

You Say You Want a Revolution, or, Vanity, Thy Name Is Indigo

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Johannes Gutenberg started a revolution. Arguably, without his invention, the Renaissance might have remained a decidedly Italian affair and a highly localized one at that. But, with the advent of moveable type and the printing press together with whatever form of delivery they were using back then in the days before FedEx (unimaginable), The Word, the word, and the world of ideas spread throughout Europe and eventually across the planet.

Probably at about the same time, pioneering wannabe authors were also getting their first rejection slips and, as time passed, they would not be alone - not by a long shot. I'm sure that each and every one of them felt that their talent was being thwarted and the public at large was being denied the pleasure of their literary genius. For most this was a rather fanciful conceit, but hence the name of the industry that sprang up to meet the pent up need to be published - the vanity press.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, "vanity press" is a noun and is defined as "a publisher that publishes a book at the expense of the author." In fact, many vanity presses have been little more than scams. While appearing to be book publishers, they would deliver a book but with none the traditional publisher "extras" - like editing, marketing, sales, placement, etc. Most often the production was performed at very inflated prices and, to make matters worse, the author didn't actually own the printed books. Wannabe authors galore, driven by their vanity to be "published", were like sitting ducks in the sights of unethical vanity presses.

While Gutenberg certainly helped the vanity press drain the wallets of untold numbers of would-be authors, he would probably be surprised and much more delighted by what the bleeding edge evolution of his communication revolution has wrought for the modern-day photographer - online vanity presses (of sorts) that enables even the most rank amateur to "publish" their photographs in rather striking, sheet-feed, offset-printed, hard-bound books. Or, miracle of miracles, in an edition of one. And, by the way, would you like that delivered overnight?

Now maybe you have to be fogey like me to see the "miracle of miracles", but suffice it to say, if I had asked an offset printer 30 years ago to print one 20 page, 4-color (CMYK), hardbound book, they would have laughed their asses off (probably all the way to the bank, if they actually produced the book after giving me a quote). Total cost would probably have been in the 8-10,000 dollar range (conservatively) and production would have required at least 2 - 3 weeks.

After delivering my photographs to the printer, I would have to return again, probably twice, to check proofs (2 rounds), and then again for the better part of a day (or night, depending on which shift it was printed) to press-proof the print run. There would be at least 2 press runs, one for each side of the sheet. In order to get that one perfect set of press sheets for one book, the printer would use about 1000 sheets of paper just for set up, proofing and waste.

And then there's the bindery. The last hardbound book production of my work that I supervised required binding about 10 books to get the binding set up "right" before they actually began to bind in earnest. Just getting it right took about half a day of my time at the bindery.

So, I contrast that with my first experience a little over a month ago of producing my first online custom hardbound book. Miracle of miracles, it took about 2 hours of my time (at home), and, miracle of miracles, because I placed my order in the early AM and specified overnight delivery, I received my book the next day at the cost of \$28.50 - yet another miracle of miracles.

To be honest, that first book was less than overwhelming (but way more than underwhelming) in quality and appearance. The print quality was decent and the binding materials and quality were acceptable. That said, everyone (except my most demanding critic - the wife) who viewed the book was impressed and amazed. Most were not intimately familiar with my original photographs/prints and therefore did not notice any color difference between the originals and the printed piece. And to be fair, something is always lost/changed in the conversion from a larger color space (RGB originals) to a smaller color space (CMYK for offset printing), However, as additional books from other sources demonstrated, some do it better than others.

Who are those others? The ones of which I am aware are: Ofoto.com (Kodak), Snapfish.com, Shutterfly.com, MyPublisher.com, Photoworks.com, iPhoto (Apple.com/ilife/books/), ImageStation.com (Sony), and, in my opinion and experience, the uncontested top of the heap, king of the hill, leader of the pack - SharedInk.com. More on SharedInk.com a little further on.

Each company has tried to distinguish itself from its competitors in some fashion - different cover materials, different paper stocks, different layout/design formats/capabilities, and different book sizes (although most offer multiple sizes). The book sizes range from 6x9 inch soft cover up to 12x16 inch full-bleed hardcover. Prices run the gamut from \$9.99 to \$59.99 for a basic 20 page (10 sheets, 2 sided) book. All offer an 8.5"x11"-ish "standard" 10 sheet (20 pg) hardcover book for around \$29.99, although once you sign up (every site requires free "registration") you will receive fairly regular email notices of sales and discounts that can reduce your cost by up to 25%.

