

When Publication Is a Dubious Honor

Print-on-demand publishing tools are a boon to self-publishers, but some subsidy presses using the technology have acquired a reputation for accepting book manuscripts from any authors who can fog a mirror—and thus glutting the marketplace with substandard products. That’s one negative aspect of the meme that says with new technology “anybody can be an author or a publisher.”

To get to the bottom of widespread suspicions about a little-known Maryland publisher, a group

of professional science fiction and fantasy writers and editors, masterminded by James D. Macdonald, planned a sting operation last fall.

They wanted to test whether PublishAmerica, which has a large author list but was accused by some unhappy clients of poor business practices, was really as selective as it claimed to be. A deliberately very badly written fake book by a fake author, *Atlanta Nights* by “Travis Tea,” was submitted by the group.

Members each wrote a chapter or two. The chapter numbering was

faulty, the storyline contained characters who died in one chapter and wandered back into the action in a later one, and characters changed race, gender, and motivation across chapters. No attention was paid to continuity of space, time, causality, or common sense—never mind art. The fake book was accepted for publication.

According to one of the sting’s writers, Teresa Nielsen Hayden, who reviewed *Atlanta Nights* for Lulu.com, “The book’s moment of true genius comes not when one of the characters wakes up and realizes that all of the foregoing chapters were a dream but when that happens AND THEN THE BOOK CONTINUES ANYWAY.” Hayden gleefully guarantees that the book provides “hour upon hour of innocent and educational fun.”

But we’re not giggling. It’s “educational fun” only for those who already know better—those clever and savvy enough to be in on the joke. The fact that *Atlanta Nights* was accepted and published completely without regard for its quality suggests a grim reality that’s the converse of the truism of how difficult it is to get published.

Naïve or inexperienced people who believe they have a story to tell, and aspire to be book authors because to them that’s an honorable achievement, will not get what they think they’re paying for: a professionally edited and produced product they can be proud of. Technology can’t fix that kind of business model. ♦