Mass Authorship and the Rise of Self-Publishing

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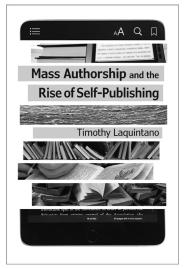
Mass Authorship and the Rise of Self-Publishing

Timothy Laquintano
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In Richard Russo's satirical *Straight Man* the narrator, a tenured English professor in a small town in Pennsylvania, contemplates *Off the Road*—a slender novel and the only one he's written in twenty years. The author's campus bookstore purchased copies remaindered by the publisher, of which a few hundred copies never sold. After the narrator's office assistant attempts to assuage his ego by telling him he'll "write another book someday," he contemplates his one-book project and asks himself "Ours is a fragmented culture. If I wrote another book, who would read it?" (Russo 177). But does an abundance of books justify abstinence from writing? Timothy Laquintano's *Mass Authorship and the Rise of Self-Publishing* indirectly answers with a resounding no.

Book publishing in the twenty-first century is becoming more accessible and writing-based literacies more common as platforms such a Wattpad have emerged to offer writers a platform for ebooks that is similar to that which YouTube offers video makers. Laquintano notes that collaboration and the circulation of writing through new platforms are often steeped in "practices of individual ownership and secrecy" due to the fact these communities tend to be built on both a gift economy and a reputation economy wherein fans await "next installments" from individuals with established reputations (154–55). Ever mindful of technological determinism and claims that Web 2.0 is democratizing publishing, Laquintano takes a more nuanced approach to explore how networked writers on user-generated sites "develop social media practices that preserve a strong notion of the author and resist technological affordances that threaten it" (124–25). One ebook author Laquintano interviews exploits "the stream of attention" that was focused on her writing when one of her stories was plagiarized (139). She then used this disorienting experience to market her work. The momentum from the plagiarism controversy enabled her to build relationships with readers through sharing "creative writing tutorials she ran from her website" and posting links to her stories and books (139). She could have sued the young person who stole her work, but instead took the moral high ground through contributing educational resources and advising aspiring writers to support authentic forms of user-generated writing and to reinforce the belief that "falsely claimed texts" have no value for members of the online self-publishing community (136).

My enjoyment reading *Mass Authorship*, recipient of the *Computers and Composition* Distinguished Book Award in 2016, arose from the ease with which I could see connections in Laquintano's work with my teaching and pleasure reading. How come my composition students were familiar with indie music and movies, but not indie publishing? How could it be possible that every student in my Composition II classes has spent countless hours on YouTube, but only one student out of thirty-five had read an ebook on Wattpad, FictionPress, or Scribophile? I also observed connections between Laquintano's interviews and the experiences social work scholar and public speaker Brené Brown recounted. As a new faculty member Brown self-published her first book, had a colleague praise its content, and then was ridiculed for "vanity publishing" (206). Laquintano, in fact, argues that digital self-publishing is not synonymous with vanity publishing because the latter has historically been notorious for exploiting and financially deceiving novice and dependent authors, whereas self-published authors often become "small independent publishers" and advance their fields of inquiry (35). Further, Brown's critical reflection on her knee-jerk perception that authors are required to distance themselves from the "unsavory ordeal of promoting and selling" books has resonance with at least two of the publishing professionals Laquintano interviews in *Mass Authorship* (Brown 209). One of Laquintano's interviewees, Hannah Leed, a romance writer, demonstrates that marketing and promoting one's writing, as a self-publishing author, "can encroach so deeply on the writer's experience that it not only diverts time from one's craft, it also initiates a kind of writer's block caused by the disruptive ping of mobile technologies" (72). Likewise, professional poker player and self-published writer Ryan Fee explains to Laquintano that "constant engagement" with readers in an online poker community brought "fatigue and frustration" that detracted from the time he could invest refining his poker game, which was the focus of his free ebook (177).

Laquintano makes it clear that it is increasingly possible for authors to occupy a hybrid space as they move back and forth between self-publishing and traditional publishing practices (79). He interviews a motley assortment of eighty-one self-published writers who range from "professional poker players, memoirists, recreational romance writers, and popular fiction writers who have achieved bestseller status" (25). Laquintano returns repeatedly to the dominance of academic humanist models of authorship in the mindsets of some poker players and romance writers who publish their work online, stress lexical and syntactic perfection, and thwart plagiarism and copyright violations through "reifying and reproducing communally valued notions of authorship" (130). In fact, of hybrid authorship practices, Laquintano acknowledges that even without traditional publishing gatekeepers, those same standards "have been programmed into readers" and influence how self-publishing authors understand and experience their own professional practices (79).

Laquintano's clear articulation of reading-oriented vs. writing-oriented dispositions makes *Mass Authorship* essential reading for community literacy practitioners and scholars invested in popular education movements. Compositionists who want to support and develop writers and writer-oriented

identities in their classrooms will find Laquintano's critical examination of the dominance of reading-oriented models of literacy illuminating. The goal of writing-oriented literacy development is to orient people to develop habits of mind, competencies, and dispositions, which then "spill over into hobbyist and semiprofessional book writing" (Laquintano 34). Laquintano's eight years of research on shifting literacy practices sheds light upon relatively invisible indie publishing platforms, such as Wattpad, which are less well known by the public when compared to platforms for amateurs working in other media industries. Moreover, Laquintano helpfully discusses community-based publishing through outreach from organizations such as 826 Valencia and public library programming, in addition to exploring National Novel Writing Month and print-on-demand book machines.

Those who wish to build and sustain writer-oriented communities and champion writing-oriented literacies will especially appreciate the David and Goliath story of eight indie authors who each contributed a mystery or suspense novel to a box set. Through their collaboration, calculated release date, competitive pricing, and networks of fans endorsement, these indie writers landed at "number seven on the *New York Times*" bestseller list and gained access to the "self-reinforcing quality" of the bestseller moniker (108). Despite the fact that traditional publishers likely understand the collaborative and information sharing practices of indie authors as an improper tactic to seize a spot on the bestseller list, similar forms of collaboration enable wider public visibility and audience reach for indie authors. Access to a spot on the *New York Times,* or other bestseller lists, impact how indie authors' texts will circulate in the future by providing a seal of approval that extends beyond what organic social media platforms or word of mouth marketing can achieve.

Mass Authorship functions as a call to composition scholars to study everyday acts of textual production by ordinary writers. Laquintano's interviewees challenge the dominance of reading-based literacies to demonstrate how communities of writers and readers develop their own standards for which communicative practices are worthwhile (16). As Laquintano's meticulous research affirms, standards of value shift when we conceptualize publishing as a "literacy practice" that develops when writers and readers engage together through new "digital infrastructures" and social media technologies (9). To echo Laquintano and to come full circle with the question of why writing matters at a moment in time when books have become ubiquitous, what matters most on Wattpad and in other online communities is how participants "organically establish themselves as valuable to the community" through the supportive labor of "reading, commenting, and critiquing the works of others" while sharing one's own work (170). Laquintano's understanding of books as read-write media, as opposed to read-only media, is strengthened by his "grounded approach to defining authorship" (6). I heartily agree with Laquintano that standards of quality and value that are sensitive to the different needs, norms, cultures, and affinities of a diverse range of self-identified authors are essential for the development of more capacious conceptions of authorship and accessible publishing practices in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution*. Random House, 2015.

Russo, Richard. *Straight Man: A Novel*. Random House, 1997.