fiction (Brown, 2011). Similarly, in 2023, 10 of 15 awards went to female authors. There is a higher recognition rate for women authors in online spaces like Goodreads than in traditional news outlets. For example, the *Atlantic* reviewed 63% of work by men, 36% by women, and less than 1% by non-binary authors, a trend observed for more than a decade (Vida Count, 2019). *Hence, online platforms can successfully connect female authors with their predominantly female readers.* On the other hand, only one BIPOC author won the Goodreads Choice Award in 2023, suggesting that the industry is predominantly white and that a future area of study should address how to create a more inclusive environment for BIPOC authors.

Research Question and Main Argument

My dissertation aims to answer: How has the platformization of self-publishing altered the way that female authors interact, connect with, and define their readers? I undertake to respond to this question by examining the self-publishing practices of female authors through three case studies in the genres of romance, mystery, and poetry. My project includes qualitative research methods to assess (i) how mainstream publishers, female authors, and readers perceive the practice of self-publishing; and (ii) what makes self-publication an appealing alternative to conventional publishing practices. My main argument is that the process of contemporary self-publishing facilitates a direct

connection between female authors and their readers, made possible by platformization. Readers and authors can network with each other as the web shifts from a static entity to interactive platforms. My dissertation argues that the reader is no longer just a consumer but also provides the Canadian female self-publisher with the opportunity to gain other forms of capital, granting self-publishers authorial agency and the ability to produce diverse and culturally significant content in the genres of romance, mystery, and poetry.

In the early 2000s, scholars linked the popularization of self-publishing to the wide adoption of eBooks (Larson, 2024; Laquintano, 2016; Rowberry, 2024). Laquintano (2016) equates contemporary self-publishing specifically to electronic self-publishing. However, I should flag that not all e-Books are self-published, and the history of e-Book production is outside the scope of my research. Even though, during my interviews with self-published authors, the convenience of eBooks was mentioned, I argue that it was the platformization of the publishing industry that further spurred the rise of self-publishing by connecting professional authors directly with readers. My study does not trace the development of platformization but connects this phenomenon to changes in the relationship between authors and readers resulting from the adoption of Web 2.0.

Without the support of a traditional publisher or an online distribution platform, access to readers can be restricted because bookstores may be hesitant to stock self-published books (Sheridan Burns, 2022). My study explores how platformization, rather than the widespread adoption of the eBook, prompted the massive uptake of self-publishing by professional female authors. Platforms influenced the development of the self-publishing industry by serving as distribution networks and intermediaries between authors and readers. Platformization, moreover, expanded the role of the reader; from

simply being a consumer of books and eBooks, the reader now holds multiple roles (e.g., tastemaker, personal connection), which I will discuss in more detail throughout my dissertation.

I am specifically arguing that platformization has impacted the relationship between Canadian female authors and their readers because the Canadian publishing industry offers limited ways to reach readers. Boggs concludes that “the voices of Canada’s periphery are being silenced at the expense of larger, commercially-focused” presses (Boggs, 2010, p. 44). The Canadian publishing industry is small compared to the US and foreign international presses such as the big five (Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Hachette Book Group, and Simon and Schuster). In addition to competing with large-scale foreign companies, Canadian presses also compete with one another, leaving smaller presses outside major centres like Toronto and Montreal in precarious positions (Boggs, 2010). Arguably, authors have few choices when it comes to submitting their work to select Canadian publishers. Reaching international readers before the rise of platformization was difficult.

Several scholars over the past decade have begun investigating readers' agency and how this power has increased with the introduction of Web 2.0 (Driscoll 2019; Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2019; Jaakkola, 2019; Boffone and Jerasa, 2021; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023). Web 2.0 emerged in the mid-2000s with the rise of media-sharing sites, replacing the static format of the early web, which permitted online users to passively consume information (Newman, 2022). Web 2.0 allows individuals to share, comment, and create digital content, making the online space interactive. Through the introduction of open user-generated content sites, such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and YouTube, the

internet functions as a collective of ideas and data (O'Reilly, 2007). Hence, through the transformation of the web from a static entity into an interactive platform, readers and authors can interact with each other.

Recent studies have argued that the internet is transitioning into a Web 3.0 or a Web3 format (Rosati, 2023; Rudman and Bruwer, 2016). The transition is not recognized as fully complete, as new developments are adopted by users. Rudman and Bruwer (2016), who conducted a literature review of the development of Web 3.0, identified some defining characteristics: AI produces content rather than humans; algorithms provide targeted information to users; and large conglomerates manipulate data. Since Web 3.0 is associated with technological developments in data and AI, I propose that Web 2.0 was the driving force behind the redevelopment of the relationship between an author and a reader and is more significant to flag than Web 3.0, which encompasses other developments not encapsulated in my study.

The power that the contemporary reader holds can be described by the concept of participatory culture coined by Jenkins (2006). Online users: this category captures digital readers who are both media producers and consumers; they seek out stories across multiple platforms and contribute their interpretations and additional information about the work. The contemporary reader consumes different media across different platforms, from printed books to YouTube videos to TikToks.

Similarly, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) describe the contemporary reader as someone who reads across multiple devices, employs a variety of methods to discover and choose books, and shares their reading experiences with others, both online and offline. Their description of a reader's actions relates to my main argument about the

changing relationship between the author and the reader due to the spread of platformization in the book industry. An author can arguably go viral overnight if their work is actively promoted on social media by online users who share it across multiple platforms. Hence, my dissertation argues that the reader, whom the author is now directly connected to through online platforms, offers the Canadian female self-publisher the opportunity to gain different forms of capital. Self-publishers, in turn, gain authorial agency and the ability to produce diverse, culturally significant content across the genres of romance, mystery, and poetry.

Methodology

Self-publishing is a relatively novel area of inquiry. It is only in the past decade that the phenomenon of self-publishing has been explored as a research area by scholars (Abate, 2016; Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013; Carolan and Evain, 2013; Holley, 2015; Laquintano, 2010; Laquintano, 2016; Larson, 2024; Rowland 2014; Sinche, 2024; Skains, 2019; Sheridan, 2022). Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend using qualitative methodology when a scholar undertakes an emergent research design that incorporates a broad set of viewpoints and does not focus on proving or disproving a hypothesis. Hence, for the purpose of my research, a qualitative methodology is ideal for generating novel findings about the self-publishing industry that have not been raised in previous studies and for answering the research question I posed at the beginning of the dissertation. Specifically, I employed two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and content analysis.

In order to answer how the platformization of self-publishing altered the ways that female authors interact, connect with, and define their readers, I employed interviews as my main research method to examine the views and opinions of the dominant actors in the publishing industry (authors and acquisitions editors), which cannot be done through observation or case studies. Other scholars have used similar methods; for instance, Laquintano (2012) utilized interviews with self-publishers in his research, and Duffy (2017) interviewed bloggers for her study on aspirational labour.

I used multiple data collection methods to enhance the validity of my study. There are downsides to undertaking interview research, such as unequal weighting of each question or comment by the interviewee, misunderstanding the question, or participants not trusting the interviewer (Barbour and Shostak, 2011). Hence, content analysis was also employed to analyze the interactions of online readers who did not know that they were being observed.

My study focuses on three specific trade book genres (romance, mystery, and poetry). I decided to focus on trade books (works for general audiences) to assess how mainstream publishers and self-publishers cater to general readers. First, I study romance because female authors are often grouped stereotypically into this category. This genre of trade fiction is usually regarded as less prestigious than other literary categories (Cameron, 2020). Second, the project incorporates mystery books to examine how women navigate the challenges of self-representation when producing work that is associated historically with male authors, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, and male characters (e.g. even though Agatha Christie wrote mysteries, her most famous sleuth is Hercules Poirot, who features in 33 novels as compared to Jane Marple who features in

12 novels). Lastly, the study explores poetry to assess what drives authors to pursue this genre, given that it inherently offers little economic capital. From a traditional industry perspective, there is little money to be made from poetry: “from the economic point of view ... at the bottom is poetry, which, with a few, very rare exceptions (such as a few successes in verse drama), secures virtually zero profit for a small number of producers” (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 328).

Sample Sets I and II: Semi-structured Interviews (Self-Publishers and Workers of the Canadian Traditional Presses)

I used critical case sampling to reach out to specific female self-publishers who are active in the public eye and advocate for self-publishing. I started my search by exploring different organizations, such as the Toronto Romance Writers and Crime Writers of Canada, to find authors who indicated in their profiles that they were self-publishing their work. I then looked at their social media networks to find other authors who actively identified with self-publishing and compiled a list of 25 candidates. At the end, I recruited and interviewed 15 self-published authors who responded to my request. Table 1 indicates the approximate number of self-published books that I was able to find on Amazon for each author; however, the author could have written more self-published books on platforms like IngramSpark that are not advertised on Amazon, they could have books written under a pseudonym, or they could have self-published books that have been taken down by the author for the purpose of editing.

I contacted potential candidates for the interview process via email and through social media (when available). Even though a random sample is considered more representative and adds validity to the study (Neuman, 2007), finding a set list of self-published authors proved challenging. Several authors do not identify with self-publishing because of the negative perceptions associated with it (S. Anderson, 2004). Numerous self-publishers are also difficult to identify because they register their own companies separate from their author names and publish under an imprint. Furthermore, there are no official self-publishing associations in Canada from which I could have drawn a list of members. I did not want to reach out to private print-on-demand businesses because it would be problematic to access their clientele base. I did not want to contact any self-publishing companies that are often labeled 'vanity presses,' which sell package deals to authors and keep their client lists private. Additionally, I investigated self-published books created with commercial intent (the books are available for a set price; they are not available for free download); hence, I did not contact self-publishers who solely produce work on platforms such as Wattpad or fanfiction sites that are not intended for retail sale. The romance authors include Kaylea Cross, Jackie Lau, Eve Silver, Allison Temple, and one author who chose to remain anonymous (referred to as Jane). I did not have issues finding romance authors for my study. The romance community is very active on social media, and I found the authors via the Toronto Romance Writers Association and through online blogs about self-publishing.

Mystery authors include Cathy Ace, Janet Kellough, Steena Holmes, Donna Warner, and one author who chose to remain anonymous (referred to as Nancy). The mystery authors were more difficult to secure. I reached out to five other authors who

either declined an interview or ignored my request. The mystery authors could not connect me to other self-publishers in the community, since their connections were mostly traditional published authors.

The poetry authors include Denise Gushue, Erin Murray, Katie Feltmate, and two authors who chose to remain anonymous (referred to as Christina and Emily). I searched through online blogs about self-publishing poetry to find the authors. At first, I had difficulty getting a response from the original set of Instagram poets I contacted. I was not able to secure interviews until I reached one person in the community, who gave me the contact information of other members of the Instagram group. This sample group was the only one of the three to provide me with contact information for other participants willing to take part in my study. The poetry community was very tight-knit. The snowball sampling method worked well for recruiting poets for my study and revealed networks I was unaware of at the outset (Neuman, 2007). Regarding the sample size, I recruited as many participants as I could until I no longer obtained new data, resulting in 15 self-published authors.

I offered all my participants the option to anonymize their data; however, most of the authors in the study did not wish to remain anonymous. They were supportive of the dissertation and of the way the self-publishing practice was promoted. I decided to keep the names of the self-published authors because I wanted to discuss their books. Since most of the authors in my study publish niche content, it would be easy to identify them once I included their book synopses, even if I anonymized the data. For instance, Kaylee Cross publishes military suspense romances and has appeared on the New York Times bestseller lists, so her series would be easy to find.

Additionally, I interviewed 9 workers from the Canadian traditional publishing industry (seven acquisitions editors and two literary agents, as seen in Table 2). I started reaching out to presses that were listed with the Association of Canadian Publishers (ACP) because it is the largest professional organization in Canada for owners of traditional presses. It was founded in 1972 and represents 115 publishers (Association of Canadian Publishers, 2020). Moreover, this is a Canadian organization that promotes Canadian presses, authors, and content, all of which are important themes in my research. The list of members is available on the ACP website.

At first, I contacted only acquisitions editors, but I realized that literary agents also act as gatekeepers in the publishing industry. I used the snowball method to secure interviews by asking acquisitions editors and the author for contact information for literary agents. However, after interviewing two individuals who had worked at literary agencies, I concluded that their answers to my questions were similar to those of the acquisitions editors, and I did not reach out to any other industry professionals. I stopped at 9 participants, following Neuman's (2007) advice to recruit as many participants as possible until no new data were obtained.

The second sample set of acquisitions editors and literary agents represents traditional workers of the publishing industry. In serving as the gatekeepers and frontline agents of traditional publishing, acquisitions editors and literary agents decide what might interest readers. Since there are no romance presses owned and operated solely by Canadian companies, I tried to reach out to the Canadian branches of four global publishers that produce romance literature: Harlequin, HarperCollins Canada, Penguin Random House Canada, and Simon and Schuster Canada. However, I was not able to

secure an interview with any of the representatives of the presses. Once I started contacting representatives of Canadian small to medium-sized presses, the acquisitions editors discussed publishing as a whole, often not focusing on a specific genre, which helped fill in the gaps for why romance presses virtually do not exist in Canada. One reason is the lack of resources to produce the high volume of books a romance press issues each month.

I interviewed seven acquisitions editors from presses that publish mystery and poetry. The acquisitions editors do not take on a single genre but have a portfolio of genres. I was incorrect to assume that an acquisitions editor solely focuses on one genre. This realization also speaks to the nature of small and medium-sized presses, which have limited staff who must take on multiple roles. The acquisitions editors also participated in other functions of the press, such as marketing. I will not be sharing the names of the presses to keep participants' information anonymous, since small- to medium-sized presses typically employ only 2 or 3 acquisitions editors.

Table 1: Self-Publisher Sample Set

Name of self-published author	Genre	Approximate Number of self-published books by the end of 2023
Kaylea Cross	Romance	60+ books
Jackie Lau	Romance	20+ books
Allison Temple	Romance	10 books
Eve Silver	Romance	20 + books
Jane	Romance	5 books

Cathy Ace	Mystery	20 + books
Steena Holmes	Mystery	15 + books
Janet Kellough	Mystery	5 books
Donna Warner	Mystery	2 books
Nancy	Mystery	20 + books
Katie Feltmate	Poetry	2 books
Denise Gushue	Poetry	1 books
Erin Murray	Poetry	2 books
Christine	Poetry	1 books
Emily	Poetry	1 books

Table 2: Traditional Workers of the Publishing Industry Sample Set

Title/Role	Genres discussed	Self-identification
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 1)	All genres	He/Him
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 2)	Poetry	She/her
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 3)	Mystery	She/her
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 4)	All genres	She/her
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 5)	Poetry	He/him
Literary Agent (Trad. Worker 6)	Romance	She/her
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 7)	Poetry	She/her
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 8)	Mystery	She/her
Literary Agent (Trad. Worker 9)	All genres	He/him

Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. By using the semi-structured interview method for data collection, I could guide the conversations and follow up on concepts raised directly with the participants to generate more data (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Developing a list of questions in advance made comparisons easier (Hansen et al., 1998). Since I have a wide data sample, it was useful to have a structure to organize the data during the analysis phase. Moreover, the authors and industry workers often asked to see a list of questions before agreeing to participate in the study. The questions were shared with the participants before the interviews to ensure they were not put on the spot if a question felt uncomfortable and to give them the option to withdraw from the study in advance.

A downside of conducting interviews is the unequal value the interviewee places on each question or comment (Barbour and Shostak, 2011). Not all the respondents were equal conversationalists. Arguably, some did not feel comfortable or fully involved in the conversation. I was able to get through all the questions when the author or industry worker would give short replies. However, since the interviews were semi-structured, I could interact with the participants and use prompts or adjust the wording of the questions when they did not elaborate on the original questions. The authors were more responsive and willing to share their experiences than the industry workers, even though the interviews were anonymized. Overall, the community of self-published authors was very responsive to the study and eagerly shared their experiences.

Sample Set III: Content Analysis (Online Comments)

In addition to the interviews, I conducted content analysis of reviews left for self-published books. To add validity to the study, I employed a variety of data collection methods to determine whether there was a difference in how individuals perceived female self-publishers and their work. Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) note that greater insight into the research area can be gained by the “mixing or integration” of different methods, as each data collection method has limitations (p. 294).

I employed content analysis rather than interviewing readers because there could be instances of bias and unintentional misrepresentation during data collection when participants are aware they are being observed (Barbour and Shostak, 2011). Therefore, using content analysis can potentially alleviate this issue. Based on Neveu’s (2005) approach to the study of a cultural work using the field approach, the analysis should include not only views from the workers of the industry, but also the views of those who reviewed the work (analyzing the reception of the work). Readers can act as tastemakers (Driscoll, 2014), and the reviews left online confirmed that readers are not passive participants of the publishing industry but actively communicate with other readers and the author through online platforms like Goodreads.

The self-publishers uploaded their books to platforms such as Amazon, accessible to any internet user, with comment sections under each book. The comments I analyzed for the content analysis portion of the research are accessible without logging in or creating a site account (on Goodreads.com and Amazon.com). I chose these websites because users assume their reviews will be read by others. Furthermore, by exploring

how users interact with self-published books online, it is possible to gauge their views and opinions about the product without interviewing them.

Based on the ethical guidelines outlined by the Association of Internet Research, the analyzed posts can be considered public documents since users intentionally leave comments and/or ratings for other readers and online users to interact with (Franzke et al., 2020). I anonymized all the data by not including usernames and the title of the book under which the comment was left. Through this data collection process, I explored whether readers recognized that the books were self-published and whether they commented positively or negatively on this practice.

I grouped the reviews based on common themes identified during the analysis. The romance genre had the most reviews (511 on Goodreads), followed by the mystery genre (236 on Amazon and Goodreads), with poetry having the fewest (65 on Amazon and Goodreads). I chose Amazon and Goodreads to analyze the mystery and poetry genres to obtain a wider dataset; however, there were enough reviews on Goodreads for the romance genre to draw out conclusions for this study. Additionally, the romance genre accounted for the most Advance Reader Copies (ARCs) (69 reviews out of 511 mentioned an ARC); as a result, reviews on Amazon and Goodreads were often copied and pasted by the same user.

Coding

My study employed the grounded theory approach, with the results emerged from participants' viewpoints and perspectives during data collection. Creswell and Poth (2018)

advise that, when using grounded theory, the results of the study are developed by going back and forth between data collection and analysis, with interviews conducted even after the first round of analysis. I collected data from one sample group, analyzed the content, and then continued data collection for the other sample sets. I began collecting and analyzing interview data alongside the content analysis. My evaluation of readers' comments helped me generate questions for the self-publishers and industry representatives. I interviewed the self-publishers, followed by the acquisitions editors and workers at literary presses (bearing in mind the self-publishers' responses). Finally, after completing the interviews, I returned to the content analysis and performed a second round of coding to assess the consistency of the results.

I used the coding method developed by Tesch (1990) and followed the eight steps she outlined. I coded the data manually after transcribing it and undertook multiple rounds of theme categorization and code development. I did not deploy predetermined codes because there is a possibility that, when grouping information under predetermined codes, the data may not fit into these categories. I acknowledge that I may have my own biases, and by creating predetermined codes, I might inadvertently interpret the collected data differently from how the participants relayed it. The codes that emerged were grouped into four general categories (Table 3). Since I argue in this study that the self-publisher is a professional, not an amateur, I coded the interviews based on how each form of capital contributes to the author's status as a legitimate member of the industry.

Table 3: Coding Terms

Type of Capital	Code	Explanation of significance
Social Capital	Readers	Readers validate the self-publisher as a professional by following their work and directly interacting with them.
Social Capital	Community	The larger community in the publishing industry (other writers, self-publishers, editors) validated the individual as an author.
Cultural Capital	Creative freedom	Authors build up their skills by experimenting with genres and taking classes, thereby becoming experts in the publishing industry.
Cultural Capital	Awards	Awards as markers of professionalism in the field. In traditional publishing, awards are viewed as a hallmark of success; however, award committees act as gatekeepers since many self-publishers are not eligible for awards.
Economic Capital	Career	Self-publishers describe how much time they spend working on their books and products, emphasizing that it is a full-time job.
Economic Capital	Brand	Self-publishers actively build a brand by posting content online, becoming workers of the gig economy.
Symbolic Capital	Quality	Self-publishers emphasize the quality of the finished product (e.g., layout, cover design, etc.). This contrasts

		with the work of an amateur who does not invest their time into all the steps in the production-distribution cycle.
Symbolic Capital	Recognition	Authors feel recognized as legitimate members of the publishing industry through unconventional reviews and being guest speakers at conferences. These responses contrast with how traditional authors can be recognized (e.g., through book reviews from traditional media outlets such as newspaper).

I also coded each comment left under the selected self-published books and organized the data by theme. The general categories were negative, positive, and mixed. The negative category had no recommendations and only critiqued the book; the positive category had no negativity and only commended the work; the mixed category expressed some critique and some satisfaction with the work (Table 4).

Table 4: Examples of Coding of Positive/Negative/Mixed Reviews

Attitude of the Review	Genre	Example
Negative	Romance	"this one was just dumb."
Positive	Romance	"I rush out to buy her books as soon as they are released."

Mixed/neither	Romance	"It did not connect with me...However, I would recommend this book because it is a good read."
Negative	Mystery	"The characters had zero depth."
Positive	Mystery	"Fascinating characters and storyline."
Mixed/neither	Mystery	"The back-and-forth narrative is hard to follow in places, but it is well worth sticking with."
Negative	Poetry	"This is pointless and contrived."
Positive	Poetry	"It was heartfelt, eye opening, and beautifully written."
Mixed/neither	Poetry	"I enjoy the poems, and the artwork is very unique, but I don't enjoy this book as much as others that are kind of similar to it."

I am aware that I may introduce bias into the research because I am a woman researching the work of other women in the publishing sector. I tried to be as impartial as possible and utilized different validity techniques in my research. To mitigate bias, I performed multiple rounds of coding to ensure the analysis did not diverge across cases and that no unexpected codes emerged at different stages.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The traditional publishing industry conventionally holds the power to define who is an author by accepting selected manuscripts and rejecting others. The self-publisher is

recognized as a disturber of the publishing industry through bypassing traditional book production methods and professional ecosystems (Laquintano 2016; Skains 2019).

Bourdieu (1983) contends that influxes of new agents into the field, those who challenge and compete with the established actors, can serve either as forces for transformation or conservation in the industry:

When a new literary or artistic group makes its presence felt in the field of literary or artistic production, the whole problem is transformed, since its coming into being, i.e. into difference, modifies and displaces the universe of possible options (p. 314)

Based on the literature that I assessed, the influx of self-publishers into the industry pushes traditional presses to conserve conventional publishing/literary practices. Even though the self-publishing practice is often not welcomed by the conventional publishing industry, there are ways to make self-published work legitimate.

My dissertation explores how the traditional publishing industry is not being disrupted but is being innovated through platformization, which has helped propel the practice of self-publishing. I aim to answer how platformization has facilitated the development of digital self-publishing, which has reconfigured the relationship between female professional authors and their readers by helping them connect and interact online.

Bourdieu (1983) proposes that different forms of capital can be gained to validate a cultural work. Self-publishers can gain the different forms of capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, with the support of their readers. Based on my research, the process of contemporary self-publishing facilitates a direct connection between

female authors and their readers, where readers are no longer just consumers. The reader offers self-publishers access to various forms of capital, enabling them to produce diverse, culturally significant content across the genres of romance, mystery, and poetry.

Bourdieu's Concept of Capital

For Bourdieu (2005), the literary field (the publishing industry) is composed of agents and institutions that exert forces on one another. He proposes that, instead of performing an internal or external reading of a cultural text, there is a third option: analyzing the text from the perspectives of agents who directly impact how the work is created. Hence, in terms of publishing, it is vital to consider not only how or by whom the book is written, but also how it is distributed, marketed, and evaluated by the readers.

In the publishing industry, some writers highlight their precarious position and reveal that their work might not mirror their worldview or literary style, as their original text would not sell well (Brouillette, 2014). Therefore, dominant agents of the field (traditional publishers) exert dominance over a work that can influence its overall message and cultural impact because the “precarity of employment is a loss of liberty, through...censorship and the effect of economic constraints” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 43). However, in the case of my study, self-publishers are acting in opposition to the dominant agents of the publishing industry, the gatekeepers, in the face of traditional acquisitions editors and literary agents, by deciding for themselves what content will sell.

Since digital self-publishing is a contemporary addition to the publishing industry, there is the added challenge of legitimizing self-publishing in general. New entrants into

the field can “bring with them dispositions and position-takings which clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field; they cannot succeed without the help of external changes” (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 336). However, it is possible to gain autonomy in the field by generating different forms of capital: “As a rule, those rich in economic, cultural and social capital are the first to move into the new positions” (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 350). My study reveals that self-publishers acquire four forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) with the support of their readers during the self-publishing process.

Economic capital refers to anything associated with monetary revenue, such as financial stability, earning potential, and assets that can be converted into income. “Economic capital on the whole [is] more powerful” than other forms of capital, such as symbolic, cultural, and social (Benson and Neveu, 2005, p. 4). Whether authors are producing a book because they are passionate about the craft of writing or because they consider it a career, they are inevitably part of the capital system (Brouillette, 2014). Brouillette (2009) states that readers are a key part of creating products and commodities out of creative work; she views readers as consumers. Furthermore, Brouillette (2014) also introduces the government's role in promoting the creative industries as a market catering to consumers. Governments encourage people to *consume* art and, in turn, fund financially viable projects, cementing the notion that cultural industries are fully integrated into the economic realm. However, for the self-publishers in my study, economic capital was not the primary driver of self-publishing. Similarly, Duffy (2017) posits that treating financial compensation (economic capital) as an end goal is not viable for the majority of workers in the cultural industries.

Cultural capital can be gained through the development of artistic skills (e.g., technical expertise, further education, awards, etc.). Arguably, the author has to become autonomous from the constraints of the marketplace to gain cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2005). Several studies (Driscoll, 2019; Johnson, 2022) have identified readers as the new grantors of cultural capital, as they can validate a work as art through their online comments and reviews. Brouillette (2014) presents several case studies of books deemed culturally relevant by traditional publishing industry workers; however, a number of these authors and their books were critiqued by readers as inauthentic. These authors were unable to obtain either social capital (readers' support) or cultural capital (validation from the literary community), even though their work was deemed marketable by the publishing industry. *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, a fictional piece about life in modern India, was met with criticism, with some of the critique stemming from the belief that the author calculated what would sell in Europe and North America, acting as a “true cynical entrepreneur” (Brouillette, 2014, p. 98). Hence, it is not enough to be traditionally published to gain cultural capital from the community of readers.

Symbolic capital is measured through allusions to prestige (e.g., validation by other members of the publishing industry that the work is of quality; praise in the form of reviews). Thomlison and Belanger (2015) investigated how an author's symbolic capital declines after self-publishing a book. Specifically, because the self-published book is stereotypically perceived as of lower quality, the authors are sacrificing their symbolic capital. Self-publishers are taking a gamble on whether the work will sell: “A loss of prestige or an association with low quality can be seen as a high symbolic-capital risk” (Thomlison and Belanger, 2015, p. 308). However, the participants in Thomlison and

Belanger's study stated that they would likely adopt the eBook format if their readers accepted it, and that the work's prestige would not diminish. Nonetheless, the study by Thomlison and Belanger does not incorporate readers' views, whereas my research seeks to do so by analyzing online reviews. Based on my study, the symbolic capital of an author is not diminished by the book's digital format; rather, readers commend the author's work through their online interactions.

Social capital is associated with networks and associations (e.g., memberships, networks of readers, colleagues, professionals, etc.). Some authors feel that writing can be an isolating experience (Gouthro, 2014); hence, the possibility of having an open line of communication with a community of readers can prompt authors to keep producing work. Johnson (2022) notes that "using social platforms to create and form relationships with readers allows citizen authors to develop a cultural economy that relies on connectivity (feminine) rather than economic (masculine) gain." (p. 81). Connectivity for Johnson is associated with a feminine trait; this argument links to the potential reason why there are more female self-publishers than male self-publishers. Arguably, having a strong supportive network is more important for female authors to keep producing work than the economic factors.

Taking a different perspective, Duffy (2017) highlights social capital as a resource that signals an individual's class standing in society and is linked to self-branding. Duffy introduces the concept of "aspirational labour" which relates to individuals performing material and immaterial work (emotional labour, networking, designing, writing, etc.) in the hopes that in the future they will be paid either through material rewards (economic capital) and/or through useful connections (social capital) (Duffy, 2017, pp. 4-5). Gina Neff

(2012) similarly introduces the idea of venture labour, in which an individual invests different capital in an uncertain future without knowing for certain whether they will recuperate the costs. I concur with other scholars (Craig & Dubois, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 1996, 1999; Skaggs, 2022; Varriale, 2015) that different forms of capital aren't mutually exclusive. Based on my findings, self-publishers are most successful at translating social capital into other forms of capital.

Additionally, Bourdieu's concept of capital has been applied to account for the development of online content creation. For instance, Eichhorn (2022) coins the term content capital, an extension of social capital, gained by attracting more online followers through posting free content. Content creators gain visibility online by creating short videos or social media posts, which help them gain popularity and market their merchandise, from physical books to clothing. Bishop (2022) flags the phenomenon of influence creep, which describes the practice of consistently posting on social media to maintain an online identity for artistic individuals; content creators must continually think about their brand when producing digital content. However, posting free content online can translate into other forms of capital, such as social capital through the accumulation of followers who validate the creator's work through comments, or economic capital through followers buying the creator's products.

Readerly capital is another term in the broader category of capital, coined by Driscoll (2019). Readerly capital refers to readers posting content that builds their reputation among other readers, which can also be linked to social capital. Hence, different forms of capital are created in the digital realm with the introduction of digital content; however, for the purpose of my study, they will be recognized as subsets of the

four main forms of capital outlined by Bourdieu (social, economic, symbolic, cultural), and I will not evaluate each new form of capital independently.

Critique of Capital Theory

Hallin's (2010) critique of Bourdieu's theory of capital flags that field theory ultimately reduces everything to economic capital and market logic. However, the economic world cannot be ignored, as most cultural production industries depend on the market. My research considers the economic realities of the publishing industry (readers as consumers); however, I also recognize that the self-publishing process grants authors other forms of capital, such as cultural, symbolic, and, most importantly, social.

Another critique of Bourdieu's theory of capital is the lack of incorporation of audience members as active agents in the publishing industry. Neveu (2005) postulates that the issue with mass cultural studies is that scholars adhere to a formulaic analysis; social differences are not identified when describing the masses, which are often simply treated as *a mass*. However, audience members perceive the work differently based on their backgrounds. Therefore, "neither a newspaper nor a photograph nor a novel can be analyzed only by taking apart its codes, however brilliantly. It is necessary to question its reception and its social uses, the social condition of its existence and production" (Neveu, 2005, p. 203). It is important to not only recognize the author's message but also compare it to how that message is received; the audience can recognize a different message in a work than the intended one or no message at all. Therefore, the analysis of a work using

the field approach should resemble a triangle: the analysis of the industry, the form in which the work is presented, and the reception of the work (Neveu, 2005).

Readers are active participants in the cultural industries just as much as the workers. Bourdieu (1983) posits that agents in different fields (publishers, critics, etc.) act as tastemakers. Arguably, readers can recognize quality work that mainstream sources do not legitimize. Hence, there are limitations to utilizing Bourdieu's field theory, specifically in its description of the limited role of readers.

Concerning my research, it is not sufficient to simply categorize all self-published books under one label because even the different genres that attract different types of readers shape how the books are perceived. Hence, my study focuses on three genres (romance, mystery, and poetry) without generalizing about how readers perceive all self-published books.

Platformization

Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) propose that society has entered an age of the multimodal reader cubed (MMR3), as individuals consistently interact with transmedia objects through an array of digital devices and print sources. Transmedia refers to a subject that can be followed on multiple platforms. In my study, I contend that the reader is no longer just a silent consumer. The reader provides the self-publisher with the opportunity to gain different forms of capital through their online interactions, made possible by platformization. Web 2.0 enables individuals to share, comment, and create digital content, making the online space more interactive. Through the introduction of

open user-generated content sites, such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and YouTube, the internet functions as a collective of ideas and data (O'Reilly, 2007).

