



THE SELF-PUBLISHING LABYRINTH

What I Wish I Knew Before I Published My First Book

Katharine Tonti

The Self-Publishing Labyrinth

What I Wish I Knew Before I Published My First Book

By Katharine Tonti

A practical guidebook drawn from lived experience in the maze of self-publishing.

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Disclaimer: This guide is based entirely on the author’s experience. Yours will be different, with hopefully fewer wrong turns along the way. The author does not endorse any specific third-party services mentioned and receives no compensation for their inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

When I was a little girl and people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, my answer was always the same: “I’m going to write a book.”

I did that—many years ago—and tried to get it published the traditional way. Armed with a copy of *Writer’s Digest*, I sent my entire manuscript off to publishing companies. Most

never responded. A few sent a cryptic note: “Not our genre.”
“Not what we’re looking for.”

So... I gave up. Almost.

Then came the 21st century—and the world of self-publishing. Suddenly, there was no excuse. I may never be a New York Times bestseller, but I am a published author. I write essays. Goal accomplished.

I thought writing the books would be the hard part—and it was. But it was nothing compared to the labyrinth you need to navigate to understand the world of self-publishing. And then, once you get to the heart of it all, you meet the Minotaur: marketing your book.

It’s a world filled with “you don’t know what you don’t know until you know” moments that alternate with, “I sure wish I would have known that before I started.”

I read somewhere that more than 4 million books are published each year (including self-published titles). Don’t let that discourage you. So, what if 4 million books are published each year? Why shouldn’t yours be one of them?

Now, if your goal is to become a massive bestseller, it may make sense to pursue the traditional route: finding a literary agent who can pitch your manuscript to publishers. But if your goal is to publish your book—your story—then self-publishing is a powerful option.

This guide is my gift to you. Think of it as a road map to help you get your story into the world. I hope it helps answer some of the “I wish I would have known” questions. But please remember this is based entirely on my experience.

Yours will be different, with hopefully fewer wrong turns along the way.

CHAPTER 1: THE LEGACY PROJECT

Before you invest time and money into your publishing project, have a specific goal in mind. Different goals require different budgets, timelines, and levels of commitment. Let's start by looking at one path: what I call a Legacy Project.

This is a labor of love. Maybe you want to create a book for your family about how Grandpa started the family business, or you want to collect your grandmother's recipes. When you add up family and close friends, your audience will most likely be somewhere between 25 and 50 people.

In this case, your best option might be a local quick-print shop, or you may want to explore a company that offers print-on-demand services. If you choose print-on-demand, the most critical step is making sure your work is properly formatted so the printer can produce your book without issues. Start by asking the company for their specific formatting requirements.

Sample questions to consider:

- What file types do they accept?
- What size book are you planning on printing?
- What margins are required?
- What about bleeds?
- What is the minimum number of copies they will print?
- Where's the breakpoint?

You'll also be asked to make decisions about paper quality, binding (hardcover vs. softcover), and trim size. While you can certainly research these details—or even use AI for general guidance—I highly recommend having a direct conversation with a representative from the print company. They can guide you through a large portion of this part of the maze.

Kate's Advice: Your cost will depend on a variety of factors—quantity, paper weight, black and white vs. color, number of images, etc. Understanding these decisions upfront will help keep your costs from spiraling.

CHAPTER 2: YOUR GOAL IS TO BE A PUBLISHED AUTHOR

If your goal is to become a published author, this is a very different path. Maybe you want your book to be available on Amazon. Maybe you want to sell a few hundred copies over time. Or maybe you want to build an author identity, publish multiple titles and create a platform for your work. If that's your goal, then before you make any decisions about where to publish, you need to deal with the manuscript itself.

STEP ONE: FINDING AN EDITOR

Let's start with the most important step: You need an editor. Let me say that again—You need an editor.

You can absolutely use AI tools to help refine your draft, catch awkward sentences, generate questions, or clean up early revisions. That can save you time and money. But in my opinion, AI is not a substitute for a skilled human editor. A machine can check your spelling—but only a human can check your story.

What Kind of Editing Do You Need? The word editing covers a lot of territory, so be very clear about what you're asking for.

