

# SOME UNVARNISHED TRUTHS ABOUT BOOK PUBLISHING

*by*

Brooks Jensen

Everybody wants to be published. It's a universal seduction to dream about a book of your photographs, a monograph, a record of your artistic work. I say this without qualification, and glibly, because I've always wanted that myself. If you are one of those who have never had such desires consider yourself lucky. Consider yourself intelligent.

Shortly after I started photographing and became interested in publishing a book of my work, I realized I knew nothing about book publishing. I always assumed there were people who knew everything about book publishing and, could I but talk to them, I'd find out exactly how to do it successfully, profitably, with ease and confidence. I wished I could corner them and ask them all the inner secrets that remain so hidden to those of us outside the publishing world. Instead, I became a publisher.

Now, as a result of my dozen years of experience as a publisher, I know a lot more about book publishing than I used to – not *everything*, but at least *more*. Some days I wish I didn't. It's a bleak picture. It's one that I've shared with countless photographers who have excitedly approached me about their great vision for their photography book. I've candidly explained the hard truths about book publishing – at least as I see them. Some have withdrawn from the precipice of disaster. Some have published with success. In either case I've found their gratitude genuine. It seems only natural, then, to write about it here in *LensWork*, to open the book, so to speak, about the nature of book publishing. If you've ever thought about publishing a book of your photographs, this article is for you.

And let me also state by way of prolegomena, that this article cannot possibly cover *all* aspects of book publishing. Worse, I'm certainly not the definitive authority on the topic. There are many others far more qualified to write this article than I am. Because they've not done so, I'll step up and offer my thoughts even though those more knowledgeable will likely be able to amend and correct some of my observations.

Let me also add that I fully recognize that my comments will not likely endear me to the publishing world – to other publishers, book resellers, book packagers, layout and design people, or those who might wish me to present a more Pollyanna picture of their industry. I wish someone had told me years ago what you are about to read. It might have saved me untold dollars and frustration.

### ***#1 – Some Statistical Background about the Book Industry***

Before you jump into a swimming pool, don't you test the temperature of the water? It's a prudent behavior in both swimming and publishing.

#### **Readers**

- 1/3 of high school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives.
- 42 percent of college graduates never read another book after college.
- 80 percent of U.S. families did not buy or read a book last year.
- 70 percent of U.S. adults have not been in a

bookstore in the last five years.

- 57 percent of new books are not read to completion.
- 70 percent of books published do not earn back their advance.
- 70 percent of the books published do not make a profit.  
*(Source: Jerold Jenkins, www.JenkinsGroup.com)*
- About 120,000 books are published each year in the U.S.  
*(Source: www.bookwire.com)*
- A successful fiction book sells 5,000 copies.
- A successful nonfiction book sells 7,500 copies.  
*(Source: Authors Guild, www.authorsguild.org)*

### **Quantity of Publishers by Year**

- 1947: 357 publishers
- 1973: 3,000 publishers
- 1980: 12,000 publishers.  
*(The New York Times, February 23, 1981.)*
- 1994: 52,847 publishers.  
*(Books in Print.)*
- 2003: Estimated 73,000 publishers  
*(parapublishing.com)*

### **Book in Print**

- 1.5+ million titles in print (currently available in the U.S.)
- Since 1776, 22 million titles have been published.  
*(Source: Jerrold Jenkins, 15 May 99. http://www.JenkinsGroup.com US)*

What can we conclude from this? Book publishing is a tough, competitive, risky business that likely cares little about you, your art, your mission, your intentions, your bank account, your vision, your sensitivities, or your naiveté. Furthermore, your chances of success in a publishing project are zero – or so close to it that you and zero are indistinguishable from one another. That's the good news.

But, I suspect this will not deter you, and it shouldn't. The statistics might be bleak – bleaker than you thought – but knowledge about the difficulties of the road ahead does not mean you should cancel the trip. Whatever you decide to do about publishing your work, you should do so from a position of facts, knowledge, and experience. Forge on!

