

SMALLBUSINESS

BRIEFINGS

Digital publishing — it's complicated

Creating a digital book from a print book is surprisingly complicated. "You don't just flick a switch and get a decent digital book," said Association of Book Publishers of BC executive director Margaret Reynolds. "There's a conversion process, an archiving and distribution process, and that's all in flux right now. Pricing is uncertain. Distribution is difficult. You're dealing with Sony and Amazon and Kobo and we Canadian publishers are very small potatoes in that world. If you "buy" a digital book, "you haven't bought the book, you've leased it," Reynolds pointed out. "There's talk in the industry about how do you share and how much do you charge for it? Currently e-versions are considerably cheaper. Do you get the same rights?"

Jenny Lee, Vancouver Sun

TOP TIP

More than three-quarters of Canadian post-secondary students have found a job for the summer, according to a poll released Monday by BMO Bank of Montreal. Only one per cent of respondents to the BMO survey said they would go to work for themselves this summer, though it's unclear whether this reflects increased employment prospects with established businesses or reduced prospects for self-employment. BMO offers this advice to students thinking about putting themselves to work this summer:

- **Do your homework.** Learn what you need to know to set up a business, including the pros and cons of incorporating, and tax implications. Stress-test your idea and research your marketplace. What products will you sell at what prices, and what are the sales targets you'll have to meet to break even, or make a profit?
- **Weigh the lifestyle.** Think about why you want to be your own boss and whether you really want to make the sacrifices necessary, like missing out on a lot of summer fun, particularly since there's no guarantee that the payoff will match the time, energy and money you'll have to invest up front to make it work.

Postmedia News

NEWS

Learn how to do business with the federal government in a free, one-on-one, Small Business BC consultation session. Your 30-minute appointment with a Public Works and Government Services Canada supply officer allows you to ask specific questions about the purchasing process, where to find opportunities and how to respond to proposals. Bookings are first come, first served. Phone or Skype appointments are available for those living outside Metro Vancouver. Call 604-775-5572 or 1-800-667-2272 for an appointment between July 20 and Aug. 23. Appointments are available from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.



Mountain Machines by Sara Leach has sold 2,500 copies and has been on the B.C. children's bestseller list for four months.

SELF-PUBLISHING | Tall mountain to climb before getting product to market

Plenty of work behind Sara and Johanne Leach's kids' book success story

BY JENNY LEE
VANCOUVER SUN

When Sara Leach couldn't find anyone to publish her book, she and her mother Johanne took matters into their own hands and decided to self-publish. Before they knew it, *Mountain Machines*, a children's counting book about the machines on a ski hill, had sold 2,500 copies and made the B.C. children's books bestseller list for four months. "We broke even in about three months, and since then, we've been making a profit," said Sara, a Whistler teacher-librarian. Neither Sara nor Johanne have any illusions about entering one of the toughest industries in B.C. They joke about having made enough for an extra cup of coffee now and then, but the fact is they're shrewd, they've done everything right, and their second book, *Sounds of The Ferry*, has already made it to the top of the Association of Book Publishers of BC's children's books best-seller list, association executive director Margaret Reynolds said. "One of the reasons that *Mountain Machines* has done as well as it has is there is a really specific market for it and it's a market I know well and have connections in — the ski hill market," said Sara, 39. The book sold very well during the Olympics, and is popular among tourists in the Whistler bookstore and toy store, Sara said. It's also stocked in all eight Whistler Blackcomb retail stores and the major Whistler grocery store. "Having a personal connection with the booksellers is a huge advantage," Sara said. "It's really helpful in a small town." *Sounds of the Ferry* is carried in the BC Ferry gift shops, and both books are stocked in Chapters, in specialty bookstore Kidsbooks, and other Vancouver specialty stores. Of course, there's a long backstory to how the Leaches got a marketable product to the stores. Even though Sara's first effort, the chapter book *Jake Reynolds*, was about to be published by Orca Book Publishers, traditional publishers turned down *Mountain Machines* because its potential market was too small for them. But it was 2009 and the Olympics were coming. Sara and Johanne saw an opportunity and decided to grab it.



