

# Salem author self-publishes herself into a novel \$2m payday

By David Mehegan, Globe Staff | January 13, 2008



With a draft of her novel completed, Brunonia Barry of Salem wanted to find an audience. But instead of chasing after publishers - often a discouraging task for any new author - she and her husband took a different tack. They published “The Lace Reader” on their own.

Then something amazing happened: Buzz exploded around the book, both online and in stores, and mainstream publishers came calling. In October, a literary auction was held, and Barry sold the book, and a future one, for more than \$2 million.

It is one of the biggest deals ever for a previously self-published first novel and a vivid example of how old publishing norms have changed. Self-publishing was once a consolation prize for a pipe-dreamer. But today it’s possible for writers such as Christopher Paolini, author of the fantasy blockbuster “Eragon,” Richard Paul Evans, author of the bestseller “The Christmas Box,” and Zane, whose first three novels were self-published, to bypass publishers, then score lucrative contracts with them once their books are proved.

As a novelist, Barry, 47, is a late bloomer. Raised in Marblehead, she spent years working with theater companies in Maine and Chicago. In the mid-1980s, she went to Hollywood to have a crack at screenwriting. For 10 years she worked on other writers’ scripts but never sold one of her own. In 1995 she and husband, Gary Ward, moved back to Massachusetts, settling in Salem, where they started a successful game and puzzle software company called SmartGames.

Barry, called Sandy by friends, had always dreamed of writing fiction. In 2004 she wrote a pseudonymous short novel for Beacon Street Girls, a Lexington publisher of preteen fiction. Since 2000, she had also been working on a novel for adults, “The Lace Reader.”

The intricate narrative centers on a young woman who has the power to read the future in the patterns of Ipswich lace. The woman returns to Salem from California when her beloved aunt dies, perhaps by foul play. As a local police officer becomes involved with her while investigating the case, a variety of characters embroider the increasingly strange mystery.

In 2002, Barry finished a draft and, with advice from an editor friend, spent the next several years tearing the book apart and rewriting it, finishing in 2006. At times she feared she was ruining it. “I thought I might not get it back together,” she said. “If you change one thread, you must go back and change the others. Like a piece of lace, it starts to unravel.”

Meanwhile, she and Ward considered how to reach a reading audience. Barry was reluctant to seek a publisher. “We decided that we should do it,” she said. “We didn’t want to turn it over to someone else and wait two years.”

In California, Ward had worked for an incubator of startup companies. With that experience, he and Barry decided to start their own company, edit and print the book, find a distributor, carry out a publicity campaign, and market

the books to stores - everything that established publishers do.

Most writers resort to self-publishing because they can't find a publisher. They often turn to print-on-demand presses such as iUniverse or Xlibris. The author puts up the money - usually less than \$1,000 - and the publisher edits the text, designs jacket art, and makes the book available through online outlets. But there's no inventory - books are printed when ordered - and the books rarely are reviewed. Few bookstores place orders.

"We occasionally hear from self-published authors who say, 'How can I get my book into bookstores?'" said Steve Fischer, executive director of the New England Independent Booksellers Association, "but the system is so difficult to plug into. You're responsible for everything - you have to be author, agent, accountant, postal clerk, sales rep, publicity agent, go around to your local bookstore and find out if there is any interest."

Barry and Ward were willing to do all that, and spend freely in the process - more than \$50,000 before they were finished - but there were times of doubt. "Everybody told us this would never work," Barry said, "that what we were trying to do never happens. We were scared that we wouldn't find a distributor, since they usually won't deal with a publisher that has only one book."

Rave review

By early last year, they were ready to test the market. The manager of The Spirit of '76 Bookstore in Marblehead put them in touch with store-based book clubs, whose members said they would be willing to test-read the manuscript.

"I would go to the meetings and take notes," Barry said. "I asked them to be brutally honest: 'Where did you stop reading? Did you identify with this character? What did you think of the mother?'" "With the feedback, she made some minor changes.

They incorporated their company as Flap Jacket Press and planned to release "The Lace Reader" last September. They set up a website and hired a copy editor, jacket designer, and book publicist, Kelley & Hall of Marblehead. They attended bookseller conventions, handing out advance copies and buttonholing booksellers. Kelley & Hall sent copies to book bloggers and trade magazines such as Publishers Weekly and promotional announcements to 700 independent bookstores.

Then last summer came two big breaks: First, Kelley & Hall helped land a deal with a Tennessee distributor, Blu Sky Media Group; second, a rave review appeared in Publishers Weekly. "The Lace Reader" was hailed as "a captivating debut."

Still, the couple had to close the deal with booksellers. They ordered a first printing of 2,500, then began to visit stores, trying to get them to stock the book. Among the first was Salem's Cornerstone Books.

"Sandy dropped her book off," said Beth Simpson, events coordinator of Cornerstone Books in Salem. "I didn't know her. I like to do an author appearance to generate interest; otherwise the book will just sit on the shelf." She arranged to have Barry do a reading, then called Salem and Marblehead newspapers, which ran stories about the reading.

"That generated incredible interest," Simpson said. "We had a handful of people a day coming in, asking if we had the book. At the appearance, we had about 40 people, which was a big crowd for an unknown author. We sold out in a blink - probably 80 to 100 books. We don't sell 80 to 100 books of Stephen King or Dennis Lehane."

Word spread. Several teachers read the book, and both Swampscott and Marblehead high schools added it to the literature curriculum.

## The seven-figure offer

With years of experience in screenwriting, Barry thought the story might interest Hollywood. So she and Ward sent a book to agent Brian Lipson, a book-to-movie specialist at Endeavor Talent Agency in Los Angeles. Lipson liked it but doubted it would sell to the movies without a commercial publisher. So he sent it to Rebecca Oliver in Endeavor's New York literary branch.

"I read it overnight and loved it," Oliver said. "I called Sandy and said, 'I have to work with you. This book is amazing.' It has strong characters and an amazing twist at the end. I sent it to a few publishers. The phone started ringing."

Laurie Chittenden, executive editor of publisher William Morrow, was one of those who called. "It reminded me of why I love books - a good story, wonderful atmosphere, good characters, a real sophistication," she said.

Morrow made a seven-figure offer (the author, agent, and publisher would not reveal the number), which Oliver turned down before holding a three-day auction in October. Several publishers submitted bids, and Morrow came out the winner. None of the principals would name the exact amount of the two-book deal, but Oliver confirmed that it exceeds \$2 million for world English rights. She has also signed deals for foreign-language rights in at least 16 markets, and said that Hollywood has been calling. The Morrow edition, with editing changes, is scheduled for next September. The Flap Jacket version is no longer for sale.

Had they known how much is involved in publishing and how much it would cost, Barry and Ward say, they might not have tried it. "It's not for the faint of heart," Ward said.

David Mehegan can be reached at [mehegan@globe.com](mailto:mehegan@globe.com).