This article was intended to be a review of all of the previously mentioned companies. However, that became impractical because one notable way that these companies are distinguished from one another is by the fact that not all are Mac compatible. Fortunately, the two that matter most for me - Shutterfly.com and SharedInk.com - are.

Despite this compatibility problem, I familiarized myself with the workings of all the sites. With the exception of MyPublisher.com (free PC-only software) and iPhoto (requires iPhoto), no dedicated software is needed to create a book. After uploading your photographs to the site of your choosing, you create your book on the site using their layout tools/program - I found virtually all of the layout tools/programs to be less than intuitive and sometimes aggravatingly slow (another reason that testing was limited to just a few sites).

Every site starts with a basic book of 10 pages - 10 sheets printed on both sides, which equals 20 printed pages. Your book can have from one to six photos per page with some very basic text capability as well. More pages can be added up to a limit of (in most cases) 40 sheets (times 2 = 80 pages). Cover material choices range from colored heavyweight softcovers for the smaller sizes to linen or leather covered hardcover for the larger books.

Once your book is completed - take as long as you like, days, weeks, months - perform a careful proof check and then just hit the "Order" button. Next, you sit back and wait for your book (or books - you can order multiples) to arrive. Most sites send an email confirmation of your order and another email notification when the book is printed and ready to ship. I received a shipping notification from one site within 6 hours of placing my order - holy miracle of miracles.

After ordering books from three different sites using the same files, I was in possession of three books, all with different color results. The color reproduction ranged from good (Ofoto.com) to, better (Shutterfly.com), and best (SharedInk.com). Interestingly, most viewers preferred the Shutterfly.com variant. The color reproduction in that book was very saturated (Velviaist take note) and slightly on the warm side - very pleasing, but not the most color-accurate. That honor went to SharedInk.com.

In my opinion, there are a number of reasons why SharedInk.com ranks at the top of the heap - great print quality and color accuracy, full-bleed printing, the choice of four paper stocks, excellent quality binding and binding materials - are a few of the notable considerations. But all of these qualities flow intrinsically from the reason SharedInk is at the top of my hit parade - they are the only company dedicated to meeting the needs of professional and persnickety amateur photographers. Of all of the companies mentioned it is the only one that does not offer 4x6, 5x7 or any other size or kind of photo prints. They are not trying to be the online equivalent of a photo lab. The others are and that is focus of their online presence. For them, custom photo books are an addendum to their product line. For SharedInk.com, custom photo books are their one and only raison d'etre.

That said, SharedInk.com is also at the top of the heap, cost-wise. Their basic "standard" 8.5"x11"ish (actually 11.75"x 9"), 20 page (10 sheets x 2 sides), hardcover book is \$39.95, on average \$10 more than the others charge for a similar "standard" book. Is it worth it? Let me ask you this - do you care at all about the best possible reproduction (vis-a-vis online custom photo books) of your photographs on high-quality materials with noticeably superior binding? Do I hear a "no"?

To avail yourself of all of SharedInk.com's bells and whistles, you must be a member of their



Photographer Program. You can sample all of the benefits with a free 45 day trial membership. After that there is a one-time fee of \$129.00 for membership. Benefits include additional book sizes up to 12"x12", 250mb of storage, full-bleed printing, private-label branding, access to options such as special end papers and leather cover materials, an FTP account for uploading files, and full access to forums on which other photographers ask questions and share information and tips on making books.



And get this, you can also get press-printed samples of one or more of your books pages - essentially a press proof that allows you to check color, contrast, paper, etc. and make adjustments to your files (if needed) before you commit to printing your book. Most importantly, all books produced through the Photographer Program receive extra attention during the printing/binding process - more frequent press cleaning and additional quality checks - which results in a very high quality product.

