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## McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

### An Interview with Jeremy Soldevilla on Recent Trends in Trade Book Publishing

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#### INTRODUCTION

Jeremy Soldevilla is owner and president of Christopher Matthews and Soul Fire Press. He is a trade book publisher, who brings a new approach to our business. Jeremy has a rich publishing background as an executive in STM organizations and educational publishers as well as trade publishing. In addition to his broad executive experience, Jeremy brings an extensive book marketing background to his own company. More information about Jeremy is at the end of this interview.

I wanted to find out what "real" book publishers do as we read in the popular press that "book publishers are extraneous" and authors can now self-publish and distribute their books as ebooks through Amazon. For example, in an April 26, 2010, New Yorker article, "Publish or Perish" Ken Auletta made these statements made about Amazon and book publishers:

- "Many publishers believe that Amazon looks upon books as just another commodity to sell as cheaply as possible, and that it sees publishers as dispensable."
- "Along these lines, Amazon seems to believe that in the digital world it might not need publishers at all."

Our interview will query Jeremy about trade publishing, the major differences between fiction and nonfiction publishing, and newer promotional techniques such as social media vs. the traditional promotion methods of the pre-digital age.

*A personal note:* I have known Jeremy for many years and our relationship goes back to the time we were colleagues at an educational publisher in Boston. Jeremy was a marketing executive and I was an acquisitions editor when we worked together.

#### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q** What motivated you to start Christopher Matthews Publishing?

**A** After decades of publishing other people's books, I decided to go for a lifestyle change and moved to Montana to start writing novels. I formed a writers group, the Bozeman Ink Slingers, and became increasingly aware of the really good writers that exist, but whose work will never see the light of day because of the realities of the economy and the risk aversion of publishers to take a chance on new writers. After frustrating efforts to get an agent for my first book I slowly began to develop the idea to start a publishing operation that would mine for those nuggets of good writing that were

being overlooked by the traditional houses. I founded the company to be author friendly – to respond to writer's queries and give them feedback, positive or negative on what they had sent.

I also want to take advantage of the new and emerging reading and publishing paradigms, particularly with ebooks. They are convenient, less expensive, and are environmentally friendly. Furthermore, they can be much more interactive and even contain multimedia that bound books cannot.

Our goal is to help the good writers get published. These are often folks who have been writing for years with little or no expectation of becoming bestselling authors. They simply want physical evidence of the

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work they've put into their manuscripts and have others enjoy what they've written.

We are not a self-publishing operation. We vet the manuscripts that are submitted to us, and if we feel it is publishing-worthy, we will publish it. However, through our own experience we have learned how time-consuming and confusing it can be to properly self-publish a book, so besides our publishing program we provide services on a fee basis to those who have decided to self-publish but may not know how to format their manuscript for a printer or create a professional looking cover. We can help those writers as well.

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**Q** What were the three most difficult things during the start-up phase?

**A** The most difficult things have been re-training myself about what publishing in the new millennium is all about. It's a very different world from the one you and I started in those many years ago. And it is changing almost daily. Since I handle 95% of all the functions—editorial, formatting, social media marketing, distribution, accounting, web design, etc.—I have had to learn whole new sets of skills that require quite a bit of technological savvy. Another difficult thing has been to come up with a business model that doesn't take advantage of authors. While these things have been difficult, they are also energizing for a man in his early 60's. It keeps my mind and attitude fresh and energized.

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**Q** What is CMP's publishing niche?

**A** We are mostly interested in good fiction. However, if we are particularly intrigued by a project in another genre, we will seriously consider it. Besides our fiction, we have also published an autobiography and a musical. Our sister company, Soul Fire Press, publishes Young Adult and New Adult books. New adult is a rela-

tively new genre that is targeted at readers from the ages of 17 through their 20's and beyond. The Twilight series is a good example of this genre.

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**Q** What are the major differences between working for a large publishing company and running your own company?

**A** The buck, as meager as it is, stops here. We don't have a big staff of specialists handling all the different functions. My wonderful designer, Armen Kojoyian, works from his studio in NYC and I work from my office in Bozeman, Montana. All our work is done on the computer, and we collaborate via Skype. We are definitely a paperless operation. Unlike the large companies you and I have worked for, as a very small operation, we can be flexible and respond quickly to new technologies, ideas and ways of doing things. We have minimal overhead and only publish print on demand and ebooks, so no warehousing costs and destruction of hundreds of non-selling books.

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**Q** What have you learned and can share with those wanting to start a new book publishing venture?