- If you want grammar, punctuation, and sentence-level cleanup only, then tell them that.

- If you want someone to challenge your structure, sharpen pacing, identify gaps, and push back on weak sections, tell them that, too, but understand that this is a deeper level of work, and usually is more expensive.

Where to Find an Editor: I would strongly suggest looking beyond your best friend or a former colleague who once worked in marketing of the last company you worked for. Here are a few places where you can begin your search:

- **Editorial Freelancers Association (EFA):** They have a Member Directory where you can search for editors by skill (developmental, copyediting, proofreading). They also publish a "Rate Map" every year.
- **ACES: The Society for Editing:** If you're looking for an editor who knows the Chicago Manual of Style (the industry standard for books) this is a strong place to start.
- **Fiverr Pro (The "Vetted" Gig Economy):** Features editors who have been vetted by the platform for their professional credentials. If you're looking for a la carte services, like final proofread only, this is an option.

Kate's Advice: Even on a vetted platform, always ask for a "sample edit" of 500–1,000 words before committing to the whole book. If they won't do a sample, move on.

Before You Hire an Editor: Prepare your questions. For example:

- Do you specialize in my genre? (A children's editor may not be the right editor for a cookbook.)

- Can you provide a sample edit?
- What style guide do you use? (Chicago, APA, etc.)
- How do you charge—by the hour, by the page?
- What's included in revisions?
- What is your turnaround time?
- Will you personally be editing my manuscript?

That last question matters more now than it used to. In 2026, it's fair to ask whether the editor is using AI as a support tool—or handing your work over to AI entirely. If you are paying for human judgment, craftsmanship, and intuition, you deserve to know.

Kate's Personal Advice: Always ask for a sample edit before committing your full manuscript. That sample will tell you a great deal: Does this editor understand your voice? Do they over-edit? Do they understand your genre? Are their comments actually helpful?

YOUR ONE-STOP OPTION

Some publishing companies, like BookBaby, the company I used for my books, offer professional editing services as part of their production package. I opted for this "all-in-one" approach for convenience, but as I mentioned, you can certainly go a la carte and hire an independent professional.

Kate's Costly Lesson #1: I thought my project was complete, but when I decided to make changes to the "final" edits, I was charged \$1.00 for every single change. Add a comma? \$1.00. Delete a word? \$1.00. Those dollars

add up fast. Read your "final-final" draft carefully before you sign off.

A Note on Courtesy: Ask your editor if they would like to be acknowledged in the front or back of the book. It is a professional courtesy that costs you nothing but means a great deal to the person who helped you with your book.

CHAPTER 3: WORKING WITH ILLUSTRATORS

Before we jump into the publishing section, let's talk about the partnership with an illustrator. Whether you are writing a children's picture book, an art guide, or a home renovation manual, your visuals are just as important as your words.

Where to Find an Illustrator:

- **Fiverr / Fiverr Pro:** I used this platform because of the "escrow" system—the artist doesn't get paid until I sign off, and I don't get the final art until they are paid. It provides a layer of security for both parties.
- **Reedsy:** A curated marketplace where many illustrators have professional experience working with major publishing houses.
- **The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI):** This organization is the standard for artists specializing in children's literature. You can browse their portfolios online to find a style that matches your vision.

Setting the Ground Rules When you find an artist you want to work with, develop a clear contract.

- **Timeline:** How long will it take to complete your book?
- **Revisions:** How many rounds of changes are included in the price?

- **Ownership & Copyright:** You must get written sign-off that the artwork belongs to you. If you don't own the copyright, you may be forced to pay the illustrator royalties for every book sold.
- **Technical Specs:** Can they provide files that meet your publisher's requirements (file types, bleed, and trim marks)? Obviously, you'll need to get this from the publishing company before working with your illustrator.

Kate's Learned Lesson #1: I once failed to provide technical "specs" to my designer at the start of a project. Because the files weren't formatted correctly for my publisher, I had to hire a third designer just to fix the mistakes. Get the specs from your publisher first.