Nieborg and Poell (2018) contend that platformization is the process of “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries.” (p. 4276). Similarly, Helmond’s (2015) work outlines the rise of platforms: “as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web” (p. 5). Over time, platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Amazon have influenced how cultural practices are governed, organized, and commercialized (van Dijck et al., 2018). Platformization has a direct impact on industry infrastructure, as it shapes institutional logics (Bishop, 2023) and enables “large-scale processes of structural change” (Nielsen and Fletcher, 2023, p. 485). Specifically, in the publishing industry, Amazon has reshaped the publishing infrastructure, as companies now depend on this platform for distribution (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Platforms act as “content intermediaries” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348) by enabling two-sided markets and connecting different online users together (publishers, authors, readers) (Poell et al., 2019).

Some scholars argue that platformization has helped content creators (including self-publishers) by connecting them directly with their audiences, thereby promoting the entrepreneurial spirit of the contemporary creative industries (Bishop, 2023; Duffy, 2017). While other scholars suggest that platformization has exacerbated existing problems by flagging the precarity of labour and the lack of accountability on the part of platform owners (Duffy, 2020; Joseph and Bishop, 2024). Conglomerates have too much power

while exploiting small-scale content creators (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Bauwens, 2005; Vadde, 2017).

Even though platforms often try to present themselves as the countermeasure to gatekeepers, they “are more like traditional media than they care to admit.” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 359). Platformization has enabled large conglomerates, such as Amazon, to keep their power in the cultural industries and spread their influence further: “Platforms represent a distinct type of governance mechanism, different from markets, hierarchies, or networks, and therefore pose a unique set of problems for regulators, workers, and their competitors in the conventional economy” (Vallas and Schor, 2020, p.273). An example of this type of platform that I will discuss further in the dissertation is Amazon's KDP program, which uses algorithms to connect readers with authors.

Platformization has also been directly linked to female labour in the cultural industries, with many women content creators using platforms such as YouTube, Wattpad, and Instagram to create and share content (Bishop and Duffy, 2022; Duffy, 2017). Work by women is devalued due to the ongoing changes in platforms' functions, such as algorithms that affect the visibility of their content (Bishop and Duffy, 2022). Female content creators have to learn to navigate the changing landscape of platforms, including algorithms, layout features, and interaction/comment tools, to keep connecting with their audience.

Nonetheless, platformization has also had positive effects on workers in the culture industries. Content creators have used platforms to fit their own needs: “Social media platforms are rich with visual affordances that allow SMIs [social media influencers] to portray themselves in creative ways” (Lee and Eastin, 2021, p. 825). Affordance can be

defined as: “features that can be seen by users as having a number of potential actions associated with them.” (Meredith, 2017, p. 43). For instance, Jaakkola (2019) highlights the irony that Instagram is often thought of as a visual platform, but the users reappropriated the platform to fit their desired content: “These textual reviews seemed to resist the platform policy by intentionally misinterpreting the caption norm and turning the written text into the primary mode of communication” (p. 101). Instapoets found new affordances to fit their needs by constructing work that fit on a digital screen in a single post.

Additionally, content creators, such as self-publishers, who have not been able to participate in the cultural industries due to location constraints or personal obligations, can now easily become part of the system (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Hence, platforms have been linked to entrepreneurial drive, enabling content creators to reach their audiences directly (Bishop, 2023). I argue that this development has had a significant positive impact on the wide adoption of self-publishing by Canadian female authors, who had limited manuscript submission options in Canada before the rise of digital self-publishing.

In contrast, Spjeldnæs (2022) argues that dependence on platforms can limit authors' autonomy, as they are tied to the platform. Based on the interviews in my study, however, the self-published authors are not using a single platform. They maintain active email lists for posting promotional materials and host their own websites to connect directly with readers. Therefore, describing something as positive or negative can be limiting when assessing the real-world impacts of a novel technology. I agree with Vallas and Schor (2020) who theorise that platforms are not strictly positive or negative entities:

“The platform firm retains authority over important functions—the allocation of tasks, collection of data, pricing of services, and of course collection of revenues—but it cedes control over others, such as the specification of work methods, control over work schedules, and the labor of performance evaluation” (p. 282). Platforms serve different functions for different agents of the cultural industries. My study does not add to the scholarly work on platformization in general but uses this term to flag the changing relationship between authors and readers enabled by digital self-publishing.

Readers

Roland Barthes (2010) highlights that “Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader” (p. 145). However, he does not propose how to re-centre scholarship to incorporate the reader into the literary field. “Most readers have traditionally been voiceless among the formal institutions of literary culture. These readers have read privately, discussed books in small gatherings, or found themselves in the audiences of mass reading events and festivals” (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2019, p. 257). Nevertheless, with the popularization of different online platforms, from social media sites to online book distribution platforms like Amazon, readers can voice their opinions about books.

The reader is an essential part of the book production and consumption cycle. Obtaining the support of readers is, arguably, often enough to sustain an author’s motivation to keep writing outside of the financial gains. Online spaces are often a safe place for women to share their work because many comments are positive and the

audience is predominantly female, which encourages users to consistently upload content (Johnson, 2022). Arguably, an abundance of negative comments can damage an author's career; however, based on my research, the number of comments left under self-published books was overwhelmingly positive, which supports Johnson's study.

Several scholars over the past decade have begun investigating the changing status of the reader and how their power has increased with the introduction of Web 2.0 (Boffone and Jerasa, 2021; Driscoll, 2019; Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2019; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023; Jaakkola, 2019). Web 2.0 emerged in the mid-2000s, driven by media-sharing sites, and replaced the static format of the early days of the internet, which made online users passive consumers of information (Newman, 2022). Web 2.0 enables individuals to share, comment, and create digital content, making the online space more interactive. Through the introduction of open user-generated platforms, the internet serves as a collective space where readers and authors can network (O'Reilly, 2007).

The reader in the contemporary publishing industry, in part due to platformization, takes on multiple roles. However, many scholars still associate the reader with being a consumer (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Schroff, 2024; Sheridan Burns, 2022; Sinche, 2024; Spjeldnæs, 2022). Contemporary scholars specifically highlight the marketing opportunities that become possible when content creators, including self-publishers, connect with online users (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Schroff, 2024). Influencers foster an intimate relationship with their followers, who come to trust their recommendations and consume products and brands they promote (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Platforms create online marketplaces that do not focus solely on audience interests but also on how much consumerism can be encouraged

(Bishop and Duffy, 2022). However, boiling everything down to economic capital limits the reader's role on platforms that enable active participation. It must be noted that platforms are not just marketplaces but social realms where users, such as readers, can communicate with each other and with authors.

Another role readers take on is that of a tastemaker (Driscoll, 2014; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023; McIlroy, 2017; Stinson, 2022). Online users actively seek out content they enjoy and join digital communities to voice their opinions. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) describe the contemporary reader as someone who reads across multiple devices, employs a variety of methods to discover and select books, and shares their reading experiences with others, both online and offline. This definition of a reader links back to my main argument about the changing relationship between the author and the reader due to platformization in the book industry. Arguably, an unpopular author can become popular overnight if their work goes viral on social media, thanks to users who share it across multiple platforms. Driscoll (2019) notes that readers can become tastemakers in the field of literature by starting blogs and building readerly capital, thereby constructing their own hierarchies in the publishing industry. If members of the influencer community on social media review or feature the same book, a bestseller can be created; without internet traction on social media platforms, a book has a very low chance of becoming a bestseller (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023).

Additionally, readers can take on a more informal role, and some scholars position the reader as a friend of the author (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021; Duffy, 2017; Varriale, 2015). Authors and readers form personal connections through shared life experiences (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021; Tirocchi, 2018). Studies examine how relationships with

online content creators, including self-publishers, can positively impact youth who may be struggling with identity issues and a sense of belonging (Haupt, 2023; Hoffner and Bond, 2022; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Wellman, 2021). This is especially evident in the way that the Instapoets in my study, whom I classify as self-published authors, identified a community of other Instapoets and readers with whom they share common emotions, such as mental health struggles. Through my research, I similarly argue that the once parasocial relationship between the author and the reader is evolving into a more social one.

The term parasocial relationship was coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), who defined it as an illusion of a relationship between a celebrity and an audience member facilitated by mass media (e.g., television, radio), which creates an impression of face-to-face interaction. Many scholars still utilize the definition proposed by Horton and Wohl in 1956, which highlights that the parasocial relationship is one-sided (Hoffner and Bond, 2022; Lueck, 2015; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Tolbert and Drogos, 2019). However, in the study by Reinikainen et al. (2020), the definition of parasocial is emphasized as not fully applicable to the contemporary media environment. The scholars suggest that the relationship between online content creators and readers may involve reciprocity; however, they do not propose a new definition of the term.

I argue that the parasocial relationship has evolved into a less hierarchical structure through online media interactions. Stever (2013) compares and contrasts the parasocial relationship with a mediated relationship, which is a personal interaction between individuals mediated by digital technology (e.g., a direct message on Instagram). Stever notes that the mediated relationship is between equals, whereas a parasocial

relationship involves a hierarchical relationship. The hierarchy between a celebrity and the audience is less stark online because readers can voice their opinions, which can influence the recipient. For instance, a negative comment can affect an influencer's mood (Duffy, Ononye, and Sawey, 2024). The reader is no longer silent.

Some studies propose further research on parasocial relationships as technology advances (Stever, 2013; Reinikainen et al., 2020). I concur that the definition of the parasocial relationship needs to be re-evaluated, and the stigma attached to the term by describing the relationship as one-sided should be addressed. The definition of a parasocial relationship should be expanded to account for the interactive nature of Web 2.0, a technology distinct from the static media of television and radio discussed by Horton and Wohl (1956).

Hence, I argue that the reader can serve multiple roles in the contemporary publishing industry. Specifically, in light of my research, self-published authors connect with their readers through platformization. The multiplicity of the reader is evident in how the self-publishers discuss their relationship with their audience in the interviews. I argue that the reader is a 1) consumer; 2) tastemaker; and 3) a connection that goes beyond a typical parasocial relationship. The self-publishers recognize that by generating social capital, other forms of capital can be generated in the process. The reader is no longer just a consumer able to generate economic capital; the reader offers self-publishers the opportunity to gain other forms of capital, thereby granting them authorial agency. The process of contemporary self-publishing, therefore, grants the female professional author agency and freedom of expression through facilitating a direct connection to their readers, which is made possible by the development of platformization. Self-publishers,

consequently, can produce diverse and culturally significant content through the support of their readers.

Conclusion and Dissertation Overview

To conclude, this study does not aim to generalize about women's work in self-publishing. Further research is needed to generate a more thorough analysis of self-publishing and its relation to gender. The dissertation explores three specific genres of self-published books (romance, mystery, poetry) to draw conclusions about the drive to self-publish and to begin including the voices of female self-publishers in the larger history of the Canadian publishing industry.

Based on my findings, the role of the reader is changing from simply providing economic capital by purchasing books to providing social capital by supporting and encouraging authors. Readers interact directly with the authors and can build a relationship with them. The author, in turn, listens to readers to understand what they want to read. Unlike other studies discussed in the Literature Review on the evolving role of readers, my study explores how readers can directly interact with self-publishers to express what they would like to see produced. The parasocial relationship, in which readers idolize the author, is diminishing due to self-publishing. Arguably, readers are beginning to recognize that there is no stark hierarchy among different book publishing methods. Future research can further explore the breakdown of the parasocial relationship between readers and authors through direct interviews with readers. It would be beneficial to investigate whether readers are aware of this changing relationship

between them and the authors, and to explore whether readers acknowledge the power they hold.

My dissertation begins with an exploration of the history of the publishing industry in North America and the UK to examine self-publishing from a historical perspective. Chapter Two traces the development of traditional, mainstream publishing through the rise of literary publishing houses in the UK, the US, and Canada, as well as the rise of authorship as a profession. My study flags that male publishers acted as gatekeepers, and women authors often faced difficulties in accessing the publishing trade both as workers and as authors. I discuss this argument in light of the history of women's authorship from the 1950s to the present, also in the Anglo-American context. Additionally, I discuss the rise of genre publishing with a focus on romance, mystery, and poetry, which informs my case studies. I conclude the chapter by discussing contemporary issues facing female authors in the publishing industry, such as overwork and the undertaking of immaterial labour.

In Chapter Three, I highlight the difference between self-publishing and vanity publishing to differentiate the two practices. The main difference between the two is the business model. Self-publishers generate revenue from book sales, while vanity presses profit from authors and are not motivated to produce a quality product that readers will buy. The chapter also provides a general overview of the state of self-publishing in the Anglo-American context and specifically in Canada. A brief history of the role of self-publishing in the lives of women is also traced, flagging the importance of zines in niche communities, which links back to the important interactions between readers and authors.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six are dedicated to specific genre case studies: romance, mystery, and poetry. These chapters aim to analyze whether self-publishing offers the authors a different form of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) than traditional publishers. Chapter Four delves into how self-published romance authors perceive the practice of self-publishing. Arguably, Canadian presses are not actively pursuing romance publishing because the publishing volume is too high to achieve. Self-published romance authors produce up to six books a year to keep readers engaged, which is a significant volume of material. Romance self-publishing can be a lucrative business once authors find their niche and keep supplying books. Hence, Canadian self-published romance authors are successful in the self-publishing industry and leverage the self-publishing business model to connect directly with their readers. The self-published romance authors in my study reported that the romance genre community is very welcoming, and readers are great at providing support when authors need it.

Chapter Five centres on the mystery genre. The mystery authors revealed that most of them self-publish because they want their stories to find readers. The other forms of capital are secondary to them. Similar to romance, the volume of books in the mystery category is high, especially because mysteries are natural series - one character can be repurposed to fit multiple plots. Authors generate a following through creating characters that readers are invested in. Self-publishing is viewed as a positive method of book production that offers the chance to build a strong community around one's work. Authors in this chapter also noted that social capital can be developed into economic and symbolic capital through sales and recognition.

Chapter Six covers the poetry genre, specifically Instapoetry. Even though the authors share work on social media sites that can be accessed for free, which can be debated as a different form of self-publishing than producing full-length books, I recruited only poets who produce poetry collections available for purchase on sites such as Amazon to keep the sample sets consistent. The Instapoets produce content online to attract a general readership, hoping their collection of poems will be bought. The self-published poets spoke both as writers and readers of poetry, identifying authenticity as a feature of self-publishing that attracts readers. Self-published poets have the freedom and agency to create work they feel is authentic to their voice. However, the authors argue that traditional publishing can provide distribution networks that self-publishers do not have access to. Additionally, the poetry authors mentioned the stigma of self-publishing much more frequently than the romance and mystery authors in this study. Hence, if the end goal of a poet is to obtain cultural capital, self-publishing is still viewed through a stigmatizing lens, and workers in the traditional publishing industry neither recognize nor welcome popular poetry, such as Instapoetry, into their fold.

Chapter Seven closes the production-distribution-consumption loop by analyzing readers' views on self-publishing. I delve into the content analysis portion of this study, which examines the comments left under self-published books. It is revealed that readers, in fact, do act as a support network for authors. The reviews analyzed for the study were overwhelmingly positive, with very few negative reviews posted. Platforms are observed to be safe and encouraging spaces. Authors actively connect with their readers and obtain words of support, which motivates them to keep producing more work.

Through my dissertation, I incorporate the different levels of the publishing sphere: industry workers (acquisitions editors and literary agents), self-publishers, and finally, readers. My study aims to emphasize the importance of readers who are often overlooked. Anecdotally, there are more women readers than men. However, there are no studies that delve into how these female readers are perceived by the traditional publishing industry. The majority of the acquisitions editors in my study stated that they know, informally, that there are more women readers; however, they do not cater to a specific demographic. A future area of research should directly interview female readers to explore what changes they want to see in the publishing industry, which can help create a more inclusive and diverse publishing sphere.

Chapter Two: Historical Overview of Traditional Publishing

In the twenty-first century, being an author involves producing work with commercial intent. Rose (1993) notes, for example, that “as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and others have emphasized, the notion of the author is a relatively recent formation. As a cultural formation, it is inseparable from the commodification of literature” (1); hence, the author is a “proprietor” (p. 37). The author is seldom autonomous because producing the final product is expensive. In traditional publishing, authors sign contracts granting publishers rights to their work. Publishers then provide capital to print, distribute, and advertise the books.

Authors and publishers, nonetheless, have not always had a cordial relationship. For instance, Mark Twain privately printed *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1885 because he was not satisfied with his previous publisher (Ormrod, 2012). Twain created the imprint Charles L. Webster and Company in 1884. As a successful author already known for publishing *Tom Sawyer* in 1876, he took the opportunity to start his own imprint and earn money as both an author and a publisher.

Contemporary authors are continuing this trend of challenging traditional publishing practices, aided by technological developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Print-on-demand (POD) publishing, the adoption of virtual distribution methods, the introduction of eBooks (books available on any electronic device, such as a computer, smartphone, or digital reader), and the overall platformization of the publishing industry allow authors to produce books at low cost. These changes, however,

were not instantaneous and are still underway, as traditional publishing practices continue to dominate the industry.

Traditional Mainstream Publishing in North America and the UK: 1800s to Present Day

In the mid to late 1800s, book publishing grew into its own cultural industry through the formation of rules and regulations such as the introduction of copyright laws (Rose, 1993). During this time, the majority of the contemporary presses developed in the UK and the US: HarperCollins, originally named William Collins, Sons, was established in 1819 in Glasgow; Macmillan was founded in London in 1843; Simon and Schuster opened in 1924 in New York; Random House was founded in 1925 also in New York; and Penguin Publishing was created in 1935 in London. The big five presses in the contemporary publishing industry were founded as small and medium-sized presses in the UK and the US, which grew into large presses in the 1960s. These same presses would later be bought out by foreign conglomerates in the 1980s.

Publishing remained relatively stable until the 1960s, when a period of transition began. During this time, retailers and agents became more prominent in the book trade, contributing to the industry's expansion (Thompson, 2012). At the same time, large corporations were seeking to enter various media sectors. Many small- and medium-sized presses were put on the market as their original founders retired (Thompson, 2012). This period saw corporations in the entertainment and education sectors purchasing presses of all sizes. For instance, Random House's founders sold some stock on Wall Street to

attract outside investment, and the company expanded by acquiring other publishing houses, such as Knopf and Pantheon. In 1965, Random House itself was sold to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) (Thompson, 2012). Entering the early 1980s, further industry consolidation occurred through additional mergers and acquisitions.

Another wave of mergers began in the 1980s, when international companies sought to break into the English-speaking market (the UK and North America) by acquiring presses founded and based there (Thompson, 2012). Since international companies were unable to sell to a wider market due to language limitations in their content, acquiring companies that operated in English was a way into the North American and UK markets. Companies like Bertelsmann and Holtzbrinck in Germany and Hachette Livre in France wanted to expand overseas. For instance, Random House was sold to Bertelsmann in 1998, which already owned Bantam Books and Doubleday. Currently, the five large presses are tied to a global conglomerate: Penguin Random House, Simon and Schuster, HarperCollins, Macmillan, and Hachette Book Group.

In the Canadian publishing industry, developments were similar, with a number of small publishers opening their doors in the mid-twentieth century and eventually being bought out by large conglomerates (MacSkimming, 2007). The rise in the production of Canadian literature came only after WWII, when the Massey report found that in 1947, only 34 Canadian-authored novels were published in Canada, and in 1948, the situation became even more dismal, with only 14 novels by Canadian authors published by Canadian-owned presses (Dewar, 2017). Therefore, to cultivate and manufacture more cultural products specific to Canada, the government created the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957 (Dewar, 2017). The 1950s and 1960s saw a rise in the creation of small,

independent presses that published works by Canadian authors who became known worldwide, such as Margaret Atwood. With the creation of the council and the grants the government began distributing in 1972, the Canadian publishing industry blossomed into its own market.

Nonetheless, the mergers that affected small- and medium-sized presses in the UK and the US also affected Canada. A number of prominent Canadian publishing houses were bought out by international conglomerates. This fate befell Ryerson Press. The oldest Canadian publishing house, Ryerson Press, which originated in 1829 as the Methodist Book Room and Publishing House, began its work in the book trade as a religious publisher (MacSkimming, 2007). The press ventured into trade titles as WWI “gave a tremendous boost to publishing,” with some books selling up to 40,000 copies (MacSkimming, 2007, p. 29). However, amid competition from foreign presses, the United Church of Canada eventually had to put the press up for sale. In 1970, McGraw-Hill purchased the publishing house and became McGraw-Hill Ryerson. The Canadian Book Publishers’ Council did not oppose the acquisition (MacSkimming, 2007).

McClelland & Stewart (M&S), founded in 1906 as McClelland and Goodchild, was another well-known Canadian press that met a similar fate. By 1971, M&S was on the brink of bankruptcy, and owner Jack McClelland decided to sell the company for \$1.5 million (MacSkimming, 2007). However, the Royal Commission recognized the company as a national asset and granted it a 10-year loan of around \$1 million (MacSkimming, 2007). Nonetheless, M&S was unable to stay afloat in the Canadian publishing market as an independent press. In 2011, Penguin Random House purchased the company, bringing it under the umbrella of Bertelsmann and Pearson PLC (Dewar, 2017). This time,

the government did not stop McClelland & Stewart from being taken over, and the press became a part of Penguin Random House.

Due to these waves of mergers, the number of independent publishing houses in North America has declined. Most contemporary books now come from the branches of large parent companies: Penguin Random House, Simon and Schuster, HarperCollins, Macmillan, and Hachette Book Group (Hoffman, 2020).

Within this consolidated marketplace, in the contemporary Canadian publishing sector, there are very few publishers who specialize in genre fiction such as fantasy, science fiction, and romance. Based on my research, the majority of the current independent Canadian presses specialize in literary fiction. Even though literary fiction offers authors the possibility to apply for a number of awards and grants, the lack of other genres present in the marketplace limits the submission avenues for authors and the range of content they produce. Hence, Canadian authors who focus on writing genre fiction have only the option of submitting to foreign publishing conglomerates through agents. This route can be problematic because only a few publishing companies own the majority of genre imprints. For instance, Penguin Random House owns more than 350 imprints that support the parent company's vision and brand (Maher, 2020).

As a result of these industry dynamics, authors who produce work outside of the mainstream tropes and genres are often not offered traditional contracts. I am borrowing Hesmondhalgh's (2006) definition of the vernacular term 'mainstream,' which refers to content that appeals to a wide audience and is intended for mass production. As opposed to mainstream content, niche content, or alternative content can appeal to a specific reader, for example, one who is receptive to the mixing of different genres. In traditional

publishing, if an author combines science fiction with mystery, the acquisitions editors do not know how to market this type of work to reach the right readers (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022).

Women in Publishing: 1800s to Present Day

The first publishers who founded presses were typically men who served as both agent and publisher, building their backlists based on their own preferences (Thompson, 2012). The male publisher, arguably, acted as the tastemaker for the general public.

The history of women working in publishing is a field with many gaps that still need to be filled. Women employed at specific presses were erased from history until feminist scholars began to recognize the importance of their work and contributions (Murray, 2004). If a publishing house was linked to a man, the women working behind the scenes would often be ignored and omitted from the press's history. For instance, Murray (2004) provided a detailed account of the Cuala Press, a publishing house established in 1908 linked to W.B. Yeats. This connection with Yeats overshadowed the contributions of his sister, Elizabeth, who served as the press director. The press offered many women opportunities to work in publishing, even though they were not welcome in any of the trade unions and received significantly lower wages than men (Murray, 2004).

Similarly, Wajcman (1991) provides the example of how men's unions excluded women from the printing industry. Compositors, who were part of the union, did not want women taking their wages, which were relatively high since they were considered skilled labourers. Composition was regarded as skilled work that could not be performed by

women because it required strength to carry the forme, the printing surface where the set type was placed (Wajcman, 1991). Cockburn (1985) linked this difference in strength to social conditioning, in which boys were encouraged to participate in activities that build muscle, whereas girls were not. Hence, women were not taken on as apprentices, which further limited their place in the publishing sphere. Even though feminist presses that began to appear in the mid 1800s employed women, proving they could be skilled workers as compositors, this was not a welcome practice among men in the industry. In the early 1900s, the compositors' society (Cockburn, 1985) initiated a legal ban on women apprentices.

Women, nonetheless, still fought for the right to be a part of the publishing industry. For instance, the Women's Printing Society in Westminster, founded in 1876, supported female workers of the publishing industry. The founders of this society, Emma Anne Paterson and Emily Faithfull, also established Victoria Press, which employed and trained women to work in publishing houses. The press faced hostility from the London Society of Compositors, which negatively affected its standing in the publishing world (Murray, 2004). Men were safeguarding the industry and preventing women from working.

The phenomenon of women's work being unacknowledged remains prevalent today. For instance, Roy MacSkimming's *The Perilous Trade* (2007), a history of the Canadian book industry, describes instances in which female workers in the publishing sector were not given their due recognition. For example, MacSkimming begins his book by introducing Clarke, Irwin and Company as a press established by William H. Clarke; however, there is no emphasis on Irene Clarke's role in establishing the first literary non-fiction press in Canada. MacSkimming (2007) simply referred to her as Mrs. Clarke

throughout the chapter and recalled seeing her only during the holiday season, with a bonus cheque in hand. On the other hand, in Ruth Panofsky's *Toronto Trailblazers: Women in Canadian Publishing* (2019), a chapter is devoted specifically to Irene Clarke and her accomplishments in the publishing industry. Specifically, Panofsky (2019) states that Clarke was the driving force behind Emily Carr's literary career, as well as a number of other women entering the publishing industry.

There were many women similar to Irene Clarke who had a hand in establishing prominent Canadian printing presses, such as May Cutler, who founded Tundra Books in 1967 and became the first woman to start a Canadian children's press (Edwards and Saltman, 2010). Moreover, many female workers in the Canadian publishing industry made it much easier for other women to enter the sector. For instance, Frances Halpenny, who was the general editor of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB) from 1969 to 1988, made it her duty to include biographies of notable women (Panofsky, 2019). This highlights the importance of women in publishing who can open doors for other women and recognize their struggles.

It has also been common for female authors to experience discrimination in the book trade. Tuchman and Fortin (1984) emphasize that "Men accumulate fame in ways that encourage continued recognition in the future; women are less likely to do so, at least in part because of how critics may disparage their work" (p. 93). The fame then translates into symbolic capital that men can use to advance their careers as authors, whereas women are unable to generate as much.

Female authors often used male pseudonyms, a prominent example being the Brontë sisters, in order to hide their gender. In this way, they tried to escape unnecessary

bias from readers because they wrote about sexual passion, slang, alcoholism, domestic abuse, and violence (Nyborg, 2016). The notion of a female author hiding behind a male name or remaining anonymous is problematic, as this practice affects women's presence in the history of the publishing industry when it is reconstructed.

Women's contributions are often unrecognized and sometimes even erased from history. For instance, anthologies of famous writers would place women's work in a separate chapter (Demers, 2019), as if solidifying the binaries that already exist. Additionally, if women authors are mentioned in history texts, often their personal life would be the centre of attention and not their cultural contribution to society: "The biographies of women authors chronologically integrate information about their marriages and their children into the text. Those of men generally contain a brief sentence about marriage and children in the next-to-last paragraph" (Tuchman and Fortin, 1984, p. 80). Furthermore, even after recognizing the absence of women authors in the canon, the majority of research is still being performed through dissertation work that remains unpublished (Keown, 2021). Biographies of women authors, as well as the work they produced, become lost to the mainstream public.

Women in Genre Publishing

Genres are a product of their time and reflect common topics and themes in society (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022). Johnson (2022) notes that genres can be developed and defined throughout history: "historical values that are rooted in the time they are developed... allow certain characteristics of genres to be repeated and

canonised into a particular genre” (p. 90). A genre, therefore, helps situate a book into a canon of other works. Genres, however, are not rigid and can change based on how authors define them and how readers perceive the story.

There is a critique of creating a “rigid” approach to certain genres. Jameson (1975) argues that there is an “arbitrary ranging of complicated works into oversimplified categories” (p. 151), such as Propp’s outline for the fairy tale genre. It can be harmful to read only the characterization of a work, rather than taking it as a whole, separate from the genre to which it is grouped. There are many genres and subgenres in literature. Arguably, this number will keep increasing as more readers discover niche books that can develop into their own categories.

Categorizing books into genres plays a significant role for traditional publishers, since the category can signal what type of book will sell, to whom, and how well. Authors have to pitch their books to literary agents and acquisitions editors who work only with specific genres. Moreover, if it is not obvious what genre a book belongs to, it will be difficult to sell it to a traditional press. For instance, *The Rook* by Daniel O'Malley was signed with a traditional press, but the author received a small advance because the book was not clearly defined in terms of genre, combining elements of science fiction, fantasy, and thriller (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022). Hence, traditional presses often rely on categories to gauge how much to invest in a book and how much profit a work can generate. Genre fiction, such as mystery, can be easily turned into a series because characters and plot elements can be carried over across multiple installments. Publishers often sign contracts with mystery authors for more than one book because they anticipate readers will remain loyal, as acquisition editors interviewed for my study revealed.

The traditional literary circle is composed of male critics and reviewers (Johnson. (2022). Before Web 2.0, critics and reviewers were the arguable tastemakers who categorized books into specific genres. Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher (2022) propose, on the other hand, that in the contemporary publishing sphere, readers and authors are jointly defining the conventions of different genres. This is consistent with my own findings because authors have their readers in mind when categorizing their books, whether by creating a new subgenre to ensure readers are aware of what they are about to read or by asking platforms such as Amazon to create more categories to accurately reflect the content of the books.

In the publishing industry, binaries are often created by grouping women authors into specific genres. DiBattista and Nord (2017) note how women are classified under the domestic fiction category, while men are associated with adventure tales of travelling. Women are viewed as keepers of the domestic sphere, while men are able to explore the world. One example is Jane Austen's work; her novels are often categorized as romance, with readers assuming that the main plot point is the love story between the female and male protagonists. However, Austen held an ironic stance on marriage, courtship, and family life, which were disguised as happy endings in her stories, not to deviate from accepted societal themes (DiBattista and Nord, 2017). Hence, the book's genre shapes how readers perceive the work.

Romance

The publishing world is rife with stereotypes about romance novel readers and authors. The most common stereotype is that women predominantly read and write romance fiction (Cameron, 2020; Reed, 2019). The romance genre carries a stigma due to its association with low-brow culture (Faircloth, 2015). However, the romance genre has a rich history, which now includes many canonical texts such as *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë.

My study focuses on the contemporary romance genre, which began in the mid-seventeenth century, when books were published for a mass market (Regis, 2013). Black (2019) distinguishes a shift from the “old” romance to the “new” romance (or neo-romance) in the seventeenth century (p. 52). Specifically, Regis (2013) describes *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson, published in 1740, as one of the first best-selling romances. The story is centred around a courtship of two characters who overcome obstacles and find a happy ending or a form of resolution at the end (Pamela’s place is secured as a wife, she has not been ruined, and Mr. B. develops into a husband from a man who did not respect the heroine’s boundaries). The form and plot elements of the story have been echoed by other writers throughout the development of the romance genre (Regis, 2013).

The contemporary romance genre originated in the 1970s, when women began discussing their sexuality more explicitly in new romance novels (Radway, 1999). Harlequin Enterprises (now owned by HarperCollins) is arguably the most well-known publisher of romance novels and is what many associate with the romance genre. Originally founded in 1949 in Manitoba, Harlequin rebranded as a romance publisher in

the 1980s. The novels of Harlequin are bound to a certain stereotype: readers view these books as short, inexpensive, magazine-like publications that are quickly disposed of (Faircloth, 2015). Despite the stigma, Harlequin books immediately gained a wide audience. For instance, in the late 1970s, the return rate of Harlequin books was less than 25% (Thurston, 1987). The success of Harlequin's romance books led other publishing houses to establish their own romance imprints that would produce similar works, such as Simon and Schuster, which founded Silhouette in the 1980s (Radway, 1999). However, Harlequin remained the dominant player in the romance genre, and by the early 2000s, the company owned about 90 per cent of the series romance business in the United States (Blackwell, 2005).