**A** As my father often said, "The more you know, the more you know the less you know." Starting a new book publishing venture these days requires technical savvy and a willingness to learn new techniques and let go of old concepts. I would urge publishers to keep their standards high. Too many writers are turning to self-publishing, much of which is poorly written, poorly edited and poorly designed.

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**Q** What have you found to be different in publishing fiction when compared to educational and STM?

**A** Good question. A young writer, Megan Curd, asked me to help her format her YA book that she was

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planning on self-publishing. While not a fan of YA, I read her manuscript and was impressed with her writing and the story itself. I know that the YA market is huge and very much socially oriented. The Twilight Series, Harry Potter, etc., are examples of how wildly successful that market can be. While I have zero experience in that market, Megan and her friend Hope Collier are very much in tune with that market and are both good writers themselves. I approached Hope about taking charge of a division devoted to YA and New Adult books and she eagerly agreed. I felt a younger editor and a program geared specifically to that market and those writers would be a better way to go than put them under the CMP roof.

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**Q** What are benefits of an author publishing with Christopher Matthews Publishing? Put another way, why would an author select a relatively new company to publish his or her book?

**A** Our catchphrase is “author-run/author friendly.” Being an author myself, I understand the financial, design, technical and publishing restraints on new writers. We help them get published, whether with us or with a self-publishing operation. Because our overhead is so low, we provide more generous terms than traditional or self-publishers. Because of the extensive experience of both my designer and myself, we can produce a very professional looking book. We keep up to date on the latest trends, technology and marketing processes. We are a start-up, but we have many years of experience in all areas of publishing.

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**Q** What services does CMP offer to self-publishers and how would a self-publisher benefit from those services?

**A** While we may not accept a book for our publishing program, it could be for many reasons having nothing to do with the quality of the writing. But we are able to help someone who is overwhelmed by the complexities of various aspects of publishing. We provide editing, manuscript formatting, cover design, and general publishing advice services. We keep our fees very reasonable and affordable and the end result is a very professional piece of work.

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**Q** In light of quotes from Ken Auletta’s New Yorker article, what value does an experienced book company add to the publishing process for an author? Bottom-line: Are traditional book publishing companies, with experienced staffs, relevant when anyone with a PC can self-publish their own book?

**A** Having spent the last 40 years in publishing I am very much aware of the lack of understanding the general public has of what a publisher is and does. Yes, anyone with a computer can produce his/her own book. But there is a great deal of expertise that goes into professional book design, editing, marketing and distribution. It is rare that someone with no training can bring all these skills together like a true publishing company can. So there will be a lot of junk on the market, but the well written/produced/published books will rise to the top.

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**Q** With the number of retail book outlets shrinking daily, is it realistic for a newer independent trade book publisher to expect any sales in trade retail channels?

**A** On its own, it is certainly difficult for an indie publisher to sell into trade retail channels. However, there are distribution companies that service independent publishers for those accounts.

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**Q** In the context of today's trade publishing market, what is the role of direct-mail, catalogs, publicity, new releases and review copies to the media and to editors? Are these printed promotion items still effective and how should an independent book publisher employ them?

**A** Publicity depends on review copies and social media marketing including book blog tours. The expense of catalogs is probably not worth the return for many indies unless they have a large catalog of books.

**Q** How do you promote your online bookstore and drive traffic to it?

**A** Mostly through social media marketing—Twitter, Facebook, Goodreads, etc. We also post our URL everywhere we can, including in the books themselves.

**Q** Many rave over Facebook and Twitter as vehicles to publicize books. Most of the evidence for this is anecdotal and lacking any empirical basis. Have you had experience using social media to promote the books you publish? What are your suggestions for an author and for a trade publisher to use social media as a promotion vehicle?

**A** Social media is the primary way we promote our books. The key to success in that market is to have web-savvy authors who have a platform of readers they can reach out to. This is more effective in the Young Adult market, I have found, where the readership is very tuned in to finding and reading books on the net.

**Q** When should trade publishers use print-on-demand (POD) rather than offset printing?

**A** If their sales expectations are moderate (under 1,000 copies), then it doesn't make sense to go to the expense of offset printing and warehousing.

**Q** What criteria do you recommend in selecting a POD printer?

**A** Service, quality and turnaround time.

**Q** What is CMP's approach to ebooks? Which ebook programs/channels have been most successful for CMP?

**A** All of our books are available in both POD and eformats. The ebooks are available for any platform. We don't have any significant sales history on our ebooks yet as the first books appeared this spring. Obviously, though, Kindle is the biggest player these days.

**Q** What do you think the growth trajectory of ebooks will be for independent nonfiction book publishers?

**A** I believe ebooks make a lot of sense in the textbook market because of the multimedia benefits they allow—videos, audio clips, etc. Great learning tools. And again, the under 30 market is very tuned in to using ematerials. Currently, however, I think the market for general nonfiction ebooks will be on a much slower trajectory than fiction and textbooks.