Kate's Learned Lesson #2: Illustrations are costly. To be completely transparent: for my alphabet book, *One Rhyme at a Time*, I wanted a separate illustration for each letter. At \$200.00 per letter, the total was \$5,200.00. While I love the final product, and I don't for one second regret the investment, you must realize that if you want to recoup those costs, the resulting price of your book might be higher than what is standard for your genre. Beautiful books are exactly that – beautiful – they're also very expensive to produce.

CHAPTER 4: PUBLISHING

Okay, so let's say you have a beautifully edited manuscript. You have your art files formatted correctly. Now you're ready to choose your publisher.

When it comes to actually getting your book into the world, the two most frequently used options are a professional publishing company (like BookBaby) or Amazon KDP (Kindle Direct Publishing).

I do not have direct experience with Amazon KDP. At the time I published my children's books, KDP did not offer the option for hardcopy illustrated children's books, so I had to seek another route. Once I began working with BookBaby, I stayed with them. While I can't provide specific technical data for KDP, many of the same core guidelines apply regardless of the platform.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN YOUR CONTRACT

Read Every Word: All however many pages there are in the contract. Don't skim. This is the legal foundation of your project.

The ISBN Decision: Will you get your ISBN through the publishing company—or buy your own?

Kate's Lesson #2: I chose the “one-stop shop” option because (once again) I didn't know what I didn't know. Now, if I want to change even the smallest detail in my

books, I have to purchase a new ISBN—because the contract defines any change, regardless of how small, as a new book.

File Ownership: Get clarity on who owns it and who will hold your files. Will the company keep them in perpetuity? Can you access your original print-ready files at any time?

Pricing Control: In many cases, the company sets a "minimum price", or "floor" to cover their costs. For my books, that means the minimum price is \$21.95 for illustrated hardcovers and \$9.99 for softcovers. Unless you order in large quantities, you likely won't get a discount to buy your own books. Every book you buy to give away or donate, you pay full price.

The Royalty Reality: If you use a third-party publisher and sell through Amazon, everyone takes a cut. On my \$21.95 book, I make exactly \$1.00 per copy. That's why I don't actively push Amazon sales. But I still list my books there, because whether I like it or not, Amazon is often the first place people look. It adds credibility.

Other Reputable Publishing Options: If you want to explore beyond BookBaby or Amazon KDP, here are a few other players in the self-publishing world:

- **IngramSpark:** If you want your book available to libraries and independent bookstores globally, this is a strong contender.

- **Draft2Digital:** Excellent for authors who want to "sell eBooks across Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, and Kobo without managing each site individually.
- **Lulu:** A popular choice for creators who want high-quality print-on-demand options with no upfront costs.
- **Blurb:** Great for those legacy projects like grandma's recipe or family memoirs.

A Quick Note on "Endorsements": Just to be clear, I am not endorsing any of these companies, or BookBaby, and I'm not being paid to mention them. I'm simply sharing what I've learned and what I've seen.

THE REALITY OF RECOUPING YOUR COSTS

I want to be completely upfront with you. My total cost for four books (2 illustrated children's books + 2 short story collections) was just under: \$20,000.

That included: editing, high-end illustrations, printing, copyrights, ISBNs, and initial inventory. It does not include: website design, money spent fixing mistakes, or the hundreds of hours of my own time. To date, I've earned: Less than \$1,500 in royalties.

I'm not telling you this to discourage you. I'm telling you this to prepare you. I've been actively working on marketing campaigns for four years. And the road to breaking even? It's long – very very long.

CHAPTER 5: INTRODUCING THE MINOTAUR (MARKETING)

Now—I have a bit of a passion for Greek mythology. And as I mentioned earlier, I think of marketing as the Minotaur in the labyrinth. So let me introduce you to this creature and let's pretend its name is... They Say.

THEY SAY: "Blast your contact list." (In other words, reach out to everyone you know—personal or professional—and let them know you're a published author and where they can buy your book.)

- **My Reality:** I sent personalized information to 60 people I thought would be genuinely interested. No one purchased a book.

THEY SAY: "Give away copies for reviews."

- **My Reality:** I gave away 20 copies and received 7 reviews. Keep in mind that Amazon prioritizes "Verified Purchase" reviews over those from people who received a free copy.

THEY SAY: "Contact local independent bookstores."