With the incentive to develop the romance genre, publishers sought out and cultivated many writers who would produce cookie-cutter romance novels (with plots centred on the love story of two characters with a happy ending) (Radway, 1991). Contemporary romances written over the past fifty years have used this equation-like structure to develop their plots because readers have been consuming this work without hesitation. Moreover, romance work often draws on or is inspired by previous literary works; there is a recycling of heroes and plot elements. For instance, E.L. James, the author of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, was inspired by Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-20) and by classical literary works such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) (Downey, 2018).

The contemporary romance genre is now being reassessed. A common stereotype of the romance genre is that it goes against feminism by casting the female protagonist as a victim (Cameron, 2020; Reed, 2019). However, this arguably simplistic view of

romance is being flagged by scholars. For instance, Radway (1991) has critiqued her own study of women romance readers, noting that her conclusion about the genre could have been influenced by earlier, unflattering scholarship. Furthermore, there are female authors who redefine the romance genre in support of the women's movement (Radway, 1999). For instance, some romance novels urge readers "to identify not only with [the] new heroine but with a powerful man who is not only not threatened by her independence but convinced that she can combine it with intimacy, connectedness, and love." (Radway, 1999, p. 411). Arguably, the stigma attached to romance novels as being magazine-like publications is subsiding.

A perception in the publishing industry by literary critics is that romance is not a serious genre and does not require much critical analysis; it is therefore critiqued and looked down upon (Cameron, 2020). However, this point has also come under scrutiny. Researchers employ a variety of feminist theories, such as feminist political economy, to analyze how the romance genre has impacted the market as a whole, securing a more prominent role in readers' lives (Reed, 2019). Hence, the idea that the romance genre is "lesser than" other genres is now largely discredited (Radway, 1999, p. 396).

Since I interviewed authors who write across a variety of subgenres, I needed a general definition of the Romance genre to help me decide who to include in the study. The definitions I found often focused on specific subgenres (e.g., Radway (1999) focuses on Harlequin-type romances), which were too narrow. Through reading the works by the romance authors in my study, I have identified some of the defining characteristics of the contemporary romance genre and created my own definition that I apply in my analysis: (i) a plot driven by a relationship (e.g., love at first sight; friends to lovers; enemies to

lovers, etc.); (ii) the overcoming of internal (e.g., personal trauma, grief, etc.) or external barriers; (iii) the growth of characters (e.g., the protagonist becomes more independent, the protagonist changes from closed off or hurt by past experiences to being healed by love); and (iv) a happy ending (e.g., marriage or defining the relationship). The contemporary romance genre has a loyal readership that purchases a steady number of books, similar to other genres in Canada (Zara, 2023).

Mystery

Like the romance genre, the mystery genre has undergone numerous changes and developed into a variety of subgenres and subcategories. The mystery genre, as it originated in the seventeenth century, was aimed at a male audience. Magazines were purposefully aimed at a male readership, such as William Edwin Burton's *Gentleman's Magazine*, founded in 1837. The magazine published numerous short pieces in the detective story genre (Panek, 2011). Critics of the time often compared female authors to their male counterparts. For instance, Anna Katharine Green's *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) was praised by critics, but reviewers flagged her gender, unlike male authors (Panek, 2011). Moreover, the majority of the protagonists in the mysteries and crime novels were also men, with only a "handful of stories [that] feature women" (Panek, 2011, p. 188). If women were included, they would often be seen as victims who needed help from male protagonists (Hill, 2017).

In biographical books, female mystery and detective authors are often skimmed over. Panek (2011) states that the formula of the detective story developed from Poe to

Dickens to Collins to Gaboriau to Conan Doyle. The list comprises male writers who helped develop the detective genre but omits the women who also helped shape it. For instance, in Panek's book, Agatha Christie is mentioned only once in the introduction, as outside the scope of his study. However, it should be noted that Agatha Christie is not the only woman who contributed to the progression and popularization of the mystery novel within the time frame the author investigated. For instance, gothic novels like Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) displayed elements of mystery such as the uncovering of schemes and crimes, which also influenced the popularization and development of the genre. Panek (2011) briefly mentions some female authors, but he also links them to "sensational" detective stories (p. 126). The word "sensational" conveys a fleeting popularity that undercuts the significance of women authors and their role in the development and history of mystery writing.

Nonetheless, female authors have slowly established their voices in the mystery genre: "Over the past thirty years, women writers have overhauled the traditionally male-dominated genre of crime fiction by writing strong female characters who drive the plot and solve the crimes" (Hill, 2017, p. 52). The female mystery authors tackle social issues prevalent in society, whether it is misogyny, physical abuse, or addiction. For instance, Hill (2017) cites the novel *Report for Murder* (1987) by Val McDermid as not only introducing a female detective but also accentuating that she is part of the LGBTQ+ community.

There are a number of mystery and crime subgenres that came to life in the twenty-first century. For instance, Domestic Noir, represented by Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), can be described as part of the thriller subgenre since there is an aura of suspense around

the outcome of the story in addition to the mystery element of what happens to the protagonist (Murphy, 2018). However, this genre is arguably problematic. The idea of associating women with the home and domestic life can be limiting. Hence, the subgenre creates further boundaries, wherein women's work is not just categorized as a thriller but as a thriller set in the home. However, the aim of *Gone Girl* was to emphasize that "women have the same right to be portrayed as unsympathetic, morally complex and unabashedly villainous characters as their male counterparts" (Murphy, 2018, p. 159). Hence, contemporary female crime and mystery authors are challenging the genre's rigidity and creating stories that better reflect their agendas.

I created a general definition of the mystery genre that I use for my study since the definitions I came across in other literature (Hill, 2017; Murphy, 2018; Panek, 2011) focus on defining specific subgenres of mystery (e.g., Nordic noir) and do not provide a general overview of the genre. Through reading the works by the mystery authors in my study, I have identified some of the defining characteristics of the mystery genre: (i) a plot that is driven by the uncovering of something that the protagonist does not know and wants to find out (whether it is a crime, an abduction, a robbery, etc.) and a protagonist that does not have to be a detective; (ii) inclusion of a suspect and evidence or clues; (iii) elements of suspense (e.g., high stakes, gory details, risk of danger); and (iv) a resolution (the protagonist finds out/solves the "case."). Readers might know who committed the act from the beginning, but usually they do not. However, the mystery genre has a vast number of subgenres; for instance, cozy mysteries do not focus on gore or violence, are often set in small communities, and allow for humour and light-hearted dialogue.

Poetry

Poetry was the most popular genre among women authors in the eighteenth century (Keown, 2021). Miller (2016) contends that in the United States, this genre hit its highest peak in the first half of the twentieth century. Even though this genre was taken up by many female writers, female poets are often missing from its history of development. Many women published anonymously, or in anthologies, or were simply unpublished, leaving behind manuscripts. This creates a challenge in discovering, preserving, and studying female poetry and situating it within historical perspectives (Keown, 2021). For instance, the Brontë sisters published under pseudonyms, and even their collaborative poetry anthology, published in 1846, sold only three copies (Smith, 2016).

Another issue is that women's poetry was often dismissed as trivial, and hence neither recognized nor preserved throughout time (Bacscheider, 2005). Anthologies often create either a chapter/section dedicated to women poets or divide the poetry specifically based on gender (Kinnahan, 2016). Keown (2021) suggests that instead of inserting women into the history of poetry, it is important to rework the chapters altogether to avoid boundaries; both female and male authors should be studied simultaneously, without creating a visible separation. An additional issue raised by Forsyth (2005) is that there is not only a gender divide but also a class divide, as working women poets are further erased from history. Moreover, the female poets in the biographical anthologies are predominantly white and heterosexual (Kinnahan, 2016). This lack of displaying a variety of female poets creates an absence of role models (Forsyth, 2005).

Additionally, it is important to evade the binary between female and male authors because it is possible for authors to take on different identities as they work on their writing: “poets of both sexes experimented with gendered identities and learnt from each other’s techniques.” (Keown, 2021, p. 6). For instance, William Sharp also wrote under the pseudonym Fiona Macleod, and the two personas were regarded as two separate authors until Sharp’s death, when the truth was revealed (Denisoff, 2019). However, there is still a division between the female and male forms of poetry that is being discussed in research. For instance, Chapman (2013) describes Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry as “more muscular, political, public” in the mid-1850s (p. 277). “Muscular” was a way to emphasize a positive shift in Barrett Browning’s writing, but it also carries undertones of equating more ‘serious’ poetry with the male figure. The female poet was generally regarded as “capable only of limited scope and craft” (Kinnahan, 2016, p. 3).

Moreover, women were seen as the muse and not the writer (Kinnahan, 2016). Similar to the mystery genre, where female characters are often described/labelled as victims (Hill, 2017), the same pattern can be traced in the poetry genre, where women are also depicted in girl-like terms and language (Kinnahan, 2016). Furthermore, poetry with comedic features is also attributed to male poets, such as Chaucer, to a greater degree than to female poets (Darlington, 2009), even when women use comedy to address societal issues and critique social norms (Darlington, 2009).

My study focuses on Instapoetry, a popular form that does not subscribe to any one convention in the poetry genre. Popular poetry like Instapoetry reflects the contemporary times and the society in which it is written. For instance, Instapoet Rupi Kaur writes about topics of sexual abuse that are considered taboo (Pereira, 2023). Her

poems are a lyrical organization of words, with free-form stanzas. Based on the Instapoetry that I have read, my definition of this sub-genre is: 1) a lyrical organization of words that can have stanzas, a metre, or they can be free form; and 2) a layout that is usually concise in a way that fits one social media post and looks appealing on a screen; hence, the character count is limited to what can fit on one digital page.

Women in Publishing: Current Issues and Evolution of the Female Author

Despite women creating their own niches in the publishing industry, securing executive positions in publishing houses, and writing best-selling novels, they still face obstacles both as workers and authors. Bridges (2017) argues that women working in the creative industries are “more vulnerable to insecurities than others” (p. 2). There is a rise of non-unionized, part-time, freelance work as part of the post-Fordist phenomenon, which promotes flexibility as a positive characteristic of the new work regime (Kumar, 2005). However, this “flexibility” does not provide for job security and a stable salary (Bridges, 2017, p. 14). Bridges (2017) points out that it is predominantly women who take up these positions when they leave work due to family or when they reach a “glass ceiling” and seek other employment (p. 13). Even though there are opportunities for women to participate in cultural fields, these opportunities are fundamentally flawed.

Writing by women is continually classified into subgenres, while writing by men is categorized into broad categories, such as literary fiction, that have broad appeal (Demers, 2019). Cameron (2020) describes how one of the most prominent “romance” genre writers, Nicholas Sparks, does not categorize his books as “romance”; both he and

his publishers label them as “general fiction” (p. 12). His books, such as *The Notebook* (1996) and *A Walk to Remember* (1999), employ general romance tropes of friends to lovers (*A Walk to Remember*) or choosing between two suitors (*The Notebook*), with the romance of the two main characters (a man and a woman) being the main plot point of the story. Arguably, successful writers, such as Nicholas Sparks, can choose how their work is presented to the general audience. Cameron (2020) strongly implies that this ability is simply due to Sparks’ gender. Similarly, Olson (2014) discusses how Jodi Picoult’s work (such as *My Sister’s Keeper*, 2004) is similar in plot to a number of her male counterparts nominated for the Pulitzer, yet Picoult’s work is branded as “domestic fiction” and lacks appropriate recognition (p. 261).

However, the stereotypical form of the romance category that is pushed by publishing houses is being rejected by authors in favour of claiming “sexuality for women and [the right] to imagine it in a less linear, less goal-directed way” (Radway, 1999, p. 396). Female authors experiment with the genre's sexuality by resisting generic conventions. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, written by E.L. James, proved that women can be explicit about their sexuality and not conform to the typical romance genre of a cookie-cutter happy ending. *Fifty Shades of Grey* was first written as a fan fiction piece on a website, which later banned the story for its explicit content (Downey, 2018). Nonetheless, E.L. James decided to self-publish the work on her own website. This is an example of how women are starting to reclaim the romance genre and “bypass stereotyped female sexual passivity, a trend pre-empted by the history of romance novels and soft-core erotica aimed at women readers” (Downey, 2018, p. 113). As my dissertation argues, self-publishing often serves as a means of gaining autonomy in the publishing industry.

Conclusion

The contemporary publishing industry is dominated by international conglomerates that acquired independent presses, both small, medium, and large, throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Today, authors ultimately submit their work to an imprint owned by a limited number of key players in the publishing industry, who dictate their own submission guidelines that should align with their brand (Thompson, 2012).

The practice of gatekeeping in the publishing industry dates back to the inception of organized printing, when the majority of presses were founded by white men who served as both agents and publishers (Murray, 2004). Despite gatekeeping, women have carved out a place in the publishing industry by working for presses as editors or, independently, as agents. Female authors have also evolved from hiding behind male pseudonyms, such as the Brontë sisters, to creating their own subgenres.

However, certain forms of discrimination persist in the contemporary publishing industry. Olson (2014) argues that female authors who sign contracts with traditional presses have had the unfortunate experience of being steered into a specific genre catering to women readers, such as romance. Moreover, the precarity of work in publishing has affected how women can make a living writing or working for a traditional press, due to unstable freelance job opportunities (Bridges, 2017). As my study argues, Canadian female authors have nonetheless begun to take control of their work through self-publishing, connecting directly with their readers.

Chapter Three: Historical Overview of Self-Publishing

A report published by Oullette (2007) claims that “[s]elf-publishing appeared in the 1980s and the early 1990s with the microcomputer and the introduction of desktop publishing” (p. 21). However, it is a myth that self-publishing is a completely novel business model introduced only in the digital age. There is a much richer history of self-publishing. An early mention of self-publishing dates to 1759 when Laurence Sterne brought out *Tristram Shandy* (1759) (Patterson, 2012). There are abundant examples of authors employing self-publishing for book production throughout the 1800s and 1900s, from Virginia Woolf to Edgar Allan Poe (Ormrod, 2012). Authors who were not happy with their publishers took charge of their work and paid to produce it by other means, such as print-on-demand publishing. For example, Jane Austen faced difficulties pitching her work to publishers and paid to have her first manuscript printed (Petkus, 2015). Hence, the notion of an author providing the initial capital to produce a book has been a part of the publishing industry for centuries. Moreover, the fact that some self-published authors are now considered literary icons means that culturally significant work has not always been recognized by the traditional publishing industry.

The practice of self-publishing in the 1800s and 1900s was very different from what it is today, due to the infrastructure developments in the publishing industry introduced over the past fifty years. Infrastructure refers to the production and distribution methods used by presses and authors. In the 1950s and 1960s, authors formed many small and medium-sized presses because creating a book did not require specialized training, and a press could fit into a small space (MacSkimming, 2007). The developments in printing

technology enabled the establishment of presses that also printed chapbooks, taking a commission from authors.

Print-on-demand (POD) became popular in the 1990s with the introduction and spread of digital printing technology, which allowed authors to choose how many books to print and then add to orders if they required more copies to distribute. This was not possible with offset printing, which required a fixed number of books per run. Arguably, the POD model of book publishing allowed authors to experiment with their work, since they were not signing a contract for a specific number of copies. Christopher Kular (2006) argues that, unlike traditional presses, which have backlists of books rarely reprinted, self-publishing enables authors to keep their books in print indefinitely. POD also offers a budget-friendly way for authors who are “faced with the multiple uncertainties of modern publishing” (Carolan and Evain, 2013, p. 293) to produce their books. Hence, there are financial benefits to POD publishing, such as access to copies whenever an author needs them and avoiding a large upfront investment.

The self-publishing practice changed significantly with the introduction of platformization, which acts “as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the...web.” (Helmond, 2015, p. 5). Several platforms that offer on-demand publishing services were developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, such as Lulu Press (2002) and Smashwords (2008), which are still in operation today. The creation and widespread adoption of the ePub file format enabled access to eBooks (electronic books) across multiple devices, such as Kobo and Kindle. Authors can publish their work online in a few easy steps on platforms such as CreateSpace (founded in 2000, now Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing) and Kobo Writing Life (founded in 2012).

Through platformization, the practice of self-publishing created further opportunities for authors to bypass traditional publishing methods without investing too much of their own capital in the product. Many self-publishers spend between \$2000 and \$5000 on a book, which includes services such as editing, cover design, and printing, if required (Leong, 2012; Yates and Ioannou, 2010). The price range of \$2000 to \$5000 still holds up today based on the interview data with the self-publishers who participated in my study. Self-publishing is therefore a much cheaper option than traditional presses, which charge \$50,000 to \$70,000 per book. One acquisitions editor interviewed for this study reveals, “to publish 3000 copies in Canada, you're looking at a cost ... with editing, promotion, publicity ... something around between 50 and \$70,000 to get that book out” (Trad. Worker 3). There is a substantial difference in how much a traditional publisher invests in a single book compared to a self-publisher who can produce a book online in eBook format and distribute it digitally for less than \$10,000.

The literature that explores the publishing industry in the twenty-first century mostly focuses on the technological changes affecting the publishing sphere, such as the introduction of eBooks and online distribution platforms, and omits the practice of self-publishing (Abate, 2016; Cope and Phillips, 2006; Holley, 2015; Murphy and Matterson, 2018; Potts, 2014). This signals that self-publishing is still not recognized as a legitimate or worthy sector of the publishing industry.

In Canada, self-publishing has been part of the publishing industry for almost a century, from Ryerson Chapbooks beginning operations in the mid-1920s to Margaret Atwood self-publishing her first poetry collection in the 1960s. One of the first self-published books in Canada was created by a woman in 1859. Amelia Frances Howard-

Gibbon created a manuscript for a children's book titled *An Illustrated Comic Alphabet*, in which all the illustrations were hand-drawn by the author (Edwards and Saltman, 2010, p. 22). The phenomenon of self-publishing is a legacy of the Canadian publishing industry that is, arguably, often ignored because it is not recognized as a legitimate form of book production and is often associated with vanity publishing. However, the two book production methods differ in their business models, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Contemporary Canadian self-publishers have a much wider reach thanks to online platforms such as Kindle Direct Publishing, which offer direct contact with readers. Through platformization, the online space has become a venue for Canadian women to reach a mass audience and find readers who can support their work by leaving positive comments and personal messages.

Self-Publishing versus Vanity Publishing

Laquintano (2013) links the practice of author-subsidized publishing to nineteenth-century commission publishers, who would earn a commission on book sales while helping market the book. Even during this time, some commission publishers would abuse the system and exploit authors by making improper payments. I argue that self-publishing is not the same as vanity publishing. Vanity publishing is the product of the post-war era, debuting as a mainstream business in the 1940s (Ormrod, 2012).

The traditional publishing model historically kept the author at arm's length from the market through royalties and, in that way, elevated the published author to a literary

creator rather than simply a mass producer of commercial goods (Laquintano, 2013). The book is viewed not just as a commodity in literary circles but as a piece of art; self-publishers, similarly, view their creations as cultural objects rather than solely as a way to make money, according to the interviews in my study. On the other hand, vanity publishing is the creation of a market product: the book is a commodity that is meant to sell copies (Samson, 2018).

Over the years, the term self-publishing has acquired a negative connotation due to its association with vanity publishing (Keen, 2007; Laquintano, 2016; Young, 2014). For instance, Keen (2007) argues that certain print-on-demand services, such as “Blurb and Lulu are really just cheaper, more accessible versions of vanity presses, where the untalented go to purchase the veneer of publication (p. 56). Another critique is the idea that only the rich can publish, while those of lower economic status cannot (Stevenson, 2004). Groups in society affected by the digital divide or unable to afford self-publishing are left out. There are no absolutely free forms of self-publishing, since a writer has to invest in technical tools such as a computer.

Based on my research, there is a discernible division between self-publishing and vanity publishing. For instance, Castillo (2011) emphasizes that self-publishing is a different form of publishing in comparison to vanity publishing, since self-publishers do “everything except for the printing and binding” while “commercial publishers sell books to the public, whereas vanity ones sell books to authors” (p. 423). Unlike vanity presses, self-publishing offers the option to share a work with the world without buying an expensive package from a company that does not allow the author to take control of the entire publishing process (Doppler, 2020). A vanity press is composed of people who are

not making money from book sales but from the authors who want to see their work in circulation. Authors themselves are often dissatisfied with the services provided by the vanity publishing business model, and some end up in debt after buying a package deal from a vanity press (Gateman, 1987; Samson, 2018; Silver, 2017).

In contrast, self-publishing is a different business model because profits come solely from book sales. The self-publishing business model is more accessible than that of a vanity press because it is more financially flexible; authors decide how much to spend and which services to buy (Samson, 2018). Furthermore, the vanity author is characterized as someone focused solely on getting their work into print and who knows very little, if anything, about the publishing industry (Laquintano, 2013). In contrast, based on the interviews for this study, self-publishers have a good grasp of the publishing industry, understand their reader base, and know how to market their work. Self-publishing how-to manuals depict that authors are aware of the tricks of the trade when it comes to publishing (S. Anderson, 2004; Hushion and Write, 2007; Samson, 2018; Silver, 2017).

Moreover, a number of self-publishing how-to manuals have a section that clearly distinguishes ‘vanity publishing’ from self-publishing (Samson, 2018; Silver, 2017). Gateman (1987), who created a self-publishing how-to book, mentions vanity and subsidiary publishing in her manual as distinct book production methods that differ from the self-publishing business model. In particular, Gateman (1987) is critical of vanity publishing, stating that it is composed of “a printer who will run off material to soothe the vanity of anyone who has the money to pay the price” (p. 21).

It is debated whether a work becomes illegitimate once the author pays to have the book published rather than letting it go through the customary publishing cycle (Yates and Iannou, 2010). In contrast, self-publishing involves authors financing the project themselves and having a vision for it, rather than simply wanting to see their name in print to soothe their vanity. Hesse (1995), who also published a how-to manual for self-publishers, is also critical of vanity publishing presses that “extract top dollar...to produce books all of which [the author] cannot hope to sell in regular circumstances” (p. 16). More recently, Samson describes vanity presses as “places to avoid” (Samson, 2018, p. 117). In particular, she mentions Author Solutions as a vanity press, which differs from a POD service because the company overcharges its clients for editing and cover design that can be of better quality and obtained at a more reasonable price on a freelance basis (Samson, 2018). Similarly, Silver describes authors as falling “prey” to vanity presses (Silver, 2017, p. 5). In particular, Silver also highlights the high cost of vanity presses, noting that authors must pay thousands of dollars to see their work in print and are locked into expensive payment plans (Samson, 2018; Silver, 2017). In contrast, the self-publishing business model is flexible in how much an author can spend on each service, unlike vanity presses, which offer a package deal (Silver, 2017).

Consequently, self-publishing is a viable business model that requires not only financial investment but also time and effort. A number of self-publishing how-to manuals present self-publishing as a legitimate business by highlighting practices such as registering a company, bookkeeping, and paying taxes (S. Anderson, 2004; Hushion and Write, 2007; Samson, 2018; Silver, 2017). Unlike vanity presses that offer expensive packages (Samson, 2018), the self-publishing business model is seen as more

accommodating to the author's needs. Before the rise of free online publishing platforms, such as Kindle Direct Publishing, authors were giving up the rights to their work to gain financial support from a traditional publisher. Today, publishing a book is much more affordable, and authors can retain the rights to their work when self-publishing.

The main difference between the two practices is that vanity publishing provides limited agency to the author, who does not oversee the entire publishing process because they must accept the decisions of in-house staff (e.g., cover designers, the editor). By analyzing different works on the practice of self-publishing versus vanity publishing (Castillo, 2011; Doppler, 2020; Hushion and Write, 2007; Laquintano, 2013; Samson, 2018; Silver, 2017; Yates and Iannou, 2010), I propose that self-publishing offers authors:

1. Full control over the final decisions of the project (e.g., cover art, binding, layout, editing).
2. Full control over the ability to employ others (e.g., copyeditor, line editor, cover designer, printer).
3. Full financial responsibilities for the project with the ability to decide how much to spend on each aspect of the production-distribution cycle (e.g., an author might choose to spend less on editing and contact more beta readers but spend more on advertising).

While vanity publishing offers the author:

1. Limited control over the final decisions of the project (e.g., cover art, binding, layout, editing).
2. Limited control over the ability to employ others (e.g., copyeditor, line editor, cover designer, printer).

3. Full financial responsibilities for the project upfront (e.g., the author can choose the number of books printed, but the price is set in terms of editing, cover design, etc.).

Hence, self-publishing and vanity publishing are two different business models.

Self-Publishing in Canadian Perspectives

Canadian women played a vital role in the development of the Canadian publishing industry, serving as assistants to men who established presses. For instance, the first printer in Canada, John Bushell, was assisted by his daughter, Elizabeth, in running the *Halifax Gazette* (Gerson, 2005). Moreover, hundreds of Canadian women took up writing in the 1800s and 1900s to not only earn money but also to promote specific causes and educate the population (Gerson, 2010). Nonetheless, “few ordinary women appear in early records of the creation, contents and consumption of Canadian print culture” (Gerson, 2005, p. 354). The majority of these women would pay “the costs themselves, without a deliberate reformist purpose and with little hope for financial reward” (Gerson, 2010, p. 65). Additionally, many women self-published not to be forgotten, often paying to publish only a few copies of their work themselves or leaving behind a manuscript (Gerson, 2005).

Scholars of the Canadian publishing industry do not highlight the term *self-publishing* in relation to the development of the book trade sector in Canada. It is not mentioned in either MacSkimming’s *The Perilous Trade* (2007) or Lorimer’s *Ultra Libris* (2012), which trace the history of Canadian publishing. Even though scholars discuss small presses that were run by authors publishing their own work, they draw no

connection between these small presses and the practice of self-publishing. However, a rather significant number of authors-turned-publishers would go on to establish some of Canada's most well-known presses. Arguably, these authors were acting as self-publishers, even though the term was not widely used in the industry before the popularity of digital platforms.

Authors sponsoring their work or finding a sponsor was not a novel concept during the inception of the Canadian publishing industry. Subscription publishing helped to develop the Canadian publishing industry. This model of publishing would rely on readers paying for an advanced copy of a work (MacDonald, 2005). Hence, readers played an important role in the development of the Canadian publishing industry. Readers sponsored a variety of books that interested them, which reflected their values and beliefs (MacDonald, 2005). For example, one of the first Canadian woman-authored poetry books, *The Widow of the Rock and Other Poems* (1824) by Margaret Blennerhassett, was funded by subscription (Gerson, 2005). Another model of publishing, Commission publishing, was also employed by authors who wanted to get their work into print (Gerson, 2010, p. 72). Commission publishing is the practice of paying for one's work, which is akin to the contemporary practice of self-publishing since the author maintains the copyright and control over the process of publication, such as the print run.

However, many Canadian female authors were disadvantaged financially because fewer women than men were wage earners or had access to family funds (Gerson, 2010). Self-publishing could be a risky venture that does not yield profits. For instance, Isabella Crawford self-published *Old Spookses' Pass* (1884), which sold only fifty copies (Gerson, 2010). Many Canadian women, such as L.M. Montgomery, who wrote *Anne of Green*

Gables (1908), entered the American market by soliciting their work to American publishers to gain a wider audience (Gerson, 2010).

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the number of Canadian independent presses rose substantially. According to MacSkimming (2007), in the 1960s, becoming a publisher did not require specialized training or any formal education. In the early days of publishing in Canada, a number of small and medium-sized presses were founded by poets.

Writers who independently published their work could be viewed as equivalents of self-publishers. In particular, poetry was self-published by many Canadian authors: “most volumes and booklets of poetry and literary prose issued in Canada before 1918 were financed by the author, male or female, a situation that endured well into the twentieth century” (Gerson, 2010, p. 71).

The practice of self-publishing poetry continued with many authors-turned publishers establishing their own presses. One of those publishing houses was Contact Press, founded in 1952 by Raymond Souster, Louis Dudek, and Irving Layton. The press functioned as a writer’s co-operative, and the first run of ten titles out of the thirteen published were written by its founders (MacSkimming, 2007). The authors established the press because they were dissatisfied with the traditional publishing options available to poets in Canada. Contact Press went on to become a very important member of the Canadian poetry scene, publishing a number of prominent Canadian authors, including Margaret Atwood. Gauntlet Press is another example of a small press founded by an author-turned-publisher. In 1961, Richard Outram and Helena Barbara Howard established a publishing house that produced some of Outram’s poetry collections, including *Creatures* (1972) and *Thresholds* (1973) (Shoesmith and Dondertman, 2013).

Their first poetry title by Outram was published in 1959, before the official founding of the press, indicating the drive among Canadian poets to seek out alternative ways to share their work, not always through conventional channels.

The late 1960s and 1970s also saw the inception of small and medium presses founded by poets, some of which are still active to this day. One prominent, medium-sized publishing house still in operation is House of Anansi Press, founded by writers Dennis Lee and Dave Godfrey. One of the press's earliest works was Lee's own poetry, *Kingdom of Absence* (1967) (Shoesmith and Dondertman, 2013). According to MacSkimming (2007), Godfrey was partly motivated to establish the publishing house to counter the invisibility of Canadian content among the endless shelves of American and British material. Another small press, Coteau Books, was founded in 1975 by four writers: Bob Currie, Gary Hyland, Geoffrey Ursell, and Barbara Sapergia. This press specifically focused on poetry and poets who came from Saskatchewan (Parker, 2012). The Hellbox Press was established in 1981 by Hugh Barclay, who published some of his poems and over 40 other titles (Shoesmith and Dondertman, 2013). Another small publishing house that was founded by a poet and that is still functioning is Book*hug. Jay Millar founded the press in 1997 and still publishes a variety of different titles (Shoesmith and Dondertman, 2013). Hence, poetry in Canada has a long link to publishing practices that can be seen as analogous to self-publishing.

The rise of platformization made it easier to disseminate poetry, and a number of authors in my study began posting their work specifically on social media platforms, such as Instagram, which can also be seen as a form of self-publishing. It must be noted that the small presses I have cited were all founded by male authors, and historians have

noted that they sometimes received help from their wives (MacSkimming, 2007; Shoesmith and Dondertman, 2013). Hence, women were involuntarily excluded from the history of publishing.

Chapbooks also hold a prominent place in the history of Canadian publishing. However, the idea of a chapbook also carries a stigma, as some authors do not consider it a legitimate form of publishing. A chapbook is a work with limited pages, delicate binding, and not mass-produced, often producing only a few copies (MacLaren, 2020). Nonetheless, several places in Canada offered chapbook production services specifically for writers. One of the most prominent was Ryerson Press's chapbooks, edited by Lorne Pierce. For Pierce, the chapbook, which had a limited print run, was a collector's item and did not hold the stigma of being a cheaply published book (MacLaren, 2020). However, since these chapbooks were tied to Ryerson Press, a traditional publishing house, only a limited number of authors were approached by Pierce to undertake this form of publishing. At the same time, Pierce's chapbooks, aside from the tie with Ryerson Press, were very similar to a contemporary self-publishing venture, since Pierce expected authors to contribute to the cost of printing and assumed they would take on some responsibility for selling the finished product (MacLaren, 2020). The main difference was that authors would be responsible for covering the losses if the publisher did not break even on sales of their share of the books (MacLaren, 2020).

Nonetheless, Pierce's model of publishing is not fully applicable to self-publishing. Pierce acted as an editor and decided which poems would make the final cut in the finished chapbooks. In contrast, self-publishing affords the author full control over production, marketing, and distribution. Pierce's model is more reminiscent of vanity

publishing because the author pays for a set deal (including the services of an editor, the layout of the finished book, etc.). MacLaren (2020) goes so far as to question whether Pierce was a gatekeeper, a characteristic not typical of the self-publishing model. Moreover, there was a stigma attached to chapbooks, and some authors were unwilling to publish this way. For instance, Duncan Campbell Scott, who was approached by Pierce, looked down on this method of publishing and refused to pay for the production of his work. Moreover, MacLaren (2020) states that the books were viewed as “cheaply [produced] with no offer of remuneration. These financial circumstances were poor soil for a real writing career” (p. 72). The quality of the final product was always a deciding factor in assessing a book's legitimacy. The Ryerson Press poetry chapbooks resembled a mix between the vanity press and the self-publishing model. Even though authors would contribute to the cost of the book, Pierce was taking on the role of the tastemaker and gatekeeper by reaching out to authors and thereby deciding what work readers would be interested in.

