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# Writers'

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## FORUM



# BEGIN THAT BOOK



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## the indy vibe

Getting a book deal is every writer's dream, right? So why are some published authors now choosing the independent route? Charles Naton shares his experiences with Susie Kearley

**M**y first step into publishing was when Can Write Will Write offered me a book deal for *Section 12*, a psychological horror story about a traumatised WWII soldier. It was a new venture and we didn't know each other, so I only signed a contract for the e-publishing rights at the outset.

The publisher gave me some very useful editorial feedback, which was a great help in the early days. It taught me to look at my own work through the eyes of an editor as opposed to an author. I agreed to do my fair share of marketing, as they're a small publisher, and was committed to the project.

Things started to go wrong when I saw the cover design they'd produced. I hated it. This left me stuck in the strange situation of being reluctant to throw my weight behind my own work! I was also bewildered by the publisher's reluctance to make the book available on Amazon. I thought it was a poor business decision not to have any kind of presence on that mega-platform.

So, keenly aware that one never gets a second chance to make a first impression, I made a conscious decision to draw as little attention to myself and my work as possible, until I got my electronic rights back, and could republish on my own terms. I wrote the sequel while I watched the clock ticking down.'

After that disappointing experience, I wanted complete control over the publishing process, so I set up my own publishing company, Cordant Publications. This enabled me to control my own ISBN series, which is important to me. What many publishers neglect to mention is that although you may own your material, they own any ISBN they allocate to your work. Sure, you can republish with a different number, but the fewer ISBNs there are swirling around your work the better. Nothing succeeds like simplicity.

There are a few hoops to jump through to get your own ISBN series from Nielsen in the UK, but it's not really the impossible mystery that some publishers would have you believe.

### The relaunch

When I got my rights back, I relaunched the book with a new cover, making it available in paperback too. The good news is that since striking out on my own, I've seen a significant rise in interest in the books, and in sales. At the moment I'm focusing more on building my reputation

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than shifting volume. That takes time and an awful lot of shoe leather if you're working by yourself.

Doing it all myself has been a real education. I've learned an awful lot about the subtleties of print layout: a couple of millimetres here and there can really enhance the reading experience. I urge any self-publishers to resist the temptation to cram their work into as few pages as possible to save a little bit on each sale. The thing to remember is that a book is more than just the words it contains. The way it looks and feels is just as important as what's printed inside.

As for buying in specialist skills, I'd suggest that if you can do a good job yourself, then do it. If you need a specialist skill such as a designer or webmaster, remember you get what you pay for. Make sure you understand exactly what you're buying before you commit, and if you see a 'guaranteed formula for success', then run in the opposite direction!

It was a challenge finding the right graphic artist to represent my work. Sure, there are lots of very talented and capable people out there, but the trick is finding that one that's right for you. Add print

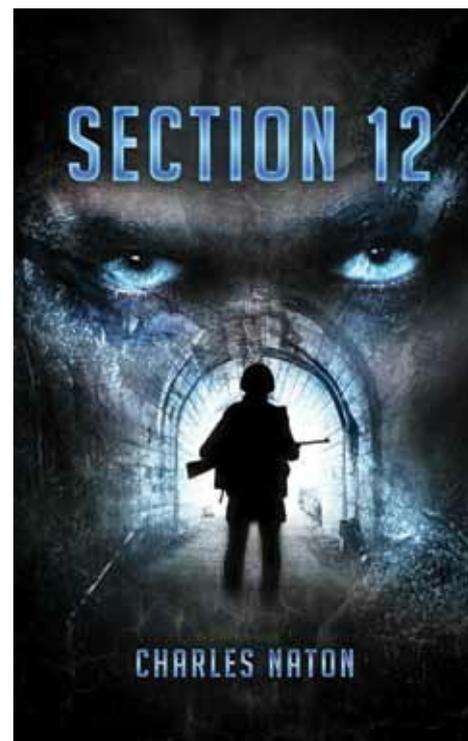
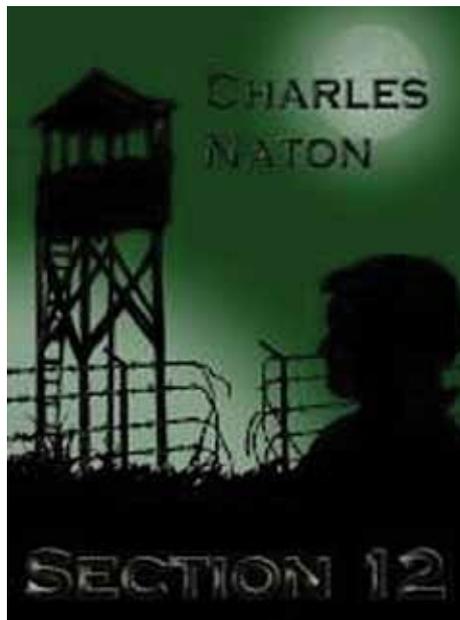
*Be ready to abandon that lovingly prepared and foolproof marketing plan...*