- **My Reality:** I contacted three local shops as a "local author." None were interested.

THEY SAY: "Get into libraries."

- **My Reality:** I did this, and they accepted the books. But remember donated books are rarely promoted. They are

sitting on a shelf waiting to be found, but the library isn't promoting them for you.

THEY SAY: "Do book signings and community events."

- **My Reality:** This requires you to provide your own inventory and supplies (tables, flyers, promo materials such as bookmarkers) upfront. I have opted not to pursue this route yet.

THEY SAY: "You need a website.: On this point, I agree. I built mine myself on Wix with the step-by-step guidance of Gemini (AI). It took weeks of work, but it was far more affordable than hiring a designer.

- **The Budget:** You also have to factor in the cost of your domain name and the hosting platform—think of it as "cyber rent" you pay each year to keep your writing in one place.
- **The Strategy:** I use my site for my blog and to link directly to BookBaby for sales. I chose not to sell directly from my site to avoid the headaches of shipping and payment processing. Plus, I receive a higher royalty when people buy through the publisher's store rather than Amazon.

CHAPTER 6: THE EMOTIONAL HURDLE

Before we go any further, we need to talk about something that's not technical, it's emotional.

Do not expect your friends and family to be your primary support system. That's hard to hear. But it's true.

It's not that they don't love you. It's just... this may not be their thing. Your aunt may adore you—but she may not read children's books. Your best friend may be proud of you—but not sit down with your manuscript.

There's a difference between: "I'm so proud of you" and clicking purchase... and writing a review. As I mentioned, I reached out to 60 people I knew personally. None purchased.

So, here's my advice: Don't take it personally. Your friends and family are your cheering section—not necessarily your customer base.

Your job is to find strangers who genuinely love your work. Those are your readers.

The Cost of "Giving It Away"

One of the hardest habits to break as a new author is the urge to give your book to anyone who shows interest. But here's the reality: Every time you give away a book, you're handing someone cash.

In my case, \$21.95 per copy. At first, I thought of it as the cost of doing business. Now, I think differently. I may not say

it out loud, but I always ask myself: What am I getting in return? A speaking opportunity? Exposure to a new audience? If there's no clear value exchange, the book stays on my shelf.

What I Do Instead: Instead of giving away books, I offer discount coupons. I want people to see the value of the work. And a discounted purchase still counts as a verified sale—which matters for visibility and algorithms.

One More Reality

A person is not going to buy the same book twice. Once someone buys your book—that's it. Unless they're buying it as a gift, you can't go back to the same group again and again. This isn't groceries. It's not a recurring purchase. It's a book. Which means you need to find a new audience—over and over again.

CHAPTER 7: METADATA AND DIGITAL ADVERTISING

Now let's talk about selling your book through social media. A lot of people assume social media and digital platforms are free. They are—if you're posting vacation photos. They are decidedly not free if you're trying to sell a product.

In a universe of millions upon millions of books, how will anyone ever find yours? I think of that image, "Pale Blue Dot." It's the picture of Earth taken by the Voyager spacecraft—a tiny speck in a vast, dark void. That is your book in the current marketplace. How do you help readers find "home"? The answer is Metadata.

What is Metadata? I define metadata as the specific words and phrases that act as a beacon, helping people navigate the great universe of books to find your specific title.

- **The Broad Category:** Mystery, Romance, Travel, Cooking, Children's, etc.
- **The Subcategories:** This is where you get specific. For example, "Children's Fiction" might drill down into "Early Learning" or "Humorous Verse."

The Power of Search Options Try to think like a reader, not an author. What would someone actually type into a search bar to find a book like yours?

For my alphabet book, for example, my metadata includes a wide net of phrases:

- Children's books
- Illustrated children's books
- Books for children ages 2-5
- Books for kids ages 2-5
- Alphabet books
- Silly alphabet books
- Books that rhyme for children

Kate's Pro Tip: Don't be afraid of the "typo." People search quickly and make mistakes. Including common misspelling. In your backend keywords—like "chidlren's books" or "cildrens pixture books"—these can actually capture traffic that your competitors are missing. Try it yourself: type a word quickly into a search bar and see how many "autofill" options the platform gives you. Those options are your roadmap.