NICK PROCAYLO/PNG

Author Sara Leach (front) has had plenty of help from mother Johanne in publishing her books.

Mountain Machines wasn't Johanne's first publishing venture. She started Poppy Productions in 2007 to publish a book her brother wrote on the Winnipeg Falcons hockey team. "You just kind of jump in with both feet," the former *Vancouver Sun* features writer said. They found illustrator Steven Corvelo on the Internet and got to work. Johanne paid Corvelo in advance. Sara's husband, a graphic designer, did the design. Nitpicky little details ranged from tracking down the wife of a Nebraskan farmer for permission to use the words "pipe dragon" for the machine that carves the snow "pipes," to arranging for a bar code and International Standard Book Number (ISBN). Many self-publishers "get very consumed by the editorial or by the production of the book, but forget they actually have to sell it," Reynolds said. "Another mistake people make is they price according to

what the book cost them to produce," she said. "There is a huge rise in self-published books, but that doesn't make it any easier for them to get their books into traditional markets. ... People get enthusiastic about reducing unit costs by [producing] more, but you've got to be prepared to be able to sell that many. The last thing you want is [2,000] or 3,000 copies sitting in your basement." Johanne Leach didn't fall into any of these traps. She published 3,000 copies of *Mountain Madness*, then convinced Nancy Wise of Sandhill Book Marketing, who handles independent publishers, to add it to her distribution list. "It was a fair bit of work to get her. I had to keep at it," Johanne said. "I knew about editing and design, but distribution is key and you have to get a distributor to really make it work or you're just batting your head against the wall." Getting *Sounds of the Ferry* into the BC Ferries gift shops

was critical. That started with the book having a distributor and Johanne having built a relationship with the Association of Book Publishers of BC, which has a relationship with BC Ferries' supplier, Jimmy Pattison's The News Group. Wise said she accepted *Mountain Machines* because she found the production values and illustrations "excellent," and the price point, at \$9.95, "perfect." Small publishers can succeed in specialized niche markets, said Wise, author of *How to Self Publish and Make Money*. "You try to make the book for 25 per cent of your retail price," Johanne said. So far, *Mountain Madness* has made around \$7,000 on \$16,000 in sales, but Johanne didn't need to pay Sara's husband, and Sara and Johanne's portions were calculated after the proceeds came in. So far, Sara has received \$3,000 for the book, and Johanne \$2,000. Demand is high enough that Johanne is considering a reprint.

In retrospect, one of the biggest surprises for Johanne was the extent to which she and Sara would have to market the book. Distributors want publishers and authors "who can do publicity and promotion," Wise said. "That's what sells books. There are a lot of books that are great, but not in the limelight." Wise said she will pick up one in 20 books pitched to her. She carries 1,500 titles. She doesn't want to hear from self-publishers until their finished book is in hand. Books must have bar codes as well as catalogue and publication data, which trigger library orders. "If you do a couple of thousand a year, you'd be doing very well," Wise said. "If you're clever like Johanne has been, if you have all your ducks in a row, yes, I think you can make money at it." Of all genres, children's books are the hardest in terms of self-publishing, Wise said. "That market is the toughest to crack. You don't get media." The opportunity to make money on picture books is shrinking, with the growth being in mid-grade novels, Sara said. "Part of the reason is parents are pushing their kids out of picture books sooner and into chapter books," Sara said. "It's a shame, because there's lots to be gained from picture books." "E-books and digital books are a growing segment, but from what I can see, they are not putting the printed book at risk yet," Sara said. "We are looking into making an [interactive] app for *Mountain Machines*, and we have ideas on where we could go with *Sounds of the Ferry*." Johanne's next goal is to find a U.S. distributor. *Sounds of the Ferry* has already made a jump across the border, and is now being sold at The Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, Calif. "I'm not about to retire on what I've made, but we've made money on the first book and hopefully on *Sounds of the Ferry* as well. We've already made a good start on covering our costs."

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» GOING DIGITAL IS A DIFFERENT BUSINESS | BRIEFINGS (LEFT)

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