

## Vanity publishing? It's not as ugly as you think



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LAST December, writer Lee Ju-lyn spent an entire weekend cafe-hopping around Boat Quay, Dhoby Ghaut, Bugis and Orchard Road.

No, it wasn't an experiment on the human limits of caffeine intake.

Lee had publicised on her blog, on Facebook and via SMS that she would be camping out at various cafes to meet up with anyone interested in buying a copy of her newly-minted book.

It was a Haruki Murakami-meets-Tim Burton-meets-blog entries collection of short fiction titled *All the People Imagine & Other Short Short Stories*.

In two days, she met up with 20 people and sold 30 copies. After two weeks of this informal meet-and-sell session tactics, 100 books were sold.

Welcome to the world of self-publishing.

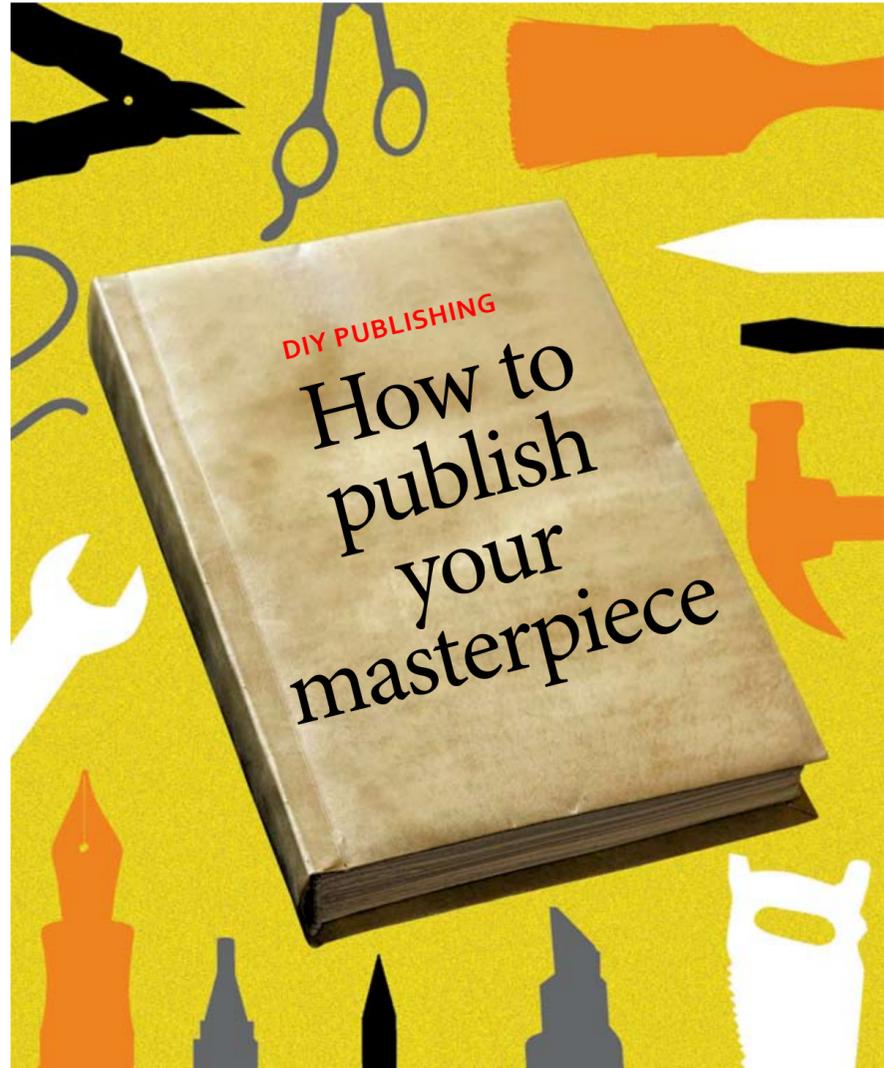
### 'VANITY' IS UGLY

Going DIY (do-it-yourself) has attained the status of cool in music and films.

But that's hardly the case when it comes to publishing, where it's also known as "vanity publishing", an unflattering term that denotes everything from bad writing to being the last resort of aspiring writers rejected one too many times.

"Every single step of the way is uphill. Distribution is difficult, bookshops aren't enthusiastic and people don't necessarily trust your product to be good," said Shamini Flint, the Singapore-based Malaysian author of the popular *Sasha Visits* children's book series under her own imprint Sunbear Publishing.

But Flint's case belongs to the



YEN YOK

annals of happy-ever-afters. Sunbear Publishing has sold, by her count, around 75,000 copies of her children's books in Southeast Asia, the United Kingdom and Australia.

When no publisher would pay any interest in her *Inspector Singh* crime fiction series, Flint decided, oh well, she'll just publish it herself.

Not that she ended up having to. Last year, British publishing company Little, Brown eventually signed a five-figure deal for three of her *Inspector Singh* books. The first book will be out in Singapore and Malaysia in July.

Flint also revealed that the series has recently been bought by St

Martin's Press in the United States.

### 2 LEGIT 2 QUIT

Working with a publishing house provides business know-how, existing distribution channels, and instant credibility. For playwright/poet Ng Yi-sheng, it was the very association with a reputable pub-

lisher that convinced him to publish his first book of poems, *Last Boy*, with local publisher firstfruits.

