Micha Berman was doing everything right. After spending a year as the assistant cruise director on a luxury liner, he decided to write a book about his adventures. He landed an agent, a major accomplishment for an unknown author. Publishers actually looked at his book proposal, another accomplishment. It even got as far as a committee at a few of the major publishing houses.

“Random House, Penguin,” mentions Mr. Berman, a Baltimore native who lives in San Francisco. “They loved it. That’s the word that got back to me.”

In the end, though, none bought it. “They didn’t see enough of a market for it,” says Mr. Berman, 38, married and a father, a social worker and voice-over artist for TV and radio commercials, who found the experience so disappointing that he put his book aside.

Last year, though, Mr. Berman’s hopes were revived. He read an article about the newest trend in publishing. Instead of traditional publishers and the frustrating route he’d already taken, there are now new avenues to expressing yourself in print. Self-publishing is booming. Mr. Berman decided to take a look.

“I realized this was a great opportunity. It was a mechanism for me to get my book out,” says Mr. Berman, who in 2008 published “Permanent Passenger: My Life On A Cruise Ship,” a 180-page paperback, through lulu.com, a print on-demand company.

Industry experts credit improved technology for the popularity of self-publishing. They talk about different categories of self-publishing and sometimes, confusingly so, they disagree on terms. Despite that, the picture that emerges is of two major trends: self-publishing companies and print on-demand.
Self-Publishing Companies

Gregg Wilhelm has a reputation. And it’s an enviable one. Mr. Wilhelm is known as the go-to literary guy in Baltimore. Executives of Circal Video, a large, non-profit literary arts organization, and director and editor-in-chief at Apprentice House Press, an independent book publishing company at Loyola College, Mr. Wilhelm considers the author as his or her own self-publishing “company.”

In other words, the author owns the copyright. The author pays for producing his book, and he or she retains 100% of the royalties. He or she retains the right to sell copies, or even include the same text in a new book.

Mr. Wilhelm, who has written and published six books under his own imprint, his goal is to make the author into an expert in marketing and promotion.

One author reported spending $40,000 to produce his self-published book. Another author says he talked to a “book shepherd” who charged $20,000 to guide him to print his book online, which he then offered for sale at local bookstores. Mr. Wilhelm says print on-demand is a high-end, high-quality mass production method.

On the other hand, says Mr. Wilhelm, “A book is a book.” The fee is based on such factors as the book’s dimensions, hardcover versus paperback, four-color versus one-color, and number of copies printed.

People self-publish for many different reasons. They have been rejected by a publisher, or they have ideas that a publisher wouldn’t think are marketable. Or they want to control the script.

A book is the result of the author’s work. It has a cover story. It has name recognition where it counts. It becomes a collectible, a collectible that can make money during its lifetime.

The traditional publishers are getting after celebrity names. If your name isn’t Tom Clancy or Danielle Steel, you don’t get published,” says Mr. Wilhelm, whose clients include companies that want to record their histories for posterity and CEOs who want to express their philosophies, sometimes with the help of ghost-written book by the likes of Mr. Wilhelm.

Mr. Wilhelm views print on-demand as a way to manufacture a book, not as a way to produce books.
Ms. Stonesifer has worked at a major publishing house. She knows what goes into producing a book, from creating an eye-catching cover to considering how it will be cataloged. “Overall, traditional publishers are doing fine. They are using the Internet to market their books,” she says. Self-published authors, on the other hand, may get themselves listed on Amazon or wrangle a book-signing at their neighborhood bookstore. It all depends on how much effort they’re willing to put into it.

“The technology has made it easier to be an author, but it’s not any easier to get your book out there,” says Ms. Stonesifer.

But Ms. Stonesifer does see a place for self-published books. For example, there is a much greater interest in Maryland genealogy and Maryland history. A well-researched, well-written self-published book on those topics would be considered.

Ms. Stonesifer gives another example. About five years ago, she noticed that requests and lots of those books were self-published, says Ms. Stonesifer. “Then [the genre] caught the attention of the publishers and it morphed into the mainstream.”

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Electronic Era

At the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Ms. Stonesifer is in charge of selecting new books. She goes after books that reflect African-American life in America. She’s interested in self-publishing. “We get a lot of requests and lots of those books were self-published,” says Ms. Stonesifer. “Then [the genre] caught the attention of the publishers and it morphed into the mainstream.”

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