



Living in Key West for the past 10 years, Shirrel Rhoades pretends to be "semi-retired." But that's hardly the case. After nearly 40 years holding senior positions with such publications as Harper's, Reader's Digest, Scholastic, Ladies' Home Journal and Marvel Entertainment, he continues to consult with international publishing companies and he also writes a weekly syndicated column as the film critic for Cooke Communications. As if that's not enough, he is now launching what he calls a "virtual book publishing company." Expecting to go live in the next month or so, Absolutely Amazing eBooks already has about 20 authors lined up and nearly 50 manuscripts in hand.

Q: Tell us a little about your new ePublishing business.

A: Having published books with Reader's Digest and other major companies, it became clear to me the old economic paradigm for book publishing no longer works. It's too costly to pay writers big advances, pay to print and ship their books to bookstores essentially on consignment, then get half of them back a year or two later.

Just doesn't work anymore. And that's coupled with declining sales due to the technological advent of eBooks cutting into the bookstore market. So I thought it might be more effective to publish eBooks only, and use social network marketing techniques and lower pricing to drive sales. That's the concept behind Absolutely Amazing eBooks, the electronic publishing company my partner Al Kelley and I have set up.

Q: Why wouldn't an author just self-publish online?

A: He or she could do that. Amazon has a pretty good program to accommodate self-publishing. But many writers would rather spend their time writing and leave the technical and promotional details of publishing to a professional.

Q: Will there be hard copies of the books available for those that would rather turn the pages?

A: Not through bookstores, as a rule. But there will be a print-on-demand capability that will allow a writer to do book signings or give a gift to his or her mother.

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Q: Could you give us some examples of the genres you're covering?

A: Sure. In our first season, we will release 15 titles (we're aiming for about 50 titles a year). This first go-round ranges from mysteries to science fiction to romance to travel to literature. Future titles include self-help, erotica, spy novels, and humor. Maybe even children's books.

Q: One of the first books is a collection of short stories. Why short stories?

A: As a former fiction editor for Saturday Evening Post, I'm aware that the art of the short story is almost dying out, due to a lack of media to publish them. Very few magazines – Esquire, Atlantic, Harper's – still publish them. So this new venue opens up a whole new approach to getting short stories directly to readers.

Q: Could you give us an example of one of your short story collections?

A: Making my home here in Key West, I've become a fan of mysteries that are set on our island. So I thought it would be fun to collect mysteries by the leading Key West mystery writers and put them together in one volume. It's never been done before. That first volume (I hope it will be an annual event) is titled "Murder in Key West and Other Island Mysteries."

Q: What writers will be in that anthology?

A: I've become a big fan of [Michael Haskin's] Mad Mick Murphy novels. And Tom Corcoran, who writes the Alex Rutledge series, is doing one especially for this collection. Other writers include Jonathan Woods, Mike Dennis, Hal Howland, Roberta Islip (who writes under the name Lucy Burdette), Jessica Argyle, and me – if you'll forgive the audacity. Eight authors in all.

Q: How much are you drawing on your comic book executive background/contacts in this venture?

A: Not so much from my comic book contacts. At least not yet. But quite a bit from my more "serious" publishing contacts. In addition to introducing some terrific never-before-published authors, I've been able to call on several established authors to give me their "trunk books."

Q: What's a "trunk book"?

A: Many well-established writers have books they've written that never got published for one reason or another. Typically, these manuscripts get put away in a drawer or a trunk. Thus, they are called trunk books. Darned good novels that I will be bringing to the reading public for the first time ever.

Q: What do you see as the future of the traditional NYC publisher being?

A: Pretty grim. Amazon is now the 800-pound gorilla. And as more and more tablets go onto the market, more and more books will be read on Nooks, iPads, Samsung Galaxys, you name it. You just can't put the genie back in the bottle.

Q: Why should writers be interested in publishing with you?

A: Many shouldn't. If you've got an agent and a mainstream publisher, you don't need me. If you know how to self-publish and drive traffic on the internet, you don't need me. I'm targeting the in-between niche. Writers who can't get the attention of big publishers versus independent writers who want someone else to take care of the details of eBook publishing. Amazon will publish you, but they won't promote you.

Q: What about promotion?

There are many internet opportunities out there, how do you chose the right one for your books?

A: Promotion and marketing

is a unique skillset. And online it gets even trickier. I bring a lot of marketing background to the table, but I also have a guy trained in social network marketing, and I have access to the top marketers in the industry. In fact, this month I'm moderating a publishing industry panel on that very subject in New York City.

Q: What's the best way for a writer to query you about submitting a manuscript to Absolutely Amazing eBooks?

A: Mostly, I've been soliciting manuscripts one-one-one, no agents involved. Sometimes they come as referrals by someone I trust. But I'm open to submissions. The company's email isn't up yet (that will happen when we go live online), but many people reach me through my email address that's published along with my syndicated movie reviews: srhoades@aol.com.

Q: What should a writer do before submitting to you? Does he/she need cover art, editing, a certain format?

A: This is NOT "vanity publishing." Absolutely Amazing eBooks does not charge anybody to be published. The book has to be something that I think people might want to read. If the author wants the company to provide a book cover, there's an at-cost design fee. If the author wants an ISBN number (that's not required with eBooks), there's a slight handling fee. Otherwise, we do it all at no risk to the author. We take care of the editing, formatting for specific e-reader devices, placing with online booksellers as well as our own website, plus all the marketing and promotion. In a way, we will be selling authors rather than specific books.

Q: Sounds pretty good. Do you really think it will work?

A: Who knows. It's a whole new world out there in cyberspace. I call it a "noble experiment." But I'd bet my dime on it. The publishing industry is rapidly changing.

Q: Speaking of the publishing industry, did I hear you're getting an award this month?

A: (Blushing). Yes, I'm being inducted into the FMA (Fulfillment Management Association) Hall of Fame. Maybe that's a hint that I should be retired?

Q: You don't sound like you're ready to retire...

A: Not me. I'm having too much fun.