

# New Media

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Can Emap jump on the online bandwagon? Page 54

## BOOKSHOP



Publishing your novel on the internet means you have no talent. Rubbish, says Mark Piggott, who is sure he will succeed where Stephen King failed

## E-publish and be damned

**M**y first novel came out in October, and the response so far has been unenthusiastic, but not because of its literary merit. Why? Because Behind Blue Eyes was published on the internet. It wasn't as if I published it myself. I answered an advert in the Guardian for new writers, satisfied myself that I wasn't dealing with a vanity publisher, and finally got a contract.

"Hi, I know two words: Stephen King. But there is a difference between how he tried to operate and how reedmee.com operates. For all his pulling power, King relied on trust and honesty, and also used to write over a period of time, and answer direct questions, and publish on a regular basis. With reedmee.com you get the free sample and if you like it, pay your money, either by credit card, which is instantaneous but makes some people nervous, or by cheque. Then you are sent the whole novel in a format of your choice.

able to support new writing talent and read manuscripts which might never have reached bookshelves. If some of our authors migrate to conventional publishing, that's fine. But I don't believe the publishers would have been receptive to them because they weren't good enough to get a deal anywhere other than the internet. Publishers are now in the hands of fewer and fewer companies, and will book those authors who have the most passion to get customers in and read quickly or possible, with a Harry Potter or Bill Bryson in their pocket, under publishers who are struggling to do what they do best: discover new, brave voices, who may not be the next Nick Hornby (or Anthea Turner) but who have something to say, and say it well.

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Yes, I know, two words: Stephen King. But there is a difference between how he tried to operate and how [reedmee.com](http://reedmee.com) operates. For all his pulling power, King relied on trust and honesty; and the novel was written over a period of time, which tested both the patience and the memory of the reader. With reedmee.com you get the free sample and if you like it, pay your money, either by credit card, which is instantaneous but makes some people nervous, or by cheque. Then you are sent the whole novel in a format of your choice.

to profits. "When Tim [Waterstone's] ran things, he left the managing of each shop. With these new, non-book people at HQ running things, profit and productivity always come first. They're talking about having sales reports from publishers completely, just not about their confidence. But they're talking about having sales reports from each other."

Having been shut down for years, I almost succeeded in having a further published in 1998. But I changed their minds, on the grounds that The Pudding - about a divorcee's perspective on marriage - wasn't, and they were right.

I finished a non-fiction novel, published ahead of time, and returned to the shelves. I then had the unexpected attention of the society Margaret Thatcher had allowed into the room. I went back to a book I'd been working on for years. These books are just what I need.

"Hello Mark, this is Dr. Harriet [Waterstone's] assistant. We've just finished reading 'The Reptiles'. I can't find a copy of it, but I'm reading a 200-page article on it, and I can come up with something more quickly. I'll be in touch with you a few days later. The contract will be through the post, computer with the information and copyright fees."

Reedmee.com. That made it, I don't think. The point was that the publisher had turned down the book. With reedmee.com, the publisher would be in a much better position to support new writing talent and read manuscripts which might never have reached bookshelves. If some of our authors migrate to conventional publishing, that's fine. But I don't believe the publishers would have been receptive to them because they weren't good enough to get a deal anywhere other than the internet. Publishers are now in the hands of fewer and fewer companies, and will book those authors who have the most passion to get customers in and read quickly or possible, with a Harry Potter or Bill Bryson in their pocket, under publishers who are struggling to do what they do best: discover new, brave voices, who may not be the next Nick Hornby (or Anthea Turner) but who have something to say, and say it well.

The site can take greater risks with new writers, because there is less financial outlay; yet, ironically, potential profits are greater. Each novel is sold for under £4 of which I, as author, get roughly £1.60. But I'm not in it for the money; I just want to be read. E-publishing has fulfilled that wish, whereas the traditional publishers seem less and less able to take risks.

