

Is P.O.D. the Most Vile and Profane Set of Initials Since S.O.B.?

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There is a new underclass in America. It is not based on ethnicity. There is a good chance that every ethnic group in America is represented in this underclass. It is not based on sex or sexuality. Both males and females are included. Homosexuals, Heterosexuals, and I wouldn't be surprised if a number of Autosexuals are also included. Physical attributes do not determine inclusion or exclusion. The beautiful and the ugly, the tall and the short, the obese and the emaciated are all, or certainly could be, counted among members of this underclass. What about intelligence, even basic mental abilities? While there has been no national test in this regard that I know of, I think it is safe to say that every member of this underclass has, at least, the ability to express themselves in a defined task, and has completed that task. This new underclass has not, as far as I know, been given a name. So let me coin the term, and let this new underclass henceforth be known as the PODs.

I am a POD.

I am neither dreadfully ashamed nor inordinately proud to make that statement. I make it simply as a matter of fact.

PODs, of course, are authors who, by either opportunity, choice or necessity, have had their books published utilizing the relatively new -- some would say advanced -- print-on-demand technology.

I first saw the computer-controlled print-on-demand press one weekend several years ago on CSPAN's "Book TV." They were covering that year's Book Expo, and there, among the seemingly unending herd of book booths all flashing their colors to attract and hopefully mate with book store buyers, a very one-on-one, glad-to-meet-you, let's-press-some-flesh, human sort of endeavor, was this -- this thing that looked like a copy machine on an illegal sports drug, which did not press flesh but pressed paper and, in doing so, made a hell of an impression on me. Wow! I thought. This is exciting. Print books only when there was an order -- print-on-demand. Save the cost of large print runs, the expense of warehousing thousands of books. Lower a publisher's up-front risk, so allow for the taking of a broader range of chances. In a publishing world where much money is paid to few authors, and bestsellerdom is the kingdom of choice, leaving behind a bunch of serfs toiling away in fallow fields, I came away from the broadcast feeling that

publishing was entering into a more democratic era, that more authors would be able, at last, to see themselves in print.

Little did I imagine at that time that when I actually became a POD I would suffer the rebuke of prejudice and feel the sting of discrimination. The road to the promised land, it seems, is not a well-paved one.

Well, if that's true, why go on the road at all? There are many answers to that question, some which I will illuminate below. Then I will come back to the prejudice and discrimination. But be warned, this is not going to be, as one might imagine, a diatribe against booksellers. There are very real and practical reasons why rebuking has taken place and stings have been felt. But first, let's hop onto the road.

In 69 B.C. Marcus Tullius Cicero, who was making his reputation in Rome as an orator, orating mainly in legal cases, won one of his most important cases by default. The former Roman governor he was prosecuting for abuses in office chose voluntary exile rather than to lose the case. For strategic reasons, Cicero had not yet given the five speeches he had planned that laid out the case against the former governor. The audience was disappointed. And it was being bandied about by Cicero's critics that this great orator had won his most important case without opening his mouth. So Cicero arranged to have copies of his speeches made and circulated. This self-published bit of vanity cemented Cicero's reputation. Those speeches have been in print now for 2072 years.

And yet, "self-published" is currently such a nasty word. Of course, not all P.O.D. books are self-published. My novel, *BLOOD IS PRETTY*, for example, is not self-published. Nonetheless, there is a stigma that P.O.D. means publish-on-demand rather than print-on-demand. In either case what it really is, is a process that by-passes traditional publishing and its coterie of gatekeepers. Why is this appealing? Because it is so damn hard to get published. Now one could choose to believe that modern big business publishing allows for all the cream to rise to the top, leaving only the cruddy curds behind, thereby making it a truism that those who are published deserve to be published, and those who aren't deserve all the ignominious pain they've suffered. One could choose to believe that. One could also choose to believe that all the corporate C.E.O.s who say they relish honest *laissez-faire*, may-the-best-man-win competition, wouldn't be thrilled, just thrilled, to be handed -- probably by the government -- a virtual monopoly in their area. But you would be a fool to. C.E.O.s know that the universe is a random place of very little justice, and cream does not always rise to the top, and we can get stuck with the cruddy curds by hook, crook, or someone's really poor taste. Any advantage you can take in this chaos -- take it.