We're told we now have more computing power in our cellphones than the Voyager spacecraft had when it left Earth. We might as well use it to research competitors. Look at the 'Customers who bought this also bought...' section of books similar to yours. Those titles and descriptions are full of the metadata that might be helpful.

AMAZON CAMPAIGNS

Whether you publish via Amazon KDP or a third-party publishing company, Amazon offers a campaign platform to

help your book get noticed. You enter your metadata and keywords, and you can run a campaign for as long as you choose.

Amazon will even offer you "pricing guidelines" for example, suggesting that most authors spend \$10.00 per day. What that \$10.00-a-day buys you is essentially "Sponsored Product" status. This is when the "Gods of the Algorithm" begin their work, placing your book in front of potential buyers who are searching for similar titles.

Kate's Learned Lesson: Tuition in the School of Life I consider the money I invested in Amazon campaigns to be my "tuition" in the school of hard knocks. I had to admit that it made no financial sense to spend \$10.00 a day to generate \$1.00 in royalties (remember, because I didn't publish directly on Kindle, my margins were slim). However, I didn't want to admit that I hadn't tried every possible avenue, so I launched a campaign anyway. The Result: I spent \$800.00 and generated \$1.00 in sales. This is why I no longer run active campaigns on Amazon.

THE MATH OF THE ADS

Before you give Amazon or Meta a single dollar, you need to understand two numbers.

- 1. The CTR (Click-Through Rate):** This is the percentage of people who saw your ad and actually clicked on it. For books, a "good" CTR is surprisingly low—usually around 0.4% to 0.8%.

Kate's Insight: If your CTR is lower than 0.3%, something

is wrong with your "packaging."

2. The CVR (Conversion Rate): This is the percentage of people who clicked the ad and actually bought the book. For a well-optimized book page, you're looking for a 10% to 12% conversion rate.

The "Kate Reality Check" Calculation:

- If a click costs you \$1.18 (the current 2026 average for Amazon Ads) ...
- And it takes 10 clicks to get 1 sale (a 10% conversion rate) ...
- You have just spent \$11.80 to sell one book.
- If your royalty on that book is only \$1.00... You have just lost \$10.80 on that sale.

Kate's Take: This is why "They Say" to run ads, but "They" don't always do the math for your specific book. Always calculate your "Break-Even" point before you start the campaign.

CHAPTER 8: THE SOCIAL MEDIA LONG GAME

Social media is often touted as the "holy grail" of book sales. In my experience, sales are unlikely to follow a single post. I've opted for what I call the Small Budget/Long Game approach.

Pinterest: The Inspiration Board Pinning a book on Pinterest is a very, very long game. To get real engagement, you have to generate a significant volume of posts. I put up a pin for each of my books, but I found Pinterest to be more of an "inspiration board" than a viable selling platform for authors.

LinkedIn: The Professional Pivot I once had a professional profile with more than 700 contacts that somehow disappeared into the "black hole" of cyberspace. So here's what I did. I used it as an opportunity to rebuild with a new identity. I am no longer showing up as a corporate marketing professional; I am showing up as an Author and Essayist. My approach is passive and professional. Each week, I post a new essay. My primary objective isn't a direct sale; it's to drive traffic to my website and increase blog subscribers.

THE "TURTLE" APPROACH TO META

Now, let's talk about the Meta platforms: Facebook and Instagram. Instead of spending \$500.00 for a one-week ad

campaign, I use a strategy I call the Turtle: focused, steady, and managed on a budget I can control.

I've learned how to use a simple tool called a "Boost." When I post an essay on Instagram that I'm particularly proud of, I set a limit of \$5.00 a day for five days. The Cost: \$25.00 total. This is roughly the price of my daily Starbucks Chai Latte for one week. This brought in about 100 additional followers. It's about building a community, not just a transaction.

A NOTE ON E-BOOKS

In one of these small campaigns, I sold two e-books for \$2.99 each. Did I "lose" money? Technically, yes—I spent \$25.00 to make roughly \$4.00 in royalties. But compared to the \$800 Amazon Minotaur, this was a highly successful test of interest.

