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TW Column by David Biddle

How Self-Publishing Taught Me Patience



Coming Soon: *TW's Winter 2014 issue launches next week with a focus on literary critics and quality. Here, David Biddle offers a taste of what's to come with his spirited defense of indie literature. Let the games begin!*

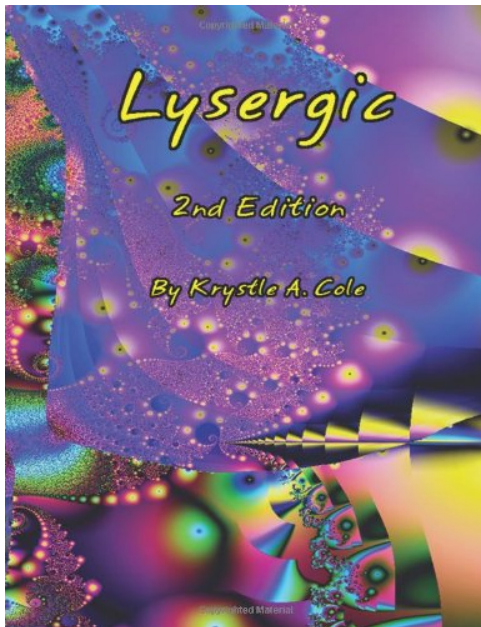
I tried reading a good fifty self-published e-books in 2013. I finished five. I also began reading fifty books published the old-fashioned way. Of those, I finished five.

Okay, I'm a slow reader. Ten books a year is about my average. I'd do better if I weren't on Facebook and Twitter every day; it also took time to read all the books I didn't finish. But I guarantee I'll start more self-published books in 2014—and I bet I'll finish more than five. The five indie books I finished were as good as, if not better than, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* or even George Saunders's *Tenth of December*—both of which I read early in 2013.

You see, I've figured something out about indie work: It's a different beast than the stuff put out by the likes of Penguin, Hachette, and HarperCollins. The trick is to learn to read indies in a different way than you would slicker books that have been passed through the filter of a dozen publishing professionals.

The trick is to become a patient reader.

I've been buying indie books all over the place for the past few years. More than half the work on my e-reading devices is self-published. Since I've got three books of my own out there, I need to pay it forward and buy work by other indie authors. The thing is, no matter how much I wave the "Go, Indie!" flag, I'm ultra-discriminating about what I read. Cognitive dissonance has held me back, bogged down as I've been with the following logic: *Why read self-published books when I still haven't read all the David Foster Wallace, Toni Morrison, and Haruki Murakami in the world?*



Yes, I am that kind of asshole book snob.

Fortunately, this ridiculousness began to change in 2012, when I finished Krystle Cole's self-published account of the time she spent, from 2000 to 2003, connected to Gordon Todd Skinner and the new psychedelic manufacturing vanguard in the United States. *Lysergic* is an extremely personal story of an intelligent young woman coming of age during some of the most bizarre drug experiences I've ever read. I have no doubt the raw power of this story would have been turned to mush by mainstream publishers.

Since reading *Lysergic*, other indie books grabbed and stuck with me in 2013. Last summer, I read Nancy Bevilaqua's *Holding Breath: A Memoir of AIDS' Wildfire Days*, and this one clinched the lesson: Indie literature is no different from indie music or indie film. Independent art of all kinds is independent because the artists control every aspect of production—and that's the point.

The magic of indie art is that it feels more authentic and down to earth. Think hand-held cameras and living room

recordings. With literature, of course, authenticity is a tricky thing. It comes through word choice and honest description. Literature happens not because editors and academics give it the nod, but because a writer puts her whole self on the page—as in *Holding Breath*, a heartbreaking love story.

Bevilaqua, a freelance author and poet, told me in a recent e-mail interview that she chose the self-publishing route because she wanted to make all the calls on her book. For instance, she included a great deal of poetry in the text. Even her simple narrative observations are highly charged and lyrical:

Every so often I find a sick or dying bird on a sidewalk.... [t]hey'll look up into my eyes for a moment as if they're trying to gauge what my intentions might be, and as if they're saying, Do whatever you're going to do; I've given up.