## #2 – *Making Books is Easy*

Based on my conversations with hundreds of photographers, most of them assume that 80% of the challenge in seeing their work in print is the challenge of simply *producing* their book. When pressed, they might agree that 20% of the challenge is selling it. In fact, it's just the opposite. Today, making books is easy and selling them is, to be candid, *very difficult*.

Starting roughly in the mid-1990s desktop publishing became readily available; scanning and Photoshop started to become commonplace. The challenge of physically producing a book became so easy as to be almost child's play – at least when compared to the production logistics of, say, a scant 20 years earlier in 1975. Confusion about this appears when photographers begin asking questions about their project. *How should the images be scanned? What size should the book be? What fonts should be used? How should the book be laid out? What are the binding alternatives? What about papers, inks, duotones and screening pat-*

*terns?* All such issues are relatively easy to resolve in this day of ubiquitous desktop publishing. Sure, it takes little time, and getting scans perfectly calibrated for a particular printing press, paper, and ink set can be a challenge. But none of these are so difficult as to make it an impediment to easily producing a book. Application of sufficient capital or learning to new, readily available skills will reduce these challenges to molehills.

Interestingly, no one has ever asked me to name the most important distributors. No one asks about packaging, shipping, advertising budgets, book tours, promotional posters, wholesale discounts, and a thousand other details about selling a book. I'll address marketing in more detail later in this article.

Printing is also relatively easy. There are now so many printers who can produce high quality 300-line screen duotone printing (the cutting-edge technology of books printed in the 1970s) that there's probably a printer in your town who can do this, maybe even two. The technological challenges of printing such high quality reproductions of photographs is no longer limited to the elite printers in the industry. Of course, some are better than others, and there will always be an elite class that pushes the envelope to even higher standards. But, this doesn't change the fact that it's now relatively

easy to produce, print, and bind a museum-quality book, as so many hundreds of photographers have done.

So, if you want to have a book of your work, making it is not much of a challenge. That's the good news. But once you have them, tucked safely away in your garage or basement, now what will you do? This is where the challenges of marketing are likely to whack you squarely upside the head.

### **#3 – *The Changed World of Bookselling***

Desktop publishing has become so common that the sheer number of photography books being published is mind-numbing. There was a time in the early 1970s when a photography book collector could reasonably expect to purchase *every* new photography art book published. There were so few new titles each year that I knew several people who did – they purchased *every single new title*. Now, the number of monographs and other photography art books is so overwhelming that the simple laws of supply and demand have choked the distribution channels and forced buyers to make choices. With so many more books vying for the public's purchasing attention, selling books has become more and more difficult, partly due to the simple laws of supply and demand. But, there's more to the story.

Change #1 – Consolidation. In the last

dozen years there's been a tectonic shift in the book publishing world. The consolidation of booksellers into fewer and fewer megastores and their use of sophisticated technology has been nothing short of revolutionary. I can best illustrate this by discussing one particular book, *Passage* by Irving Penn. When this book debuted in 1991 it was expected by its publisher, Knopf, that it would quickly become a bestseller. Irving Penn has a widespread reputation in the worlds of photography, art, and fashion. Knopf printed the book in a very large edition, and then distributed it to a handful of statistical test stores.

Change #2 – Data. The megastores' computer models are so sophisticated they can analyze selected test stores' data and within hours tell you whether or not your book will sell. They can even project *how many* they believe will sell based on sophisticated statistical extrapolation. After 72 hours, they predicted that *Passage* would not sell well. They rapidly cancelled their pre-production orders. In previous generations, this might not have been a problem – only a delay in the publisher realizing their profit. But conditions have changed, thanks to our friends at the Internal Revenue Service.

