Independent bookstores embrace digital publishing with 'espresso' book machine

Stacy A. Anderson

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Clare Dickens only wanted to share her story to help others. But in the process, she became a successful independent author - with the help of a local bookstore and its instant publishing machine.

Dickens wrote "A Dangerous Gift" with her son Titus, a memoir of their life dealing with his bipolar disorder. She completed the novel after he took his own life at the age of 25 in 2006.

Though Dickens found a publisher in Iceland to release the book in 2007, she still wanted a broader reach. The Espresso Book Machine at Politics and Prose in the District of Columbia enabled her to bring the memoir to local bookshelves and beyond earlier this year.

Her book has since become the best-selling, self-published title at the local bookstore and its website.

"I didn't expect to sell any at all," Dickens said. "I didn't want to be a best-seller. It's really about getting my son's story out there and helping other people."

Self-publishing has been made easier since the Espresso Book Machine by On Demand Books debuted in 2006. The machine also can make copies of out-of-print editions.

The first machine was installed briefly at the World Bank's bookstore. Through a partnership with Xerox, the company now has machines in about 70 bookstores and libraries across the world including London; Tokyo; Amsterdam; Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; Melbourne, Australia; and Alexandria, Egypt.

Thor Sigvaldason, chief technology officer of New York-based On Demand Books, said the technology can help book retailers twofold.

"It can, potentially, give them a huge virtual inventory so they can have as many books as Amazon, all in a little bookstore," he said. "It turns independent bookstores into places to get books published. It's a new thing for the bookstore to do: not just sell books, but actually create books."

Dickens' book costs $10.38 to print and retails for $16. Bill Leggett, a bookseller who co-manages the machine, said about a dozen copies are sold a month. "That's better than a lot of authors who have major publishers," he said.

Politics and Prose has produced almost 5,000 paperback books - some in as little as

five minutes - since receiving the book machine nicknamed "Opus" last November. Leggett said about 90 percent of the books printed on the machine are self-published works by local authors.

The others are out-of-print editions, millions of titles available in the public domain like Google Books, and digital formats licensed out through major publishers including Harper Collins.

Alfred Morgan Jr. was able to get a copy of his father's out-of-print 1923 aviation guide, "How to Build a 20-foot Bi-Plane Glider," printed on the machine for $8. The volume was on Google Books.

"Many would admit that the physical reality of a book in your hands offers something that you don't quite get from books on a computer or on a tablet," Morgan said.

The semi-retired physician, an avid Kindle reader, keeps the paperback copy of his father's book in his home office. "My father was ahead of his time in many ways. It's like a family memento," Morgan said about the book.

Customers at Politics and Prose have also printed rare editions, or "editions drifted out of print," by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Shakespeare, Leggett said. An out-of-print edition of Mark Twain's "The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson" with a simple cover and more than 400 pages costs about $12.

How the Espresso Book Machine works: The machine uses two PDFs, one for the cover and another for the text. The cover and text, both generated from digital files, are printed simultaneously on opposite sides of the machine. They meet in the middle section of the machine, where they are bound, before dropping to a trimming station on the bottom. The book is dispensed through a chute.

Interest in producing paper books comes at a time of substantial growth in the electronic book industry. The Association of American Publishers reported 3.4 million ebooks were sold last year, up more than 300 percent from 2010. Still, revenue from electronic book sales was just a fraction of that for printed books, $21.5 million compared to $335.9 million, the association said.

As bookstores continue to close their doors, crippled by ebooks and digital reading devices, more are embracing the Espress

o Book Machine.

Northshire Bookstore in Manchester Center, Vt., produces about 5,500 books per year on the Espresso Book Machine since using the beta version in 2008 and upgrade in 2010.

Debbi Wraga, the book machine coordinator, said about 85 percent of their customers use it for independent book publishing, about 350 self-published titles so far. The others use it to produce rare books including foreign titles, or personalize books, such as Christmas carols with inscriptions and family photos.

"Besides the novelty of it, to have customers come and strike up a conversation, it's a way for us to really engage our public and move forward and find a creative way to still sell the books," Wraga said. "It's a wonderful feeling when you take it off the press and hand it to the author. You can smell the glue and the book is still warm. It's almost like handing a newborn baby to a mom."

Wraga said the book machine accounted for nearly 4 percent of the bookstore's 2011 revenue, and garnered extensive publicity well beyond what the store could afford to pay in advertising.

Powell's Books in Portland, Ore., which started using the Espresso Book Machine in early May, already has a steady stream of customers using the new technology. One recent customer duplicated a genealogy book to give to family members.

Emily Powell, bookstore president and CEO, said the machine matches with their mission of connecting readers and writers since "it certainly speaks to the fact that our community is not just readers, but they're writers and we have the ability to offer them the service of helping them get started in publishing."

McNally Jackson Books in New York City, which installed the machine in January 2011, has on average nearly one new self-publishing customer a day.

Leggett, of Politics and Prose in Washington, D.C., said consumers now have control over the publishing process, from deciding the physical dimensions, cover and layout, to how much they want to pay for it.

"It's a way for people who ordinarily wouldn't be able to have a book on the shelf to have it on the shelf," he said. "It's a way for the community to increase the number of people who can express their ideas."

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