I can remember the precise moment when the idea dawned on me to self-publish a book. I was sitting in the well-appointed office of a senior editor, high up in a Manhattan skyscraper, in the proverbial lap of literary luxury. I had just told this editor about the next book I wanted to put into the world, a book I had been dreaming about for several years. It would consist of thirty one-page stories and thirty one-page essays on the psychology and practice of writing. As corny as this will sound—and I realize it sounds corny—I even had a title chosen: “This Won’t Take but a Minute, Honey.”

“Get it?” I asked the editor, rather too ardently. “Each piece takes less than a minute to read. The whole point is to sell readers, young readers especially, ‘Listen, I know you’re in a rush, you don’t think literature has anything to do with you, but it does....’” On and on I went, babbling about the resurgence of micro fiction and the eventual redemption of literature in this age of joyous screen addiction.

Then I made the mistake of looking up at the editor. Her expression was one I’ll never forget, a rictus of polite horror. It was as if, every time I opened my mouth, a tapeworm simmered out. I am not blaming this particular editor—she was merely doing her thankless job, which consists of figuring out how she might extract a profit from my meager talents given the prevailing market—but gazing at her face, it was instantly clear to me that my brilliant idea stood no hope at all in the realm of commercial publishing.

Almost immediately, a dark vision seized me. There I was, staggering through the corridors of BookExpo America in a stained trench coat, hawking my mimeographed masterpiece. I could hear other authors murmuring in my wake, “Yeah, that’s Steve Almond. He used to have a real publisher. Now look at him, the poor fool.”

So, like any good self-preserving author, I went home and wrote the book that the editor wanted. It wasn’t an onerous task. On the contrary, the book was a long silly riff about my obsession with music, and it provided me an excellent excuse to stalk my favorite songwriters. Still, I couldn’t quite shake my original idea. I kept thinking about it when I should have been doing other things, such as copyediting the music book.

STEVE ALMOND is the author of Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life, published in April by Random House.
And then one night I went to a reading given by a couple of young authors who had books published by small presses. They talked about the ways in which the traditional, top-down model of publishing—with its bloated marketing departments and built-in publication delays, its insane retail return policy and massive transport costs—struck them as hopelessly outdated. Now that the means of book production had become widely accessible, it was time to embrace the DIY model. Rather than sitting around waiting for the New York Times Book Review to anoint them, they were busy building a network of fans online and touring the country like punk rockers. It was one of those moments in which I realized, for all my delusions of hipsterism, how deeply out of it I am. So my thinking shifted. I'd find a small, indie press. This struck me as the perfect compromise. I even chatted with a couple of editors about my little book. One of them mentioned a new royalty arrangement, which allowed authors to earn a 50 percent rate once they'd earned back a small advance. I should have been thrilled. But every time I heard the word royalty, my stomach knotted up. I'd stared at so many royalty statements over the years, nearly all of which seemed designed not only to bewilder me, but also to make me feel like a loser. And what I later realized was that I was really tired of feeling like a bewildered loser because my sales weren't better. I was tired of having my hopes for a particular book polluted by commercial concerns. And I was tired of racing around trying to sell, sell, sell because I felt beholden to my publisher. I don't mean this to sound ungrateful. Only a fool criticizes the folks working on his behalf. But that said, it's not as if millions of Americans were sitting around waiting for the next Steve Almond book to hit the local Barnes & Noble. In fact, it was more like the opposite of that. If readers found my books, particularly my fiction, it was probably because they'd seen me read or speak at a conference or been assigned the book by one of their professors. At this point in my career, I was basically a "cult" author who hand-sold a large percentage of his books. And the book I was hoping to publish, my crazy little hybrid, wasn't the sort that was liable to attract much notice beyond my own circles. 

This being the case, I couldn't see why I'd want to make it subject to a financial arrangement, even one made with a cool indie publisher. Maybe the time had come—at least for this one book—to cut the cord with traditional publishing.

