

Active Years

Retiree Writer

From diplomat to self-published author

By Bruce K. Byers, retired Foreign Service officer

I was always an aspiring writer. I wanted to write fiction. I started writing short stories when I was in high school, and as I traveled across America, and later through Europe, I kept diaries that have been invaluable for writing my stories. During my Foreign Service career I kept writing about my experiences and saving bits and pieces for future use. From time to time I worked some of them into longer manuscripts. All of these efforts form part of the writing craft for me.

After I retired, the muse inspired me to write a dozen short stories and then a novel involving a retired FSO who is recalled to a temporary assignment at an embassy in Southeast Asia that is then hit by a terrorist attack. The manuscript evolved into a nearly complete novel that I sent around to friends and family members for comment.

In 2012 I contacted my high school French teacher, who 52 years earlier had been a major influence in my life and had urged me to apply for a summer exchange program that in 1960 took me on my first trip to Europe, the first step toward graduate studies and, eventually, the Foreign Service exam.

When I re-encountered my former French teacher in 2013, I told her how she had profoundly helped me. Her influence sustained me in my college studies and, eventually, as an FSO. After our meeting, I was moved to write a novel about my high school years and my odyssey across America and across the Atlantic to Europe.

However, finding a publisher proved to be a challenge. After sending my manuscript to several literary agents and receiving kind rejections, I looked into self-publishing, using one of the many online means now available.

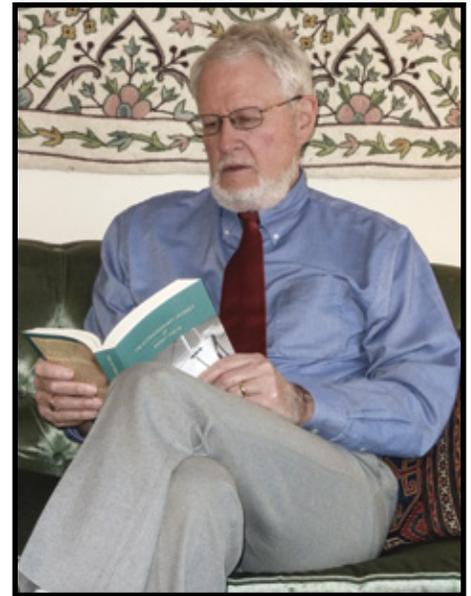
I learned one should proceed cautiously, and do one's research carefully and have realistic expectations. For instance, I did

not expect my autobiographical novel would become a publishing sensation. Often, self-publishing companies raise a writer's hopes beyond what is realistic.

I was also cautious because, of the many self-publishing companies, most are expensive with no guarantee that the resulting book will sell. After speaking with several other Foreign Service officers who had published and done their homework, I chose Author House, a Penguin Random House company. I had several lengthy conversations with their representative over nearly six months before being convinced that his company would work closely with me to publish my book. I also read the publishing services agreement very carefully and asked the representative many questions before committing.

I have not been disappointed. I had several conversations with the company's marketing representative, and then chose from a range of marketing packages one that would meet my needs without being extravagant. The package included distribution of a press release to 500 media outlets in areas of the country I chose, access to GoodReads.com and a marketing evaluation through GoogleAds, to determine sales in a 30-day period. It also included a personalized website that readers can access to read excerpts and order the book. I turned down a discounted "Hollywood" package that would have sent my novel to an agency for evaluation and possible sale to TV or movie studios, as it held no guarantee of acceptance by a production company.

Clearly, self-publishing authors carry all of their project's burden and expense. Few published authors make the best-seller lists and sales of their books may remain low. The advantage to self-publishing is that the author retains all rights to the published book. Royalties—if any—will be higher than using a conventional publisher. And the author



Bruce K. Byers reads in his living room in February.

Photo courtesy of Bruce K. Byers

controls the marketing of the book.

I had a finished manuscript before I signed the publishing agreement. After signing, I worked with the company's teams to move my manuscript to become a ready-for-publication product. I kept control over each step in this process and was totally responsible for the outcome. I chose the book's format, paper and even the type fonts for the text and chapter headings. I also selected photographs (choosing from many I had taken during my travels), wrote the captions, designed the cover and wrote the backcover text. To date I have invested \$3,450 in the project, which means I'll have to sell approximately 400 copies of the soft cover book to earn back that sum in royalties.

At each step in the production process I had to sign an authorization form that approved what the company had produced at my instructions. I also had to review the proofs—the laid out copy of everything that would be part of my book and sign an authorization to go forward to the printing stage.

Over the course of this process, I kept records and receipts for tax purposes since the project is a business whose expenses are deductible and whose royalties are taxable.

Sure, there've been some bumps in the road, but I feel the final result is a handsome book that I hope will attract readers interested in the trials of a young man trying to figure things out as he travels by bus across the country and embarks on a trans-Atlantic voyage to Europe for a summer of discovery. ■