"For fiction or poetry, it's going to be hard to be taken seriously if you're not associated with a publisher," he said.

*Last Boy* went on to win the English category of last year's Singapore Literature Prize and is currently on its second 500-copy print run.

### IT'S A FULL-TIME JOB

With all positive points of going "legit" outweighing the negative connotations of self-publishing, it may seem strange that our caffeine-guzzling friend Lee insisted on going indie.

But according to her, if you're not out for fame, a readership of thousands or a movie deal, it's a route that may actually make sense.

Having a book out had long been a childhood dream for her and "the fastest way to do it is to do it myself", said Lee, 26.

Compared to, say, the year it took for Ng's *Last Boy* to come out in public in 2006 (no pun intended), Lee started arranging her manuscript (collected from her literary blog *meekfreak.blogspot.com*) in August. A mere four months later, she was off to hang out at cafes.

But during that time, the NUS psychology graduate realised "it turned out to be quite a full-time job". Lee left her job in the human resource department of a government office and plunged headlong into all aspects of publishing a book.

That included researching on what fonts and type of paper to use (Adobe Garamond and recycled paper, respectively); laying it out (using the free online programme Scribus); doing the cover artwork; "thinking of an arbitrary number to price the book" (\$16 or 10 cents per story, she quipped); and taking care of all the legal issues like copyright and ISBN issues (which are all pretty painless, she assured).



DON WONG

Check out [www.meekfreak.blogspot.com](http://www.meekfreak.blogspot.com) for more information on Lee Ju-lyn's *All the People Imagine & Other Short Short Stories*. Are you a student interested in the ins and outs of publishing? Go to All In!, a seminar for young writers on Feb 21, 10am to 6.30pm, at The Arts House. For details on these and other publishing/writing seminars, visit [www.bookcouncil.sg](http://www.bookcouncil.sg). Or just go DIY, lah.

The wily first-time publisher had also deliberately wanted to launch *All the People Imagine* in December, as an alternative option for a Christmas gift.

For the book's 300-print run, she spent \$3,000 of her savings. She rationalised: "It's not that difficult for people who are working, much like going on a holiday in Tokyo or buying an LV bag." Hmmm, true that.

Lee has now sold half of her books. But while she's still 50 copies short of breaking even, it's an experience for keeps.

"As a writer and the dreamer who wanted to this, I was very happy when it finally came out," said Lee.

### GOING DIGITAL

It couldn't have done so at a better time.

A recent *Time* article cited *Publishers Weekly* as having predicted that this year will be "the worst year for publishing in decades". We're talking about the biggies in the publishing scene, like Random House, Barnes & Noble and Simon & Schuster, laying off staff.

With whispers of "Old Publishing" under crisis, self-publishing is becoming more and more an option. And one other way of doing it is going digital, via eBooks or podcasts (the Japanese have something called keitai shosetsu, which are novels written and read on mobile phones).

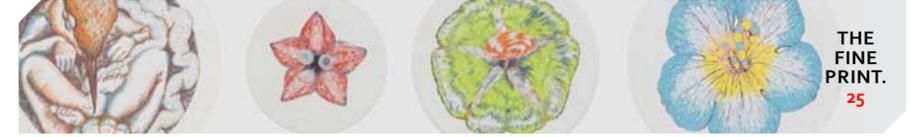
Even as they encourage trying the traditional route, National Book Development Council of Singapore executive director R Ramachandran said that e-publishing "is the way to go because you're reaching out to the market right away. The reach through eBooks is much greater".

Even someone who's been there, done that, like Flint, thinks it's a good idea.

"The Internet option is much better. The physical process of producing a hard copy of a book is very expensive and I know so many unsuccessful self-publishers.

"From a writer's point of view, it's not about the means of delivery but attracting attention to your work. Whether you're talking Internet, hardcopy or downloading podcasts, you still need people to come to your book."

In the case of Lee, perhaps, coming to your book means something literal. And involves lots of coffee.



THE FINE PRINT. 25

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## PLUS ROUNDUP

**CONCERT DATE REVISED**  
Update your gig guide. According to organisers, Joey Yung's concert here has now been changed to Apr 18, 7.30pm at the Max Pavilion @ Singapore Expo. Tickets from \$68 to \$148 at Sistic outlets.

**LATE NITE @ ESPLANADE**  
This month's instalment of the concert series features alternative band West Grand Boulevard, who were one of the first bands here to get on Nokia's Independent Artiste Club. Feb 27, 9.30pm at the Esplanade Recital Studio. Tickets at \$25 from Sistic.

## SUDOKUplus

DIFFICULTY RATING: +++++

				8	5		7	
5	1	8	7	2	9			4
		6	3	4				
2			5		7	4	6	
8								3
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9			5	7	4	2	3	8
3	4	9						

**HOW TO PLAY**  
The rules are easy. Fill in the grid so that every row, every column, and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 through 9.

**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

7	9	1	2	4	5	6	8	3
6	2	3	1	9	8	7	4	5
8	5	4	7	6	3	9	1	2
1	8	6	9	3	7	5	2	4
9	7	5	8	2	4	1	3	6
4	3	2	5	1	6	8	9	7
5	4	9	3	7	1	2	6	8
2	6	8	4	5	9	3	7	1
3	1	7	6	8	2	4	5	9