It was decided. I was going to self-publish. There was just one little problem: I had no clue how one does such a thing. And so I did what I always do in times of confusion: I ran howling into the arms of the Google Machine. This meant several

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<th>STEVE ALMOND'S SELF-PUBLISHING 101</th>
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<td>1. Get your terms straight. First things first: Printing is not publishing. Printing is just the mechanical process by which your words are turned into a book. Publishing, by contrast, includes numerous other processes: designing the cover, laying out the book, editing the text, publicity, marketing, and distribution. Hiring a firm to help you self-publish, therefore, is oxymoronic, though it certainly sounds better than vanity or subsidy publishing. I prefer the term nontraditional publishing.</td>
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<td>2. Figure out your needs. Is your book just for friends and family? If so, all you need is a printer. If you want to sell your book to strangers, you're going to need help in the areas mentioned above. Remember: You're basically assuaging the responsibilities a commercial press would carry out on your behalf if you submitted a manuscript and had it accepted. Self-publishing firms such as AuthorHouse, iUniverse, and Xlibris—three of the biggest—offer packages that include, some or all these services. The no-frills packages average around six hundred dollars plus printing, which generally costs anywhere from four to eight dollars per book, depending on print run. Deluxe options, which include a stunning array of services, from editorial and marketing advice to help setting up a Web site, can run up to four thousand dollars. There are scores more offering similar services. It's vital that you figure out exactly how much help you need, and in what areas. Self-publishing firms—unlike commercial presses—don't expect to make a profit from the sales of the books they produce. On the contrary, they make a profit by producing the books themselves. This often means &quot;up-selling&quot; customers—convincing them to buy services they don't need, or ones that won't help them, usually by making extravagant claims. Which brings us to Step 3...</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Don't be a sucker. There are limitations to what any of these companies can accomplish. Be wary of any pitch that includes talk of getting your book reviewed in major magazines and newspapers, or shelved in retail bookstores. As a sector of the industry, self-publishing may be booming, but it still lacks the legitimacy of a traditional press. Avoid any company that dangles the promise of generous royalties, or that requires a costly, up-front marketing course. And, as impressive as &quot;marketing services&quot; may sound, they often amount to boilerplate press releases and review copies sent out on your behalf.</td>
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days perusing the brave new world of self-publishing companies.

Back in the old days (read: a decade ago) these outfits were called "vanity presses," and they tended to show up in cheesy little ads in the back of magazines. These days, self-publishing is one of the industry's few growth sectors. There are dozens of companies, each offering assorted packages that include editorial assistance, marketing gurus, and cost calculators for printing. I was, to put it mildly, overwhelmed.

What I needed was some advice from a veteran. I turned to David Barringer, a friend who's been self-publishing his innovative fiction and nonfiction for a decade. "I'm actually helping three other authors with this same thing right now," he told me, then launched into a dissertation on the merits of digital versus offset printing, a distinction mostly lost on me. I only concluded. "The big question, the one you have to answer before you go any further, is this: What kind of book do you want to put into the world?"

This is precisely how I spent the next six weeks—envisioning what I wanted this book of mine to be. The first conclusion I came to—and I realize this doesn't look good on paper, but it's the truth—is that I wanted the book to be cheap. There were two reasons for this. First, I intended to write a very short book. More important, I was hoping to reach aspiring writers and part-time readers, folks who don't necessarily have twenty bucks allotted in their budgets for a book.

The second thing I decided was that "This Won't Take but a Minute, Honey" should be small enough to fit in someone's back pocket. I had certain romantic notions about how the text, and the essays in particular, would be regarded. In exalted moments, I envisioned it as a mash-up of Strunk and White's The Elements of Style and Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet.