But for the lone writer, that person who just simply wants to express thoughts in a manner accessible by members of the public, there have been few advantages when facing what seems to be the huge monolith of traditional publishing. The hunt for an agent, which you are told you cannot do without, is often a long, arduous process of research, recommendations, mailings, long waiting periods, and rejections, often in the form of form letters, or, if not, with explanations so far afield in understanding your work you tend to laugh more than cry upon reading them. And, of course, in order to attract an agent's

attention, you have constantly been asked to synopsise your work, to boil it down to its essence in a page or less for quick consumption. If that was an easy thing to do, of course, you wouldn't have had to write the damn *book* in the first place. Or you would be submitting only sonnets and haikus. In over twenty years in the film industry as both a producer and writer I have never read a synopsis that truly reflected its mother work. It was all just plot laundry listed, with no sense of characterization, uniqueness of dialog, or the true voice of the author. A synopsis is only useful in helping a person decide if they want beef or chicken, corn or peas, but gives no idea as to how they are to be prepared. I hate synopses. And let me avoid giving you my opinion of log lines. Suffice it to say, some days I see the whole world going Hollywood.

Now, if after all this, you actually get an agent, and one that isn't charging you fees for this, that or the other -- what is known in the trade as a legitimate agent -- you go through the submission process again. Except now you are submitted to publishers and by, obviously, an agent. This sounds good. But if you think, in most cases, that that agent is doing much more than slipping your manuscript into an envelope with a lovely letterheaded cover letter, then I hope you are a fantasy writer.

But let's try to be positive here and assume that the agent has a particularly appealing letterhead and your manuscript is bought for publication. In most cases you will be paid a very small advance. But that may be okay. Our focus here is getting into print, not making a fortune. Then you will have to deal with editors. A process many writers might not only need, but welcome. However, despite what I said above, the whole world probably isn't going Hollywood, but I'm afraid traditional publishing is leaning in that direction, and the Max Perkins of this world may be changing into little devils of Development Hell, mischievous little creatures who don't write or can't write, but are happy to tell you how to write. In other words, although it may be true that a good editor can improve your book, how can you be sure that your editor is good? When the process is ended, will it really still be your book? But let's assume it is, and you are a happy little author. Then it may be a year and a half before the book is actually published and out before the reading public. A very long year and a half. But there it is, out in the world, and you are so excited. Then you realize, unless your publisher has decided you are going to be a bestseller, that the book may be out there, but with very little marketing support from your publisher. So it is out there essentially alone. Well, why the hell did they go to all that trouble of buying, editing, printing and distributing the book if they are not going to support it? Welcome to traditional publishing. There are a lot of books being published each day, somewhat over 500. Take a number and get in line. Doesn't really matter though, pretty soon your book will be on the remainder shelf anyway.

But now an advantage in this random universe has reared its head, ugly to some, but beautiful to others. Self-publication, now fairly low cost due to P.O.D. technology. Or publication through one of the many new, small publishers who can afford to take more chances on more books because of the economic advantages of P.O.D. technology. It's quite attractive, I've got to tell you. It gives you a controlling interest in bucking the system, and you feel good. In either of the two cases above, the POD has experienced acceptance instead of rejection (even if he had to pay for it); has maintained complete

creative control over his manuscript (and responsibility for copy editing); has, at least, been seriously listened to about, if not collaborated on, the design of his book cover; has seen the book published in short order, and will possibly never see his book on remainder as his book will never go out of print as long as the P.O.D. publisher survives. P.O.D. is an advantage full of advantages.

Soon, if not currently, these advantages will be of appeal not just to first-time writers, but to all those poor, benighted mid-list authors who were so unceremoniously dropped at the end of the 1990's. Not to mention new sophomore authors who had their first book bought by traditional publishers in a love-at-first-sight excitement that included a commitment for a second book, only to find that sophomore effort dropped when they pulled a financial 2.0 in their freshman year.

