

# HYBRID PUBLISHING

## *Spreads Its Wings*

With new models, creative business deals, higher royalties, tailored editorial support, traditional distribution, and a whole lot more, hybrid publishing is offering authors something they can't find at traditional houses

BY BROOKE WARNER

If there's one thing that's certain about hybrid publishing, it's that it's here to stay. Unlike traditional publishing and self-publishing, the term *hybrid publishing* often feels to the publishers who occupy this corner of the publishing world like an imperfect fit. As a business model, it's been around for decades. The simplest way to think about hybrid publishing is that the author pays some or more of the production and editorial costs in exchange for the publisher's expertise—and for higher royalties.

Traditional publishers have, for years, cut these kinds of creative business deals with authors, and often at the authors' behest, especially when they have big followings and much to gain by retaining a higher royalty. Because of the nature of their relationship with authors, some of the publishers spotlighted in this feature prefer the terms *copublishing* or *partnership publishing*, though there's wide consensus that the term *hybrid publishing* has the most industry and public traction.

Some refer to hybrid publishing as the best of both worlds, because hybrid publishers draw from elements of legacy publishing, such as selective vetting and traditional distribution, and self-publishing, such as more

author control and higher royalties. To be a hybrid publisher requires facing the challenges not only of the traditional industry, which is complex and competitive enough, but also of the general lack of awareness or regulation about what it is to be a hybrid publisher.

To bring clarity, integrity, and a unified ideology to hybrid publishing, the Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA) in 2018 codified nine criteria for hybrid publishers, each pointing to functions that a reputable hybrid publisher is expected to perform. This year, the IBPA is updating these criteria and adding two additional points. Though there is more work to be done in defining and refining this type of publishing, the fact that the hybrid model is a thriving space in the publishing ecosystem speaks for itself. In this spotlight, 10 of the most reputable and successful hybrid publishers share their journeys and highlight what sets their publishing companies apart.

**Greenleaf Book Group**, run by CEO Tanya Hall, brings 25 years of experience to the table and boasts an impressive backlist and equally impressive sales. With its own distribution and customized marketing campaigns, the publisher brings a wealth of experience and

opportunities to the table for its authors. **Morgan James**, founded in 2003 by David Hancock, covers all the costs of production, printing, and distribution, requiring its authors to purchase at least 2,000 copies. In its estimation, this entrepreneurial setup empowers authors while also giving Morgan James more flexibility and speed to market. Morgan James has had multiple titles on the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists and has earned its spot as one of the most recognized hybrid publishers. Also founded in 2003, **Amplify Publishing** is home to six imprints, including Mascot Books. Founder Naren Aryal, like many of the hybrid publishers featured in this spotlight, began with a self-published book done well and started getting requests for support from other authors—so much so that it led to an enterprise of publishing companies, all of which put the author first. **Köehler Books**, spearheaded by founder John Köehler, has been very selective in what it chooses to publish since its outset in 2010 and has a traditional arm to its business, even offering traditional publishing deals to authors who sell more than 2,000 copies. Like many others drawn to the hybrid publishing space, the company prides itself on

## IBPA'S HYBRID PUBLISHER CRITERIA

A hybrid publisher must:

1	Define a mission and vision for its publishing program.
2	Vet submissions.
3	Commit to truth and transparency in business practices.
4	Provide a negotiable, easy-to-understand contract for each book published.
5	Publish under its own imprint(s) and ISBNs.
6	Publish to industry standards.
7	Ensure editorial, design, and production quality.
8	Pursue and manage a range of publishing rights.
9	Provide distribution services.
10	Demonstrate respectable sales.
11	Pay authors a higher-than-standard royalty.

others drawn to the hybrid publishing space, the company prides itself on transparency and a comprehensive approach to publishing. **She Writes Press and SparkPress** publisher Brooke Warner (author of this article) has been a leading voice of advocacy for hybrid publishing since she cofounded She Writes Press in 2012. Two years later, She Writes Press joined forces with SparkPress, founded by Crystal Patriarche in 2013. The two imprints, defined by their strong editorial vision, have been laser-focused on leveling the playing field for authors. **Page Two Books**, based in Canada, launched in 2013 to help thought leaders, subject matter experts, and organizations

publish leading nonfiction books. Like many of the other founders of hybrid presses, cofounders Jesse Finkelstein and Trena White got their starts in traditional publishing and sought to fulfill a need in the marketplace—and they've been going strong ever since. Founded as LifeTree Media in 2013 by Maggie Langrick, **Wonderwell** has an editor-driven acquisition process and works closely with the dozen or so authors it publishes each year to position them for optimal success. That more than half of its list is award-winning and/or critically reviewed is a true feat in this competitive landscape. In 2014, husband-and-wife team Rohit Bhargava and Chhavi Arya Bhargava cofounded **IdeaPress** to publish “outside-the-box” business titles—and they've never looked back. IdeaPress is highly selective, publishing only about 25 books a year, and prides itself on being a “no-bullsh\*t publisher.” It's a standout in the world of business books for its author-focused approach. **The Collective Book Studio**, founded by Angela Engel in 2019, prides itself on its high-quality design and packaging, and its books are standouts in the gift, lifestyle, and children's markets. Engel comes from the sales side of the traditional industry and notes that sales are integral to the company's success; the Collective won't publish a book unless she knows she can sell it.

**Girl Friday Books** became a full-fledged hybrid book publisher in 2020, but cofounders Leslie “Lam” Miller and Ingrid Emerick had been occupying an important space in independent publishing since 2006, supporting authors with every aspect of editorial and production and helping authors to find publishers or to self-publish. Their entry into the hybrid publishing scene is a welcome addition with their deep roots in publishing and strong track record for making beautiful books.