A more contemporary example of a chapbook press is Hawkshead Press, established by John Robert Colombo, who would not only publish his own poems but would also publish the work of other writers. The press was involved in the production of Margaret Atwood's self-published collection *Double Persephone* in 1961 (Francis, 1967). Arguably, Colombo was not part of the vanity publishing culture that relied on author funding. In contrast, he was contributing to the practice of self-publishing, with authors actively participating in how their books were produced, distributed, and marketed. There were also women-run chapbook presses. For instance, Jay Macpherson founded

Emblem Books in 1954, which issued chapbooks, including some of her own; and Edna Jaques published chapbooks such as *Verses for You* in the 1940s (Demers, 2019).

There are not as many instances of prominent presses founded by authors who were dedicated to fiction and non-fiction. However, one of those presses was James, Lewis, and Samuel, a company that was founded by James Lorimer, Bruce Lewis, and Alan Samuel in 1970. The small press provided a venue for Lorimer and his friend Heather Richardson to publish their work (MacSkimming, 2007).

Some children's presses were also founded by writers who wanted to deliver their projects to the public and found no better way than to publish them themselves. One of the most prominent children's publishers in Canada is Kids Can Press. The publishing house was established in 1971 as a ten-person collective and was awarded an Opportunities for Youth (OFY) grant to help the press begin operations (Edwards and Saltman, 2010). The members of the group who founded the press encompassed artists and writers who produced the first books all by hand. Additionally, Tundra Books was founded by May Cutler, who was inspired to start the press after a very positive self-publishing experience with her essay, *The Last Noble Savage*, in 1967 (Edwards and Saltman, 2010). Cutler established the press in her own home and became the first Canadian woman to produce children's literature (Block, 2011). Therefore, Cutler, a self-publisher, is an important figure in the history of Canadian children's literature who put women on the map as publishers of this genre. Many Canadian women were prominent authors of children's books (Gerson, 2010). However, many manuscripts remain unpublished and are only available in archives; for example, Amelia Frances Howard-

Gibbon's *An Illustrated Comic Alphabet* was self-published in 1859 but not mass-market produced until 1966 (Gerson, 2010).

Arguably, many Canadian small-sized presses contributed to the practice of self-publishing, since the majority were started by writers-turned-publishers who wanted to see their work in print.

Self-Publishing: Contemporary Perspectives

The field of self-publishing has developed rapidly with the introduction of platformization and eBooks, making it easier to publish books and stories and connect readers with authors. The flexibility of self-publishing is arguably also fueled by the contemporary work culture of the entrepreneur. Post-Fordism brought the “flexible specialization and the dispersal and decentralization of production ... [and] rise in the number of flexi-time, part-time, temporary, self-employed and home workers” (Kumar, 2005, p. 76). Self-publishing follows this trend because workers do not specialize in a particular field but are hybrid labourers with flexible hours.

All the same, self-publishing does have a stigma, but this stigma is arguably starting to subside. In the contemporary publishing industry, self-publishing is a prominent method of book production. The Writers' Union of Canada (2018) reported that self-publishing is the fourth major source of income for writers. Additionally, more literary organizations are beginning to include self-publishers in their ranks. For instance, the Writers' Union of Canada began accepting self-publishers in 2014, the Toronto Romance

Writers Association accepts indie authors, and the Crime Writers of Canada welcomes self-published work as contest entrants.

Conventions and conferences are also welcoming self-publishers as speakers. There are conferences specifically dedicated to self-publishing that attract over 2,000 attendees a year, such as 20Booksto50k. The idea behind the conference is to promote a retirement plan for authors. If an author sells 20 books a day at \$7.50 each, they will earn \$50,000 in passive income (20 books sold per day will make an author \$50,000/year).

As the self-publishing business model becomes more popular, certain communities and organizations aim specifically to support self-publishers. These groups help the self-publisher connect with other industry professionals who are also working independently. For instance, there are websites designed to help writers find freelance editors and graphic designers. One prominent company is Tessera Editorial, an organization composed entirely of BIPOC staff, opening doors for marginalized community members to find clients and gain experience in publishing.

The field of self-publishing is still evolving significantly, with the development of online platforms like Amazon that allow authors to publish their work and bypass traditional presses. Bowker, a company that provides bibliographical information to publishers, reported a 7.2% increase in self-published titles in 2023 compared to 2022, with 2.6 million ISBNs registered to self-published books (Albanese and Milliot, 2024). Therefore, self-publishing is an industry that is growing and gaining more recognition as a viable option for authors who want to sidestep the traditional publishing model and take

on the responsibilities of a publisher themselves, including production, distribution, and marketing of their work.

Women in Self-Publishing

Women have been a part of the self-publishing practice, arguably, since its inception. Female authors were paid to have their work printed in the nineteenth century, created their own zines in the late twentieth century, and actively adopted digital technology in the twenty-first century.

Nineteenth-century literary icon Jane Austen subsidized the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) because she was unable to secure a traditional contract for her work (Petkus, 2015). Even after her later manuscripts were published, she still had difficulty getting her work into readers' hands. Her novel *Susan* (published as *Northanger Abbey*, 1817) was pitched to Crosby and Co.; however, due to in-house politics, the manuscript was put on the shelf, and Austen had to buy it back with the help of her brother over a decade after she had signed the contract (Burns, 2017). Austen's experience with traditional publishing arguably highlights the issues contemporary authors still face. The author is often removed from internal conversations in the office and has much less agency than is supposed. Self-publishing is a way to regain that agency, since the self-published author does not rely on the traditional press's timeline.

Women as self-publishers can also be linked to Zine culture, the production of handmade non-mainstream magazines. Zines are not part of the larger economic sphere in the traditional sense of production, distribution, and consumption because zinesters

can trade their work and therefore do not worry about copyright or profit (Gabai, 2016). Piepmeier (2009) argues that women have greater authorial agency when producing physical zines because there are no specific layouts or traditions to follow, unlike in online text production. Hence, zines are on the margins of authorship, where women have authorial power but do not receive the recognition they deserve because the work is often circulated to a select few and is not preserved. On the other hand, digital self-publishing is a way to preserve the work and make it available for years to come. Similar to zines, adopting digital self-publishing practices enables women to create positive communities that value their work (Cameron, 2020).

With the spread of the internet and platformization, women writers have an even greater chance to speak for themselves about how they want to be represented. Olson (2014) states that some women who choose not to engage with traditional publishers or seek to change the system from the inside have turned to self-publishing to gain more autonomy.

Moreover, there are other benefits to the platformization of the publishing industry, such as an easier route to reach a niche readership. This allows women to avoid mainstream publishing topics and practices and to expand their subgenre portfolio. Scholars of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example, indicate that the internet helped make a niche genre like BDSM popular with readers (Kratzer, 2020; Reed, 2019). Women are now able to bypass gatekeepers in order to prevent their work from conforming to mainstream 'women's genres' (e.g., Harlequin romances, chick lit, domestic fiction). Flood (2015) states that women are predominantly successful in the self-publishing industry,

with more than 60% of top-ranking books on self-publishing sites such as Smashwords, CreateSpace, Blurb, and Wattpad written by female writers.

On the other hand, even though technology is not “inherently masculine,” it becomes that way through social construction (Wajcman, 1991, p. 38). The idea that the internet is a male-dominated sphere with gatekeepers akin to those in the physical world counters the argument that women gain agency online. Wajcman’s analysis still holds up in the contemporary period, as many platforms continue to act as gatekeepers. For instance, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was taken down from the fanfiction site where the author originally posted the work because it was deemed too sexually explicit; hence, women are still being silenced in the digital realm. On the other hand, E.L. James published the work independently on her website after refusing to work with platforms with rigid rules.

Another argument in relation to the negative effects of online self-publishing for women is the extra labour it can add to their daily lives. Olson (2014) states that women can take up writing as a side job “while the baby is napping” (p. 264). The internet is seen as a way for women to combine traditional womanly tasks with content creation. In a similar way, Stewart Millar (1998) provides an analysis of an ad for a computer that displays a woman watching over her child while working online, which emphasizes that even though the woman is in the digital realm, there are still physical responsibilities that are part of the “woman’s” sphere (p. 21). The computer is seen as a technology that enters the physical lives of women without replacing the other responsibilities they already have.

However, there are ample benefits to self-publishing that have been cited for women. Online self-publishing platforms inspire women to take the leap into becoming an

author with relatively low economic stakes. Self-publishing platforms encourage readers to try their hand at writing, which can be done as a hobby rather than a career at first (Brouillette, 2019). Another benefit is not having to hide behind a male pseudonym and connecting directly with readers to show their authentic personality (Olson, 2014). Authors are able to create their websites in order to have “control over the formatting, delivery, and dissemination of their work ... it also allows them to return to it again and again to edit the work, often based on a feedback loop between authors and readers, which can be facilitated by comments” (Johnson, 2017, p. 140). Online users generate discussion and buzz around an author’s work and provide positive feedback (Laquintano, 2012). The online publishing world is often recognized as a support system (Johnson, 2020).

Conclusion

Self-publishing is not a novel phenomenon and has provided an alternative way for authors to publish their work through their own subsidization. Self-publishing is different from vanity publishing, a practice initiated by companies in the 1940s. The main difference between self-publishing and vanity publishing is the business model. Vanity publishers make money off authors; their revenue does not come from readers. In contrast, self-published authors produce high-quality products to attract readers and build a good reputation. Self-publishers and readers often develop a relationship through direct contact or through indirect comments and reviews online. Additionally, vanity presses offer a preset package, such as an in-house editor and cover designer, while self-publishers can pick and choose who they want to work with based on the quality of

freelance workers' portfolios. Self-publishing enables authors to create a quality product equivalent to conventionally published material.

Self-publishing has been part of the Canadian publishing landscape for decades, even if historians have not reported it. Small to medium-sized independent presses founded by authors are analogous to self-publishing ventures that contemporary authors undertake. Canadian authors who sought to publish their material without submitting to foreign presses helped develop the Canadian literary landscape. They were precursors to today's self-publishers seeking an alternative to submitting to an imprint associated with a big conglomerate, such as Penguin Random House.

Moreover, female authors have played an active role in the development of various types of self-publishing. There is a diverse history of women creating zines in order to challenge the dominant narrative produced by mainstream media. Contemporary self-publishers are utilizing novel additions to the publishing infrastructure brought on by platformization, such as online book creation tools (e.g., digital layout tools and eBooks) and online distribution networks (e.g., Amazon, IngramSpark). Women authors can now connect directly with readers because of the online platforms readily available for producing and disseminating their work.

Chapter Four: Romance Genre and Self-Publishing

“I liken traditional publishing to the Titanic. They are very slow to change direction. Self-publishing can change direction in a heartbeat.” — Eve Silver.

Romance is stereotypically seen as a genre largely written and read by women. Radway (1991), in her study of Smithton readers, argues that women prefer romance novels written by other women because “very few men are ‘perceptive’ or ‘sensitive’ and because most cannot imagine the kind of ‘gentleness’ that is essential to the good romance” (p. 73). Supporting this, my review of the Toronto Romance Association directory found that 55 out of 58 members self-identify as women, with three authors not disclosing their gender (I was not able to find personal pronouns in their bios). This suggests women play a dominant role in the romance industry.

The assumption that women are good at writing romance can limit their growth across genres. Olson (2014) argues that publishers and editors often pigeonhole women into the romance genre. However, women authors want to experiment with subgenres. For example, E.L. James, author of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, explored the BDSM subgenre. She wrote an explicit story, examining her main characters' sexuality in an unconventional love story. Without online platforms, *Fifty Shades of Grey* would not have reached the same level of popularity.

Fifty Shades of Grey was originally published on a fan fiction website, which banned it for explicit content (Downey, 2018). The anecdote reveals that some platforms

associated with an organization “are more like traditional media than they care to admit,” even after presenting themselves as having no hierarchies (Gillespie, 2010, p. 359). Work by women is often devalued due to the power of the platform creators (Bishop and Duffy, 2022). Specifically, Spjeldnæs (2022) notes that reliance on a single platform to reach readers can be limiting for authors.

My study argues that not all self-publishing platforms are the same, and authors pick and choose how to successfully self-publish online using digital tools. For instance, E.L. James republished the story independently on her website. Arguably, without access to online tools, her book would not get the same level of distribution, and niche genres like BDSM would not be popular with readers (Kratzer, 2020; Reed, 2019). Moreover, Larson (2024) attributes the success of some female authors to “the digital disruption of cultural production, the rise of new communication forms, and evolving political economies of work and gender” (p. 178). Similarly, in my study, I explore that the “digital disruption” has become permanent and enabled women authors to produce content without the validation of a traditional press. As my dissertation argues, digital self-publishing often serves as a means of gaining autonomy in the publishing industry.

After the 2014 acquisition of Harlequin, no Canadian presses specialized in romance. As a result, Canadian romance authors must choose whether to seek an agent, approach foreign presses, or self-publish. Since foreign presses are usually large conglomerates with limited diversity (Hesmondhalgh, 1996), digital self-publishing is an appealing option for authors wanting to break away from conventional genre standards.

Self-publishers can pursue different forms of capital because they are less constrained by economic capital than large presses (Skaggs, 2022; Varriale, 2015). By

generating different forms of capital, self-published romance authors can experiment with plot, characters, settings, marketing, and distribution. The interactive nature of Web 2.0 lets readers and authors network. The reader is no longer simply a consumer. Building on Driscoll's (2014) conclusion that the reader is now a tastemaker in publishing, I argue that the romance author and reader relationship has become more intimate through online communication on platforms like social media.

All the romance authors experienced both sides of the publishing industry as hybrid authors, publishing their books both traditionally and self-publishing. Kaylea Cross started writing while working a full-time job but is now focusing solely on self-publishing. She is selling enough books to support herself financially. Cross started her author career with an online romance publisher but now self-publishes about 5 books a year in the military romantic suspense subgenre (in which the protagonist must be a former or current law enforcement or military personnel). Her drive to publish under this subgenre stems from her interest in history and Special Operations. Her self-published books have hit major lists; she is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author. Her work has won numerous awards, including the Daphne du Maurier, HOLT Medallion, and the National Readers' Choice Awards. She has published more than 60 books, which make up 12 series, including *Crimson Point Protectors* (2022-23) (eight books in the series) and *Hostage Rescue Team* (2014-18) (12 books in the series). The *Hostage Rescue Team* series predominantly uses the popular trope of getting the one who got away/lost lovers reunite. The plot features at least one character working for Special Ops, such as an FBI agent, who must resolve a hostage situation. The female protagonists in the series are

predominantly those being saved and protected. Each book ends with a happily-ever-after close, by having the hostage saved and reunited with her lover.

Similar to Cross, Jackie Lau also shared that her writing journey began while working full-time in a different industry. In 2018, Lau decided to pursue self-publishing because she was not making enough in sales with her traditionally published books. Lau specifically stated that once she began self-publishing, she was no longer constrained by the publishing industry to feature mainstream characters in her work. Mainstream characters are those who appeal to a wide audience and are inserted into plots intended for mass production (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Instead of focusing on characters that would appeal to a mass market, Lau was excited to focus on Chinese-Canadian characters. This move represents the contemporary drive to produce #ownvoices content, authors writing about characters who represent their own community. Lau produces 4 to 5 books per year. She publishes series such as *The Cider Bar Sisters* (2020-22) (6 books available) and *Holidays with the Wongs* (2019-20) (5 books available). *The Cider Bar Sisters* is a series about a group of friends who meet in a bar and discuss their love lives. Each book uses a different trope, such as a sunshine/grumpy pairing and a friends-to-lovers pairing. *Holiday with the Wongs* focuses on the lives of one family who gather together for the holiday season from Thanksgiving to Christmas. The series also uses common tropes, such as the fake girlfriend who finally enters a relationship or the secret boyfriend who commits by the end of the book.

Eve Silver started as a traditionally published author writing in the young adult (*The Game Series: Rush*, 2013; *Push*, 2014; and *Crash*, 2015) and romance genres. At the time of writing, she was the sole author of over 20 books. Her work has garnered stellar

reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal* and several awards, such as the *Library Journal's* Best Genre Fiction Award. Silver leads self-publishing workshops and offers a self-publishing guide, advocating the benefits of the self-publishing business model. Part of the reason she is pursuing self-publishing is the change in submission guidelines. Contemporary publishers are now requesting full manuscripts, and she revealed that her current work would not be considered mainstream because it would not appeal to a wide audience. Specifically, Silver writes gothic romance and contemporary paranormal romance novels (*Dark Desires*, 2005; *His Dark Kiss*, 2006; *Dark Prince*, 2007; *His Wicked Sins*, 2008; *Seduced by a Stranger*, 2009; and *Dark Embrace*, 2018). The main plot point of Silver's Dark Gothic Series is a romance that develops due to close proximity. The plot centers on a woman who takes a job with a man with a dark secret. The female protagonist tries to uncover her potential lover's past. The trope in these stories is similar to *Beauty and the Beast*, with the woman ultimately redeeming the man who was closed off and unfriendly before she entered his life.

Allison Temple also began her writing journey as a traditionally published author. After she regained the rights to her work because the traditional press was closing, Temple chose to self-publish. Temple writes queer romance and has written over 10 books centred on male/male and female/female relationships, such as *The Pick Up* (2018), *The Neighbourly Thing* (2022), and *Destination Bedding* (2023). Temple's *Seacroft Series* (*Top Shelf*, 2019; *Cold Pressed*, 2019; and *Hot Potato*, 2019) focuses on the residents of the town of Seacroft in North Carolina. She uses several familiar tropes in her work: *Top Shelf* and *Hot Potato* use the friends-to-lovers trope, while *Cold Pressed* uses the friends-with-benefits trope. She has stated that queer romance is not attracting

much attention from traditional publishers, and she is having trouble securing a new contract with a press. Since she enjoys writing queer romances and has an audience, she continues to self-publish.

Jane is the only author who is no longer actively self-publishing and wishes to remain anonymous. She has self-published several books. She revealed in our interview that she self-publishes only her niche projects, which would not do well in mainstream publishing. For example, her self-published series focuses on characters participating in a college club set in the 1980s. Since the plot is dedicated to a specific era, it alienates readers who might not be familiar with the 1980s or who are not interested in non-contemporary plotlines. Her other self-published book focuses on the famous/non-famous trope, exploring the love story of a famous musician and an academic. Jane began writing romance novels in her thirties while working another job. Once her writing career became steady enough, she left her day job and now supports herself through her writing. She has authored more than 20 books. One of Jane's self-published books was nominated for a prominent award, which gained her recognition in the traditional publishing industry. Currently, Jane wants to pursue traditional publishing and only self-publish books if the rights are reverted to her by the traditional press. Jane states that she enjoys writing and editing much more than the legwork involved in promoting a self-published book. Additionally, the genre in which she writes, rom-coms, performs well in terms of sales when marketed by a traditional press; Jane stated that she writes "middle of the road romcoms, middle of the road meaning heat level... I write the type of books that [traditional presses] know how to market." Her books are not niche books that many self-published authors often devote their time to.

According to the workers of traditional presses, it's challenging for small presses to produce a high volume of romance books on a monthly basis, which deters Canadian publishing houses from actively pursuing romance publishing. Nonetheless, Canadian romance authors can successfully participate in the publishing industry by self-publishing their work. All of the self-published authors in this study produce multiple books a year and find their audience by posting their physical books and eBooks on online platforms like Amazon.

Authors use different forms of capital to gain legitimacy in the publishing industry (Bourdieu, 1983). Authors can balance the pursuit of different forms of capital without focusing on one that can limit their authorial agency (Craig and DuBois, 2010). Based on the five interviews with self-published romance authors, all four forms of capital were mentioned as stepping stones toward achieving authorial agency and freedom of expression. However, after I coded the responses, social capital was identified as the most used code by four out of the five authors. This was consistent with both the mystery and poetry self-published authors who participated in my study.

Surprisingly, the coding revealed that economic capital was the second-most-desired capital for self-published romance authors. This was not the case for self-published mystery authors or self-published poetry authors. Based on the interview data, the number of books romance self-publishers produce is greater than that of mystery and poetry authors. As my dissertation reveals, romance self-publishing offers female authors the possibility of quickly producing multiple books a year, generating economic capital to a greater extent than in other genres in my study.

Social Capital

Romance reader groups and book clubs have arguably become more popular with the introduction of online platforms such as Goodreads, which allow users to share their reading experiences. When Radway (1991) conducted her study of Smithton women in the 1980s and 1990s, readers were a separate group from the authors. The readers she interviewed were often disappointed to meet the authors in person and discussed romance novels only with a friend or family member; they rarely joined romance reading groups or interacted with other readers at bookshops. In contrast, with the development of online social media platforms and messaging tools, readers can connect directly with each other and with authors through channels such as email or social media.

Arguably, it is easier for authors to build social capital in the publishing industry than in the pre-Web 2.0 world. Self-publishers actively use online tools to gain readers' attention and favour. This attention can be translated into other forms of capital, whether economic (from book sales), symbolic (through praise), or cultural (through readers' award nominations). Hence, the role of the reader has evolved from a silent observer to an active participant and even a critic as platformization has transformed the publishing industry.

Readers

As my study argues, through the support of their readers, a self-publisher has authorial agency in the publishing industry. The self-publishers in my study utilized social

capital to obtain economic capital. Women, specifically, have been linked to the successful production of social capital that can then be transferred over to other forms of capital (Hong et al., 2023; McAdam et al., 2019; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Past and future networks can help generate economic or symbolic capital (Duffy, 2017).

Romance authors consider their relationship with readers to be special and intimate. For instance, Silver gushed about her experience connecting with her following: “I love getting emails from my readers, I love hearing from them, and I always try to respond to them.” Silver specifically noted how she cultivates social capital by actively responding to her readers. Unlike authors who are viewed as romantic figures leading a certain bohemian lifestyle (Birkerts, 1994), contemporary authors position themselves as approachable.

My interview data revealed that the author is welcoming the reader into their personal world by interacting with them online (e.g., Instagram direct messages; emails), altering the parasocial relationship that once existed. Cross revealed that the “romance genre has to be one of the most inclusive, kind, supportive, warm, and fuzzy communities out there,” which supports Larson’s (2024) study on the communal environment around the romance genre.

Moreover, self-publishers can use social capital to gain economic capital. For instance, Lau revealed that her readers have positively reacted to the inclusion of food references in her books, and she has kept this aspect alive in her work to positively influence book sales:

One thing I discovered, I put a lot of food in my books, and readers seem to like that. So, I kept doing it. There was also a side character in one of my early books,

a bunch of people did ask for his story, so I always sort of thought about doing it, but that was part of the reason I did it.

Lau has a dedicated series devoted to a sisterhood that meets in a bar: *Cider Bar Sisters* (*Her Big City Neighbor*, 2020; *His Grumpy Childhood Friend*, 2020; *Her Pretend Christmas Date*, 2020; *The Professor Next Door*, 2021; *A Very Beery New Year*, 2021; *Her Favorite Rebound*, 2022; and *Her Unexpected Roommate*, 2022). The plots feature scenes of the Cider Bar Sisters dining at various food establishments around Toronto. Lau has authorial agency when it comes to listening to or not listening to her readers; she chooses to listen, which generates economic capital through the sale of her books.

On the other hand, Temple stopped writing a book because, creatively, she was struggling, and the readers were not asking for the continuation of the series: “There was a third book planned, and I was writing it just as the pandemic hit. And I really struggled myself creatively to finish anything ... ultimately, I put that third book aside, in part because no one was asking for it.” Temple saved money by not finishing the book that readers were not interested in buying. This anecdote reveals that the self-publisher has more authorial agency in the publishing industry than the traditionally published author. In traditional publishing, an author who signs a contract for a specific number of books must complete them or face financial penalties for failing to fulfill the contract. In contrast, the self-publisher can opt out of completing a series or stop writing about a particular character, based on reader feedback. Knowing that a book will not sell well can save self-publishers from spending unnecessary time and money on the project.

Community

The work of the traditional author is, debatably, validated by the workers in traditional publishing and an official contract (e.g., literary agents, acquisitions editors). Self-publishers, on the other hand, are validated as authors by a community composed of other self-published and traditionally published authors. Arguably, when an author decides to self-publish, the larger their social network, the easier it is to produce quality content. Self-publishing grants authors the ability to seek out others who have self-published or hire a team to help with editing and the design process. For example, Lau uses her social network to connect with cover artists. Cross employs a team of editors to work on her book, including a developmental editor, line editor, and copyeditor. The freedom to choose one's network is part of the authorial agency that self-publishing offers.

Larson (2024), who analyzed the work of self-published female romance authors, voiced the same conclusion as my research in relation to the friendly nature of the romance community by describing it as a “unique site of feminized labor” (p. 14). The community of romance authors in Larson's study, like the one in my study, participates in mentoring and the sharing of advice. Self-publishing, as the process of self-organization, provides romance authors with the opportunity to connect to networks of support (Larson, 2024). Similarly, Sinche (2024) noted that self-publishing provides a space for authors to discuss their work and actively insert their voices into the communities they inhabit. Hence, self-publishing across different digital platforms enables romance authors to build social capital by networking with fellow authors, industry professionals, and, most importantly, their readers directly.

Cultural Capital

The subthemes of awards and creative freedom emerged during the conversation with several authors, who stated that awards could be controversial. Traditional presses and award committees act as tastemakers; authors need to produce content deemed acceptable by the various workers in the industry. In contrast, self-publishing grants authors authorial agency to produce culturally diverse content that adds to their cultural capital; readers who discover niche content act as new tastemakers by helping authors promote their books through online posts (Driscoll, 2014).

Awards

Awards can be a form of cultural capital because they validate the recipient as an expert who produces prizeworthy content. Publishing companies, often large presses like Harlequin, have the economic capital to invest in editing a work, creating a marketing plan, and paying the fees to enter the book for nomination for the award. Traditional workers in the publishing industry who possess economic capital convert it into cultural capital (Varriale, 2015).

Traditional publishing workers often cite awards as something they have access to, while self-publishing does not. One acquisitions editor stated, “A lot of self-published books aren’t eligible for the same awards as commercially published books, traditionally published books, professionally published books” (Trad. Worker 5). Another acquisitions

editor also said that self-published books are not eligible for awards: “When everyone asks me for advice, I definitely recommend they do not self-publish” (Trad. Worker 1).

However, there is a great deal of politics involved in the awards associated with the publishing industry. The infamous RITA Awards, presented by the Romance Writers of America (RWA) since 1990, were dominated by white authors writing about white women who fall in love with white men (Beckett, 2019). The awards underrepresented BIPOC authors and LGBTQ+ community members (Dimon, 2020). In 2018, this controversy came to light when a prominent author, Alyssa Cole, did not make it as a finalist even though her work, *An Extraordinary Union* (2017), won numerous awards, such as the RT Reviewers’ Choice Award’s Best Book of 2017 and the American Library Association’s RUSA Best Romance for 2018. The next year, Kennedy Ryan was the first Black woman to receive a RITA in 2019. However, diversity concerns still plagued the award, and it was replaced in 2020 by the Vivian Award, in honour of Black RWA founder Vivian Stephens.

Even though an award adds to an author's cultural capital, the self-publishers in my study said they did not use awards to gain authorial agency. Being nominated for an award arguably implies that an author must conform to certain publishing industry rules, such as adhering to a specific style or genre. The two acquisitions editors who mentioned awards did not comment on the controversy surrounding awards or the lack of cultural diversity among finalists and jury members. In contrast, the self-publishers were more focused on creating culturally diverse products and maintaining their authorial agency instead of producing mainstream content that appeals to a wide audience.

Creative Freedom

Even though self-published authors do not value awards to the same extent as traditional presses, they gain cultural capital in other ways. Self-publishers generate cultural capital by producing numerous books, developing their writing abilities, and gaining exposure to the publishing process. Skills are often seen as devalued in the online world, where producing a high volume of content matters more than content quality (Eichhorn, 2022). In contrast, the self-publishers in my study actively develop their writing skills by attending workshops and writing across multiple subgenres.

The issue of being pigeonholed into one genre of literature is a concern for female authors (Olson, 2014). Traditional presses often sign contracts with authors for series, which limits their creative freedom. In contrast, self-publishers can experiment with their characters and produce content they are passionate about.

Arguably, an author can develop their skills by experimenting with different genres rather than following a specific trope-driven story favoured by mainstream presses (Hong et al., 2023). What is marketable is not always what authors want to focus on; this idea was echoed by the authors in my study. Three of the five authors (Lau, Silver, Temple) specifically stated that they self-published work they did not consider mainstream. Nonetheless, they found an audience (social capital) and were able to write what they wanted thanks to self-publishing. For instance, Lau wanted to incorporate and focus on Chinese-Canadian characters, which is something she thought would not do well in mainstream publishing. Other authors in my study focus on niche subgenres that are not considered mass-market fiction in the traditional publishing industry. Cross focuses on

military suspense, Temple on queer romance, and Silver on gothic and paranormal romances. Self-publishers can find a global readership that validates their work, in part, due to the platformization of the publishing industry.

Economic Capital

Mainstream traditional publishers are driven by economic capital when signing authors who produce commercially viable work that appeals to mainstream audiences (Brouillette, 2014). In the contemporary publishing industry, this is evident in traditional presses focusing on certain tropes and subgenres until they no longer turn a profit. For instance, the self-publishers in my study stated that there is a drive in traditional publishing to label romances as rom-coms because this subgenre has become popular with a general readership. Nonetheless, romance self-publishers can generate economic capital, often more successfully than their traditionally published counterparts. Larson (2024) found in her study that, with the widespread adoption of the eBook format, romance self-publishers earned more money than traditionally published authors. I argue that it is not only eBooks but also the ability to use platforms that act as distribution networks (e.g., Amazon) that helped self-publishers gain economic capital. During the interviews, self-publishing was often equated with entrepreneurial work, suggesting that this form of publishing can grant greater economic capital than participating in the traditional publishing industry.

Career

Bourdieu (1983) posits the theory that small-scale producers (e.g., independent artists, small presses) are unable to generate high levels of economic capital. Skaggs (2022) similarly contends that a small-scale producer, such as an artisan, risks becoming commercially unsuccessful if they do not follow industry conventions. However, it is not impossible to gain economic capital while self-publishing, arguably, due to the emergence of platforms that allow for the gig economy to flourish. Larson's (2024) study on romance writing flagged that the romance author's median income has grown compared to other book genres; specifically, "the authors who saw the greatest income increase were those who published in both formats, traditional and indie" (p. 162). Hence, my study argues that self-publishing can be a way to generate economic capital by connecting directly with readers.

There are several success stories of women becoming the breadwinners in their families by taking on self-publishing as their full-time job. For instance, a former literary agent revealed:

There's a huge number of women who ... would either have left the workforce, like I said, and found a new career in self-publishing, made more money than they ever made in corporate from self-publishing. And then many of them became so successful that they actually hired their partners, who are often male, out of their jobs to be their admin. That is a very, very common story. So, then you have like the woman being the creative engine and really connecting with her readers through marketing, and then the male partner driving kind of like the secretary work, and I love that dynamic. (Trad. Worker 6)

Members of the cultural industries often take a leap of faith and risk their creative work in hopes of acquiring some form of capital (Duffy, 2017). For instance, Bishop (2022) interviewed artists and artisans who quit their jobs and began making art full-time after their Instagram following grew. Self-publishers similarly transition to writing full-time when their reader base grows, as evidenced by tracking their sales data.

Branding/Marketing

In the contemporary cultural industry, one must be consistently visible online to succeed (Bishop, 2022). In addition to producing quality work (which generates cultural and symbolic capital), the authors must also complete a steady number of books per year or even per quarter to generate enough economic capital to call self-publishing their full-time job. The self-published authors in my study publish from 2 to 6 books per year. This finding can be linked to another form of capital - content capital. Coined by Eichhorn (2022), the theory posits that online content creators must produce a consistent stream of work to remain relevant.

Conversely, working across different digital platforms consistently can put pressure on content creators, such as self-publishers, especially women (Bishop and Duffy, 2021). Consistently posting content and being visible can have a negative emotional toll on an individual (Duffy et al., 2024). However, the female romance self-publishers did not flag content capital as a negative phenomenon and were happy to accumulate it.