One brief footnote on e-books: Some publishing companies will convert your book into an eBook (for a price of course). Ditto for audio books. If you choose to "hire a voice actor" to record your books – ask questions. If you don't know what questions to ask, Google is free – type in "what questions should I ask voice actors about voicing my eBook?" (My experience, AI can generate more substantial questions for you.)

THE "VIDEO" HURDLE

I'll be the first to admit: Instagram is currently obsessed with video (Reels). At this stage, I'm not comfortable being on camera in that way. That is a choice I've made for myself. Between managing my website, LinkedIn, Facebook, and

Instagram, while writing a high-quality essay every week—I am already investing at least 20 hours a week into my author platform.

Doing it Well vs. Doing it All My philosophy is simple: If you are going to do something, do it well.

- **The Learning Curve:** Learning how to produce, edit, and market video content is an entirely different skill set. At this moment, it is not something I am interested in learning.
- **The Creative Choice:** My first love is the written word. If I spend ten hours a week struggling with video editing software, that is ten hours I am not spending on my next book.

Kate's Advice: Do not let "Platform Guilt" drive your strategy. It is better to have a vibrant, engaged community on one or two platforms than a "ghost" presence on six. Choose the platforms that let your voice shine. As someone once told me, "Build your house on land you own"—your email subscriber list.

CHAPTER 9: BEWARE THE SCAMMERS

If I can give you only one piece of advice, it is this: Beware of scammers. Beware, beware, beware.

They will come at you from every direction—social media DMs, unsolicited emails, and text messages. They are sophisticated, they are relentless, and they are after your money.

They will claim to have "large distribution networks" or represent the film industry. One actually told me that Stephen Spielberg was interested in turning my children's book into a feature film.

Another common tactic is promising you a "premiere table" at a prestigious international book fair for a fee—often around \$8,000.00. But there's a catch: you still have to pay for your own flight and hotel. In reality, your book will likely end up in a "self-publishing" corner of an exhibition hall – that is, assuming there's a book fair once you get there.

How to Spot the Scam:

- **The "Dear Author" Red Flag:** They often don't even bother to personalize their messages. They don't even bother to use your name or the title of your book.
- **The Flattery Filter:** They will tell you your work is a "masterpiece" that just needs their "specialized marketing" to hit the bestseller list, or that they have a

mailing list of hundreds of thousands of readers just waiting to discover your book.

- **The "AI" Truth-Check:** Here is what I do: I run their emails through Gemini or another AI platform and ask, "Is this a known publishing scam?" So far, every single one of them has been flagged as a scam.

Kate's Golden Rule: Legitimate agents, publishers, and producers do not "cold-call" unknown authors via Instagram DMs, text msgs or email. If they want you, they will be professional, specific, and they won't ask for money up front.

CONCLUSION

I wrote this guide as a roadmap, not as a reason for you to abandon your dream. Yes, there are challenges. Yes, there is a "Minotaur" in the marketing labyrinth, and yes, it is expensive.

But in spite of every "Lesson Learned" and every dollar of "Tuition" I've paid to the school of hard knocks, I still consider self-publishing my books a significant personal achievement.

I can finally look back at the six-year-old version of me and say, "You did it, sweetie. You're a published author."

And if I can do this? I truly believe—you can too. So go ahead. Publish your book. Do the work. Navigate the maze. Put the Minotaur in its place.

And then say it out loud: I wrote a book. I'm published. I did it.

Kate's website: booksbykate.net

Kate's Blog: [From Where I Sit \(booksbykate.net\)](http://From Where I Sit (booksbykate.net))

Kate's books:

For children:

Lionel Lincoln Lawrence LePet, the Loudest Child
Anyone's Ever Met

One Rhyme at a Time – The Alphabet Book

For Adults:

Other People's Stories, Volume One

Other People's Stories, Volume Two

All books available on bookbaby.com and/or amazon.com
(Search author: Katharine Tonti)

DISCOUNT COUPONS AVAILABLE FOR ALL BOOKS IF
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1. Use code "Lionel" for 15% off.
2. Use "Rhyme" for 15% off.
3. Use OPSV2" for Other People's Stories for 15% off.