quality issues, IT issues, distribution, ISBN allocation and marketing into the mix and the serious self-publisher ends up being very busy indeed.

I've done all my own techy stuff too. I built my own website, although the artwork was supplied by my long-suffering and extremely talented graphic artist. I own the domain, rent the server space and I manage my own affairs. It all costs about a fiver a month.

I don't have any kind of formal IT background, but there's a ton of really good drag-and-drop web design programs out there, and they needn't be hugely expensive. I tend to pick up software when it's on offer if I think I might have a future need for it – I seldom pay any more than £50 for a program. I think of it as an apprentice building up his toolkit, and that policy has really paid off as there's

The original cover (*below*) that Charles disliked, and (*right*) the new cover that he commissioned from a graphic designer for his own launch



not much I can't do for myself these days.

I've also learnt how to collaborate with other creative folk, to listen to their specialist insight and to explain important decisions where it's not possible to please everyone. Self-publishing is a big challenge, but it's something I enjoy doing. I like figuring out how to do things and get the best results.

### An advantage in obscurity

Since deciding to self-publish, I've found word of mouth, via the internet, is the most successful way to sell books. Being 'fashionably obscure' can actually be an advantage. Some consumers mistrust large corporations. This mutual mistrust has given birth to what I like to call 'a subculture of the small'. This is expressed through counterculture campaigns to shop local and support 'independent' artists and content producers.

A reader looking for something authentic which is not the obvious product of a focus group algorithm will gravitate towards authors like myself, just as they do in music or art. For every dozen or so happy consumers in the mass-market, there is at least one disenchanted soul searching for something else, something 'real'. That's still an awfully big potential audience, but of course the trick is finding them and gaining their trust.

### Marketing and new readers

I take care of all my own marketing and have learnt to be very adaptable. Obviously reader reviews and recommendations are

an excellent tool, although you have to be prepared to step back from those. They belong to the readers, not the author.

It's important to let the customer lead the marketing. By that I mean you have to be ready to abandon that lovingly prepared and foolproof marketing plan when you discover that all the action is happening somewhere else! I'd prepared an excellent Google campaign and spent a great deal of time on SEO (search engine optimisation) work, only to discover that my future readers were all hanging out on Facebook and Amazon.

Amazon's Kindle library has been one of the best ways for new readers to find and try out previously unknown authors like myself. Half a dozen signed books donated to cosy pubs around the country have done me no harm either.

We are living in fascinating times, where it's possible to take an idea and reach out to literally millions of potential customers in ways that were never possible before. However, self-publishing still requires a lot of hard work – in addition to actually writing something good in the first place!

Self-publishing isn't for everyone and the results will be hugely disappointing if you're hoping to be an overnight success. But for the able, the committed and the determined, it really can be a brave new world.

• The sequel to *Section 12*, *The Cronus Equation*, is due out in early 2016. For more about Charles, see [www.charlesnaton.com](http://www.charlesnaton.com)