The self-publishers linked the added economic benefits to their fast-paced publishing schedule. Romance self-publishers can decide how many books a year they have to publish to make a profit, and the royalty statements come quicker than in traditional publishing. The self-publishers are taking advantage of the new system for quickly producing content online, which enhances their authorial agency and the possibility of putting out culturally significant content. Their readers are a click away. Even though the role of the reader has evolved, they are still consumers who can be targeted through online platforms such as social media and Amazon, which self-publishers leverage to their advantage.

Symbolic Capital

Unlike traditional publishing, symbolic capital is harder for self-publishers to gain because they are not always recognized by traditional media outlets that review books, such as the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*. On the other hand, readers who leave reviews and comments on platforms such as Goodreads can validate an author's work. The reader often acts as a tastemaker (Driscoll, 2014), attracting more readers with positive reviews or deterring others from consuming the content through negative comments. Based on the findings in Chapter Seven, which analyze comments left under books on websites such as Goodreads and Amazon, Driscoll's argument about the active role of readers remains evident in the contemporary publishing industry, as evidenced by the abundance of reviews left under self-published books.

Recognition

Online users actively seek out content they enjoy and join digital communities such as Goodreads to voice their opinions. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) describe the contemporary reader as someone who reads across multiple devices, employs a variety of methods to discover and choose books, and shares their reading experiences with others, both online and offline. Moreover, Driscoll (2019) mentions how readers can become tastemakers in the field of literature by starting blogs.

The possibility to leave reviews and comments on online platforms like Goodreads can also add to the symbolic capital of an author who is highly rated on the platform: “Goodreads reviews, and reader reviews across other sites, are crucial to the new commerce of publishing” (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022, p. 52). The books of romance authors are on Goodreads and rated between 3.5-5 stars, which signals to other readers that the work is consumable. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are also online spaces where readers share their opinions about books (Boffone and Jerasa, 2021; Jaakkola, 2019). The possibility of being recognized for one’s work is no longer solely tied to legacy news outlets; it is possible for authors to be featured in an online blog post that readers actively maintain. Hence, to generate symbolic capital, romance self-publishers often need to build social capital and a network first, which can be done through online platforms. The romance authors in my study had the most comments under their books on Amazon and Goodreads, compared to the other genres, suggesting they are successful in building a wider reader base.

Quality

Conglomerates in the publishing industry (e.g., Penguin Random House) often cut corners to produce products and make sales (Hong et al., 2023). Silver mentioned in the interview that her traditionally published book had a spelling mistake on the cover, and she was asked to change the spelling of the word throughout the work. As an author tied to a traditional publishing press, Silver did not have the agency to remake the cover of her book. In contrast, the process of self-publishing allows you to quickly change course and fix any mistakes.

The self-publishers in my study commented on the quality that they strive to uphold because they want to win their readers' favour. Silver mentioned that she makes her books appear as if they are traditionally published: "I want to put out the same quality of book as I put out as a traditionally published author; it's just that I am choosing who is working on it." The romance self-publisher's drive to produce quality content signals that they are consciously creating products that a professional author would strive to make. The romance authors want to appease their reader base, which often expresses dissatisfaction on platforms like Amazon through comments. Self-publishers actively recognize readers as reviewers of their work, who can help generate sales.

Discussion

Bourdieu (1983) posits that "in the field of cultural production economic profits increase as one moves from the 'autonomous' pole to the 'heteronomous' pole," while

other forms of capital, such as cultural capital, decrease (p. 326). Hesmondhalgh (2006) has argued that the issue with Bourdieu's theory is its failure to incorporate developments in the publishing industry, such as the rise of big conglomerates (e.g., HarperCollins, Penguin Random House), and that different types of capital are not mutually exclusive. I expand on Hesmondhalgh's theory and argue that the practice of platformization further reshapes the industry's infrastructure, making it easier to access different forms of capital through online distribution networks.

Throughout my work, I argue that the process of contemporary digital self-publishing grants the Canadian female self-publisher agency and freedom of expression by facilitating a direct connection to readers, made possible by platformization. Specifically, for romance self-publishers, the possibility of directly connecting with readers and publishing multiple books a year in digital format enables them to generate higher levels of economic capital than other genres in my study. Larson (2024) specifically notes that romance authors have historically had a close relationship with their readers. My study builds on this and adds that this relationship has only strengthened with the introduction of online platforms.

Nonetheless, the consistent need to be visible online and interact with online platforms has been flagged by some scholars as problematic and limiting the authorial agency of content creators (Bishop, 2023; Duffy et al., 2024; Joseph and Bishop, 2024). Platformization has enabled conglomerates to maintain power in the cultural industries and spread their influence (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Vallas and Schor's argument is evident in Amazon's reshaping of the publishing industry. The prices of physical books

and eBooks have not risen significantly over the years, which has been flagged as problematic by workers in traditional presses.

Similarly, the romance authors in Larson's (2024) study also flagged Amazon as an untrustworthy ally—one that gives thousands of authors the chance to publish and earn money, but one that can just as easily vaporize their incomes “with a single algorithm tweak.” (p. 198). Authors have to consistently learn to navigate the changing landscape of platforms, including their algorithms and layouts. The romance self-publishers in my study, however, did not report any negative experiences with online platforms such as Amazon. Specifically, connecting directly with readers was emphasized as an added bonus of romance self-publishing in the digital age.

For romance self-publishers who write niche content, it is easier to generate social capital now than it was two decades ago, thanks to online communication. Duffy (2017) links high levels of social capital to an individual's higher standing in the professional world and to self-branding. Correspondingly, one acquisitions editor mentioned: “It feels like a lot of readers in the romance genre, for example, will buy anything by their favourite writers. And so, marketing those books, it behooves the author to get involved because the author is the brand that will bring readers back to subsequent books of theirs” (Trad. Worker 2). Networks of readers actively follow an author's work by checking for new releases and connecting online via email and comments. For instance, a study conducted by Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) revealed that ‘favourite author’ was the number one category for readers when choosing a book to read. Hence, gaining social capital by producing multiple books a year can help cultivate a strong network, aid romance self-

publishers in maintaining their authorial agency in the publishing industry, and earn economic capital in the process.

Based on my findings, the self-publisher can subscribe to some conventions and avoid others while still being financially successful in the publishing industry by producing niche content. For instance, even though Temple creates plots based on tropes (conventional rules of the publishing industry), her male-male romances are not being signed by a traditional press. Self-publishing grants her the authorial agency to keep producing work she is passionate about without being constrained by the conventions of traditional industry actors. The diverse content she is creating is important to keep producing to ensure literature represents society and promotes inclusivity. Based on the interview, Temple revealed that she has readers who value her work and follow her as a professional author. She can generate economic capital by making her books available on online platforms, even if traditional presses are not offering her a contract.

Similarly, Lau was hesitant to include diverse characters in her romance novels; however, as she began self-publishing, she always included at least one Chinese-Canadian main protagonist. Through networking, she found her readers. Similarly, Boffone and Jerasa (2021) investigate the community around *Cemetery Boys* (2020), a YA novel about a trans Latinx boy written by a trans-Latinx author, which gained a large following through readers' support via #ownvoices in literature. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) posit that through the #ownvoices and #weneeddiversebooks online campaigns, it is possible to find a supportive online community. Hence, social capital can serve as a stepping stone in an author's career toward gaining economic capital. Without the

platforms that host the communities, self-publishing niche content would have been more difficult.

Brouillette (2009) notes that “the old ideal of the artist’s aversion to market success no longer holds. The artist has been subsumed into the creative class, bohemian values persist only as lifestyle choices, and creativity and market circulation are synonymous and unfold in tandem” (p. 145). My study corroborates this argument by exploring how the romance self-publishers were most successful at generating economic capital, given that self-publishing was a full-time career for them. The authors in my study publish five or six books a year, which is comparable to a small independent press. For example, Wolsak and Wynn, a small Canadian press, included about eight books in their Spring 2024 catalogue and six in the Fall 2024 catalogue. Hence, for a self-publisher to produce six books yearly constitutes a colossal amount of labour. The economic side of self-publishing can be lucrative because this publishing model allows many books to be published each year, and the royalty system is higher than in traditional publishing. Larson (2024) similarly flagged the possibility of generating a high level of economic capital when one self-publishes romance books. In contrast, even if a reader asks a traditionally published author for the next book in the series, the author virtually cannot do anything about releasing the book early.

Silver contributed a great analogy of how traditional publishing can limit authors who want to change directions: “I liken traditional publishing to the Titanic; they are very slow to change direction. Self-publishing can change direction in a heartbeat.” Similarly, Larson (2024) notes that romance authors “came early to technology” (p. 138), utilizing desktop computers to fit their fast-paced writing schedules. Traditional presses, large and

small, have set schedules that can be booked years in advance, as well as a set number of books that must sell to break even. Self-publishers can also have a schedule, but they can change course if a series is not selling well. It is much more difficult to change course when one is traditionally publishing.

Larson (2024) contends that eBooks transformed romance publishing; however, I argue that it is the development of different platforms that aided the fast-paced writing schedule of romance authors and further connected them to their readers. Arguably, without access to Web 2.0, eBooks could still be produced, but their distribution and advertising would be limited. Hence, romance self-publishing enables female authors to produce a high volume of books every year, generating economic capital to a greater extent than other genres in my study.

Conclusion

For the romance self-publishers in my study, authorial agency was a driving force behind their decision to self-publish. This model of self-publishing offered them the chance to produce diverse content that covers niche topics important to the community and which promote inclusivity. Both Lau, who writes about Chinese-Canadian characters, and Temple, who focuses on LGBTQ+ characters, have expressed their concerns about traditional publishers. However, through self-publishing, they can experiment with their content and gain cultural and social capital. Moreover, self-publishers can build economic capital. Similar to other studies, I posit that self-publishers gain different forms of capital that can be exchanged for one another (Skaggs, 2022; Varielle, 2015). Specifically, I flag

the importance of social capital and the connection authors have with readers that motivates them to keep producing culturally significant content.

Self-published romance authors are aware of the financial benefits of self-publishing. They have successfully adapted to the demanding self-publishing business model, producing up to six books a year, enabling them to achieve financial success and security. This comes in contrast to traditional publishing, which oftentimes provides authors with moderate financial success. Traditionally published authors often have to take on extra work because they do not earn enough to support themselves (Larson, 2024; Gouthro, 2014). Instead, the self-publisher can decide how many books they want to produce per year based on how much time and effort they want to put towards their writing.

Some scholars emphasize that the consistent need to produce content and to become accustomed to using online platforms is a negative aspect of platformization (Bishop, 2023; Duffy et al., 2024; Joseph and Bishop, 2024). The self-publishers in my study, however, did not flag the consistent need to produce content as a negative aspect of self-publishing. Arguably, self-published romance authors are able to sustain their place in the publishing industry by connecting to their readers directly through online platforms.

Chapter Five: Mystery Genre and Self-Publishing

“It’s not like a refrigerator; people buy one or two, and then they don’t buy anything for years. There are readers who read a book a day or a couple books a week.” — Nancy.

A mystery often begs for multiple installments because its characters can easily transition to new settings. Even after Arthur Conan Doyle killed off Sherlock Holmes in *The Final Problem* (1893), the protagonist's popularity and readers' negative reaction forced the author to bring Holmes back (Keishin Armstrong, 2016). Arguably, mystery publishing can be a lucrative venture if one can create successful characters that generate and retain a loyal readership.

It is easier to produce a series indefinitely online than in print, since costs can be kept lower. By applying the long-tail economic theory to self-publishing, I argue that there are more opportunities to deliver content online to readers who were previously absent. It is also possible to generate more revenue since the platformization of the publishing industry. The long-tail thesis, proposed by Chris Anderson (2004), argues that backlist titles can take on a new life in the digital realm. Readers who find a new release can read the author's previous and future books. A study by McKinnon (2015) similarly reveals that “in the digital environment the demand for long-forgotten media texts is rarely, if ever, zero” (p. 203). Using the long-tail theory, I propose that the platformization of the publishing industry benefits mystery self-publishers who continue to build their brands, thereby stimulating more book sales.

Many traditionally published authors are often unsure when their next book will be sold to a press. For instance, the traditional presses did not extend Ace's and Kellough's separate contracts, two authors in this study. Neither press explained why the series was winding down. Arguably, there could have been several reasons, since a traditional press is affected by many factors, such as government aid and overall economic capital generated from the sales of its products (books).

In the Canadian publishing industry, mystery presses are often dependent on grants. For instance, House of Anansi consistently receives grants from the Canada Book Fund. In 2025, the press received over \$200,000 in grants ("Grants and Contributions," n.d.). Many Political Economy analysts (Garnham, 2014; Golding and Murdock, 1996; McChesney, 2000; Downing, 2014; Mosco, 2009;) emphasize the important role the government plays in the function of the cultural industries. Vincent Mosco (2009), for instance, identifies the importance of creating programs to protect the survival of cultural work. Government funding and grants are debatably a positive way to continue developing a community's cultural artifacts. However, since the Canadian presses have become dependent on grants to function and compete with their American counterparts, the number of books they can print is limited. Canadian mystery authors often have to find other avenues for pitching outside the Canadian presses; two authors in my study, Ace and Kellough, decided to keep their series alive by self-publishing the next instalments.

Both authors knew readers were waiting for their work and took a leap of faith to self-organize, as did the romance authors in Larson's (2024) study. Self-publishing on digital platforms offered them greater authorial agency in the industry than traditional

publishing, as it connected them directly with their readers through platforms like Amazon. Self-publishers, therefore, use platforms to connect with and build support among their readers, who help them gain different forms of capital that traditional publishing often cannot. Without platforms like Amazon, even if Kellough and Ace decided to produce an eBook, the distribution process would have been cumbersome. However, with advancements in the digital self-publishing industry, the mystery self-publishers in my study can quickly produce their books, connect with current readers, and attract future readers.

Anecdotally, mystery and crime writing is often seen as dominated by male authors. An acquisitions editor from a medium-sized Canadian press explained: “From men, I get detective and crime. And I get geopolitical thrillers with big ideas taking over the world bank who is trying to control biological weapons or something like that ... [I] don't get women submitting mysteries ... interestingly” (Trad. Worker 1). The editor added, “men love crime, gore, and splatter ... it'll start with a body that's been horribly mutilated, and you have to find who did it” (Trad. Worker 1). This suggests a stereotypical division in subject matter between female and male novels. Another acquisitions editor similarly noted, “there is an awful lot of mystery out there by white men, and I'm not so interested in spending my time reading police procedurals, written from that social identity” (Trad. Worker 2). The conventional mystery genre is characterized by detectives, mostly male, solving grisly crimes.

In contrast to the acquisitions editors' observations, contemporary female mystery authors are contributing work on par with their male counterparts. When I analyzed the Crime Writers of Canada member directory, out of 330 members, 186 identify as women,

and 140 members identify as men at the time of this study (Winter 2024). Two authors did not have profiles, and two identified as non-binary (based on their personal pronouns). This means that 56% of the members identified themselves as women based on personal pronouns in their author bios. I did not detect a stark over-enrolment of male authors in the organization, as would stereotypically be assumed.

On the other hand, out of the 330 members, 23 authors used their first initials instead of their names. By browsing the profiles of these authors, 18 were revealed to be female (identified by she/her pronouns), and only five were male (identified by he/him pronouns). This reveals that female mystery authors use initials to present themselves to readers, potentially to appear gender-neutral.

Janet Kellough, a self-published author, stated in the interview for this study that her community of writers was so exasperated by seeing the same male mystery authors at Canadian conferences that they created their own: the Women Killing It Crime Writers' Festival. The conference focuses solely on female authors and provides a platform for them to network, share their content, and form a community. An additional positive aspect of the conference is that it accepts authors of all types, including both traditionally and self-published writers.

Women mystery authors in my study were more likely to publish across multiple genres than the other authors. The mystery self-publishers also often mixed genres and found their readers through online platforms. For instance, *Finding Emma* (2012) by Steena Holmes appears under multiple categories on Goodreads: Fiction, Mystery, Contemporary, Drama, Chick Lit, Adult Fiction, Book Club, Audio Book, Mystery Thriller, and other categories based on the users' reading list (on Goodreads, readers can classify

the book by putting it on their virtual shelf). The book can find the right readers through links to these categories. Another example is authors actively promoting their books under different subgenres to attract more readers themselves. Ace reached out to Amazon to add more subcategories she could link her book to, to attract the right readers. For instance, her book *The Case of the Unfortunate Fortune Teller* (WISE Enquiries Agency Mysteries Book 11) (2025) appears under the categories of “Cozy Craft and Hobby Mystery” as well as under “Private Investigator Mysteries.” Hence, readers can search for key terms such as “cozy” or “investigator” to find the book. The categories make it easier to find readers on digital platforms.

The five self-published authors in my study have different experiences with self-publishing and traditional publishing, which have shaped their perceptions of each book production method. Specifically, three out of the five women (Ace, Kellough, Nancy) started their journeys into authorship through self-publishing. Four of the women are now hybrid authors (Ace, Holmes, Kellough, and Warner), and one exclusively self-publishes (Nancy). As Larson (2024) contends, a traditionally published author who has also begun to self-publish has the potential to earn more economic capital than just being a traditionally published author. My study expands on Larson's observation and argues that the process of self-publishing offers the author more opportunities to gain different forms of capital, not just economic.

Cathy Ace wrote the most mystery novels among the women in my study, with more than 20 books available. She has two series: *Cait Morgan Mysteries* (2014-25) (13 books), which she describes as similar in style to Agatha Christie, and the *WISE Enquiries Agency Series* (2007-23) (8 books), which are cozy mysteries. The *Cait Morgan* books

feature a Welsh Canadian criminal psychologist who travels to a new location in each book with her husband, Bud Anderson, a retired cop. In each story, an unexpected murder occurs, which Cait is asked to solve by someone close to her. The *WISE Enquiries Agency Series* features four female sleuths who are Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and English. The series is described as cozy by Ace because it takes place in an old mansion and features characters who eat cake while solving mysteries that are not described in a gruesome manner. Ace is the only female mystery author to be shortlisted for two national awards in the same year (the Bony Blithe Award for Best Light Mystery Award *and the* Arthur Ellis Awards for Excellence in Canadian Crime Writing) (Flanagan, 2017). Ace ventured into self-publishing when she bought the rights to her work from her publisher and wanted to keep developing the series. She was a guest of honour, along with Steena Holmes, at the conference When Words Collide 2023.

Steena Holmes started out writing romance novels but later switched to domestic fiction with elements of suspense. She still writes romance under a pseudonym with a traditional publisher. Her most popular book is *Finding Emma* (2012), a suspense novel, which she developed into a five-book series due to popular demand. The story revolves around a mother searching for her lost daughter. She decided to self-publish the story because the traditional press rejected the book. In contrast to the cozy mysteries, Holmes writes in the mystery thriller subgenre. The book that I analyze in Chapter Seven focuses on an ex-con artist who ends up in the middle of a gruesome murder mystery. Being a hybrid author, Holmes can pitch her books to presses she thinks will do well through traditional distribution methods (such as her romance novel *Charmed by Chocolate* (2017), published by Tule Press) while opting to self-publish books that do well through

her marketing strategies. The latter are usually books that combine different generic conventions (such as her family drama/mystery *Finding Emma*). Her conference profile for When Words Collide (n.d.) reveals that she has sold over 2 million copies of her titles worldwide.

Janet Kellough began her writing career by self-publishing stories about southern Ontario history. She has received numerous accolades for her achievements, such as the 2020 Prince Edward County Heritage Awareness and Advocacy Award for her work as a novelist, storyteller, and playwright in showcasing local and area history. Kellough's mystery series, *Thaddeus Lewis*, is composed of seven books. The historical mystery fiction series set in Prince Edward County centres around Thaddeus Lewis, a preacher who becomes a sleuth trying to solve the mystery of his daughter's death. Kellough, who lives in the county that inspires her work, stated that she enjoys researching and preserving local history. *Wishful Seeing* (2016), the fifth book in the *Thaddeus Lewis Series*, was shortlisted in 2017 for an Arthur Ellis Award in the Best Novel Category. She self-published a couple of novels before being signed to a traditional publishing house. After five books, the traditional press did not offer her another contract; however, Kellough knew that there was an audience waiting for her work and, like Cathy Ace, decided to self-publish the next installment of the series.

Donna Warner wrote two mystery novels, under the *Blair and Piermont Crime Series*, at the time of our interview. The first book in the series, *Targeted* (2015), is set at a resort where a murder occurs. The trope of using a getaway as a plot point to introduce a murder and a list of potential suspects has been used by many mystery authors, most notably Agatha Christie. Warner self-published the book after the rights had been

returned to her. Based on the interview with Jane in Chapter Four, a publishing contract can expire, and authors can regain the rights to their work and self-publish.

The author, who has never published traditionally and wishes to remain anonymous, is referred to under the pseudonym Nancy throughout the study. Nancy writes lesbian/sapphic fiction across several genres, from science fiction to fantasy to romance. She has also written mystery works, specifically under the “cozy” subgenre, as well as supernatural novels. She started writing stories in her mid-thirties but didn’t publish them until her forties. She has over 20 books available, all self-published. Nancy’s mystery involves an amateur sleuth who is employed by a mysterious woman to solve a missing-persons case. The mystery falls under the “cozy” subgenre because there are no gruesome details and features feel-good characters, such as the protagonist’s grandmother as a matchmaker. Nancy was critical of the mainstream lesbian fiction available, stating that it does not cover real-world LGBTQ+ issues, but only focuses on overused cliches such as a same-sex couple wanting to have a baby, and the issues associated with coming out. However, she did contend that small independent presses were doing similar work to self-publishers, covering a variety of topics and not focusing solely on profit margins but on what would connect with readers.

Based on the data that I collected, the mystery authors generated all four different forms of capital. Social capital was mentioned most often by four of the five authors and was flagged as the most important asset when producing a series. Mystery authors create series that attract loyal readers. My dissertation reveals that specifically for mystery authors, digital self-publishing offers the possibility to switch and broaden genres, which is easier to do when producing digital content that requires less investment. The mystery

genre is evolving as different subcategories become popular, while others continue to find their niche readership through online networks.

Additionally, mystery self-publishers can cultivate economic capital by producing series indefinitely as long as readers are waiting for their work. Economic capital is tied to the social capital that the self-publishers cultivate. If there is a network of readers who will keep reading and promoting the author's work, the series can continue, with the self-publisher gaining economic capital. Since four of the five authors (Ace, Holmes, Kellough, Warner) have written mystery series, their connection with readers is arguably not surprising. The authors gauge whether readers crave more of the same content by analyzing comments, feedback, and sales data from platforms.

Social Capital

The mystery genre is associated with series (developed characters can be repurposed across different plots), which allows authors to gain social capital by building a network of readers. Making connections and building social capital are among the initial ways to gain recognition in the industry (Duffy, 2017). Ace and Kellough, whose contracts were not renewed by their traditional publishers, both kept producing books in their respective series because readers kept asking them about their next books. By building social capital over the years, they were able to translate it into additional economic capital. On the other hand, when self-published mystery authors are unable to gain any more social capital, they can gauge whether it is time to move on to the next project.

Readers

Based on the answers provided by the self-published authors, readers are the ones who either motivate the authors to keep writing or to seek out other forms of publishing. Arguably, readers often act as gatekeepers in the online world, leaving comments and providing feedback to authors across different platforms (Laquintano, 2016). For Nancy, it was her online community that prompted her to begin her self-publishing journey: “I’ve had some readers probably ask for self-publishing way back in 2010.” Moreover, for Ace and Kellough, the publisher and the readers were at odds with one another. The press did not want to publish any more books, but readers were waiting for the series to continue. Kellough listened to her readers to keep her series of books alive: “I knew there was still a market for this series, because I’m hearing from readers that they want more, and so I self-published the next two titles in that series.” Kellough’s experience exemplifies how authors form networks with their readers and gain social capital.

This type of two-way feedback between the author and the reader motivates self-publishers to keep producing books, as they have confidence that their work will sell. This also signals that readers are not silent; they are actively invested in what will be produced, when, and by whom. Additionally, books that might not have been considered long series can have sequels if the audience asks for more content. *Finding Emma* by Holmes can be read as a standalone book, but Holmes went on to write four more novels featuring the characters from the first.

Community

In addition to reader support, self-publishers build a support network of other industry professionals. While some authors use their community to gain emotional and inspirational support, others use it to network and find a variety of opportunities to succeed economically in their careers. Nancy revealed: “There is a ton of networking possibilities now that did not exist like 10 years ago, even, so it’s great. I would say there is a large industry now around self-publishing. Lots of services, conferences, books, courses, there is a lot going on.” Arguably, events that offer networking opportunities and help build social capital are easier to access online, such as attending a conference via Zoom or connecting with other authors via direct messages on social media. For instance, when *Words Collide*, Canada’s largest festival for multi-genre writers and readers that aims to build a strong literary community, holds a writing competition with an online entrance that enables authors to share their work with others. Hence, online platforms enable the promotion of this conference.

The idea that social capital is often valued because it can be transferred to other forms of capital was also raised in the interviews. For instance, Ace revealed that she accumulates economic capital through the sale of her books and then reinvests it into attending conferences and travelling to network to gain further social capital. Nancy similarly stated that she began self-publishing because of support from her online community via personal messages, and that she is able to earn money or break even every time. The example of how Ace and Nancy use different forms of capital shows that self-publishers can generate all four forms of capital, but social capital is valued most.

Cultural Capital

In traditional literary circles, the difference between an author and an amateur is a contract from a traditional press (Gouthro, 2014). However, signing a contract for a book series can, arguably, limit the author's creativity. The traditionally published author is obliged to carry out a project even if they are no longer inspired by it (Olson, 2014). In contrast, the mystery self-publisher can quickly change course and abandon a series if no readers are interested.

The work of the self-publisher can be considered a high-quality cultural product. As Driscoll (2019) notes, "claiming the status of a professional implies a belief that one can do something that others can't, that one has particular experience or accreditation" (p. 301). The mystery self-publishers in my study put effort into developing their writing skills through workshops and classes, according to the interview data. Moreover, mystery self-publishers stood out for expressing the greatest creative freedom in genre experimentation. The authors mix different genres, which grants them cultural capital as they build their writing portfolio. For instance, many mystery novels also featured a romance subplot, such as Nancy's, which appeals to a wider community of readers.

Awards

Writing a winning book can raise the author's profile in conventional literary circles: "Book and author prizes are important to the reading industry to confer cultural capital on titles and individual writers." (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023, p. 21). However, award

committees often have to operate within industry conventions, which limits the list of nominees. The self-publishers in my study did not view awards as raising their author profile or as a way to generate more readers.

Only one mystery author, Ace, brought up receiving awards. She stated:

I should mention winning awards is important ... I think it's important more for the writer's soul than necessarily for book sale numbers. To be shortlisted for the Crime Writers of Canada award with one of my *Cait Morgan Mysteries* this year was fantastic. It raised the profile of the book; I don't think it hurt book sales. Winning the Bony Blythe Award for Canadian Light Mystery didn't hurt sales. It raises the profile, and it does bring the attention of reviewers to your work.

Ace specifically stated that she could not prove she gained economic capital from winning the award, but it did not diminish her sales.

This stands in contrast to Bourdieu's (1983) idea that economic and cultural capital are often at odds. As my study argues, self-publishers connect with readers who evaluate their work as critics through the different rating systems on platforms. Self-publishers have specific knowledge of how many copies are sold because they can evaluate what impacts sales by tracking this number on their sales platforms, such as Amazon. Hence, for Ace, awards did not diminish her sales, which signals that mystery self-publishers can gain different forms of capital in the process of self-publishing.

Creative Freedom

The interview data for this study revealed that mystery self-publishers are willing to experiment with their writing style and genre, thereby developing their skills as authors. Holmes, Kellough, and Nancy came to the genre after writing other types of books and, in doing so, added to their repertoires. Holmes specifically stated, “This is what I love about being an indie author—the ability to write in different genres, under different names.” Holmes started with writing romance and transitioned to writing women’s fiction; she also writes thrillers and domestic fiction. She added mystery to her repertoire, which attracts a different type of readership than her other genres. Her previous readership might like the new repertoire, but they can also follow other series that are not mysteries. As a self-publisher, Holmes can experiment with her writing style and develop as a writer by exploring different genres.

Conversely, traditional publishing can tie down an author to a specific genre indefinitely (Olson, 2014). Three acquisitions editors I interviewed who work for medium-sized Canadian presses mentioned that if they like a series, they will try to gain as much money from it as possible, until it can no longer generate revenue. Specifically, one acquisitions editor said that presses tend to contract a specific number of books: “So, you tend to contract three books at a time. You need that first book to do really well, to support the second and third book, or to keep it going ... there’s great risk in series publishing ... mysteries are such a natural series genre” (Trad. Worker 4). Binding an author to one series means the author is focused on only one genre.

Similarly, Kellough contends that self-publishing can be an alternative to traditional publishing, which limits the author’s creative output:

Because I have that option, it means I'm willing to experiment a little bit more with what I'm doing. Part of the problem with working with traditional publishers is you can really get stuck in a rut; they want more of the same. Particularly if it's a series, they just want more of the same. They don't have to think about how it is going to be marketed.

Self-publishing offers authors the agency to work on multiple projects at once and to generate cultural and social capital in the process.

Economic Capital

Economic capital is a driving force for many professionals in the cultural industry: "Economic capital on the whole [is] more powerful" than other forms of capital, such as symbolic, cultural, and social (Benson and Neveu, 2005, p. 4). Analogously, Brouillette (2009) argues that creating products and commodities out of creative work is almost inevitable. However, none of the mystery authors identified economic capital as their primary motivation for self-publishing. This is similar to a finding in Duffy's (2017) study, which contends that achieving a large sum of money as an ultimate end goal is not viable for the majority of aspirational labourers, such as self-publishers.

Career

The authors in my study recognize that publishing in general is not a career that can generate millions of dollars. Being an author can come with economic hardships;

several traditional authors have to have another job on the side to support themselves. For instance, in Gouthro's (2014) study, the writers she interviewed stated that their immediate networks of friends and family advised them to have a backup career ready in case they did not become successful. The authors in Gouthro's study were traditionally published and could not financially support themselves without taking on other work. According to the Writers' Union of Canada (2018), authors are earning significantly below the median Canadian income; in 2017, authors earned an average of \$9,380. Larson (2024) similarly found that authors' earnings in the US are declining.

Both Kellough and Nancy stated that their goal is to break even when producing their books. They have a set amount of money that they are willing to invest in the book and would like to see the same amount of economic capital returned. Similarly, in an interview for the Alliance of Independent Authors (2013), Holmes revealed that her earnings are not the main factor of success: "I took my focus off selling my books and placed it on getting to know my readers—once I did that, I haven't wanted to look back!" Holmes actively generates multiple forms of capital – social through networking with her readers and economic, as she continues to produce work with commercial intent. As self-publishers, the mystery authors can experiment with how much to invest in the book based on their available capital, thereby exercising authorial agency. However, how much they can earn is closely tied to the social capital they can generate through their readers' support.

Branding/Marketing

The market might be oversaturated with books, but the authors in my study have learned to build a loyal reader base through their brands. They are actively converting social capital into economic capital. Nancy provided a great comparison of books to refrigerators:

One thing I like about authors is that there is no competition. People really help each other because if a reader buys another author's book, that does not mean they are not going to buy your book. It's not like a refrigerator; people buy one or two, and then they don't buy anything for years. There are readers who read a book a day or a couple books a week. So, I like the cooperative spirit among authors; I find that really positive.

Nancy's statement illustrates that a genre like mystery can be consumed relatively quickly by readers.

Like romance self-publishers, mystery authors can produce a couple of books a year in a series. However, the authors in my study did not flag that they produce multiple books a year. Ace and Holmes are the only authors who are actively printing multiple books. The mystery self-publishers are aware that self-publishing could offer them greater economic capital if they printed more books, but they choose not to focus solely on economic capital, as do the aspirational labourers in Duffy's (2017) study.

Symbolic Capital

A study by Belanger and Thomlison (2015) argues that symbolic capital is more difficult to gain as a self-publisher. Due to the stereotype that self-publishers are

amateurs, their work is perceived as low-quality; as a result, authors are sacrificing their symbolic capital in the publishing industry. However, as other studies have noted, different forms of capital are not mutually exclusive, and self-publishers can gain multiple forms of capital throughout their careers (Craig and DuBois, 2010; Skaggs, 2022; Varriale, 2015).

