

# On the do-it-yourself trail with Bill Sullivan

The Oregon writer and outdoorsman has built a solid career out of regional-interest books and done it mostly on his own

By Melissa Hart

**A** GIANT PIPE organ greets me as I step into William L. Sullivan's sunny living room. "My last book did well," he tells me, then sits down and proceeds to play a thundering Bach fugue.

The book is *Oregon Trips and Trails*. For more than a decade, Bill Sullivan has self-published regional guidebooks, alerting adventurers to where to find hiking trails, campgrounds, remnants of pioneers' wagon-wheel tracks, and which tiny

diners offer the best homemade pie. In addition, he's penned four novels. His latest book, *Oregon's Greatest Natural Disasters*, examines floods, earthquakes, fires, eruptions and tsunamis that have impacted the state over the past 13,000 years.

In a business that tends to look down on writers who self-publish their work, the earnest, bearded author in blue jeans and hiking boots consistently proves his worth. "I made over a hundred thousand dollars last year," he notes.

His front porch bears boxes of books ready to be shipped out to gift shops and bookstores around the state. He leads me downstairs to his office and we pass a room packed with boxes. I glimpse the covers of *100 Hikes in the Central Oregon Cascades* and *Exploring Oregon's Wild Areas*.

"I've published all different ways," Sullivan explains. "I've published a novel with a big New York publisher through an agent. I've published academic textbooks [about desktop publishing and using computers] without an agent. I've worked with big and small publishers, with and without agents. Self-publishing I like best for the kinds of books I do."

We sit down at an expansive desk, surrounded by paintings done by his wife, Janell Sorensen. Several manual typewriters are perched atop glass-fronted barrister bookcases crammed with volumes. He nods in the direction of one. "All books I've bought and had autographed from Oregon authors over the years," he explains. "The most interesting books there are those that are self-published."

## What advice do you have for self-publishers?

There are an awful lot of skills needed. Not just the writing, but the editing, book design and packaging, marketing and shipping. If you're lacking one of those skills, or maybe you think you're good but you're not, you need to hire it done. And if you hire an editor, a book designer, a marketer and a distributor, you haven't saved anything over letting the publisher do it.

You'll come out ahead if you have some of those skills and you're willing to take the time to use them. If you just want to write and send your manuscript off and never have to worry about it again, self-publishing is not for you. I write mostly regional books of regional interest. If you're writing a general-interest novel that has to reach everyone in the country, a big publisher can do that.

## Do you like the marketing aspect of self-publishing?

I do. I feel like I know the whole process of the book. Just now, I got a call from Down to Earth, a garden store in Eugene. They ordered two each of my books. A publisher would just say "Good," and send them. But I know that store and I know my books. I told them there are five books for different parts of the state. You need a lot more of the books for this area of the state, and less for Eastern Oregon. She agreed. It's going to work out better for her and for me.

Editors at big publishing houses always did things I thought were stupid. Sometimes they're right, but often they're wrong, especially if they're off in New York making decisions that make sense in New York, but don't make sense about a book about Oregon.

## Can you give me an example?

Put a picture on the cover from North Carolina. Let the book go out of print just before Christmas. Or keep it in print for six months and then discontinue it forever, but

not give you the rights back for years.

I did outdoor guidebooks with a publisher in Seattle. They took a year to edit the book from the time I gave them the manuscript. For a guidebook, that's a bad idea. Self-publishing, I'm able to make changes to the book three weeks before it goes on the shelf. I can get all the new fees and winter storm damage to trails into the books that people buy all summer. It makes my books noticeably better than those done by publishers.

### What is your advice on finding a printer?

Don't go down to the local print shop and say "Can you print this book?" because they'll say yes. But they're lying. What they'll really do is job it out. There are 100 presses that print books in this country. It comes back and they stick their name on it and sell it to you at three times the cost. Most of the big book printers are in the Midwest. I print some books there. But with the price of gas going up, I'm printing more in Oregon.

I print 5,000 copies for a little less than \$10,000. They cost me about \$1.70 to print, and I charge \$16.95. I price the books at about 10 times what I paid. One mistake self-published authors make is to price their books too low.

### Do you have marketing advice for people who have already self-published and now have boxes full of copies?

Unfortunately, I usually hear about a project after the books are in boxes in the basement. Then I get a call from someone saying "I just ordered 5,000 copies of my grandma's memoir with aliens, and now how do I sell them?"

You should have been thinking about this long before. You have to set up your own interviews, talks and book signings. Offer a free presentation—a slide show, a lecture, or a workshop or class. Libraries are glad to host those. Clubs are glad to do it. If your book's on quilting, there's a quilting club that would love a presentation. Give the presentation for free, and you'll sell a bunch of books and get publicity. Newspapers are willing to feature someone who's doing a workshop, [not just] an author who has a book.

### How many months before publication would you suggest self-publishing authors begin marketing their book?

Start before you write the book. Figure out where you're going to market it. If it's a book on golf, you need to find out where the pro shops are, the conventions; how many places could stock the books. How many magazines and journals could run an article and an ad? If you're not finding ways to market the book, then you need a publisher.

In my case, the safe thing is to write a book that has such a strong local interest that you know every bookshop in the area will carry it—a history of the area or a travel guide. Then you can go to each bookstore and show them the book and get them to stock it.

The problem is that now, there are more chain stores. It's not easy to get into the chains. Ingram, the biggest U.S. book distributor, doesn't want to deal with publishers who have fewer than 10 books. If you've published one book and go to them, they'll tell you to come back when you have nine more. If you don't get it into Ingram, that's hard. You can get it into Baker & Taylor pretty easy, and Amazon—no problem. But Ingram? That matters. Bookstores don't want to order from 10,000 little publishers. They just order one box a week or a day from Ingram.

I pause to point out a discrepancy in Sullivan's travel guide to Eastern Oregon, explaining that ranchers have posted "No trespassing" signs along his suggested route to the ghost town of Blitzen. "What happens when you get disgruntled e-mails about perceived inaccuracies in your books?" I ask him.

He jots down a note and hands me a free autographed copy of *Oregon's Greatest Natural Disasters*. "Someone sends an angry e-mail saying they got to a destination and the trail signs were missing, or the bridge was out. I send them a thank-you and an autographed book." He smiles. "Suddenly, they're my biggest fans."

### Melissa Hart

Melissa Hart's book *Chica*, a memoir, will be published this fall. She teaches journalism at the University of Oregon. Web: [www.melissahart.com](http://www.melissahart.com).

## THE BILL SULLIVAN FILE

**Education:** William L. Sullivan studied at Deep Springs College in the California desert, received an English degree from Cornell University, studied linguistics at Heidelberg University in Germany, and earned a master's in German literature at the University of Oregon.

**On becoming a writer:** "I taught high

school English after college. I loved literature, but the students were not enthused. I wanted to become a freelance writer. I told my wife I wasn't likely to make money on it for a while. She said she'd support me for seven years, but at the end, if I hadn't made a living as a writer, I'd have to get a job clerking at Kmart. It was the

bottom of the seventh when I sold *Listening for Coyote*, the story of my 1,000-mile hike across Oregon, to a New York publisher. I got a \$25,000 advance, more money than I had earned in my life altogether at that point. Then I could concentrate on writing."



Sullivan

(In 2005, the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission chose *Listening for Coyote* as one of the 100 most significant books in the state's history.)

**Events:** Sullivan conducts about 30 slide shows and book signings a year. Web: [www.oregonhiking.com](http://www.oregonhiking.com).