At the recent Frankfurt book fair there was a first prize of \$100,000 for best original e-book. If you take into account the development of hand-held readers from companies such as Palm and Handspring, the eco-friendly saving of paper, and reader-author interactivity, should publishers and bookshops feel threatened?

"We do not see ourselves as replacing traditional publishing," says reedmee.com founder Chris Piggott, who has 18 years of publishing experience under his belt. "Our readers will be able to support new writing talent and read manuscripts which might never have reached the book shelves. If some of our authors migrate to conventional publishing, that's fine."

But is it possible that these authors would never have reached the shelves because they weren't good enough to get a deal anywhere other than the internet? With publishers now in the hands of fewer and fewer companies, and with bookshops under enormous pressure to get customers in and out as quickly as possible, with a Harry Potter or Bill Bryson in their pocket, smaller publishers are struggling to do what they do best: discover new, brave voices, who may not be the next Nick Hornby (or Anthea Turner) but who have something to say, and say it well.

"It's getting harder and harder to get our books on to the shelves," says Hayley Ann, founder of Codex Books, who publishes Billy Childish, Stewart Home and other "off-the-wall" writers. "There are two problems we have with Waterstone's in particular at the moment. First, they aren't taking as many titles from the independents; and second, when those books they do take sell out, they aren't re-ordering, even though they're obviously selling well."

Ann believes the problems at Waterstone's stem from the power of publishing conglomerates. Fewer and fewer companies own more and more publishers, and profit comes first - but hasn't it always? "Waterstone's is owned by HMV Media, and they've been trying to sell it for about a year now. I believe that Tim Waterstone actually wants to buy it back, which would be one solution, but he probably can't afford it. They're trying to make the company attractive to potential buyers, and that means maximised profits."

Robert Topping, former manager of Waterstone's in Manchester, feels new management was responsible for a tougher line with independents which has, ironically, led to a decrease in profits. "When Tim [Waterstone] ran things, he left the purchasing of books up to the manager of each shop. With these new, non-book people at HQ running things, profit and productivity always come first. They're talking about banning sales reps from publishers completely, just ordering from catalogues. But publishers and book sellers need to meet, to learn from each other."

Having been a freelancer for years, I almost succeeded in having a thriller published in 1995. But Orion changed their minds, on the grounds that The Provider - about a Scouse gangster who has to find £100k to pay for his daughter's life-saving operation in America - was crap. And they were right. I decided to leave gangster novels to public school boys, and returned to the subjects I knew best: the dispossessed detritus of the society Margaret Thatcher had refused even to recognise. I went back to a book I'd been working on for years, Three Bridges, and got myself an agent.

"Hello Mark, this is Dr Radice here, of Gregory and Radice. I've just finished reading Three Bridges. I can't say I enjoyed it, in fact it was like reading a 500-page suicide note, but it does show you have talent, so if you can come up with something more uplifting I'd like to offer you a deal." A few days later the contract came through the post, complete with film rights

options and percentage fees for Russian translations. I had made it.

Or so I thought. Two years and numerous re-writes later, publisher after publisher had turned down the book, with comments such as these: "I found it a fascinating novel, the characterisation is terrific and the plotting works impressively on many varied levels. However, I'm afraid it felt a little too bleak and unusual for our list and I think it would be a tough one to break out as commercial fiction. Mark is certainly talented and there's no doubt that Behind Blue Eyes marks an impressive debut, I'm just not quite convinced that we could do it justice at this stage - it's probably a little too avant-garde for us."

Thanks to reedmee, which liked the off-the-wall quality, I'm now getting featured in the press and even got interviewed on radio by Robert Elms. Apparently there's even a small fan club developing in the States, which is bit of a worry.

E-writers aren't helped because some newspapers and even the Big Issue won't review e-books at all. Unless some multinational corporation has given it approval, it seems the book isn't valid. But because I have refused to compromise my beliefs and my style of writing, I think my books are just as important as the latest six-figure deal by some pretty young thing. I never thought an old Luddite like me would be singing the praises of new technology, but I'm singing now.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/dec/04/fiction>