If this article is beginning to read like an endorsement of SharedInk.com, that's because it is. Remember, though, it's a qualified endorsement - I did not sample every site out there. That said, my years of experience working with the printing industry leads me to suspect that, with the exception of SharedInk.com (and possibly MyPublisher.com), all of the sites mentioned here will deliver more than acceptable, though not necessarily superior, products. In the future, I will be reporting back on MyPublisher.com because, like SharedInk.com, they are not an online photo lab - books seem to be their only business. I'll figure out how to deal with their PC-only software (Virtual PC on a Mac?), because I definitely want to sample their 12"x16", full-bleed book - that's a 32" spread, folks.

SharedInk.com endorsement aside, what this article is really endorsing is the idea of self-publishing a photo book. In addition to the always pleasant, and yes, perhaps vain, thrill of seeing your photographs in print (in a book), just going through the exercise of picking 10 or more photographs for your book, will help develop and sharpen your photo editing and self-evaluation skills. You will begin to see, if you haven't already, whether your photographs, as even a mini-body of work, demonstrate a sense of coherent vision. Do they work together to create a narrative about a subject? Or are they just a collection of photographic odds 'n ends? Viewing your photographs in a single bound volume is a very different experience than seeing the same photographs framed and mounted on a wall.

As an added benefit, unlike framed prints or a bulky portfolio, you can take your work almost anywhere. The opportunity to share your vision (and get feedback) is greatly expanded in a manner that online forums simply can't match. There is simply no substitute for the tactile viewing experience of seeing ink-on-paper and turning the pages of a genuine, honest-to-god book of your very own photographs. You can even rationalize the vanity thing by thinking of it as doing your bit in the ongoing Gutenberg revolution.

And while you're feeling your self-publishing oats, think about another possibility that has me very excited and intrigued - taking the idea of the time-honored family/personal photo album to an entirely different level. Imagine the results of living, say, to the ripe old age of 70 and "publishing" one book a year, a kind of family/personal Year-In-Review thing. Just think about that for a moment or two.

As far as my own photography is concerned, I feel that I have been introduced to a new medium, or at the very least, a new media. As many of you already know, I am not a fan of "greatest hits" (single, stand-alone photographs) photography. Photographs in a series or a coherent body of related work is what flips my switch, and now, miracle of miracles, I can publish signed and numbered, limited edition books of "collections" of my photographs intended for sale in galleries.

The possibilities of this newly democratized media are endless, and some heavyweights in the Fine Art field are starting to "work" in this media/medium - see A Flutterin Knuckleball: Lunch with Stephen Shore and Tim Davis (www.blindspot.com/issue26/conversation26.html).

And just for the record, some (but not all) self-published books I would like to see (and buy): a series of Michael Gordon's scheinpflugged BW photography, a series of just about anything by Michele Legendre, a series of Youssef Ismail's trees (accompanied by some of his interesting observations about the spiritual), a series of Eric Fredine's Cooking Lake and emerging Highway photographs (together), and Thomas Mitchell's 52 Week PAW project (4 photographs a page please, just to keep the cost down). Eight to ten tightly edited photographs per book would be just about right (Thomas Mitchell excepted).

Perhaps it's time for a self-published bookstore on NPN? The reach of the internet and the power of the self-publishing revolution could be very synergistic.

In any event, if you don't feel that your work is worthy enough yet to spend the "big" bucks for a premium book like you get from

[SharedInk.com](#), then by all means have a book printed from one of the less expensive sites - Shutterfly.com would be my choice. At around \$12.95 or so for a softcover 20 page book, why not? Get the feel for what your photographs look and feel like in a printed volume. Hell, you can barely get a decent print from a photo lab for that price. What do you have to lose?

In my opinion, you (and maybe posterity) have a lot to gain.

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MARK HOBSON is a family guy lucky enough to be living in his favorite place on earth, the Adirondacks. A former agency creative director and commercial photographer, Mark has brought his love of the wilderness and photography together to form Nessmuk & Stoddard Trekking.

Mark's photography has been used by Fortune 500s such as Kodak, Xerox, Heinz, PPG, and Bausch & Lomb. As a creative director he has produced campaigns for clients such as; I LOVE NY, Lake Placid, The Adirondacks, Cooperstown and the Finger Lakes.

His Adirondack photography has been exhibited in galleries in the NE. He has won recognition as a repeat finalist in the Carnegie International Nature Photo Competition. Mark has also been a judge for the Kodak International Snapshot Competition as well as the Kodak Camera Club.

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