In my study, self-publishers gain symbolic capital even though they produce eBooks, which are associated with lower symbolic capital (Belanger and Thomlison, 2015). The publishing industry is not static and is influenced by different technological developments such as the introduction of eBooks and online platforms (Cope and Phillips, 2006; Kenneally, 2018; Potts, 2014; Young, 2014). Hence, the opportunity to gain symbolic capital is changing. The self-published mystery authors in my study did not perceive a stigma towards the eBook format and are actively using online platforms to create quality content.

Quality

A high-quality book generates more symbolic capital by attracting readers and cementing the author's professional status in the eyes of consumers (Carolan and Evain, 2013). Quality refers to a book's overall features, from the layout to the cover design. For instance, Ace stated, "All readers will download the odd free self-published books just to give it a go, and I'm still looking at these things thinking the cover is awful, the quality of this writing is dreadful, either the editor is crap, or they just haven't had an editor." It was important for the self-published author to present her work in a way that meets industry

standards, including an appealing cover design and proper editing, to attract more readers. Arguably, without access to online platforms that help with the formatting and layout of the eBooks, the quality of a self-published book could be diminished. Hence, through platforms, mystery self-publishers produce quality eBooks that attract readers, generating both symbolic capital (e.g., a good reputation) and social capital (e.g., a network).

Moreover, the mystery self-published authors in my study are experts in self-publishing; for instance, both Ace and Holmes were invited to serve as guest speakers at When Words Collide 2023. Self-publishers who gain status through producing quality work are invited to conferences, where they share their expertise with others and gain both symbolic and social capital through networking and increased visibility.

Discussion

Canadian mystery authors have several options for getting their work into print. They can either submit their work to an agent, who will then pitch it to a large international press, or the mystery authors can pitch it to a small/medium-sized Canadian press. Compared to the American market, there are fewer Canadian mystery presses, which can limit the options available to Canadian authors. In each of these scenarios, the author may be required to sign a contract for a specific number of books, as discussed in the previous section. On the other hand, an author can self-publish their work, which grants them greater authorial agency than traditional publishing, as I have argued in this chapter.

Brouillette (2009) posits that readers play a role in creating products and commodities out of creative work when they purchase books. Whether authors are producing a book because they are passionate about the craft of writing or because they consider it a career, they are inevitably part of the capital system (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Brouillette, 2014). All the authors in my study are publishing commercial work. However, as the interview data shows, economic capital is not the driving force behind self-publishers' continued content production. Readers are not merely consumers.

The ability to switch between different genres was flagged as an important benefit of self-publishing. Self-published mystery authors do not have to be pigeon-holed into the mystery genre or into one series if they want to experiment with their craft, gaining authorial agency in the process.

Traditionally printed authors submit their work to specific literary agents and acquisitions editors who only work with specific genres. Traditional presses view the genre mixing as a challenge, as discussed in Chapter 3 through the example of *The Rook* by Daniel O'Malley, which combined science fiction, fantasy, and thriller (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022). However, genres are a product of their time and reflect common topics and themes in society: "genres are contingent on and responsive to their social milieus." (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022, p. 6). Genres are not rigid and can develop into different sub-genres depending on how authors define them and how readers perceive the story. Through online platforms and distribution channels, the self-publishers in my study are mixing genres. Readers and authors are jointly defining the conventions of genres in the contemporary publishing industry (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022). According to my findings, authors have their readers in mind when categorizing their

books, such as Ace asking platforms like Amazon to create more categories to accurately reflect what the books are about and to reach more readers. Traditional presses do not have the same options for experimenting with genres as self-publishers (Varriale, 2015).

As a Canadian author submitting to a Canadian press, one has to understand that the Canadian publishing industry is highly dependent on external actors in the global publishing industry (American conglomerates as competitors and government agencies as grant providers). In Canada, small presses consistently struggle to stay afloat and rely on government funding (Lorimer, 2012). This holds true today as one acquisitions editor revealed that it is the competition from the US market that makes it difficult for Canadian presses to become competitive:

In terms of genre publishing, though, I think a lot of what ends up being challenging for writers in the Canadian market has to do with the size of the Canadian market by comparison to the United States. Their market is 10 times larger than ours. And so, there's more room for presses to emerge that have a specific genre. It's easier to sell only science fiction in the US market, whereas presses have emerged in Canada that seek to specialize in something like science fiction, and they have a tendency to ultimately fail because they don't have access to a large enough market. (Trad. Worker 5)

Even though series can be a lucrative investment, Canadian publishers still struggle to make ends meet.

A former literary agency worker echoed this need for a consistent stream of content to be successful: "I think of the speed of the self-publishing readership ... people consume it really, really quickly. So, you kind of have to keep producing and staying relevant and

engaging in a way that is sustainable with your readers” (Trad. Worker 6). The lack of resources makes it difficult for Canadian authors to be sure that their work will continue to be printed, as in the case of Kellough and Ace.

In addition to competing with foreign conglomerates, Canadian presses also compete with each other, leaving smaller presses outside the big centres like Toronto and Montreal in precarious positions. Boggs (2010) points out that “a policy may privilege already dominant players in a given industry, or it may undermine their source of competitiveness” (p. 25). Canadian grants intended to aid workers in the cultural industries might end up benefiting only the dominant players in publishing. This leaves authors who want to write about specific Canadian content at a disadvantage.

Particularly, in my study, Kellough produces a historical mystery series set in Prince Edward County. For her, the setting was an important aspect of the story. Kellough, who lives in the county that inspires her work, wants others to know about the local history. Without the possibility of self-publishing, the series would have stopped being produced, cutting out Canadian-specific content from the marketplace. Self-publishing gave Kellough the authorial agency to keep the setting in Prince Edward County, thereby enriching Canadian cultural content. Through platforms like Amazon, Kellough can connect with readers worldwide.

By applying Anderson’s (2004) long-tail economy theory to publishing, there are opportunities to deliver content online to readers who were never there before and gain more revenue in the process. However, this benefit of online publishing is not recognized by everyone. One acquisitions editor revealed: “It’s not usual [for] like a 20-year-old book to really find a huge audience now, necessarily, so for most authors, they just prefer to

have it available, and it's super easy to order any of our books from anywhere." (Trad. Worker 7). The idea proposed by the acquisitions editor is that a book does have a shelf life. A backlist title may be available online, but it is no longer actively advertised by traditional presses because it is assumed that anyone who wants to read it has already found it.

Arguably, without access to online platforms that help self-publishers distribute and format their content, culturally significant works like Kellough's books or diverse sapphic fiction like Nancy's could be lost to readers. Through the examples of Nancy and Kellough, it is evident that readers crave reading books that depart from mainstream conventions. As my study argues, the parasocial relationship evolves as the level of intimacy between authors and readers increases. The author is no longer an imaginary person in the reader's mind, and the readers are no longer simply a consumer to the author, who now engages with them online.

Conclusion

The mystery authors revealed that most of them self-publish not because they want to become rich or recognized by the publishing industry; they self-publish because they want their stories to find readers. Authors want their manuscripts to come to life through sharing their work with a community. Especially for mystery authors whose work tends toward a natural series, it is possible to build a network, since mysteries can feature different plots but the same characters. Hence, the possibility of generating social capital is high.

Genre publishing can be difficult to break into, especially in Canada, because a category like mystery often appears in series, which can be expensive. Through self-publishing, authors can continue a series indefinitely. If a series does not work, it is possible to abandon a book and move on to something new. In a traditional publishing house, there is a schedule that must be maintained, with many books taking a couple of years to produce. The self-publisher, in contrast, can pivot and decide not to dedicate any more time to a series if it is not attracting readers. Two of the self-publishers I interviewed went on to publish more books in their series after traditional publishers declined to offer them further contracts; they knew there were readers who wanted to continue following their stories.

The creative freedom that comes with the self-publishing process adds to the self-publisher's authorial agency. Authors can experiment with different genres. The mystery authors I interviewed wrote in other genres, and their readership followed and consumed the new books and series. For instance, Holmes publishes romance traditionally because she knows this genre can perform well by being marketed through a mainstream press, but she continues to self-publish her suspense fiction.

Conversely, traditional publishing can limit the genre to which an author is assigned because traditional presses do not publish all genres (Olson, 2014). Self-publishing, in contrast, offers the flexibility to write in any subgenre and even mix different genres. Self-publishers can gauge whether their reader base is receptive to their new content by tracking sales. With the help of platforms, sales data and online engagement can be easily saved and evaluated. Specifically, in my study, Kellough focused on promoting Canadian content as a self-publisher without needing to reach out to Canadian

presses. As a self-publisher, she can successfully produce diverse, culturally significant content by assessing whether readers are waiting for the next instalment of her series.

Chapter Six: Poetry Genre and Self-Publishing

“The concept of asking someone, asking some firm, to validate you as a person and your story or your work, and determine if it’s worthy of being printed in the book and made available to sell is ridiculous. Why would I? Why would I? Yeah, why would I leave that up to someone else? As a writer, I know my inherent value and worth.” —Katie Feltmate.

Poetry is often considered the most difficult genre to publish for profit. In a study on the changing format of online content and the rise of content creators, Kate Eichhorn (2022) contends that poetry is circulated in small circles, and even well-known authors sell only a couple of hundred copies of their work. An acquisitions editor I interviewed agreed, saying, “it is not at all a commercial enterprise” (Trad. Worker 1). However, there has been an increase in poetry sales and a rise in the number of new poetry readers over the last decade (Weaver, 2020; Wong, 2018). In part, this is due to the promotion of a popular poetry genre, Instapoetry, written by Instagram users (Instapoets). Instagram, as a platform, influenced the development of the poetry genre and enabled poets to share their work with a large global audience.

While work shared on social media sites that can be accessed for free can be viewed as a different form of self-publishing than producing full-length books, I argue that Instapoets are self-publishers because they produce content with the intention to find a general readership – someone who follows their work either through subscribing to the

social media account or through the purchase of their products. Specifically, for this study, I recruited Instapoets who self-published full-length poetry collections either digitally or in print for purchase. These Instapoets connect with readers online, who then purchase their physical books. Oftentimes, contemporary poets, in general, post their work on a public social media page with the intent to generate a readership and eventually sell their physical books with the collection of their poems. Authors are actively participating in the platformization of the publishing industry by connecting with their readers on different platforms, such as social media. Additionally, by equating Instapoets with poets in a general sense, I argue that publishing hierarchies are changing due to novel advancements in the industry, such as access to platforms. Based on the interview data from my study, Instapoets are recognized as legitimate poets by their community (e.g., their readers and other authors).

As a popular poetry form, Instapoetry does not subscribe to any one convention in the poetry genre. A number of the poems are lyrical, with words arranged in stanzas and metre, or free form. Popular poetry, like Instapoetry, is symbolic of the contemporary times and the society in which it is written. The layout of Instagram poetry is usually concise, fitting one social media post and appealing on a screen; hence, the character count is limited to what fits on one digital page. For instance, a poem by Rupi Kaur (2015) reads: “how it is so easy for you / to be kind to people, he asked / milk and honey dripped / from my lips as i answered / cause people have not been kind to me” (11). Arguably, it is natural for the literary industry to evolve consistently, especially with the development of different online platforms.

Sales of poetry by authors with a strong Instagram following accounted for over half of all poetry sales in Canada in 2019 (Mongeon, 2019). One of the most prominent Instapoets is Rupi Kaur, who was named Writer of the Decade by the *New Republic* in 2019 (Alam, 2019). Kaur gained popularity on Instagram, where she posted her poems and sketches. On her website, Kaur (n.d.) revealed that she self-published using CreateSpace (before it became Amazon KDP) in 2014 and sold copies at local events and stores with the help of her friends and family.

In 2015, Kaur posted a photo to Instagram displaying a small menstrual leak. The photo went viral because it was deemed controversial and taken down by the platform. After the viral event, Kaur gained sales and support from online social media communities, and her poetry collection attracted the attention of a traditional press, Andrews McMeel Publishing (Watts, 2018). *milk and honey* (2014) went on to become a *New York Times* bestseller, selling over three million copies to date and being translated into numerous languages (Weaver, 2020). Some of the themes covered by Kaur in *milk and honey* include female empowerment and love, as well as topics that are often deemed taboo, such as abuse and sexual harassment. The poems are all written in free verse, with dainty sketches often accompanying the words.

The reviewers of Kaur's work are divided into two camps; some admire her work, while others do not consider it poetry because it does not follow certain conventions of the genre, such as subscribing to one metrical pattern. There is pushback from members of the traditional poetry community who believe that poetry should not evolve outside of established norms. Watts (2018) mentions that "of all the literary forms, we might have predicted that poetry had the best chance of escaping social media's dumbing effect; its

project, after all, has typically been to rid language of cliché” (14). Critics have stated that Kaur’s work is sometimes overly simplistic, uses cliches, and is free of any genre forms and literary devices (Flood and Sian, 2018; Khaira-Hanks, 2017; Park and Abdelmeguid, 2017). In addition, Kaur attempts to speak for all South Asian women in her work without differentiating her own personal experience from others, such as growing up with the opportunity to obtain post-secondary education (Park and Abdelmeguid, 2017). At the same time, Kaur makes her poems mainstream enough not to alienate the Western audience, her market demographic (Giovanni, 2017).

Other poetry critics, however, recognize the genre's evolving form and that Instagram poetry has a place in the publishing industry (Alam, 2019; Weaver, 2020). Many note that Kaur’s writing connects with readers on a deep, emotional level (Giovanni, 2017; Wong, 2018). Many readers recognize that Instapoets are brave for sharing painful, autobiographical details with a wide audience, which is reflected in the poems (Flood and Sian, 2017).

Michaela Angemeer, a successful Instapoet with over 200,000 followers, is a strong advocate of self-publishing. One of the posts on Angemmer’s (2022) blog revealed that she would only self-publish in the future and avoid traditional publishing. The poet self-published her first two books and later secured a traditional contract for her third book; it is unclear from the blog whether she was approached by the publisher or submitted her work and was offered a contract.

Angemeer disclosed that several factors turned her against traditional publishing: the amount of work she had to put in herself, the lack of support and personal connection with her readers, and the lack of monetary compensation. Angemeer revealed that there

were multiple typos in her traditionally published book, which made the experience worse; it is assumed that traditional publishing should have a quality standard. During the traditional publishing process, Angemeer was unable to generate the economic capital she had previously accumulated through self-publishing. She was unable to generate the same level of social capital because she stated she lacked a personal connection with her readers. Additionally, she lost symbolic capital because the book did not meet her expectations. For Angemeer, self-publishing generated different forms of capital, enabling her to exercise authorial agency and freedom of expression.

For this study, I interviewed five female poets who self-publish and do not have traditionally published books, but whose poems are published in anthologies and literary magazines. The participants are active on Instagram and have built a community around their work through their social media platforms or websites. This group of authors was the only one that actively recommended other participants who would be interested in my study. This suggests that the Instapoet community is tightly knit. Two out of the five authors asked to remain anonymous for this study and will be referred to as Emily and Christina. Their desire to retain anonymity can be attributed to the fact that they are still awaiting traditional contracts, which, in their words, can attract more readers by providing a larger distribution network. Katie Feltmate, however, flagged that she will only continue to self-publish because it grants her authorial agency in the publishing industry.

Katie Feltmate, based in Halifax, began writing poetry during the pandemic and decided that a traditional publishing contract would be too long a wait. One of her books, *love in the age of quarantine* (2021), focused specifically on topics around the pandemic (e.g., isolation, abusive relationships), which required Feltmate to publish it in a relatively

short period of time. Traditional publishing, in contrast, cannot accommodate short time frames. Feltmate looked into self-publishing and found that it was the best option due to the quick, easy process on digital platforms. Feltmate is now an advocate for self-publishing, providing workshops and support to other authors considering this untraditional publishing route. Her main job is in public relations, and she writes poetry on the side.

Denise Gushue is a photographer with over 20 years of experience who decided to branch out into painting and literary work during the pandemic. She is a self-taught artist who is now dedicating her time to painting. She has exhibited at the Concave Gallery in Perth and with RAW: Natural Born Artists in Ottawa. Her written work is often accompanied by very detailed, intimate art pieces, which stand in contrast to the Instagram poetry, which features minimalist sketches by Rupi Kaur. Gushue has self-published one poetry book, *11*, and has a section on her website dedicated to poetry. Her poetry collection explores her sexuality, covering such intimate topics as her experience with her body.

Erin Murray has published two poetry books: *Show Me Your Scars* (2020) and *Courageous Conversations* (2022). She is a mental health advocate and began writing as a way to cope with mental illness and to share her experience with others. Her poetry books cover topics related to mental health and depression. Murray leveraged her network to find an illustrator, underscoring the collaborative nature of Instapoetry. Murray has generated a community of poets on Instagram where she also connects with her readers. She was completing her Master's degree at the time of our interview.

Emily wrote her book of poetry and self-published it during the pandemic. Writing has always been part of her life; she has been creating stories since childhood. She is still finding her voice as a writer, as the interview revealed that she will no longer pursue the long-form style of poetry. Her poetry collection explores finding oneself through nature and love, offering a way to escape the fast-paced contemporary lifestyle. Emily wants to keep writing and growing as a poet and plans future books exploring different types of poetry and formatting.

Christina self-published one poetry book. Her writing journey began at a young age through creating short stories, which evolved into poetry and prose. Her poetry collection focuses on themes of love, family, loss, and heartbreak. As an undergraduate student, she was a part of a poetry circle, a community of poets attending her post-secondary institution who would read their work to each other and connect on a regular basis. The group was also employing art as a form of therapy. Using poetry as therapy came up in several interviews, with other authors, such as Murray and Gushue, stating that writing poetry can serve as a therapeutic process and a way to connect with others.

Unlike the other genres investigated in this study, poetry authors are aware that self-publishing does not always provide them with the cultural capital they need to succeed. However, based on the interviews I conducted, the traditional community of small- and medium-sized presses recognizes self-publishing as a process a poet must go through before being welcomed into the fold of conventional publishing. For instance, one acquisitions editor noted: "There is a long-respected tradition of self-publishing poetry. So, there isn't so much stigma against self-publishing poetry. We all know Margaret Atwood's very first book of poems was self-published" (Trad. Worker 1). There

are different forms of cultural capital that an author can generate. Even though self-publishing provides them with cultural capital through skill development, it does not confer recognition in the traditional field.

In poetry, self-publishing (whether digitally on social media platforms like Instagram or in print) is still seen as a stepping stone to traditional publication. The authors can start building a network and a brand through interactions on digital platforms, which provide the social and symbolic capital needed to secure a traditional publishing contract and gain the desired cultural capital. It is problematic, however, that traditional publishing does not view popular poetry, such as Instapoetry, as culturally significant. In contrast, Instapoets help diversify traditionally published content with their work covering culturally significant themes in society, such as mental health struggles and coping with abuse.

By using different online platforms to self-publish (Instagram and Amazon), Instapoets gain different forms of capital as stepping stones to building their careers as professional authors. Self-publishing allows Instapoets to experiment with their craft and gain social capital in the process, giving them the agency to decide whether to collaborate with traditional presses like Kaur or remain self-published, as Angemeer does. Specifically, for Instapoets, social media offers them a chance to connect directly with their readers, who help them gain different forms of capital.

Social Capital

To build social capital, Instapoets consistently engage with readers. Online content producers generate content capital to build a brand and foster brand loyalty among online

users who buy their products, such as physical books (Eichhorn, 2022). For Instapoets, remaining authentic and sharing personal stories are ways to gain readers' trust. Authenticity is often linked to social capital through the development of a network of readers (Varriale, 2015). Specifically, female content producers are successful at generating social capital that can then be used to acquire other forms of capital (McAdam et al., 2019; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Connecting on a personal level to readers and other workers enables Instapoets to later acquire economic capital in the form of book sales and symbolic capital through being recognized as professional authors by readers who write reviews.

Readers

Self-publishing offers Instapoets authorial agency by enabling them to connect to readers. The poets in my study post content online either through social media or on their website, where they directly interact with their readers through comments and direct messages. They post stories that are often personal, and they worry that their work might be censored by the traditional publishers. For instance, Murray shared, “I didn’t really want someone to go like ‘we don’t like this poem about depression because it is too dark’ but that’s the story I am trying to tell, and I don’t want my narrative changed at all.” It is evident that authenticity was one of the driving forces behind choosing the self-publishing route and starting to post content online. The possibility that traditional publishers might change the content is important to flag, as women authors are often grouped into subgenres considered light (Olson, 2014).

The poets in my study use their words to cope with mental health struggles and share experiences and thoughts with others who are also dealing with similar challenges. They use authenticity to create a network that can help generate social capital. Feltmate (2023), who writes on her website that poetry can be used as a tool for healing, shared personal experiences in her book that helped her generate a community. For instance, her poetry collection, *love in the age of quarantine*, covers the topic of getting out of an abusive relationship and moving on. One of Feltmate's (2021) poems reads: "you punched a hole in the wall / and i put a frame around the cracked plaster / and called it art / called it an accident / called it forgiven" (p. 12). Feltmate relived the experience of her relationship in the hopes of healing herself, but also to share her story with others who might be struggling with abuse.

Murray also relives some of the difficult times in her life through her poetry. She is an active mental health advocate who forms networks with organizations such as Jack.org, a Canadian mental health agency. Murray expressed that her motivation for writing poetry was to connect with others:

For me, writing was never necessarily a career path. It was more of something that I wanted to do for myself. I wanted to share my journey with mental illness in hopes that *it would reach even just one person*, and that person would be touched by my writing, and it would be *accessible*. (emphasis added)

I have highlighted the word "accessible" because a common critique of Instapoetry is that it is too accessible and uses plain, simple language. For Murray (2020), the accessibility of language is seen as a benefit of her work since her main goal was to reach readers who could relate to the struggles with mental health.

In Murray's case, poetry is used as a coping mechanism for the author and for the reader. For instance, one of her poems reads:

show me your scars
and I'll show you mine
let us compare the lines
etched into our bodies
and the cuts that cross the deepest
in our minds and souls
as we delve into discussion of
the marks we've left on earth
and the impact each scar
has had on canyons and oceans
how each piece of marred skin
has had a butterfly affect
causing miracles and disasters
as demons and angels
play tic tac toe across our skin (p. 3)

The accessibility of the poem (e.g., simple verses, comprehensible language) is what, arguably, attracts readers and gains her social capital; the words form an instant connection with someone who has experienced self-harm. The opportunity to connect with an audience on a personal level is not always offered to poets in traditional publishing because there are limited interactions with readers (Angemeer, 2022). However, self-

publishing offers poets the authorial agency to share their stories, which often cover taboo topics such as abusive relationships, and directly connect with their readers online.

Community

Instagram and sharing work on other social media platforms can add to the social capital the authors are gaining, further granting them authorial agency. The authors in my study comment that Instagram is a space where they form communities with other poets who recognize them as producers of cultural products.

The authenticity the poetry authors embrace in their work stands in contrast to the myth of inauthenticity often associated with social media sites. Eichhorn (2022) contends that users post semi-fictional narratives online to present themselves in a certain way. Conversely, the authors in my study use online tools to share their stories and actively connect with a network, rather than simply focusing on building a brand. I was able to connect, for example, to Feltmate and Emily through Murray. Their Instagram group is very active, and the authors have built their own network. Experienced self-publishers like Feltmate act as mentors for others in the field of Instapoetry and self-publishing.

At the same time, reaching beyond the community can be challenging. Emily revealed: “I would say [my following] is mostly other poets. That is a challenge, trying to market your work to people outside of that tight-knit poetry community.” Emily mentioned that the community is tight-knit, which can be a benefit, but it can also be an obstacle to branching out. Finding other networks can be a challenge for self-published poets writing for a niche audience, even on digital platforms.

Even though there are in-person opportunities to connect with readers and other community members, such as at poetry festivals (e.g., The Word on the Street Toronto, Toronto International Festival of Authors), none of the poetry authors in my study reported attending events to network. The majority of their connections happened online.

Cultural Capital

There is a stigma that self-publishing is not a real form of publishing that can earn cultural capital. Self-publishers are labeled as amateur content creators (Keen, 2007). For instance, Emily noted: “There’s that stigma that it’s not like a real book.” Similarly, Feltmate also mentioned the stigma associated with self-publishing: “Generally, when I hear self-publishing, I think a little bit of the stigma that has to do with self-publishing that maybe the work isn’t that good. It’s not good enough to get published, like traditionally published. I think about that stigma.” Traditional publishing is associated with cultural capital, which is much harder to acquire when one self-publishes.

Ross (2019), the author of an article on self-publishing poetry, anecdotally revealed that by skimming Amazon bestsellers, the poetry genre had fewer self-published authors than fiction and non-fiction. Arguably, this could be because poets understand that self-publishing does not offer cultural capital. One acquisitions editor explained that poetry should go through the rigid process of being traditionally published because the industry has standards to uphold:

It should absolutely be hard to publish just as it should be hard to get a painting into a prestigious art museum, which is not to say that there should be an inequity of

access to people and that there are certain barriers that should not be in place, but the quality of writing shouldn't be one of those barriers. (Trad. Worker 5)

This comment implies that self-publishing does not confer cultural capital because there are no evaluation measures from literary agents and acquisitions editors, who still act as gatekeepers.

However, the community expects a poet to self-publish first to get their foot in the door. Emily stated: "I think it's a lot easier to self-publish poetry, because that's kind of the expectation in the community.... there are not very many traditionally published poets, but I think there's a lot more opportunities to traditionally publish a book like fiction." Although self-publishing does not generate cultural capital from the literary community, this form of publishing can provide authors with creative freedom and the chance to develop their skills by focusing on different forms of writing. Additionally, the roles of the gatekeeper and tastemaker are shifting from the traditional literary critic to readers who leave comments and post book reviews (Driscoll, 2014), a shift my study will further highlight in Chapter Seven.

Creative Freedom

Creative freedom involves the process of writing for art's sake without focusing on whether the work will be profitable (Bourdieu, 1983). Through this process, authors acquire cultural capital as they focus solely on developing their craft. Creative freedom is important to the authors in my study because they are writing personal stories that they do not want altered; the stories feature domestic abuse and mental health struggles that

are too personal to be edited. For instance, Christina mentioned that because she is writing about her own experience, she did not want anyone editing her work: “as it’s a personal project, I didn’t want a publishing house to edit my work or decide if they publish it.” Murray also revealed that her apprehension about the editing process deterred her from submitting to traditional publishers: “It was all about the content of the books. I didn’t really want someone to go: ‘We don’t like this poem about depression because it is too dark.’ But that’s the story I am trying to tell, and I don’t want my narrative changed at all.” Instapoetry is arguably an intimate form of writing because it allows authors to reveal their personal stories. For Murray, writing was an outlet for her emotions. Self-publishing provided her with the artistic freedom to go as light or as dark as she wanted when covering sensitive topics.

The authors in my study began producing literary content as a pastime; all of them turned to poetry to express their feelings and later realized that writing was something they wanted to pursue professionally. They developed their craft by posting online, receiving feedback, and then self-publishing books, which earned them readers' support. The positive online comments would not have reached the poets if they had published only print books distributed through physical bookstores.

Awards

Awards are supposed to signal the author's expertise and cement their work as culturally valuable; however, this is problematic because not everyone’s work qualifies. The self-publishers in my study are aware that self-published poetry does not qualify for

mainstream awards, as Feltmate discussed during our interview. Traditional publishing is still hierarchical and not fully inclusive. Many awards require a nomination from a traditional press, which limits who can apply, share their work with a larger audience, and gain cultural capital.

Instapoetry is arguably a culturally significant product that marks its time. It highlights contemporary societal issues that can be historically and culturally significant. For example, Feltmate wrote about her struggle with isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her work is specific to that time period and can help piece together the long-term impacts of the quarantine. Digital self-publishing offered Feltmate a quick way to publish the work online without the extensive publishing process that is characteristic of a traditional press. Time-sensitive content is ideal for digital self-publishing, which grants authors the authorial agency to quickly produce content and connect to readers online.

Economic Capital

Instagram poetry is unique in how it can generate economic capital. On the one hand, the posts are free to access, but the books containing collections of poems are sold at a specific price. The book is seen as a commercial product, and the posts can be seen as an investment that attracts future readers.

Content capital can be accumulated through consistent posting on media platforms to gain visibility, thereby generating economic capital (Eichhorn, 2022). Eichhorn contends that a book of poetry for Kaur is a form of merchandise she sells on her website, along with clothes and pens. Hence, posting online is a way to build a brand.

I was not expecting economic capital to be a driving force for the poets in my study, since poetry is often difficult to sell. For instance, Gushue stated: “Anyone that is creative or artistic, it’s not always about the money. If you’re doing it just for the money, you can lose your connection to your creativity because it’s a forced thing.” But a number of authors did discuss the prospects of eventually making money from the sale of their poetry books. The Instapoets actively invest different forms of capital, such as social capital, to build their online brand. Specifically, Instapoets can see how many followers they have (who are often readers). The number of followers allows Instapoets to gauge how much social capital they have and how much of it translates into economic capital. The poets see the interactions happening on social media when they post about their book through comments, reposts, and likes.

Branding/Marketing

The poets in my study understand that followers can be viewed as potential readers. Arguably, the more content one posts, the more chances they have to attract readers and to have their work go viral: “In today’s field of cultural production, cultural producers need to not only produce literature or art but also *ensure that someone is producing content about them and their work* and doing so on a constant basis” (Eichhorn, 2022, p. 99; emphasis added). To build their brand, self-publishers consistently have to post about their daily activities and personal stories, which attracts readers who can then discover the author’s books for sale on their profile.

A large following can also equal a traditional contract. Emily mentioned: “They [traditional presses] want you to have a lot of followers because they want you to market your book yourself. I don’t know if it sort of seems to be shifting because traditionally, or before social media, that was the publisher’s job to market your book.” Both Murray and Feltmate echoed the idea that traditional publishers view the follower count as potential readers for the book. Hence, an account that has 50,000 or more can equal a sale of 50,000 copies. Gaining social capital by building a name for oneself on social media can turn into economic capital either through self-publishing or a traditional publishing deal. Online readers are not only followers and friends but also consumers for the Instapoets.

Career

Through my research, I have found that Instapoets earn money by selling their physical books and have successful careers as authors. Bourdieu (1983) may have flagged poetry as the genre that produces “virtually zero profit” (p. 328) “by virtue of its restricted audience (often only a few hundred readers)” (p.332); but to judge by Kaur’s numbers, there are no longer just a few hundred readers for one work of poetry.

On the other hand, Watts (2018) posits that the high volume of sales diminishes the cultural capital of the work: “the cult of personality that social media fosters works precisely this way: once you care about the person, you’ll consume anything they produce” (p. 16). However, one form of capital need not be given up at the expense of another. A critique of Bourdieu’s capital theory is that it tends to polarize the different forms of capital (Dennis, 2019). For poetry, cultural capital does not have to be sacrificed

in order for the work to also gain economic capital or symbolic capital. As Eichhorn (2022) mentions, content capital is a way to gain social capital by attracting more readers through posting free content. Instapoets are successful at gaining visibility online, which then grants them the social and symbolic capital to sell books—rather than distribute them for free—and acquire economic capital. For instance, Angemeer has amassed over 250,000 followers at the time of this study, a portion of whom she has successfully turned into consumers. She generated a brand for herself by producing more than one poetry book.

Economic capital is one of the benefits of self-publishing for poets who already have readers waiting for their work. Feltmate revealed that a fellow poet with whom she is friends earned more money self-publishing than traditionally publishing. Similarly, Angemeer (2022) earned more from self-publishing than from traditional publishing. The poet disclosed in her blog that when she self-published on Amazon, she would receive 60% royalties, which would equal \$7 in profit per book after printing costs. In contrast, she would receive about 15% royalties from her traditionally published book, amounting to about \$2 per book. Additionally, Angemeer noted that if a book goes viral on platforms like TikTok, Amazon can print it whenever it is ordered. However, traditional presses have a specific print run estimated for each book before it is printed. A book can be unavailable for purchase through a traditional publisher if it runs out of copies. Platforms have positively altered the way self-published authors connect with their readers, as well as how they produce their products and make them available for purchase.