Change #3 – Tax Law. In the middle of the century, book publishers could print a book and take years to sell it if need

be. They had large warehouses, lengthy catalogs, and even a dribble of sales would eventually make a book profitable. In the short term, they could deduct the production cost of the entire press run in the year it was printed. Then the tax laws changed. Now a publisher can only deduct as a business expense the cost of a book *in the year it is sold*. This simple change in tax calculations have forced publishers to flush out any unsold inventory by the end of the year in which a book is printed, or face a very punishing tax consequence. The result was the birth of the “remainder” market.

Knopf, now realizing they had a glut of books on their hands, quickly remaindered *Passage*. Within days it began to appear on retail shelves at less than half the publisher’s price. Today it’s listed as the 459,044th best-selling book on amazon.com – essentially in the metaphorical back corner of the deep basement. Few people wanted to buy this book and the retailers knew this before the publisher did.

This anecdote illustrates the fundamental shift in publishing, and is a micro-example of the shift in retailing in general. As retailers have become more sophisticated with computer models and data gathering, they’ve become more and more skilled at discovering and predicting what customers want. Manufacturing is now, more than ever, a customer-demand, customer-driven

activity. Numbers talk, and publishers had better listen. The big publishers do; they have adapted to this new world. But for photographers who are motivated to publish or self-publish on the blind faith that their personal and self-directed creative work will find an audience – somehow – such brutal, number-crunched marketing and retailing can be an unfriendly place.

The larger booksellers are only likely to purchase a book when they know, through their statistical analysis, that their customers will be likely to buy it – a scenario that handicaps the independent or self-published book. *What is your marketing plan? they’ll demand to know. How large is your book tour? What is your advertising budget? How many radio station interviews have you scheduled? When will you be on Good Morning America? What are you doing to create demand?* Gulp. To paraphrase that famous Mark Twain comment about banks: They’re happy to help you when you can prove you don’t need it.

#### **#4 – *What It Seems versus What It Is***

One of the most interesting places to gather simple data is at amazon.com – where any book can be seen for its rank in current Amazon’s sales. This changes daily, so any survey will quickly go out of date, nonetheless, it can be illuminating. Today I reviewed of the top 100 selling

photography books, specifically for this article. These items were of interest:

- There was one – exactly *one* – monograph in the top 100 selling **photography** books – *A Collaboration With Nature* by Andy Goldsworthy. It was listed in Amazon as overall best seller #2,808.
- The top-selling non-technical, non-monograph photography book – that is to say, a book of *photographs* (from more than one photographer) – was *4 Inches*, a book of erotic photographs with a foreword by Elton John. It ranks number 923 on Amazon’s best-selling list. (Nothing sells like sex, unless it is *sex* and *celebrity* in combination.)
- The number seven best selling photography book was entitled *XXX: 30 Porn Star Portraits* which ranks number 5,553 overall. See comment above.
- *Ansel Adams at 100*, today’s best selling Ansel Adams book, is ranked by Amazon as #49,568 and does not make the list of top 100 best-selling books in the photography category. Ansel Adams doesn’t make the top 100? What does this tell us about our little projects?

- And what were the rest of the top 100? They were all “how-to” books – how to take wedding photos, how to use filters, how to master exposure in 10 easy steps, and the like.

I could flood you with more statistics, but I think you see the point. Photography books that are *books of photographs* barely blip the radar.

As pessimistic as this sounds, it’s even worse than you might guess. In my youth I would have assumed that publishing a book of my photographs was the path to fame and fortune, artistic respectability and renown. It may actually be, for some lucky few. But I’m beginning to think the lottery is a better gamble.

Let me cite one more example to make my point. When my book, *Letting Go of The Camera*, was published in November of 2004 it immediately rose to the top 10 list at one of the larger online photography booksellers. Good! It was ranked the #5 bestseller for the week of November 27 – the crucial week of Thanksgiving, the traditional launch of the Christmas selling season. I was naturally elated. But upon reviewing the purchase orders we’d received from this seller I was disheartened to find they’d purchased five copies – *five copies* – on November 10, and another copy on November 23. A total

of six. Whoopie. I was again listed in the top 10 selling books at #7 for the week of December 11. I was encouraged. Checking our records, by the end of December they'd purchased a total of 32 copies. Not bad, but not a rate that would sell many books.