I also knew who I wanted to design the book. Brian Stauffer, one of the most celebrated illustrators in the country and, luckily for me, a friend. Back in 2002, when my first book of stories was in production, Brian had created the most gorgeous cover I'd ever seen: It featured a naked woman, her pale form flung against a shimmering red background. The higher-ups at Grove, my publisher, had deemed the image too graphic. But now that I was putting out a book myself, I didn't have to worry about some suit vetoing Brian's genius. I just had to worry about convincing Brian. This was trickier than it sounded, given that he was juggling twenty-seven different projects on any given day, and preparing for his first one-man museum exhibit. Fortunately, after ten years as a writer, my begging skills are pretty near impeccable. Brian agreed, and even agreed to do the work for a serious discount. Now all I had to do was write the book.

And so I did, in about a month. I realize that this, too, looks pretty daunting in print. In fact, I'd been writing
For someone who is used
to waiting eighteen months 
for a manuscript to
become a book, this sounded
way too good to be true.

But true it was.

this book for more than a decade. Most
of the stories had been published in li-
terary magazines, then further revised.
The essays were adapted from the vari-
ous sermons I'd inflicted on my stu-
dents over the years, my goal being to
save them from the
mistakes and con-
sequent anguish I'd
suffered. I sent the
manuscript to Brian,
and a few weeks later
he e-mailed me two
absolutely gorgeous
covers.

I now returned to
the question of how
to print the book.
This meant plung-
ing back into the morass of printing
sites, most of which seemed geared
toward first-time authors, by which I
mean that their "get-started" packages
included editorial and marketing ser-
vices that I didn't need or want. What's
more, most of them required several
weeks to prepare a sample.

I was whining about all this to my
friend Tim Huggins, a former book-
seller himself, when he said, "Why
don't you use that new machine at the
Harvard Book Store?"

"What machine?" I asked.

"The one that makes a book in, li-
te: five minutes." "You're kidding me."

For someone who is used to wait-
ing eighteen months for a manuscript
to become a book, used to having to
jump through a hundred little hoops
along the way—someone frankly beset
by pathological impatience in the first
place—this sounded way too good to
be true. But true it was. Harvard Book
Store was one of a handful of shops in
the entire country to have acquired an
Espresso Book Machine (EBM). Ac-
cording to the store's Web site, it could
turn a PDF into a library-quality paper-
back in minutes.

And thus my next absurd fantasy: In
a week, I was heading out to the Uni-
versity of Idaho in Moscow to serve as
a visiting writer; what if I printed up a
few copies of the book to read from (and
maybe even sell) in Idaho?

I immediately set about revising the
essays and stories and sent them to a few
friends who, unbeknownst to them, had
just been recruited as copyeditors. A
week later, two days before my flight to
Idaho, I walked into
Harvard Book Store
to meet with Bror-
en Blaney, the
woman in charge
of the EBM.

Blaney was busy
in back, so I picked
up a paperback copy
of Evelyn Waugh's
The Ordeal of GIL-
bert Pinfield, which was on a chair next
to the EBM.

"This book," I said, when she ap-
ppeared. "It's still warm."

Blaney smiled. "Yeah, it's pretty
amazing." She opened the PDFs that
Brian had sent her and spent a minute
centering the spine of my book. "Okay,
you ready?"

The machine itself looked sort of like
a giant Xerox machine, but one that was
designed by the folks at Apple—sleek
and see-through. It was possible to
watch pages and covers being scanned
and printed, then bound with glue. I sat
there for a few minutes, mesmerized.

And then, just like that, the first-ever
copy of This Won't Take but a Minute,
Honey popped out of the machine and
fell, gumball-like, down a small chute.
Not only was my copy warm, the
cover was still sticky. I turned it over
and thumbed through it. There were
plenty of mistakes—most notably, the
covers had been printed on the wrong
sides—but it struck me as perhaps the
coolest object I had ever held.

The only question now was how to
get it into other people's hands.

Coming soon: part 2 of Steve Almond's
spaced-out odyssey into nontraditional pub-
lishing, in which he relates the epic saga
of actually trying to get people to buy his