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Authors Find Their Voice, and Audience, in Podcasts

By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN

Scott Sigler writes science-fiction horror novels, the kind one fan called “steel-tipped boot on your throat, speed-metal fiction.” Mr. Sigler has written four such books, though not many people have actually read them.

How many have listened to them, though, is a different story.

Several times a week Mr. Sigler, 37, steps into a walk-in closet in his San Francisco home. He reads into a microphone that connects to his computer via a sound mixer. Hanging shirts envelop him, masking ambient sound.

After being snubbed by publishers for years, Mr. Sigler began recording his first book, “EarthCore,” in 2005. He offered it as a podcast in 22 episodes (roughly 45 minutes each) that he posted online and sent free to subscribers for downloading. Before long, Mr. Sigler had 5,000 listeners; by the time he finished releasing his second novel, “Ancestor,” last January, he had 30,000, as he does for “The Rookie,” which is playing now.

With initial printings of novelists’ first books running as low as 2,000 copies, Mr. Sigler has a substantial audience, enough finally to attract a small Canadian publisher, Dragon Moon Press, which published “EarthCore” in 2005 and will release “Ancestor” on April 1.

Mr. Sigler also recently signed with a New York agent, Byrd Leavell of the Waxman Agency, who expects to park his latest, “Infection,” with a major publisher.

Others have turned to the Internet to build their audience, including Cory Doctorow, who offered the text of “Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom” as a free download in 2003. But Mr. Sigler is among the vanguard of authors stapling their literary aspirations to the [iPod](#).

“A lot of no-name authors like me are getting massive grass-roots exposure, and some of us are going to percolate to the top and get on the best-seller list,” Mr. Sigler said.

The business is brewing at [Podiobooks.com](#), the Web site founded in late 2005 with just 15 titles, including books by Tee Morris and Mark Jeffrey, who began offering podcasts about the same time as Mr. Sigler.

The site was founded by Evo Terra, who wrote the book on podcasting, literally; he was co-author of

“Podcasting for Dummies.” Today the Web site has about 100 titles, many science fiction and fantasy.

“Most of the science-fiction authors are more tech savvy than romance authors,” Mr. Terra said. Podiobooks features primarily unpublished writers, and has rejected books only because of “hate speech,” Mr. Terra said. The site also includes guidelines on recording a book.

“Compared to audiobooks these authors break every rule in the business, including using sound effects,” Mr. Terra said. The podcast books also use music and a full cast more liberally than traditional audiobooks. Still, what Podiobooks’ offerings might lack in polish, they tend to make up for in brash enthusiasm.

Mr. Terra plans to add some fee books by more established authors, and for now covers costs through suggested donations of \$9.99 per title (some give more, as much as \$50), with Podiobooks taking 25 percent and passing the rest to its authors.

“There was one that I really enjoyed, and I think I gave them 20 bucks,” said Martha Cox, a subscriber who listens during her 45-minute commute to Austin, Tex. Most titles are “very entertaining, and it doesn’t put me off that publishing companies have decided not to publish them,” she said. “There’s certainly substandard work available, but there is in bookstores too.”

Mr. Jeffrey founded three Internet companies, selling the latest one in 2004, the same year he completed his Harry Potter-esque fantasy novel, “The Pocket and the Pendant.” In early 2005 he released it as a podcast.

“I’m just completely impatient with the publishing world,” he said. “Even if a publisher said yes tomorrow, it would be a full year before the book was in the marketplace. Coming from the Internet, that was just insane to me.”

Along with drawing about 20,000 listeners, Mr. Jeffrey self-published it through the print-on-demand company [Lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com). (Unlike traditional vanity presses, Lulu doesn’t require writers to pay for a large printing up front, but prints copies as they sell.)

Did Mr. Jeffrey think there was a taint to giving away an audio version of his book?

“I come from the Internet,” he said. “Doing it yourself is the culture. And I thought, ‘I’ll do the first book this way and build an audience and hopefully make money on the back end.’ ”

Mr. Jeffrey said that he is evaluating three Hollywood offers for “The Pocket and the Pendant,” the big screen, and that his suitors include companies with publishing arms offering book deals.

“It’s a much more attractive package to the publisher if you have a built-in audience,” said Mr. Leavell, the agent, who along with Mr. Sigler represents others who have built Internet followings, including Tucker Max, who detailed his drunken exploits on his Web site before publishing the best seller “I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell.”

Gwen Gedes, publisher of Dragon Moon Press, which published Mr. Sigler's first and forthcoming book, said that about half of her roughly 70 authors are available on podcasts. The possibility that listeners might not buy books after hearing them free does not faze Ms. Gedes, who said the exposure alone is invaluable.

She has been approaching unsigned podcasters with book deals. "It's kind of a role reversal to knock on an author's door, to write a query letter asking, 'Can I be your publisher?'" she said.

One author she courted was J. C. Hutchins, a 32-year-old former newspaper reporter from Deerfield Beach, Fla. When Mr. Hutchins completed his first novel in a planned trilogy, "7th Son," in 2005, he sent the book to agents, since major publishing houses will not consider unrepresented writers. "I got about 35 rejections from agents," Mr. Hutchins said. "Most hard-core writers would probably scoff at the mere 35 rejections and say: 'Wait till you get a hundred. It builds character.'"

Instead of waiting Mr. Hutchins plunked down \$50 for a microphone and \$50 for a mixer and started producing podcasts on GarageBand, the sound-mixing software. He put the book's first episode, the prologue, on Podiobooks in early 2005.

And he waited.

"You can see the statistic of how many listeners are downloading the book, and for the prologue there were literally three people, and two of them were my girlfriend and myself." But Mr. Hutchins's audience grew steadily, and there are now 20,000 people listening to his current feed, the trilogy's second book "7th Son: Deceit."

While Mr. Hutchins said that he appreciated Ms. Gedes's interest in the book, he is looking for an agent anew in the hope of attracting a bigger publisher.

Attracting an Internet audience has been validating, but it all comes down to "the dad test," Mr. Hutchins said. "My Dad isn't technically savvy, and he isn't online. When he hears Amazon, he thinks of the jungle. It would be nice for my Dad to be able to walk into a Barnes & Noble and see at least one copy of my book."

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