The opportunities inherent in P.O.D. publishing also seem to have an appeal for writers from Hollywood, total professionals who welcome, for once, writing something not owned and operated by others. Maybe this is not impressive, though, as I've heard that certain members of traditional publishing are convinced that screenwriters, no matter how successful they are, cannot write successful books. Tell that to Sidney Sheldon, Stephen J. Cannell and Robert Crais.

Yes, there are many attractive advantages to becoming a POD.

But, oh the disadvantages. First of all, it's going to be assumed that because you are a POD your book is Godawful. Which it may well be. After all, it hasn't been vetted -- not to mention edited -- by "real" publishers. But more to the point, as the late Science Fiction author Theodore Sturgeon often said, quoting his own Sturgeon's Law, "90 per cent of everything is crap." And he was talking about traditionally published books. For the literary work of PODs we may well, if we really want to be honest with ourselves, have to amend the law to read "97 per cent." If crap is too harsh, let's just try mediocre, which, in my book, is far more damning anyway. Sometimes, though, "crap" is just the right word, especially when it comes to matters not literary, but grammatical. Not to mention spelling, punctuation, and just plain typos. Copy editing is not the strong suit of P.O.D. publishers, and is rarely the strong suit of writers. Nonetheless, despite all this, as in much of life, there could well be gold in the silt. Panning for it would be a honorable occupation.

But the obstacles to that occupation built into the system of P.O.D. publishing as it now exists are daunting. That which makes P.O.D. publishing attractive -- printing on demand, so no expensive print runs, no expensive warehousing of results -- makes it also ugly as sin.

For example: While printing on demand means no warehousing, it also means no warehouse exists to receive back unsold books, thus no return for cash or credit policy for bookstores. What they buy they've got to keep. Now, despite the fact that this return policy between traditional publishers and booksellers is a bit of a business anomaly -- most retailers keep what they order and just mark down items that aren't moving -- it is deemed essential by booksellers to keep them in the black. I don't know if this is really

the case for the mega-book chains, but it doesn't take a MBA degree to accept that it certainly must be for independently owned and operated booksellers, who have been battered of late not just by the mega-chains, but by the internet sale of books. And these are the booksellers that PODs should most want to be accepted by, for they are usually true book people, the kind who, when they discover a book, love nothing more than to get it into the hands of readers. They are often not just retailers, but advocates, proselytizers, drumbeaters. But they are still, always, retailers trying, usually under difficult circumstances, to make a living. They do not want to get stuck with inventory that does not move.

Especially at a high cost. It seems some print-on-demand publishers, or their distributors, do not offer the best of terms to booksellers. They have their reasons for this, and I don't have the expertise to comment. Except to say, added to a no return policy, it certainly seems like adding insult to injury.

There's another reason why booksellers, especially independent booksellers, are not fond of P.O.D. books. It seems that a lot of their business comes from collectors wanting to buy signed first editions of new books. P.O.D. books, because they are not printed with an initial print run, thus have no true first edition, are useless in this regard. In a way, I have less sympathy for this objection. As a writer I'm interested in readers not collectors. And something bothers me about the whole rationale of collecting brand new books as hedge investments or as *objets-des-artes* rather than as the lovely, usually compact, transference of a writer's story to a reader's mind they were meant to be. But business, I suppose, is business, and I'm not going to argue with it.

Because of the disadvantages mentioned above, PODs across the land have had their books prejudged as unworthy, for either literary or business reasons, of a bookseller's customers, and thus, have been, simply because they are PODs, discriminated against. All PODs have had the experience of having doors slammed in their faces so swift and hard that their noses weren't just flattened, they were pushed in. Then there they were, poor little PODs, one big nostril in the middle of their faces, shoulders hunched in humiliation, heads hanging for lack of love, shuffling off to the local Ben & Jerry's for a little, sweet, high caloric consolation.