By way of contrast, we sold about 1,500 copies in the same period directly from our website. This illustrates one of the most important unvarnished truths about publishing in today's world: **You cannot rely on others to sell your books for you.** Self-marketing is the foundation for self-publishing.

By way of additional contrast, *LensWork* sells about 17,000 copies every other month. Which brings me to the topic of ...

### ***#5 – Print runs and the Budget***

There are 290 million people in America. Surely not all of them are interested in fine art photography, but you would assume that in a country that size the number of photography books that could be sold would be at least in the *tens of thousands* and certainly not less than the *thousands*. If this were true I wouldn't need to write this article.

In my youth, as a consumer outside the publishing industry I only knew that new books were regularly published and were often good-looking books. Although I was

always curious, I never had access to the inside business data about how well a title sold, whether or not books were profitable, how much the photographer was paid, etc. It was easy to assume that book publishing was profitable based simply on the fact that so many photography books were being published. I'd still believe that, based on the external evidence, if I didn't know better.

My late friend Morrie Camhi first burst this misconceived bubble. He told me that: only one of every seven books makes money; most photographers are paid little, if any, royalties; and that most photography books sell fewer than a thousand copies. In fact, the rare one that does has to make enough profit to pay for the losses of the other six – or the publisher is in trouble! I was stunned. In the intervening years I've verified Morrie's information time and again. I've talked to dozens of photographers over the years who have had their books published by respectable publishers, had their books published by a marginal publishers, and published books themselves. I've heard tales of publishing horrors and only a few success stories. Morrie, bless his soul, was an optimist.

First, production runs are smaller than I would have ever guessed. The market for photography art books is embarrassingly small. Most photography art books are produced in a press run of around 2,000

copies. Period. Rarely will a book be printed in 5,000 copies; only a few reach as many as 7,500 copies or more. Printing is one thing; selling another. A book that *sells* 2,000 copies is an unqualified success. I am not kidding. Fine art photography books are not a strategy for those seeking wealth. You may quote me on this.

Profits are incredibly elusive. A photography art book is an expensive thing to produce. Just getting a book ready for the press is expensive – even before the first one is printed. There’s the cost of the scans, the cost of the layout and design, pre-plating proofs, on-press proofs to test the inks and paper, the printing plates, and the press set-up. Before the first book is printed it’s not uncommon for the bill to exceed \$10,000. Buy the paper, print the book, and have it hardbound, ready for shipping the typical budget is more likely to be \$30–\$50,000 – and don’t be surprised if it is more. Budgets in the \$60,000 or even \$80,000 range are not uncommon. A lot depends on the paper, the number of ink plates, the binding (softbound or hardbound), and of course the size and number of pages.

How many books does this buy you? This is where *amortization* numbers come in to play. If the press run is 500 books the budget might total, say, \$25,000 (\$50 per book); if the press run is increased to 2,000 books the budget might increase to

\$35,000 (\$17.50 per book). With this kind of amortization math you can easily see that once the preparation work is done and the press is ready to go the cost of *additional* books is relatively small – the last 1,500 books only adding \$10,000 (\$6.66 per book). Once the press is running, the paper costs and additional binding are the primary additional expense, and the time on-press amortizes dramatically. The sweet spot in the amortization of production costs is typically around 2,000 books. Any less than 2,000 and the cost-per-book skyrockets. Any more than 2,000 and the cost-per-book is not reduced substantially. Therefore, a typical press run is 2,000 to 2,500 copies – enough to amortize the cost-per-book but not so many as to unduly increase the budget and break-even analysis.