One of the IBPA's slogans, developed to raise visibility around its criteria, advises us to judge books by their content, not their business models. It's not difficult to know a good book when

you see it, and especially when you read it. In the pages that follow, you'll find a common thread in the ethos that drives these companies' founders: author-first publishing. Many hybrid publishing companies were founded as a reaction—and solution—to what was and is still not working in the traditional publishing space. And with its ongoing consolidation, traditional publishing has become even more inflexible, the barriers to entry ever higher. Hybrid publishing models give authors the kind of market access, through distribution and sales channels and publicity and marketing support, that self-publishing still cannot provide.

The future of hybrid publishing is bright, but continuing education is essential. The model's success all but ensures the proliferation of bad-faith entities using the hybrid name to offer high-ticket publishing deals with empty promises. *Publishers Weekly* is spotlighting the publishers in this issue as a nod to the fact that hybrid publishing is a force to be reckoned with. The success and, in some cases, longevity, of the 10 publishers featured in these pages is something that can be earned only through hard work, industry savvy, and commitment to integrity and transparency. Season after season, the books keep coming. Author satisfaction, along with the books' quality and sell-through, proves the merit of the business model.



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# Morgan James Publishing: Supporting Authors and Building Community from Page One

Since founding Morgan James Publishing in 2003, entrepreneur David Hancock has helped launch the careers of thousands of authors. Whether it's a business or faith-based title, a novel, or a children's story, the books' accolades speak for themselves. To date, Morgan James has more than 29 *New York Times* best-seller listings, more than 80 on the *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* lists, and a dozen titles on *PW* bestseller lists. Recently, *Extra Virgin Olive Oil* by David M. Neuman was featured on *The Kelly Clarkson Show*. Another author, Natasha Graziano (*Be It Until You Become It*), was featured on the cover of *Glamour* magazine. And those are just a few of Morgan James's many success stories. "If an author has a goal, we know how to help them reach it," Hancock says.

Publishing with Morgan James allows authors to have the credibility, distribution muscle, and opportunity of a traditional house but with key differences. Authors can retain control, ownership, and involvement in the process while benefitting from a faster time to market.

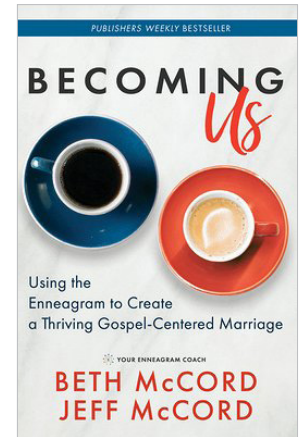
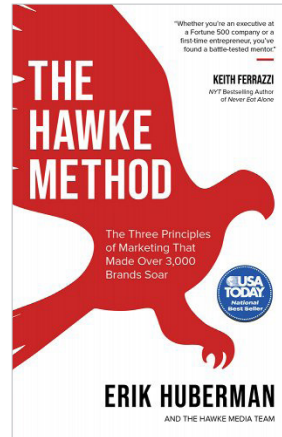
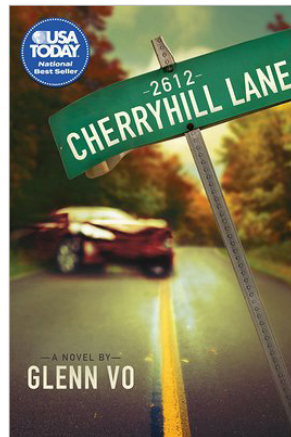
"We don't offer any 'services,' sell any 'packages,' or have any up-sells with an author once they are part of the family," Hancock says. Morgan James covers all the costs of production, printing, and distribution, and they pay higher than industry average royalties as well as small advances. Through their Entrepreneurial

**“ If an author has a goal, we know how to help them reach it. ”**

—David Hancock

Vision Mastermind™ platform, authors can track the progress of their book's development from design decisions to marketing strategies.

One of the cornerstones of the Morgan James philosophy is that, more than a book or a genre, the house is investing in the authors themselves—their lived experiences, unique strengths and abilities, and distinctive voices. The Morgan James team also looks for projects that exist in conversation with broader communities. "We love publishing books that are part of something," Hancock says, "whether it's an entrepreneurial venture, small business, big business, nonprofit, or faith message."



Morgan James works actively to help authors find the right readers. That support comes in the form of consumer direct marketing via social media, landing pages, keyword optimization, newsletters, and more. They seek out professional reviews for their authors and, prior to the pandemic, hosted three live events in Nashville each year to celebrate new book releases and to form deeper relationships with their authors.

"Morgan James, the first hybrid publisher to market, as reported by *PW*, is one of the few hybrids today that actually invest in marketing for the books we publish after publication," Hancock says. "We are in it for the long haul."

In addition to direct support from a qualified group of publishing and marketing experts, Morgan James believes in providing authors with the tools they need to advocate for their work and develop robust author platforms. In exchange,

Hancock also has a few asks of authors: that they bring their entrepreneurial spirit to the publishing partnership, provide a fully edited manuscript, be willing to invest time and effort in "doing what successful authors do," and commit to purchasing 2,000 copies of their work at a few dollars above print cost over the life of the agreement.

In addition to empowering authors to tell their stories, Morgan James is giving back in another way—by partnering with

the charitable organization Habitat for Humanity, supporting the construction of homes, donating books, and more. Building homes and publishing books may seem like strange bedfellows. But for Hancock, it's all about investing in community and sharing in a world of ideas and positive human endeavors.

"In the early days of Morgan James, nobody knew who we were," Hancock says. "The independent bookstores were the only ones giving us a chance. They saw us building houses down the street from their bookstore and supporting their communities." As is the case with authors who choose to publish with Morgan James, "the partnership with Habitat for Humanity has been a rich and rewarding experience from the very beginning."

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