Happily, this has not been the reception PODs have received from all booksellers. Some booksellers try very hard to work with PODs, especially if they are local authors, or have an interesting book. But still, it usually means that the author has to buy a stock of his books from his publisher and offer them to these bookstores on a consignment basis. For some authors, this makes business sense. For others, they simply don't have the means to do so. But, at least, they are not getting the door slammed in their face. And, if a POD makes a really concerted effort at marketing his book, finding the reasons why booksellers should buy it, and communicating that reason well, he may even find bookstores ordering the book from the normal channels, willing, by some book-loving instinct you've been able to activate in them, to take a chance on you. It has happen to me. And it is a most delightful experience.

Still, the vast majority of booksellers are slamming doors and pushing in noses and that means there may be gold out there in the silt being overlooked. And as gold is precious, may I make a few suggestions for all of us in the book trade to think about?

Is there any reason why the mega-chains couldn't have somebody at their corporate office, say a bright young Ivy League grad looking for a career in book selling, be the conduit and contact person for PODs? This person could survey the P.O.D. offerings, trying to find what may seem to be gems in the mounds of material on P.O.D. books. If something stands out in the crowd, then our bright young grad should get onto the author's website (almost all PODs have them) where, usually, the first chapter of the book is available for a read. If that hooks, then our grad should request a review copy of the book and see if it shines. If it does, and bright young grad recommends that the book be carried in the stores of the mega-chain, then the mega-chain, with its purchasing power, should be able to, I would hope, make a deal with the P.O.D. publisher that would not only include an attractive discount rate for the bookseller, but a commitment from the publisher to launch a marketing and publicity effort on behalf of the title, which should be an easy decision, knowing the book is going onto the shelves of a major mega-chain. For its part that mega-chain shouldn't just alphabetize the book on its shelves, but should include it in its New Discoveries section, or, possibly, create an endcap display for the P.O.D. Discovery. If really good P.O.D. books are found in this manner, then is it not conceivable that "P.O.D." could start to take on the attractive patina that "Independent Cinema" has today?

A version of this same effort could be taken on by BookSense, the umbrella organization of many of the independent book stores across the country. In their BookSense 76 monthly publication it would be lovely to have some P.O.D. Discoveries of the Month. Also, if BookSense could guarantee a certain amount of books to be purchased by a certain amount of the independents, again, maybe a mutually beneficial business arrangement could be made.

If this effort could be made to discover gold among the works of the PODs, then book review publications, from the Sunday sections of major newspapers, to magazines like *Publishers Weekly*, *Pages*, *Book*, *Bookmark*, etc., not to mention genre reviews such as *The Mystery Review*, or *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* should open themselves up to reviewing the works. They will have to be flexible about it, of course, not tying their reviews to traditional publishing publication dates, for a P.O.D. discovery might well be of a book that's been available for a year or more. It would be nice, in fact, for these publications to search out and find some gold themselves, calling the booksellers attention to P.O.D. books of merit. A nice, beautiful loop of information could begin to take place.

As to the problem of signed first editions: Could not all the P.O.D. publishers make an industry standard that declares the first, say, 500 copies (excluding review copies), of any P.O.D. book its first edition? All that would be required is, from book 501 onward, a "second edition" notice be included on the copyright page. It has to be easy to do folks -- it's all digital!

And what about book clubs? I'm not talking about the many-millions-reached-daytime TV ones (although what POD wouldn't want to be chosen for pixel fame?), but rather the original book clubs, the 10, 20 member ones discussing books while drinking in intoxicants and stimulants, some of which are the books themselves. The *Los Angeles Times* calls them "...the newest marketing force in a flailing multi-billion dollar industry." Well, book clubs, "use the Force," discover some P.O.D. gold and really tell the industry where to go.

These suggestions, of course, do not follow the pattern of traditional publishing and traditional publishing's relationships to both the booksellers and the press, not to mention their courting of book clubs. But I think they are worth considering because new technologies rarely go away, and P.O.D. publishing is probably here to stay. It would be a shame for people whose stated professional purpose in life is to bring the works of good writers to willing readers not to discover, at least, the entertaining glitter and possibly the deep preciousness of that gold that may be out there among the literary efforts of the PODs.