Now do some math. If the budget is, say for round numbers, \$40,000 and you end up with 2,000 books, the cost-per-book is \$20. Keep this number in mind. Now, how much should the books sell for? The industry standard is that retail should be 7x the cost of production. A book that costs \$20 should then sell for – a whopping \$140. Everyone knows that is too much for the average consumer, so margins immediately shrink for expensive art books.

Alternatively, you can reverse engineer from retail down to a budget *cost*. If you

think your book needs to retail for \$50, you might want the cost-per-book to be closer to \$9-10. This explains why so many photography books are printed in China, Hong Kong, or Singapore. Publishers are desperate to reduce their costs, but in doing so they are often left with an inferior product – not always, but often.

### **#6 – *The Retail Price Is Not What You Get***

A more typical photography art book will have a retail price of, let's say, \$75. Now suppose you want to sell your book through Barnes & Noble, Borders books, or some other megastore. These stores will only buy your book if it is sold through a distributor – someone like, for example, Ingram Books. Ingram will tell you that they will pay you *retail less 60%* for your book. Your “\$75 book” will now collect for you (or your publisher) only \$30. At that rate you'll have to sell 1,333 (two-thirds of the press run) just to pay the printing bill. Not until the 1,334<sup>th</sup> book sells will there be any “profit” to pay for things like your travel, your royalties, your taxes, your film, your cameras, or your No-Doze.

However, don't spend the money yet. This does not include the fact that sales to distributors are based on a “guaranteed sale” clause. That is to say, if the retailer fails to sell your book they have the right to return it for credit within a year. You'll be excited when you get an order for ten books only to be dashed when, eleven

months later, you get eight of them back – dog-eared and shop-worn. This happens so frequently that many independent publishers now refuse to sell to some of the most abusive wholesalers, particularly those who sell to small, independent bookstores. It's not profitable to sell to them. Simply said, wholesale distributors are shipping conduits, not marketing machines.

But what about working with retailers directly? Some retailers will buy from small publishers and they will typically pay *retail less 40%* for your book. Such retailers are often much more motivated to sell and much pickier in what they choose to stock. They tend to buy only those books they're confident they can sell. Selling them your \$75 book will collect for you \$45. Better, you say. Keep the “break-even” analysis clearly in focus. Just because your cost-per-book might be \$20 does not mean that a sale for \$45 is profitable. At \$45 wholesale, you will need to sell 888 of them to pay the paper, printing, and binding bills. Obviously, if you sell 500 books and hit the marketing wall (a common occurrence) the project is not yet profitable.

What about working with galleries and other photography related outlets? Many galleries don't sell books; those who do tend to sell only books by photographers they represent. For those of you self-pub-

lishing, the question becomes how many galleries represent you? How well do they sell your work? How quickly do they pay?

### **#7 – *The Problem of Marketing***

All of this begs the question: *How big is the market for fine art photography monographs?* Again, I dislike sounding so pessimistic, but the unvarnished truth is important for you to know. If you want to find out, ask the average photographer who has produced 2,000 books how many they still have in their garage. Almost anyone has the ability to sell 100 to 500 books, give or take. But that leaves 1,500 books waiting for unknown buyers. (This assumes your press run was *only* 2,000.) Now who are you going to sell to? And where are you going to find them? And how much will it cost to market to them?

This explains why so many photographers who are successful selling books are the ones most active teaching workshops and doing public lectures. They at least have a means to market their books directly. Given enough workshop students, even a sizable press run will eventually be sold. I cannot overemphasize the importance of some form of self-marketing, developing your own audience, finding your own sales outlet. For those outside the public eye, it's a difficult thing to connect with an audience. It is simply the unrelenting law of supply and demand. If you are an unknown photographer there will be

little demand for your book – except from your friends and neighbors and photo compatriots amongst whom you are a celebrity. As I say, anyone can sell 100 to 500 books. It's the remaining ones that determine whether or not your book is a success.

