

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Critical mass

An innovative publishing firm looks to crowd-source its selections

AARON RODRIGUES

ABOUT THREE MONTHS AGO, Nuzhat Aziz, a Pune-based journalist, finished the manuscript for her first book—a collection of short stories on anti-Muslim prejudice and women’s rights in Islam today. As the work neared completion, she did as every aspiring author does, and went in search of a publisher. The publishing industry can be fickle, she soon understood. Several large, traditional publishers never got back to her, and smaller firms showed interest but nothing more. Aziz was stuck.

Then, on Twitter, she heard about Bloody Good Book, a new publishing venture inviting online submissions. Aziz logged on to the company’s website, and sent in her manuscript. In June, as part of the company’s official launch, Bloody Good Book uploaded three of Aziz’s short stories for public view, alongside samples from fifty other submitted manuscripts.

“In terms of publishing, we are trying to do something different, and there is space for us to alter the way publishing works,” Niyati Patel, who co-founded Bloody Good Book with the Navi Mumbai-based author Rashmi Bansal, told me over the phone in June from Ahmedabad, where she is based. The company aims to harness the power of the online crowd to discover good books, and to open doors for talented young writers. When a manuscript comes in, and if it meets certain minimum standards, Patel uploads the first three chapters or stories from the work to the website. There, readers pass judgement through ratings and reviews. Participation is open, and only requires registration on the website. Bloody Good Book currently has slightly over 3,500 users.

At the end of every month, the company and its print partner, the publishing house Westland, evaluate the ten best reviewed and ten most popular titles and consider whether to publish anything from the shortlist. “The final decision is taken by us ... even though we take into consideration the views of our readers,” Patel said. “This is one place where we take editorial control.” Bloody Good Book plans to publish e-books, while Westland may choose to also publish physical copies of any

work. Bloody Good Book hopes to publish up to half a dozen titles this year, including works of both fiction and non-fiction, and also cookbooks.

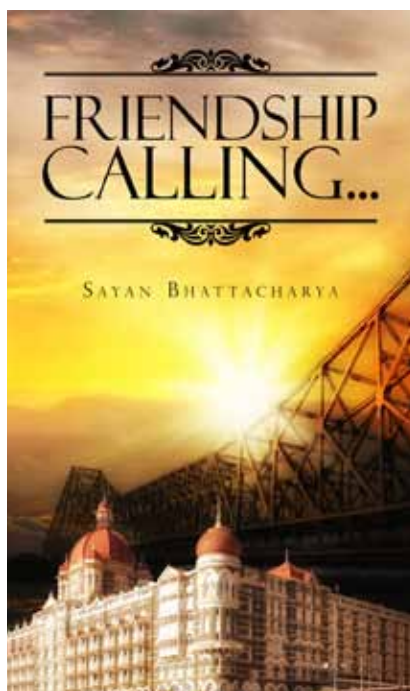
Bloody Good Book’s greatest appeal to writers is its relative transparency. Sayan Bhattacharya, who had earlier signed with a small publishing house, complained about sluggish feedback, and said that firm had “promised one thing and delivered something else entirely.” Bhattacharya is among the writers whose work went up for public scrutiny on the Bloody Good Book website in June. He told me he likes the company’s innovative approach, where readers’ comments come in quickly and are publicly shared.

In addition to crowd-sourced feedback, Bloody Good Book promises authors attractive financial terms: 40-percent royalty on the net receipts from e-books, and at least 10 percent of the sale price of every physical copy sold by Westland, rising to 12.5 percent if sales cross 25,000 units. “Most mainstream publishers give between 7.5 and 10-percent royalty for print publishing, and 25 percent net for e-books,” Mita Kapur, a literary agent, told me. Bloody Good Book also allows writers to bypass agents, and so keep a larger share of their earnings.

The company’s founders hope their publishing model will appeal particularly to the country’s growing number of young and tech-savvy readers. Compared to other markets, Indian consumers remain strongly attached to print, and e-book sales are relatively low. “Most publishers are reluctant to enter the e-book market, but we believe that there is potential with users reading on their cellphones and tablets,” Patel said. Deloitte, an international professional services firm, predicts that India will have 104 million smart-phone users by the end of 2014—an increase of 51 million over last year.

In keeping with its focus on internet users, Bloody Good Book plans to market its books aggressively through social media, in addition to more traditional promotional events such as book launches. “I believe our biggest advantage is that we have our own community to tap into. Since we are a small publishing house, we are going to think of different ways to market our books,” Patel said. For instance, Bloody Good Book encourages authors to be creative in publicising their own work. Aziz, for example, has a video on YouTube and the Bloody Good Book website—with stirring photographs and a soundtrack, and footage of Delhi’s Jama Masjid—describing the themes of her work.

When we spoke last month, Aziz told me she was delighted with her experience. “In the future I may look at traditional publishing houses, but for now I am very happy,” she said. “It’s a great platform, and an amazing first step.” ■



Bloody Good Book lets users review and rate samples of manuscripts online.