Symbolic Capital

It can be argued that Rupi Kaur has significant symbolic capital. She is recognized by the popular media community as a successful figure, appearing on Vogue's and the BBC's Women of the Year lists in 2017 and being named Writer of the Decade by the *New Republic* in 2019. She was also the host of the Scotiabank Giller Prize in 2022. Kaur, nonetheless, does not hold any poetry-specific awards at the time of this study, given out by the literary community, except for the 2017 Goodreads Choice Awards Best Poetry. Instapoetry is considered successful in a different way than poetry that strictly follows the genre's traditional conventions. Authors can obtain symbolic capital by being acknowledged and commended by readers who help legitimize an Instapoet's work. Social capital can translate into symbolic capital in the digital realm because readers are active tastemakers in the publishing industry by leaving comments and posting reviews, which helps build an author's reputation (Driscoll, 2014).

Recognition

Recognition for one's work can take many forms and can enhance an individual's symbolic capital and professional status. For instance, if an author regularly receives positive reviews from readers, they are gaining recognition, even if this recognition is not coming from workers at traditional presses. Feltmate stated that as a self-publisher, "you do have to kind of create your own recognition, your own kind of milestones you're working towards."

Feltmate also mentioned that a marker of success is when "strangers on the internet certify it," which is an interesting take on success in poetry. These "strangers"

were not specified as literary critics or any type of reviewer, but just a regular reader. If readers see the work as legitimate, that is enough recognition for the self-published author. Christina similarly mentioned that she feels successful when readers reach out. Murray mentioned that getting her “first book review ... was super rewarding.” She did not specify whether the review came from a blog or a traditional news outlet, but the acknowledgement of her book by someone else made her feel like the work mattered. By generating social capital, self-publishers also gain symbolic capital, which motivates them to keep producing work they are passionate about.

Quality

The poetry book is an art piece in itself and has to uphold certain standards. Debatably, it is not a book that one gets from an airport stall and then leaves behind on a plane.

In her blog, Angemeer (2022) specifically flagged that the quality of the traditionally published book was lacking due to several typos, which deterred her from going the traditional publishing route again. The finished product must be of the utmost quality because poets are building their brand and want to appease their readers. Especially for poetry, which can be accompanied by visuals, it is important to deliver quality work that meets professional standards. Emily revealed that for her next book, she would “get art done by an artist.” Murray employed an acquaintance to complete the artwork for her book. Likewise, Christina hired someone to design a professional-looking cover. All the

authors recognized that they should produce a high-quality product to attract readers and gain symbolic capital.

In contrast to the romance and mystery genres, it is difficult to publish a poetry book as an eBook, as it cannot be displayed and can only be accessed on a specific device. For instance, Emily decided not to publish her work as an eBook: “I also don’t think that within the poetry genre specifically, many people read it as eBooks, though I could be wrong. It just wasn’t something that I thought about for this project.” This makes posting Instagram poetry more accessible because the format is designed for screens. Readers are reached through a digital platform, even if the final product (the collection of poetry) is in a physical format. Self-published poets now have a much easier way to reach niche readers than before the advent of social media and digital distribution platforms. Self-publishers like Angemeer recognize that there are more options for connecting with readers than before the rise of platformization and are opting out of traditional publishing.

Discussion

Based on the interviews, Instapoets found it difficult to accumulate cultural, economic, and symbolic capital. However, social capital was more easily gained through interactions on social media platforms. Social capital, in turn, can be converted into other forms of capital, as in the case of Angemeer, who gains economic capital through the sale of her work. Gaining social capital through connections with readers online enables Instapoets to produce culturally significant content they know is relatable and authentic.

It is a myth that the online community is egalitarian (Duffy, 2015). The platforms are often associated with toxic working conditions for content creators (Duffy et al., 2023), especially when being vulnerable. Content creators are first driven to post online to pursue their “artistic passion” (Duffy, 2015, p. 55), but they encounter the reality that online platforms have hierarchies shaped by algorithms and internal policies. For instance, Rupi Kaur, who is known for her authentic post about her menstrual leak, had to face Instagram removing her post multiple times before the community voiced their dissatisfaction. Hence, online readers appreciate authentic content, and in order to utilize the platform to one’s advantage, an online content creator has to build a following of advocates and supporters (social capital).

The Instapoets in my study mentioned that staying authentic was a factor that cemented their relationships with readers and fellow poets. Murray specifically flagged that she wanted to remain authentic to her voice and go as light or as dark as she wanted without being censored by a traditional press. This chapter argues that because Instapoets maintain authenticity in their content, they can gain social capital by having their readers connect with them on emotional and personal levels on online platforms.

The theme of authenticity is often linked to social media influencers and their work with brands (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Reinikainen, et al., 2020; Schroff, 2024). The community criticizes content creators who pursue only economic gain (Duffy, 2015). The stigma of becoming a sell-out attaches to content creators who choose to collaborate with brands and receive compensation for their content (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). Arriagada and Bishop (2021) similarly posit that “cultural workers have historically been impelled to negotiate the tension between authenticity and commercial as a binary”

(p. 570). Hence, online content creators must display authenticity and sincerity in their content to avoid this type of backlash (Duffy, 2015).

What defines authenticity is a contested topic for online users, who often assume that anything posted online can be tied to a brand or self-branding endeavours (Khamis, 2017; Lee and Eastin, 2021). When blogging first became popular, it was believed that this practice offered content creators creative autonomy, the chance to be authentic, and more opportunities to collaborate. However, posting content online subjects the user to hierarchies in the digital environment, and in order to get ahead, one must be market-driven and focused on self-promotion (Duffy, 2015). Hence, online users are often skeptical of the authenticity of content creators (Duffy et al., 2023; Lee and Eastin, 2021).

Authenticity is important for online content creators to gain and retain their follower count. Some social media content creators go so far as to emulate amateurism, using shaky camera angles to convey authenticity (Bishop, 2018). There are a couple of criteria for being perceived as authentic. For instance, Lee and Eastin (2021) contend that authenticity is a “multidimensional construct” (p. 822) “consisting of: having a warm personality, engaging in genuine endorsement activities, revealing personal life matters, being talented in their area of expertise, and being distinct from others” (p. 833). This definition of authenticity is linked to social media creators who interact with brands and post content about different items, from make-up to clothes, which does not fully relate to my research. Because the Instapoets are only endorsing their own products (their poetry books), Lee and Eastin's (2021) definition of online authenticity does not fully apply to my study. However, the part of the definition I would like to flag concerns revealing personal

matters, which can be linked to how Instapoets share their struggles with readers through their literary work.

Emotional performance, as depicted by showing not only positive moments but also failures, is one way to gain authenticity points (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021, p. 572). Similarly, Duffy et al. (2024) found that “the commercial logic of authenticity helped to cast *personal vulnerability* – that is, putting one’s personal insecurities, injustices and even trauma on public display – as a strategy for growing community and improving career prospects” (p. 355). Authenticity is linked to being emotional and vulnerable in front of one’s readers.

Social media creators often avoid voicing any negative experiences about their followers (Duffy et al., 2023). This was corroborated in my study: the Instapoets did not share any negative experiences with their followers and instead provided only positive experiences and stories, viewing their followers as readers and friends. The Instapoets in my study reported receiving frequent personal messages from their readers. Because the parasocial relationship between the audience and the content creator is changing, readers expect to connect with Instapoets “on an emotional level and therefore demand genuineness.” (Lee and Eastin, 2021, p. 825).

Specifically, Arriagada and Bishop (2021) note that online users view the online content creators as friends. Similarly, Lee and Eastin flag that online users connect with content producers who share a “similar lifestyle, concerns and tastes” (p. 826). Arguably, because there is a wide variety of niche content, and because it is possible to follow a content producer with a similar lifestyle and shared concerns, Instapoets can easily find their niche audience on digital platforms like Instagram. Based on the conversations I had

with the Instapoets, sincerity is associated with authenticity. Vulnerability in covering taboo topics, such as mental health struggles, makes Instapoets authentic to their readers.

To create accessible poetry, Instapoets had to change how their work is displayed on the page. By exercising authorial agency in the publishing industry, Instapoets can cover topics important to them in accessible language. Instapoets expressed in the interviews that their hesitation about being traditionally published stems from the fear that their work will not be accepted as is. For instance, Feltmate stated that she does not want anyone questioning her self-worth as an author: “The concept of asking someone, asking some firm, to validate you as a person and your story or your work, and determine if it’s worthy of being printed in the book and made available to sell is ridiculous.” One of Feltmate’s poems about an abusive relationship covers a taboo topic that is accessible to the audience through her simple word choices. She can share her work on platforms like Instagram and connect with readers who have experienced similar situations or who would like to learn more about the topic. She is also able to connect to readers through Amazon and self-publish her collection of poems through that platform. Even though there are hierarchies on platforms that often create unjust working conditions (Duffy et al., 2024), the Instapoets in my study have not expressed dissatisfaction with working on Amazon or Instagram but have stated that they were pleased to connect with their readers directly outside of a traditional press.

Conclusion

Kaur's *milk and honey* was one of the most banned books in US classrooms in the first half of the 2022-23 school year because it includes mentions of sexual assault and violence (Pereira, 2023). This contrasts with Kaur's goal of creating poetry that others can relate to in times of need. Her book can be used as a resource when an individual does not want to talk openly about certain topics, such as sexual abuse or trauma. On the other hand, her Instagram poetry is available online to anyone with a digital device, something that would not have been possible before the rise of platformization in the publishing industry.

The self-publishers in my study spoke as both writers and readers, identifying authenticity as a quality that attracts an audience and enables them to accumulate social capital. Self-published poets have the authorial agency to create work that feels authentic to their voice and vision. Online platforms that enable self-publishing and the sharing of one's work are important: they foster communities and promote authentic voices in digital spaces. Murray, for instance, is an active advocate of mental health: "I write poetry mainly focused on topics of mental health and mental illness. The organizations that I tend to support through my writing are Canadian organizations, like the Canadian Mental Health Association." Self-publishing gives Murray the freedom to go as dark or as light as she wants with her own story, while also allowing her to advocate for a cause she believes is important.

However, there is still the idea, expressed by Instapoets, that traditional publishing can provide distribution networks they do not have access to. This is a controversial idea

because not all traditional publishers have the same distribution and reach as the big conglomerates (Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Hachette Book Group, and Simon and Schuster). Unless an author is published by one of the big five, their work might not get the distribution they expect.

Once a self-published poetry author develops a brand and gains a following, it is much easier to publish for profit. If the author's end goal is to gain monetary compensation for their work (economic capital), self-publishing can be a viable option. Additionally, if an author wants to obtain recognition from readers—and not necessarily from the literary community—the possibility of directly interacting with one's audience through social media platforms can also confer symbolic capital on poets through self-publishing. If, however, the poet's end goal is to obtain cultural capital, self-publishing remains stigmatized by workers in traditional publishing, who do not welcome popular poetry, such as Instapoetry, into their fold. The hierarchy in traditional publishing limits the entry of new authors, such as Instapoets, who produce culturally significant work reflective of contemporary society; however, with the rise of platforms, this content can find readers.

Chapter Seven: Readers and Algorithms

“You cannot write romance and kill the characters off or have them break up at the end of the book. That is not romance, and the readers will turn on you. They will come after you with pitchforks and torches and run you out of town.”
— Cross.

Throughout this study, I have argued that readers have taken on additional roles beyond being consumers. Readers can also act as tastemakers and gatekeepers in the contemporary publishing industry. They can form a personal relationship with the authors due to the changing nature of their parasocial relationship. Since we are living in the age of “recommendation culture” (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023, p. 8), readers can easily share their opinions with others through multiple channels, such as social media and book review sites. Due to the abundance of books produced each year, “the readers are finding it increasingly difficult to find their way” (Carolan and Evain, 2013, p. 286). Readers seek guidance in the form of online reviews or videos left by other online users.

Self-published authors recognize the evolving relationship they have with their readers. For instance, self-publishers obtain the help of their readers when editing or creating new work: “Authors may also use reader comments to adapt the contents of their book to their readership. The collaborative development method can be very fruitful as readers feel invested in the book development process and will be interested in purchasing the resulting artefact” (Carolan and Evain, 2013, p. 292). Laquintano (2010)

also notes the changing shape of the parasocial relationship between authors and readers by describing it as “sustained authorship,” which views “authorship as sustained interaction among authors and reader/writer” (p. 471). Laquintano brings up the example of poker players who produce how-to manuals and often recruit beta readers from the community. The poker players are appealing to a specific readership. Like poker players in Laquintano’s study, the self-published authors interact with their community. They receive feedback and advice to refine their projects and build a readership.

For this study, I analyzed comments on Amazon and Goodreads to gauge readers’ thoughts about self-published books. Both sites have open-access comment sections intended for public reading. I anonymized the information linked to each book because I did not contact the users directly. All the books were written by the authors I interviewed for this study.

The ratings for each analyzed book ranged from 5 to 3.7 stars. Most readers simply included a star rating. For instance, one romance book has 961 ratings (average 3.77 stars), but only 192 written reviews. I did not take the star rating into account because there is no universal way readers assign stars. For instance, some 3.5-star reviews for Lau’s novel commended the plot, while other 3.5-star reviews flagged poor character development. Therefore, I performed a content analysis of each comment to evaluate the overall attitude towards the work.

I created three categories to describe readers’ comments: positive, negative, and mixed. The positive/negative binary did not account for comments that combined a critique with a positive response to the work under review. The mixed category also encompassed reviews that did not provide any evaluation of the work but included a

general comment or a synopsis. Some examples of reviews categorized in the mixed category include:

“This was okay, but I found it pretty unbelievable.”

“Grocery store paperback.”

“It did not connect with me ... However, I would recommend this book because it is a good read.”

For instance, the “paperback” comment can be evaluated as both positive and negative. One reader might want a low angst read, while another might see this as a negative comment and assess that the book has no depth. There were reviews I did not take into account: those that just said “Read” with a star rating, and comments that were not in English. Out of 849 reviews, I omitted 35 based on my criteria and analyzed 812 reviews that were: (i) positive (614), (ii) negative (63), and (iii) mixed (135), as seen in Table 5.

I chose the books based on whether they were a part of a series (I observed the comments under the latest book in the series) or whether the book had the most comments. I will not disclose the names of the books written by the self-publishers because the reviewer data is anonymized.

Table 5: Number of Positive, Negative, Mixed Reviews

Category	Romance	Mystery	Poetry	Total
Positive	383	174	57	614
Negative	42	18	3	63
Mixed	86	44	5	135
Total	511	236	65	812

Summaries were a common element in the reviews. The book synopses ranged from a few lines to multiple detailed paragraphs. The brief synopsis proves that the reviewer read the book and can act as a guide for future readers. A reader can browse the reviews to see which tropes the book uses or whether there are any trigger warnings. Specifically, two books in the romance category included trigger warnings in the comments section (loss of a family member and an abusive relationship). Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) found a comparable culture among readers, with readers feeling responsible for sharing any triggers: “members [alert] each other to content that might be potentially distressing because a book dealt with racism or homophobia and/or depicted some form of violence” (p. 70). Hence, readers are not only reviewing the work in a general way but are also taking on extra responsibilities of content monitoring that were not present before the interactive features of Web 2.0.

Tropes were also a popular feature in reviews, as readers mentioned them to help categorize the work. Tropes act as subcategories, ranging from friends-to-lovers romances to grumpy/sunshine romances. A trope can be a reason why a reader picks up a book. Thus, reviews identify tropes to help attract new readers.

Table 6: Reviews that Expressed They Wanted to Read More by the Author

Genre	Number of Reviews
Romance	100
Mystery	75
Poetry	10
Total	185

Each genre was evaluated individually; however, common themes emerged during data analysis. There was an overwhelming number of positive reviews, which could entice other readers to consume the work as well. My results were similar to those of a study by Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo (2019) on comments left under novels on Goodreads: “Reviews are more likely to express positive rather than negative emotions” (p. 257). For my study, 614 reviews were classified as positive (75% of the reviews). Arguably, this indicates a community of readers dedicated to the authors' work, as evidenced by positive reviews. Out of the 812 reviews, 185 comments (Table 6) mentioned that they were going to read more books by the author or had previously read the author's books. This signals that almost a quarter (23%) of readers are returning, and that the authors have successfully created a community.

There were very few negative reviews, which I had located in the comment sections. Only 63 of 812 were classified as negative based on the coding, representing less than 10% of all reviews. For instance, *did not finish* (DNF) was an indicator of a negative review. Holmes similarly stated that she considers a book a failure if the readers do not finish it. Readers can consume an unlimited number of books in the Kindle Unlimited (KU) program; a '*did not finish*' review could deter other readers from even starting the book.

A limitation of analyzing online reviews is the credibility of the content. With the proliferation of AI-generated content and spam comments, not every online review is trustworthy. Some platforms use algorithms to filter spam reviews, and users can download AI tools to spot fake reviews on their own (Xiang et al., 2023). Other sites, such as Goodreads, allow users to flag spam reviews. Since the data sample was manageable

to analyze manually, I manually scanned the reviews for credibility based on several factors. Reviews are trustworthy when they provide (i) appropriate detail, (ii) relevant information, and (iii) two-sided opinions. Reviews are not credible when (i) they employ promotional language, (ii) discredit one product in favour of another, (iii) include glowing comments by a one-time poster, and (iv) when similar reviews appear within a short timeframe (Filiari, 2016). Banerjee and Chua (2019) note that reviews with relevant titles and detailed descriptions are also deemed trustworthy by consumers.

I manually analyzed all the reviews and did not detect any non-credible reviews in the data sample. However, neither manual analysis nor online AI detection tools are ever 100% accurate. A future study should collect data through interviews or focus groups with readers to minimize the possibility of collecting nonhuman-generated reviews. The analysis of online reviews can be helpful when assessing general opinions about a work, but in-person data collection methods can reveal in-depth information that passive content analysis cannot. For instance, in a focus group or interview, readers can flag specific elements of a work that they did not find relevant to share on a public platform.

Romance Readers

Romance readers contributed the most reviews and formed the most active readership community. I did not analyze both the Amazon and Goodreads reviews because several entries were copied and pasted across both platforms. There were enough reviews on Goodreads to obtain an accurate description of the romance readers' attitudes. Overall, I analyzed 511 reviews: 383 were positive, 42 were negative, and 86

were mixed. Commonalities across all the reviews included mentions of tropes, loyalty to the author, and loyalty to the series.

It must also be noted that the romance genre had the most readers who received advance reader copies (ARCs) based on reviews. This signals that an author must actively reach out to readers and provide them with advance copies to generate online discussion. Similarly, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) contend that one influencer cannot make a book a bestseller, but if many influencers recommend the same book, that work can gain popularity. Arguably, if a book has many positive comments, it will be appealing to readers because there is power in numbers. By having access to books online, readers who have found a favourite author can easily access their backlist and read their other works.

Positive Reviews

Many positive reviews expressed their dedication to the author; reviewers stated that they had followed the author's work for years. For example, some positive comments include:

“I rush out to buy her books as soon as they are released.”

“Lau is my go-to for low angst.”

Of 511 comments, 100 reviewers specifically stated they would like to read more of the author's work, representing almost 20% of all reviews. This signals that self-published authors generate a loyal readership. Additionally, a review left by a loyal reader can

prompt other online users to seek out older books by the same author. These loyal readers, arguably, act as promoters of an author's backlist.

Another predominant feature was an expression of dedication to the series. Every book was set in the same universe, with a call-back to characters from previous books. Readers were invested in the series and the characters:

"I like this series and the coffee shop, so I am determined to read them all."

"Waiting to read a book about Brandon."

Readers were drawn into the fictional universe, an example of how readers become hooked on a series.

By evaluating the comments, it becomes evident that readers form an intimate relationship with the author. At the same time, the comments do not fully illustrate how the connection between the authors and the readers developed. The self-publishers I interviewed revealed personal anecdotes that depict how the relationship between the author and the reader is no longer purely parasocial. For instance, Cross revealed that when she travelled to Scotland, a reader who lives there spent the whole day with her.

Even though the personal stories are not shared in the comment section, they are important to consider when evaluating the changing relationship between the reader and the author. Silver also mentioned a story about readers who had been following her work for years. During a conference, a reader shared that they had kept her earlier works published under a pseudonym, Heath Kenen: "I was a keynote speaker at [the When] Words Collide conference, and that was really fun. There were readers who knew me as Heath Kenen. I wrote two books under that name years ago, and they saved them and

brought them in, and that was exciting.” The personal stories from Cross and Silver prove that it is possible to retain a loyal readership by sustaining a relationship with readers.

Genre conventions are an important part of writing. For self-publishers trying to build an audience, sticking to conventions can help attract loyal readers who seek books with specific elements. Tropes, such as famous/non-famous pairings, grumpy/sunshine pairings, and best friend/little sister pairings, appeared to play a significant role in the reception of romance books. Based on the comments left on Goodreads, readers noted the tropes and themes they enjoyed and came back to:

“Sunshine and grumpy. A favorite trope.”

“Great example of the grumpy-sunshine trope.”

“Intelligent woman is respected and smouldered ... it works for me every time.”

Once a reader picks up a romance with a specific trope, they know what to expect because tropes follow very specific conventions (e.g., the enemies-to-lovers trope will have two heroes who start off as enemies and then turn out to be in a romantic relationship, as in *Red, White, and Royal Blue*, 2019, by Casey McQuiston). Cross stated, “You cannot write romance and kill the characters off or have them break up at the end of the book. That is not romance, and the readers will turn on you. They will come after you with pitchforks and torches and run you out of town.” Cross understands that readers are looking for a specific ending in each romance book they pick up.

In addition to tropes, readers can respond to specific elements unique to a particular series. For instance, Lau mentioned that her readers are responsive to the inclusion of food in her work: “One thing I discovered I put like a lot of food in my books and readers seem to like that. So, I kept doing it.” Lau can gauge, through direct

communication with readers, which elements will retain readers and potentially attract new ones.

By reviewing the comments under the books, you can gain a general overview of the types of tropes readers appreciate. Through direct communication with readers, however, it is possible to evaluate the *specific* elements they commend. Lua, who secured a traditional publishing contract, includes food descriptions in her work because her readers enjoy this element. For instance, her traditionally published book *Love, Lies, and Cherry Pies* (2024) also includes food references, such as cake decorating classes and bubble tea scenes. The book's main trope is the fake boyfriend who turns into a real one, but it stands out for its unique elements (detailed food scenes) that readers actively seek out based on Lau's conversations with them.

Negative Reviews

None of the readers indicated that the books were self-published, or if that influenced their reading experience. The books were evaluated in a manner similar to that of a traditionally published book.

Several negative reviews noted that the book did not follow the subgenre or the expected trope. This is especially true of series.

"I have liked the others in the series, but this one was just dumb. This wasn't a gothic novel, it's paranormal."

"I am still disappointed that a book ... set in a kinky book series is ... not going to have puppy play."

Silver noted that self-publishing provides the opportunity to quickly re-categorize a book if it is not reaching the correct readers: “I can turn very quickly. I can say, I’m marketing this as a paranormal romance, and it’s not working; it’s not reaching paranormal romance readers. What if I target it to dark fantasy readers? And so, I can do that. Whereas traditional publishing cannot.” Readers voice their opinions online, which may prompt an author to change the category for future readers. Online platforms and the eBook format give authors greater flexibility and freedom in categorization and for last-minute edits.

Mystery Readers

The mystery genre had the second-largest number of reviews. For this genre, there were more reviews on Goodreads than on Amazon. Since the number of reviews was manageable to compare, I ensured that the reviews on Amazon and Goodreads were unique (none were copied and pasted). This could be because only Steena Holmes had reviews from readers who received an ARC.

Positive Reviews

The mystery genre had the most positive reviews that are tied to a loyal readership: 32% of reviews (N=236) mentioned that they would like to see more of the characters and read more books in the series. Compared to romance, only 20% of readers (N=511) said they would read another book in the series, and only 15% (N=65) of poetry readers stated they would read the author’s work again. This links back to the idea presented in Chapter

Five: that mysteries work well as series and that mystery authors can generate a loyal readership more easily than either romance or poetry authors.

Even though two of the books written by Holmes and Nancy were not extended into a series, readers wanted the stories to continue—especially in the case of Nancy’s book, which had a romantic subplot. Readers hoped to see the main character become a full-time sleuth because the story was funny and interesting.

“I hope there will be a next adventure.”

“And I definitely want to read the next book in the series.”

Nancy did not turn this book into a series, but if she were to write more, she already had readers who would consume her work. Similar to my findings, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo’s study (2023) indicates that books by a favourite author are higher on the list of potential reads than recommendations from the community: “The author’s name connotes a degree of cultural legitimacy and offers the reader a level of reliability” (p. 28).

The other three mystery novels by Ace, Kellough, and Warner were part of a series, and readers were interested in continuing to follow the characters and also to continue following the author:

“I look forward to reading her other titles,” wrote one reader of Ace.

“Series gets better as it continues,” contends a reviewer of Kellough’s book.

“Hope to see more of ... soon,” wrote one reviewer of Warner’s book (characters’ names hidden to preserve anonymity).

Not only are the readers actively consuming the work of these authors, but they are also voicing their loyalty. Readers are giving their stamp of approval, which allows the authors

to gauge whether they should invest their time in writing more books in the series or switch gears.

Some of the authors in my study write in multiple genres. In addition to mystery, Nancy writes fantasy fiction, and Holmes writes domestic fiction. Readers have noted in their reviews that they follow the author's work across these different genres, showing their loyalty not only to the genre but also to the author's writing style.

"Steena Holmes is becoming the queen of dark and creepy."

"The author changed genres for her last two novels, and I believe it suits her."

Readers have followed Holmes through multiple genres; hence, the development of a reader base does not depend only on a series.

Once an author builds a loyal reader base, even if they change genres, their fans follow. For instance, Stephenie Meyer, the author of *Twilight*, also wrote *The Host* (2008), an adult science fiction novel with an initial print run of 750,000 copies (Publisher's Weekly, 2008). Arguably, the print run was high because the press assumed that *Twilight* fans would go on to read *The Host*, which they did, as the book sold over 3 million copies. Arguably, a series can outrun its course, but that does not mean the author lacks a loyal readership. on

Like romance authors, mystery self-publishers also shared personal stories about how they maintain relationships with readers over many years. The parasocial relationship between the author and the reader is diminishing. Holmes specifically used the word "personable" when discussing her relationship with her readers. She is consistently interacting with her audience online and in person. She maintains a relationship with her readers by staying in touch between book releases through online

marketing initiatives. If her readers were not loyal to her, they would not join her online book clubs. Indeed, Holmes's Readers Coffeehouse, with over 15,000 Facebook subscribers, shows that the author can maintain the interest of thousands of readers.

Holmes has also revealed that by talking to readers, she is able to gauge how dark she wants a plot to be: "They don't influence how I write, but how light/dark I go. I've written a few books that are darker—more in the psychological suspense/thriller genre—and while readers enjoyed those books, they prefer my darker women's fiction/family drama stories more." Even though Holmes can write across genres, her readers prefer her women's fiction. This discovery can help her plan publishing timelines. Holmes might want to produce a book in a genre that sells well to cover her costs before publishing in one that is still building an audience. In contrast, traditional publishing has very strict timelines that are several years in advance. Self-publishers, however, can gauge which book to publish next based on audience comments and personal conversations with their readers.

Negative Reviews

None of the comments flagged that the books were self-published. In the case of Ace and Kellough, each series began as a traditionally published series. Then, when the traditional presses did not offer them new contracts, the authors turned to self-publishing. Evidently, the transition from traditional to self-publishing proceeded smoothly, as readers did not begin writing negative reviews.

The negative reviews (18 out of 236) were primarily in the comments under Holmes's book (16 negative reviews out of 167). There were DNF comments, and some readers flagged typos throughout the book. Other reviews commented on how the book was not exciting enough: "I didn't find it very thrilling or suspenseful." These types of comments indicate that the subcategories the book is linked to—mystery, thriller, and suspense—are not entirely fitting. Readers who had hoped for a thriller like *Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl* (2012) might have been disappointed when their expectations were not met. Hence, readers can warn others that this is not a suspenseful read. However, none of the reviewers flagged that the book was self-published or associated poor quality with self-publishing.

Poetry Readers

The poetry genre had the fewest number of reviews. There were more reviews on Amazon than on Goodreads, indicating that Amazon is an effective platform for reaching readers. The lack of distribution avenues came up as a concern for Instapoets during the interview process, and it proved to be a valid concern. Since there were fewer reviews of self-published poetry books, this might indicate fewer readers were reached. A potential reason for the lack of reviews is that the books must be ordered in physical format, while the romance and mystery novels are available as eBooks. Two out of the five poetry books in my study are available in an electronic format, and these books have more reviews. Arguably, readers might be more willing to purchase a less expensive eBook than a physical copy.

Positive Reviews

The theme of community is evident in a number of the reviews. Some readers stated that they would like to follow the author's work. Specifically, 10 out of 65 reviews (15%) mentioned that they wanted to read future poetry collections by the author:

"I'm looking forward to future collections from this writer."

"I hope she writes more books in the future."

"I'm looking forward to reading more poetry from this poet."

Since authors in other genres have produced more than one book and already built a reader base, it is not surprising that poetry authors have fewer loyal readers.

The poetry authors are building a readership that could become loyal fans of their work. One reviewer specifically described that they had been following the author since she started posting on social media: "I've always loved [her] work on Instagram." Hence, the community began on Instagram and later moved to another platform. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) emphasize that the reading experience is now multimodal, meaning readers experience not only the book on the physical page but also through reviews and online interactions. Online users want to access content on all their devices. Instapoetry introduces a new way for readers to connect with authors, which complements the multimodal experience.

The intention to re-read poetry books was also evident in the comments. This may be what drives authors to publish physical copies and avoid eBooks.

"A staple that every home should have on its coffee table. Will be re-reading for years to come."

“This is definitely a read I will turn back to time and again.”

The readers themselves state that a poetry book is not a one-time read, unlike the romance and mystery novels analyzed in this study, which were branded “low-angst” or “escapism.” The poetry books are regarded as works of art.

During the interviews, the Instapoets mentioned that, in addition to online interaction, word of mouth was an important way to connect with readers. For instance, Murray stated: “I do a lot of work where I combine my book and my writing with mental health advocacy, so I reached a network through there, and other than that, it’s kind of word of mouth through family and friends to reach readers.” This comment suggests that online marketing alone may not be enough for a new author. Similarly, Feltmate shared that through self-publishing, she has developed friendships in her community, including with bookstore owners and fellow writers. It is important for Instapoets to have a physical presence, whether it is through book signings or book tours.

Another idea that emerged during coding the positive reviews was the poetry's relatability: 16 out of 65 reviewers (25%) said they connected with the authors' work.

“The emotion is raw, and you can feel it all throughout you.”

“It is haunting, relatable, and miraculous.”

“This book is so relatable.”

The readers said they liked the poetry because they could relate to it. None of the reviews of the mystery and romance books indicated that readers could relate to the plot. Based on the interviews, the self-published poetry authors specifically stated that they did not want their work censored or edited by a traditional press because they were sharing

intimate details of their lives. The personal aspect of Instapoetry helps attract readers who share similar emotions.

Readers also appreciate relatability, which can be linked to the work's authenticity:

"Every reader will find a line that resonates to their very soul."

"She encourages young women to be their bold authentic selves."

Authenticity in poetry, such as sharing one's personal story, is a way for authors to connect with readers.

One of the poetry books specifically deals with the quarantine, which had several reviewers stating that they could relate to the experiences of the author:

"Every emotion I ever felt in 2020 and more have been expressed so beautifully in this book."

"Whether 2020 brought you heartache, loneliness, introspection, grief, self-love, or new hobbies, there is something here for everyone."

One of the benefits of self-publishing is how swiftly publication is realized. A work that needs to be put out quickly—such as a book covering the quarantine—is a good candidate for self-publication. Hence, there are benefits and downfalls when producing poetry online. One benefit is the ability to quickly connect with readers across multiple devices and platforms, which attracts a broader range of readers. At the same time, distributing a physical book can be difficult and expensive without the backing of a traditional press.

