

Beware of Scams Targeting Independent Authors: How to Spot and Avoid Common Pitfalls

In recent years, the rise of self-publishing has empowered thousands of independent authors to share their stories with the world. However, with this newfound accessibility comes a dark side: scammers looking to exploit inexperienced writers. Understanding the different types of scams targeting indie authors is crucial for anyone looking to publish their own work. I'll mention a few of the common scams I've seen, a recent real-life example, and offer tips on how to avoid falling victim to these unscrupulous outfits.

1. Vanity Publishers: The Disguised Trap

Vanity publishers often pose as traditional publishers, but instead of paying the author for their work, they charge exorbitant fees for publishing services. They may promise extensive editing, marketing, and distribution, but deliver subpar or nonexistent services. Here's an example:

You get an unsolicited email from a "publishing house" praising your manuscript and offering you a publishing contract. They'll do all the work (editing, interior layout, book cover art, and help you with marketing your book)—for a fee. And, I'm not talking a few hundred dollars. No, this "exclusive opportunity" will cost you thousands.

How You Can Spot a Vanity Publisher Scam:

- Out-of-the-blue offers from publishers, even if they haven't seen your manuscript.
- Your publishing package must be paid upfront to cover their costs.
- The salesman says this is a limited-time offer and uses high-pressure tactics to urge you to sign quickly.

How You Should Respond:

- Google that company. Look for reviews or complaints online (sites like [Writer Beware](#) are helpful).
- Ask for details about their pricing, services, and success stories. (Beware that these may be fake also.)
- Consult with a professional or join writer forums to seek advice before signing anything.

2. Fake Literary Agents: The Promised Connection

A fake literary agent or book promoter claims they can connect you with traditional publishers or film producers, but only if you pay a fee for "submission services," "editing," or "production costs." Here's an example:

An author receives a message from an agent who says they loved the author's book excerpt (often found on public platforms like Amazon or Goodreads). They claim they have contacts in Hollywood and can get the book turned into a film, but only after the author pays a \$500 "reading fee."

How to Spot the Connection Scam:

- Legitimate literary agents earn a commission from book sales, not from upfront fees. They will never ask you for payment of any sort. Reading fees are old-school practices shunned by modern agents.
- Vague promises of Hollywood deals or guaranteed publication.

How You Should Respond:

- Check the agent's credentials on sites like QueryTracker or the Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR).
- Ask for a list of clients and published works. Reach out to those clients directly for feedback.
- Decline any requests for upfront payments.
- *Ghost them—HARD!*

3. Bogus Marketing Services: The Social Media Trap

Scammers prey on authors eager to promote their books by offering bogus marketing services. They promise things like book reviews, social media promotions, or access to mailing lists but fail to deliver quality results if they deliver at all. Here's what you might experience:

An author is contacted by a "Book Marketing Expert" who offers a package deal including 100 book reviews, social media promotion to 50,000 followers, and an email blast to a targeted reader list, all for \$1,000. After paying, the author realizes the reviews are fake, and the social media followers are bots.

How to Spot This Trap:

- Over-the-top promises of instant success, like "Become a Bestseller in 30 Days!"
- Reviews or social media accounts that appear fake or have low engagement.
- The marketing company does not provide any verifiable past successes.

How You Should Respond:

- Request data or case studies from previous clients.
- Start with smaller, verifiable services before committing to large packages.
- Use reputable marketing services vetted by author communities.

4. Phishing Scams: The Infiltrating Attack

Phishing scams often target authors by pretending to be reputable companies like Amazon or other self-publishing platforms. These scammers typically send emails or messages asking authors to update their account information, providing a fraudulent link that captures personal details. Here's how this goes down:

An author receives an email claiming to be from Amazon KDP, warning them of a security issue. The email includes a link to "secure their account," but the link leads to a fake login page designed to steal the author's credentials.

How to Spot This Con:

- Urgent language demanding immediate action.
- Suspicious email addresses or links that don't match the official domain (e.g., support@amaz0n.com instead of support@amazon.com).
- Unusual requests for sensitive information like passwords.

How You Should Respond:

- Do not click on any links or provide personal information.
- Go directly to the official website and check your account for notifications.
- Report the email to the company it is impersonating (e.g., Amazon's phishing report service).

5. Fake Awards and Competitions: The Pay-to-Win Scheme

Scammers often set up fake book awards or contests with high entry fees and little to no judging criteria. They lure authors with the promise of prestigious-sounding awards that have no real industry recognition. Here's a typical scenario:

An author is invited to submit their book to an award competition with a \$150 entry fee. The competition guarantees exposure and a high chance of winning. After entering, the author "wins" but receives only a digital certificate and no tangible benefits.

How to Spot This Scheme:

- High entry fees with vague descriptions of how the prize money is allocated.
- Lack of information about past winners or judging criteria.
- Claims of "guaranteed" awards or too many categories to be credible.

How You Should Respond:

- Research the award or competition. Look for past winners and whether they benefited from the recognition.

- Check for reviews or warnings from other authors online.
- Avoid competitions with high fees and little transparency.

Tips for Protecting Yourself as an Indie Author

Research First: Thoroughly research any company, agent, or service provider before engaging. Use author forums, social media groups, and websites like Writer Beware for insights.

Trust Your Instincts: If something feels off or sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Scammers often use urgency to pressure you into quick decisions.

Seek Community Feedback: Independent authors can be a great resource for each other. Ask for feedback in writing communities or forums before making a decision.

Read Contracts Carefully: Don't sign anything without fully understanding the terms. If necessary, consult with a legal professional.

Final Thoughts

Scammers are becoming increasingly sophisticated, but you can protect yourself by staying vigilant, doing your research, and connecting with the writing community. Remember, a legitimate publisher, agent, or service provider will never pressure you for money upfront or make grandiose promises that seem too good to be true. Keep writing, but always be cautious when navigating the business side of publishing.