There are photography books that can connect with a large audience. The American Booksellers Association reports that 80% of art books are purchased as gifts. If the subject matter of your book lends itself to this market, you have reason to be more optimistic. Here are two examples: *The Hat Book* by photographer Rodney Smith (Doubleday, 1993) had an initial press run of 35,000 – and sold out! Why did it do so well? Because lots and lots of people love hats. It was a beautifully produced book, printed extremely well, and the photography was very interesting. It is not what I would characterize as a traditional fine art monograph, but it was still a beautifully produced small volume. It sold for \$35. It was packaged and marketed as a gift and was successful. Another example is by the photographer Keri Pickett in a book she produced called *Love In The 90s* (Warner Books, 1995). This is a touching and sentimental book about her grandparents who lived into their 90s and loved each other deeply. She photographed their aging love affair and posthumously combined her photographs with their love letters. It was a beautifully

done and sensitive book – again an inexpensive one – and sold, according to Keri, over 135,000 copies.

It is important to note that both of these were not purchased as monographs celebrating the photographer’s creative life. They were purchased by people for whom the subject matter was paramount. Only rarely is a book of photographs of interest outside of photographic circles unless the subject matter is the connection with the buyer. I’ve proposed for years that even a famous photographer like Ansel Adams sold so many books not *because* he was “Ansel Adams” but because his pictures were of a subject that so many people valued so dearly. The great pristine landscape he photographed at the height of America’s burgeoning environmental movement made a connection that promoted his books. His fine art black-and-white photographs appealed to an audience who had only passing interest in fine art black-and-white photographs but who loved Yosemite, the pristine mountains, and the purity and clarity of nature’s grandeur. Of course, those of us who love fine art black-and-white photographs loved his work, too. But the market for his books was so large because his appeal superseded the small market of photography fans.

### ***#8 – So What Is a Photographer to Do?***

How does one become successful in the world of publishing? What role should

publishing play in a photographer’s career? What is a photographer to do?

The answers are complex, with many variations, none of which are guarantees. Publishing is a high-risk venture and, like all such gambles, is best entertained when one can afford the loss, should it occur. There are some strategies, however, that have proven successful for other photographers.

Print a short-run book – only 500 or so total. The cost-per-book will be high, but the budget may be more affordable. If reselling your book at a competitive price is not important, this might be the way to go.

Success in business is often determined by “combination marketing” – Hollywood movies promoted at fast food restaurants; beer companies who sponsor NASCAR teams, etc. Similarly, the success of photography art books are often the result of combinations – for example, book and print combinations are a frequent way to subsidize a portion of the printing costs.

Workshop instruction or public lectures get books in front of a potential buying audience, as I mentioned earlier. Find a way to coordinate your book-selling efforts with others. There are numerous strategies, too many to detail in this article.

But, the important point is that proactive marketing is the key.

There is another bit of advice I can offer unhesitatingly and guarantee to be useful and accurate: do not begin a publishing project naïvely. Know the risks, know your market, know your expectations, know your budget, know what you are willing to sacrifice to see your images in print, and most of all, be realistic in your expectations.

Despite all the fervent wishes, publishing a book will very likely not make you famous, not make you wealthy, not make you a celebrity, not increase the collector's demand for your original photographs, and, if statistics can be trusted, not

likely pay for itself. Does that mean you shouldn't publish? Heavens no, it means no such thing. It does mean that self-publishing is best considered as a form of *consumption* rather than as a form of *entrepreneurship*. So considered, done carefully, done prudently, self-publishing can be a way of sharing your work with a wider audience than you would likely ever accomplish with original prints. Seen in the context of original prints, electronic publication, gallery shows and exhibitions, magazine publication, special editions prints, posters and notecards, and the myriad other ways of producing and distributing one's photographic images, book publishing has a role. It is a role that is best, however, when entertained with one's eyes wide open.