Negative Reviews

None of the reviewers mentioned that the poetry books were self-published. The majority of the reviews were positive ($57/65 = 88\%$). There was only one negative review, accompanied by a one-star rating, specifically commenting on the quality of the written work: “This is pointless and contrived.” However, the review did not elaborate on what specifically was “pointless” or “contrived.”

It should also be noted that some of the reviews specifically commented not on the quality of the poems but on the quality of the printed book: “A fair bit of pages are just black ... and the poems aren’t that great. Some of the ink was smudged as well.” This can also relate to the benefits of being traditionally published; publishers have access to more resources to produce quality books. Specifically, one worker of the traditional publishing house said, “We make our books on really beautiful paper, so people are probably less inclined to buy and purchase eBooks than they might. Because they really like the tactile qualities.” Hence, for poetry books, paper quality can boost sales, which was not mentioned in the mystery or romance reviews.

Kindle Unlimited and Algorithms

Since the authors and readers in my study use Amazon to produce and access books, it is important to describe and analyze the KU subscription model. Some others make their books available on Amazon at a set price, while others list their books in Kindle Unlimited, where readers can access as many books as they like for a subscription fee.

Based on the interviews, KU has both positive and negative features for authors. For instance, it is easier to reach readers because the platform can make different book categories easier to find. At the same time, the platform pays per page read; as a result, the system can be flooded with books thousands of pages long.

Some authors in my study said they do not want to share their books on KU, citing these pros and cons. For instance, Ace stated, “I am not pursuing this for myself, I don’t like the business model, and I don’t like to feed Amazon too much. I think competition is healthy in the industry ... And I’m a wide author for that reason.” A wide author publishes their work on multiple platforms, which means that they will not obtain the same royalty payout as the authors who only publish on KU. Cross explained it this way:

You get paid with KU per page read, whereas when you are wide, you get paid 70% of the cover price of your eBook. You just get that off the top. I don’t have to wait for a reader to read it. And the page payout is really, really low. It is hovering somewhere around half a cent or just below half a cent, so you have to sell a lot of books or have a lot of readers read the books to make a lot of money in KU. Hence, readers influence whether authors choose to go wide and which books are put into KU.

Nancy stated that she knows her readers do not like Amazon, and she chooses to go wide for that reason. Silver stated that if an author decides to put a book in a series into KU, they must make the whole series available, as readers will not want to buy each book individually.

Other authors, like Temple, are exclusively publishing through KU:

It does seem that the vast majority of readers in that niche are KU readers who've bought into the subscription. I know people who make a living publishing more widely outside of Amazon, but for myself, particularly when I was starting out, KU was an effective way to reach readers as an unknown.

Temple specifically mentioned that, as an unknown author, KU was a constructive way to reach readers, and this could be due to Amazon's algorithmic process. Arguably, Amazon is creating a new publishing industry monopoly that influences what readers consume through its algorithms.

The algorithms on platforms like Amazon play a role in determining which content becomes popular. The idea behind an algorithm is simple: it provides readers with a convenient way to find work that is similar in scope to the work they previously purchased. The issue is that different books can be linked together even though they are not similar (Laquintano, 2014). "Digital algorithms drive a change of conventions, influencing in some unexpected ways the cooperative activity of people in genre worlds" (Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher, 2022, p. 51). The algorithm can do more harm than good when it recommends books that differ from the ones readers have previously read. Moreover, algorithms can undermine women's authorial agency by grouping their work in ways the authors did not intend. For example, some romance authors are associated with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which can affect the readers they reach (Kratzer, 2020).

Another issue with online content creation is the "pay to play" advertising model: authors have to spend money to advertise their work on platforms to be visible. With these advertising dollars, the algorithms seem to recommend the books to readers more often.

The authors in my study have observed this change in the algorithm and, as a result, use some platforms less. For instance, Nancy stated:

I do have a Facebook page, but I don't use it that much anymore because of Facebook's changed algorithms, the way they basically want you to pay to reach people now, so I don't do much with the page. I would announce when I put a book out, but I'm not actively trying to grow my audience there. I would say it is mainly through email that I interact with readers.

Nancy specifically flagged that the algorithm changed on Facebook and that the easiest way to reach readers is through the email list. This underscores the importance of targeting readers directly rather than relying solely on new technological developments.

Getting around the algorithm is not a new phenomenon in the publishing industry. Before the introduction of online platforms, before the algorithm debate and whether one should "pay to play," authors were paying for BookBub's advertising. BookBub is a service that helps millions of readers discover books they'll love while providing publishers and authors with a way to drive sales and find new fans. Upon joining, members receive unbeatable deals selected by our expert editorial team, handpicked recommendations from people they trust, and real-time updates from their favorite authors. BookBub works with all major eBook retailers and devices, and partners with thousands of the industry's leading publishers and authors to promote their books. (BookBub, n.d.)

Jane stated: "There was a golden age of BookBub advertising, in which if you could get a BookBub ad, you could sell a lot of books." Some readers are aware of the implications of algorithm recommendations and try to navigate this new online world, while others are happy to get recommendations: "Instagram's algorithm is potentially

helpful in this regard because it delivers more of ‘what you want to see’” (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023, p. 67).

Becoming viral on social media seems more important to Instagram poets than to the other authors in my study. Instagram poets flagged that gaining followers was extremely important, and going viral can make one’s career successful. Feltmate specifically stated that she uses trending sounds on TikTok to make her content go viral and gain more views.

There are instances of authors utilizing certain trends in their posts and successfully going viral. For instance, Flood (2022) describes the story of Alex Aster’s book *Lightlark*, which debuted in August 2022 and had a long journey to getting published. Aster was dropped by her literary agent and decided to take to TikTok to gauge whether a book she had been working on for a while would interest readers. The book went viral online, and soon Aster landed a publishing contract. In part, *Lightlark*’s success was due to how Aster used trending sounds, which garnered many likes and views, propelling the video and leading to algorithm recommendations. Aster’s story also indicates that traditional gatekeepers (such as literary agents) do not always know what readers want to consume.

Discussion

Based on the reviews, readers like to share their experience reading a book with other online users. My findings echo those of Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023), who contend that society has entered an age of the multimodal reader cubed (MMR3).

Individuals consistently interact with transmedia objects through an array of digital devices and print sources. Recommendations now have a central role in how readers seek out content. Moreover, readers themselves are taking on an active role as tastemakers through the interactive nature of Web 2.0. Self-publishers are aware of this change. In comments and reviews, readers are vocal about what they like and dislike in the novels they consume, from favourite tropes to engaging characters. Readers voice their opinions openly.

The numerous positive reviews on Amazon and Goodreads indicate that the online space is a welcoming environment. Johnson's (2022) study likewise posits that women actively participate in online spaces because they receive predominantly positive feedback. Moreover, Johnson contends that this welcoming environment is sustained because readers are also often female.

I could not identify each reviewer's gender in my study because the profiles did not include personal pronouns. For future research, it would be useful to analyze whether self-published books are predominantly consumed by female readers. It is assumed that most reviews were left by women, as Goodreads reported that its user base is predominantly female (Brown, 2011). Even workers in traditional publishing acknowledged, anecdotally, that women are their main consumers.

Additionally, content analysis was an effective way to draw generalizations about a work, but the authors' anecdotes offered much more personal insight into their relationship with readers. In contrast, a traditional publishing issue raised by the hybrid authors in my study was the lack of funding for face-to-face interactions with readers. Ace

revealed that there was barely any marketing plan for her traditionally published work. Book tours are very rare for traditionally published authors.

On the other hand, self-publishers try to meet their readers face-to-face through conference attendance and book signings. For instance, Cross revealed: “Outside of social media, I have gone to a few conferences, but it is usually the signings where you sit down and get to meet the readers face-to-face that are the most interesting interactions for me.” The comments I evaluated revealed generalizations about what readers look for, such as different tropes, but I was unable to pinpoint specific elements readers enjoyed in the books (e.g., food scenes in Lau’s books). Moreover, not every reader is an avid social media user. Online communication is often supplemented with face-to-face interactions for self-publishers.

Face-to-face interactions also develop the parasocial relationship between the author and reader and can generate a strong sense of loyalty in the reader. In contrast to this, Watts (2018) contends that it is a negative characteristic of the social author to create intimate connections with the readers: “the cult of personality that social media fosters works this way precisely: once you care about the person, you’ll consume anything they produce” (p. 16). Contrary to what Watts argues, self-published authors are creating genuine connections with readers, not simply to gain economic capital. As my study has argued, the possibility of fostering a connection with readers should not be critiqued; it is a natural evolution of the author-reader relationship since the introduction of Web 2.0.

Even though algorithms are a prominent part of online platforms, readers are conscious of their influence. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023) underscore that “readers have more ways of sharing their reading than ever before, and they can create content

that influences other readers around the globe, but they must also contend with direct and indirect forms of marketing online, with data harvesting, aggressive algorithms, and data surveillance” (p. 8). Many readers in the contemporary media environment are, arguably, tech-savvy and have developed critical media literacy skills. Hence, an algorithm can prompt some readers to consume books in similar genres, but readers are ultimately responsible for deciding whether the algorithm's recommendation was correct.

Some authors try to trick the algorithm, but readers are the ones “educating” it by either purchasing or ignoring a recommended book. Readers are the ones who can make a post go viral because they view it multiple times and share it across different platforms. Essentially, readers now act as gatekeepers and tastemakers in the publishing industry. Moreover, the parasocial relationship they had with the author before the invention of interactive platforms is changing into a personal one.

Conclusion

Self-publishing is opening up possibilities for readers to find content they are interested in outside the mainstream. Nancy shared, “One of the drawbacks I’ve heard is that there are so many books published now, how do you wade through them and all that. But I would much rather have that problem than people aren’t able to read stuff.” Something similar was said by a former literary agent I interviewed, who stated that there appears to be more gatekeeping in traditional publishing now than before because agents and publishing houses are all based in New York. The publishing industry's monopoly creates a limited set of plots, characters, and genres that readers can consume.

Yet, since the introduction of Web 2.0, the role of the reader has changed from simply being a consumer. Self-publishers are recognizing that readers now seek out niche content on their own, without direction from traditional presses. The majority of reviews on websites such as Amazon and Goodreads are positive, which signals that readers are enjoying the content of self-published authors - content that often is not deemed marketable by mainstream presses.

Additionally, readers can find books with comparable plots and writing styles using the algorithm. The algorithm can aid the author by promoting their work to readers, but it can also accidentally categorize it into a subgenre that was not intended. As the online world continues to develop, even with the introduction of algorithms, readers are becoming increasingly active in choosing their reading material. Readers have an active say in what they buy and consume. As my study argues, self-publishers successfully produce diverse and culturally significant content with the support of their readers.

Conclusion

The foreign conglomerates, such as Bertelsmann and Holtzbrinck, originally from Germany, and Hachette Livre, from France, own large presses mainly publishing out of New York that dominate the traditional publishing industry. The five main publishing houses (HarperCollins, Macmillan, Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group) are owned by foreign conglomerates that also own the majority of North American and UK imprints, which were acquired during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Thompson, 2012). This monopoly, arguably, creates issues with the diversity of materials produced. Even though large presses like HarperCollins and Penguin Random House have Canadian offices and local imprints that can sign local authors, they are still associated with foreign conglomerates that are driven to publish what is profitable. For instance, HarperCollins owns more than 120 imprints that arguably have to align with its brand image (Nova, 2022). Writers are, therefore, submitting manuscripts to agents who then submit to the big five publishers (and their imprints) with the hope that the product is marketable.

The five main publishing houses have a huge stake in the market. For instance, if Penguin Random House, the largest of the five, were to acquire another global publishing house from the list, it would be responsible for every third book printed in the United States (Hoffman, 2020). Arguably, if the majority of manuscripts go through acquisitions editors at the big five publishing houses, there are limited plots, characters, and genres that become bestsellers. For example, there was a wave of rom-coms centred on Hockey Players, such as *The Au-Pair Affair* (2024), written by Tessa Bailey, and *Ice Breaker*

(2022), by Hannah Grace, which have reached bestseller status. When a trope is popular in mainstream publishing, publishers remain receptive to the plot line until readers grow tired of the subgenre and move on to something new, as indicated by a decline in sales. However, once the fad fades, committed readers of niche content have to look elsewhere for the subgenre.

Fortunately, with the development of platformization in the publishing industry, readers can now find niche content that is not often available in the mass market. Through various platforms, readers can discover books not typically published by mainstream presses. As my study argues, readers who find these books can recommend them to others, thereby increasing visibility for niche content.

Niche books are often produced by small and medium-sized presses and self-publishers. Self-publishing allows authors to bypass conventional publishing practices and sidestep mass-market topics in favour of their own stories (Sinche, 2024). Specifically, women authors have carved out their own space in the publishing industry through self-publishing (Flood, 2015). Female self-publishers use online book creation tools (e.g., digital layout tools and eBooks) and distribution networks (e.g., Amazon, IngramSpark) to instantly connect with their readers.

As my dissertation argues, the online world can be a welcoming space where readers motivate female authors to continue producing and sharing their work. An overwhelming number of comments left under self-published books were positive, as outlined in Chapter Seven, indicating that readers do not perceive self-publishing as inferior to traditional publication. Throughout the study, I have contended that the process of contemporary self-publishing facilitates a direct link between female authors and their

readers through the development of platformization. Readers are no longer just consumers; they are tastemakers. Authors and readers form a personal connection that goes beyond a typical parasocial relationship. This development in the relationship between the author and the reader provides the self-publisher with the opportunity to gain different forms of capital and produce diverse, culturally significant content across the genres of romance, mystery, and poetry.

Specifically, in Canada, self-publishing has had an important role in the development of the publishing industry. Small and medium-sized Canadian publishing houses established in the 1950s and 1960s were often founded by authors, a practice analogous to self-publishing. Canadian authors, who issued material without the aid of foreign presses, were the ones who advanced the Canadian literary landscape. In the contemporary publishing environment, small and medium-sized Canadian presses rely on substantial government funding because they are not reaching enough readers and cannot compete with foreign conglomerates. In contrast, Canadian self-publishers, who often produce books focused on niche subgenres, have learned to connect directly with niche audiences.

Through the development of Web 2.0 and the multimodal nature of technology, society is in an era of the multimodal reader cubed (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023). A reader follows an author's work through printed content and on digital devices, and also connects with them online through social media sites. Readers can form intimate connections with authors, including meeting them in person, connecting through direct messaging, and participating in author-hosted reading groups on online platforms.

Many readers can find niche content online about topics and tropes that large foreign traditional presses may not always consider financially viable. For instance, a self-publisher I interviewed said her agent could not find a traditional publisher willing to sign her male-male romance novels. Undeterred, she connects with readers herself through self-publishing.

Additionally, readers find books with similar plots and writing styles based on the algorithm's output. Readers have learned to use the algorithm to their advantage by clicking and liking specific content in hopes of getting comparable recommendations (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023). Even with the introduction of algorithms, readers are not passive consumers; they try to understand how the algorithms work.

Hence, as outlined in my study, self-published authors connect with their readers through platformization. In the online publishing industry, the reader takes on the role of a 1) consumer; 2) tastemaker; and 3) a personal connection that goes beyond a typical parasocial relationship.

Overall Results and Discussion

My research underscores the importance of readers who can provide an author with social capital in the form of support and encouragement. Through this study, I came to recognize the important role of readers in the contemporary publishing industry. Specifically, readers take on multiple roles, from a consumer to a tastemaker, by leaving reviews online. Additionally, readers can directly connect with authors via social media to express what they want to read. Arguably, traditional publishers do not connect readers

and authors on a personal level because they lack the budget to send authors on book tours, as Ace discussed in the interview. Authors have to independently seek out ways to connect if they want to form a relationship with their readers.

Digital self-publishing is an effective way to reach readers in the Romance and Mystery genres. However, the Instapoets posited that a poetry eBook is not as superior as a printed book. Traditional publishing is still considered to have a wider reach than self-publishing in genres such as poetry. Imprints owned by conglomerates can distribute poetry books through physical bookshops and reach readers worldwide. For poets who publish print books, traditional publishing is a way to secure financial support for a high-quality product. Print books are more difficult to distribute as a self-publisher than as a traditional press. In the poetry genre, the eBook format arguably does not always sell well because a poetry collection is meant to be saved and revisited many times, as the Instapoets mentioned.

Moreover, being traditionally published is a marker of cultural success. Poetry authors and workers at traditional presses stated that self-publishing poetry can be a stepping stone to traditional publication, offering authors the opportunity to win awards and recognition from the literary community.

Self-publishing, however, can provide authors with certain capital that traditional publishing cannot. Authors can write in a genre that they want without considering the constraints of mainstream topics. Self-publishing offers authors cultural capital by providing them with the creative freedom to experiment. Hence, both mainstream and unknown authors still seek traditional publishing to reach their audiences. Authors, however, who produce niche content, such as military romantic suspense or male-male

romance, can self-publish successfully by turning their relationship with their readers into an interpersonal bond and connecting with them online.

Through my analysis of comments and reviews, I found that social capital was the most popular form of capital that self-publishers gained along the way. Connecting with readers provides them with the opportunity to build a loyal readership that will consume new content and read their backlist. My dissertation identified several reasons why self-publishers are successful in reaching readers: (i) digital self-publishing offers a fast way to connect to readers through eBook creation and distribution; (ii) digital self-publishing offers a way to write into multiple genres; (iii) digital self-publishing offers a quick and direct way to connect to readers through social media platforms; and (iv) digital self-publishing offers readers access to niche content.

Digital self-publishing offers a fast way to connect to readers through eBook creation and distribution

Based on my findings, the role of the reader is changing from simply offering economic capital through the sale of books to providing authors with social capital through support and encouragement. In Chapter Four, which focused on the romance genre, self-publishing enables authors to explore diverse topics important to readers seeking inclusive content. Both Lau, who writes about Chinese-Canadian characters, and Temple, who focuses on LGBTQ+ characters, felt that the characters they wanted to write about would do well in the self-publishing market rather than with traditional presses.

Self-published romance authors are aware of the financial benefits of self-publishing. They have successfully adapted to the demanding self-publishing business model, producing up to six books a year, enabling them to achieve financial success and security. This contrasts with traditional publishing, which often provides authors with moderate financial success; traditionally published authors often have to find work on the side because they do not make enough to support themselves financially (Larson, 2024; Gouthro, 2014). Instead, the self-publisher can decide how many books they want to produce per year based on how much time and effort they want to dedicate to their writing. Arguably, Canadian small and medium-sized presses are not actively pursuing romance publishing because the volume is too high to achieve, according to one acquisitions editor.

To keep readers engaged, self-published romance authors produce multiple books digitally each year, a significant volume of material. Digital romance self-publishing can be a lucrative business once the authors find their niche and keep publishing into that market. Hence, Canadian self-published romance authors are successful in the self-publishing industry and leverage online platforms to connect directly with readers who are already waiting for new releases. Like romance, the volume of books in the mystery category is high, especially because mysteries are natural series. Authors generate a following by creating characters that appeal to readers through multiple installments. Self-publishing is viewed as a positive approach to book production, offering the opportunity to build a strong community around a series. How can romance and mystery self-publishers keep up with this volume of books? They produce eBooks, which are much cheaper to produce than print books. The platformization of the publishing industry has

helped propel self-publishing, enabling authors to produce digital content and connect with readers.

Some scholars emphasize that the consistent need to produce content and to become accustomed to using online platforms is a negative aspect of platformization (Bishop, 2023; Duffy et al., 2024; Joseph and Bishop, 2024). The self-publishers in my study, however, did not flag the consistent need to produce content as a negative aspect of self-publishing. All the authors expressed a positive attitude towards digital self-publishing and treated it as a full-time job. Arguably, self-published romance authors can sustain their place in the publishing industry by connecting with readers through online platforms, thereby gaining authorial agency and the ability to produce diverse, culturally significant content.

Digital Self-publishing offers a way to write into multiple genres

Chapter Five discussed how traditional publishing can limit the genre to which an author is assigned, as traditional presses do not publish all genres (Olson, 2014). Many traditionally published authors have to shop their books around to get them published or write in a more mainstream category. Self-publishing, in contrast, offers the flexibility to write in any genre, as authors handle marketing and can gauge readers' receptivity to their new genre. For instance, Holmes continues to publish both romance and suspense fiction because her readers consume both genres.

The mystery self-published authors in my study who were dropped by their traditional presses are doing well and earning money that the traditional presses missed

out on. These self-publishers knew that there were readers out there, waiting for their work, and they have been able to maintain their audience. The authors in my study who began their publishing journey by working with traditional presses, Ace and Kellough, seamlessly transitioned to self-publishing, and their readers did not notice a difference between the traditionally published and self-published editions of their books. Specifically, Ace has been self-publishing her books as eBooks and has garnered even more readers than she had while traditionally publishing. Kellough, who focuses specifically on Canadian settings (Prince Edward County), can continue promoting culturally significant Canadian content by creating eBooks and distributing them online without the backing of a traditional press.

Writing in multiple genres can arguably be financially straining, but the self-publishers in my study spoke specifically of the benefits of the eBook format and how they can keep prices low relative to traditional presses. It is cheaper to produce an eBook than a printed book. Additionally, it is possible to increase readership by keeping the eBook price lower than that of a printed book. In traditional publishing, the price of an eBook has been very close to that of a printed book. For instance, on the House of Anansi website, Margaret Atwood's *The Circle Game* is offered as a trade paperback for \$15.99 and as an ePub for \$14.95, which is only one dollar less. A reader might, arguably, be more willing to buy the eBook if it were half the price of the print book. Silver mentioned that eBooks should be cheaper because readers technically borrow them; they are not allowed to print them from their devices or share them with others: "They don't own that eBook. They cannot resell that eBook. It's not like when you buy a paperback, and you can take it to a used bookstore and sell it. They are purchasing the right to read that book.

But they can't do anything else with it. It's really almost like a rental agreement." Ace stated that she brought down the price of her eBooks when the rights reverted to her: "I think they were running at around \$7 in the US market for an eBook. I brought the price down to 4.99 within the US market." Additionally, eBooks can be more accessible to individuals with limited budgets who do not want to pay shipping fees and have a mobile device.

Digital self-publishing offers a quick and direct way to connect to readers through social media platforms

In Chapter Six, I underscored an additional technological advancement in the publishing industry - the use of social media to publish content. The poetry authors mentioned the stigma of self-publishing much more frequently than the romance and mystery authors in my study. Hence, the traditional publishing industry does not recognize or welcome popular poetry, such as Instapoetry, into its fold.

The Instapoetry case study revealed that the publishing industry is changing, with readers consuming content on social media platforms. Publishing poetry on social media should be considered a legitimate way to build a portfolio for a poet seeking to connect with the multimodal reader cubed, as described by Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023).

The hierarchy in traditional publishing limits new entrants, such as Instapoets, who can produce culturally significant work reflective of our contemporary society. Small and medium-sized Canadian presses are, arguably, not signing Instapoets with large followings because they cannot afford large advances. Instapoets have developed the

necessary skills to reach an audience and connect with a wider community of poets worldwide. Hence, through the platformization of the publishing industry, poetry authors can connect directly with their readers, bypassing traditional gatekeepers.

Self-published poets can create diverse, culturally significant work that feels authentic to their voice and vision. Online platforms enable the sharing of one's work, which is important because this practice fosters communities and promotes *authentic* voices in digital spaces. Murray, for instance, is an active advocate of mental health: "I write poetry mainly focused on topics of mental health and mental illness. The organizations that I tend to support through my writing are Canadian organizations, like the Canadian Mental Health Association." Self-publishing gives Murray the ability to advocate for a cause she believes is important and to work with communities close to home, promoting Canadian organizations.

Digital self-publishing offers readers access to niche content

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I discussed how readers interact with self-published books online. Self-publishers are recognizing that readers now seek out niche content on their own, without direction from traditional presses. The majority of reviews on websites such as Amazon and Goodreads are positive, suggesting that readers are enjoying the content of self-published authors, often deemed unmarketable by mainstream presses, such as Temple's male-male romances.

Additionally, readers can find books with comparable plots and writing styles using the algorithm's results. The algorithm can aid the author by promoting their work to

readers, but it can also accidentally categorize their work into a subgenre that was not intended (Kratzer, 2020). As the online world continues to develop, even with the introduction of algorithms, readers are becoming increasingly active in choosing their reading material (Driscoll, 2014). Readers have an active say in what they buy. There is, however, more to investigate about how readers perceive their new role and whether they fully recognize it.

Future Research Areas

Recognize that the Parasocial Relationship between Readers and Authors Is Changing

Before the popularization of social media and the internet, readers had a romantic notion of the author – the writer led a bohemian lifestyle, and their written work was a reflection of this life (Birkerts, 1994). However, with the introduction of social media sites, the author is no longer viewed as a fictional character. An author experiences things readers have experienced and shares them on social media, allowing readers and authors to form genuine connections. For instance, the self-publishers in my study spoke as both writers and readers, identifying authenticity as something that attracts an audience. Instapoets, specifically, have the freedom to create work that touches on taboo topics and themes such as trauma and abusive relationships. Readers want to know more about an author, whether through their social media pages or face-to-face interactions.

Further research centered on audience studies should specifically investigate how authors and readers recognize the change in their relationship, for instance, through focus

groups with both authors and readers. Future research can contribute to Friend Studies and to understanding whether the relationship between the author and a reader can be considered a friendship. Moreover, future research should explore the suspension of the parasocial relationship between authors and readers. It would be beneficial to investigate whether readers are aware of this changing relationship and the power they hold.

Incorporate the Perspective of Readers

My study does not seek to generalize about women's work in self-publishing; other genres, such as science fiction and literary fiction, for example, might offer different forms of capital to self-publishers. Based on the discussion in Chapter Seven, online content analysis is a way to gauge a general understanding of the shifting role of readers. One argument I make, similar to Driscoll's (2014) study, is that readers are the novel tastemakers in the publishing industry; however, they are not fully recognized as such, and their power to influence other readers has not been sufficiently investigated by researchers. Next steps should include a study dedicated specifically to readers and their reading preferences.

This dissertation aims to emphasize the importance of readers, who are often overlooked. Anecdotally, there are more women readers than men; however, no study has examined how these female readers are perceived by the traditional publishing industry. In my discussions with workers in traditional publishing, even though the majority estimated that there were more women readers, they admitted they did not cater to this

demographic. The question arises, then: Is the work published by traditional presses really what women readers want to read, or is it what they are forced to read?

A future area of research should consider whether female readers want to see a change in how the industry functions by gathering their views on the content being produced. Questionnaires supplemented by focus groups would be a way to gather data on female readers' views and perceptions of the bestsellers produced by the five foreign conglomerates. Through this type of study, it would be possible to create a more inclusive cultural industry.

Final Thoughts

My study was inspired by the need to include the voices of female authors in the history of book publishing. Female authors have always had to carve out their own niche in publishing. For instance, Jane Austen self-published her own books (Petkus, 2015). Women in Canada took on the role of literary agents and advocated for women writers (Panofsky, 2019). In the contemporary digital realm, women authors can share their work online with a supportive audience that legitimizes it. The line between a professional and an amateur is shifting due to the tools offered by the digital environment (Eichhorn, 2022). A hobby can turn into a career when one invests in the right capital (Duffy, 2017). The amateur artist can transition into a professional by building a large online following and consistently posting content related to their work and themselves (Bishop, 2022).

By gaining access to different forms of capital, Canadian female self-publishers are cementing their place in the industry. Social capital, in the form of support from

readers and a community of writers, cements the legitimacy of self-published work. Cultural capital gained from experimenting with different genres provides self-publishers with opportunities to perfect their craft and become well-rounded authors. Economic capital in the form of revenue earned by self-publishers from selling their work signals that their writing is a full-time job, not a hobby. And symbolic capital, in the form of readers recognizing the quality of the work self-publishers produce, validates the self-publisher's reputation.

In interviews with self-publishers, social capital—derived from readers' personal comments—was cited as the most valuable form of capital. The authors' drive to publish is fueled by readers who legitimize their work through positive reviews and comments. Self-publishers value the relationship that they develop with their readers and recognize them not only as a resource to mine for economic capital, but as members of the publishing industry whose recommendations matter. Readers interact directly with authors via social media and email. The social capital authors gain from readers comes from these personal interactions that motivate them to keep going. Online spaces for female authors are safe enough to share their content without harsh judgment. The internet, once thought of as a male domain, is now used by women to meet their own needs—a space where they share inclusive and diverse content (Johnson, 2022).

Over the course of data collection and analysis, I came to recognize that the voices of female readers are not taken into account by mainstream publishers. Self-publishers, however, recognize that the role of the reader is changing from an observer to an active participant in the publishing industry. Readers were once passive consumers of books who followed recommendations from bookstore staff. In the contemporary digital

environment, readers are now active members of the publishing industry. They can market a book by recording reviews and posting comments on digital platforms like Goodreads. They can turn an unknown author into a sensation overnight.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Questions for Canadian Women Self-publishers

1. What words come to mind when you hear the term “self-publishing”?
2. How would you define self-publishing?
3. What motivated you to self-publish?
4. What are some positive aspects of self-publishing that you have experienced?
5. What are some negative aspects of self-publishing that you have experienced?
6. Outside of the writing, are the elements of self-publishing like marketing, cover design, etc. enjoyable?
7. Do you feel like there is a community around self-publishing? Are you a part of any self-publishing groups online or in person?
8. How would you define the genre of your work?
9. Do you have a favourite genre that you read?
10. Do you interact with your readers directly? And if you do, in what way(s)?
11. Have your readers ever influenced what you wrote about or how you wrote?
12. How would you identify if a book was a success? What does success mean to you?
13. What words come to mind when you think about mainstream traditional publishing?

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions for Workers in Traditional Publishing

1. What words come to mind when you hear the term “self-publishing”?
2. Can new business models like self-publishing be incorporated into the Canadian publishing industry?
3. What are your views on genre publishing?
4. Is there a specific readership that the press caters to that determines what kind of work will be accepted? Or what kind of work will be successful?
5. Does the press take into account the social media profiles of authors?
6. Do you see the press as a participant of the counterculture movement (reference “printed in Canada by mindless acid freaks”)? Do you feel like Canadian presses are participating in this counter-culture movement where they are not printing mainstream genres?
7. Are authors expected to actively promote their own work (for instance, post on their social media, blog about their books, etc.)?
8. Would you say there is an association of a specific gender in relation to the authorship of the poetry that is submitted to you? Do you tend to get more submissions from women, men, or is it relatively equal?
9. What would you say are some positives aspects for authors when being published by a traditional press?
10. How do you see the future of the Canadian publishing industry?
11. Does the press accept/seek/get submissions from Instagram poets?
12. Are there any negative aspects to being traditionally published?

Appendix C: Recruitment letter

Dear (potential participant's name),

My name is Liz Poliakova. I am a PhD candidate in the Communication and Culture program at York University. I am reaching out to inquire whether you would consider participating in my study on Canadian women in self-publishing. The research is conducted for my dissertation. The purpose of my study is to understand why women choose the route of self-publishing. Through this research, I intend to make the narrative of Canadian women on self-publishing available to others. I intend to ask questions centered around your views on the self-publishing phenomenon and your experience with self-publishing.

By participating in the study, you agree to a one-on-one semi-structured interview. The interview will be one hour long and, based on your preference, can take place either virtually (Zoom) or in person in a coffee shop of your choosing.

If you have further questions or you are interested in participating, I can be reached through email: lizziepo@yorku.ca

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Best,

Liz Poliakova

Appendix D

List of study participants

Role/Name	Genres discussed
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 1)	All genres
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 2)	Poetry
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 3)	Mystery
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 4)	All genres
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 5)	Poetry
Literary Agent (Trad. Worker 6)	Romance
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 7)	Poetry
Acquisitions Editor (Trad. Worker 8)	Mystery
Literary Agent (Trad. Worker 9)	All genres
Kaylea Cross	Romance
Jackie Lau	Romance
Allison Temple	Romance
Eve Silver	Romance
Jane	Romance
Cathy Ace	Mystery
Steena Holmes	Mystery
Janet Kellough	Mystery
Donna Warner	Mystery
Nancy	Mystery
Katie Feltmate	Poetry
Denise Gushue	Poetry

Erin Murray	Poetry
Christine	Poetry
Emily	Poetry