**Q** How does CMP handle ebook distribution? What are your tips in planning for the smoothest and most economical ebook conversion?

**A** Our ebooks are available through our own websites and on Amazon, B&N.com, Google Editions, and a score of other sites. There are some excellent helps on the internet for creating ebooks, many are free. As time goes on it gets easier and easier to do ebook conversions.

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**Q** Any other thoughts you want to share with our readers?

**A** This is one of the more exciting times in the publishing world. It is threatening to some, and a magnificent opportunity for others. As more players, writers as well as emerging publishers, get involved bringing fresh ideas, incredible new technologies and new models to the industry the landscape will be quite different in the next few years. For centuries the concepts of a book and publishing has been static. As of the last couple of years those concepts have been turned upside down. It will be interesting to see how things shake out, and how the big traditional publishers adapt.

### ABOUT JEREMY SOLDEVILLA

Jeremy began his publishing career in textbook and professional reference publishing in the 1970s. His roles over the next decades have included acquisitions editor, textbook sales rep, Vice President of marketing, STM Marketing Director with the American Mathematical Society, and Chief Operating Officer of the U.S. office of Blackwell Publishing. In 2004 Jeremy moved to Bozeman, Montana, to turn his attention to writing novels. After experiencing the ego-numbing process of being a new writer, he formed an author friendly company, Christopher Matthews Publishing, in January 2011. He spun off a second imprint, Soul Fire Press, focusing on Young Adult books that summer. His first novel, Thief Creek, was published in April. He is still writing when he can find the time, but he spends most of his days learning new skills to advance his publishing operation.

Jeremy can be reached at [jeremy@christophermatthewspub.com](mailto:jeremy@christophermatthewspub.com) or 406-388-0743 His websites are: <http://christophermatthewspub.com> and <http://soulfirepress.com>.

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B-14, *College Publishing Glossary*, 2009, 3 pages

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PD-4, *How to Think about New Product Development and Acquisitions: A Checklist*, 2009, 2 pages

PD-6, *Tips for Acquisitions Editors and Publishers: Maximizing Acquisitions Potential at Conventions*, 2009, 2 pages

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I-49, *Book Acquisitions: An Interview with Claire Reinburg, Director NSTA Press*, 2010

I-8, *Successful Independent Book Publishing: An Interview with Judy Galbraith*, Free Spirit Publishing, 2010

I-15, *Ebooks and Copyright: an Interview with Attorney David Koehser*, 2010

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B-11, *Book Publishing Financial and Statistical Reports for A Book Publishing Company*, 2009, 3 pages, \$3

*Contents:* Sales Reports; Profit/Loss Statements; Inventory Reports

B-12, *How to Evaluate the Book Acquisitions Function: 29 Questions to Ask*, 2009, 7 pages, \$7

*Contents:* Why Ask Questions about Acquisitions; Questions to Ask; Decision-Making; Documentation; Marketplace; Metrics; New Products; Performance; Process; Recruiting Authors; Documents to Review; Benefits

B-13, *Starting an Association Book Publishing Program: 20 Questions to Ask, 2007*, 2 pages, \$3

*Contents:* Why Publish Books; Risk-Reward Ratio; Co-publishing; Books and Journals; Resources Needed and Costs; Staffing; Authors; Outsourcing; RFPs; UBIT

B-16, *Book Publishing Co-Publishing Basics and a Checklist of Questions*, 2006, 3 pages, \$5

*Contents:* Co-Publishing Defined; Dynamics; Organizational Fit; Questions to Ask; Get Competent Advice

B-17, *How to Think about Author Advances: Six Tips*, 2006, 1 page, \$2

B-18, *Twelve Attributes and Traits of Successful Acquisitions Editors*, 2006, 3 pages, \$5

*Contents:* Entrepreneurial Drive; Initiative Taker; Persuasive; Sales-Oriented; Friendly and Enthusiastic; Empathetic; Listening Skills; Competitive; Tenacious; Organized; Analytical; Decision-Oriented

B-19, *Editorial Strategic Planning for Book Publishers*, 2009, 2 pages, \$2

*Contents:* Why Plan Acquisitions; Eight Questions to Ask; Who Should Participate

B -20, *Tracking Book Author Prospects*, 2009, 2 pages, \$2

*Contents:* How to Track Prospects; Tracking Stages; Maintaining Prospect Records

B-22, *McHugh's 10 Suggestions for Successful Book Acquisitions*, 2011, 4 pages, \$5

*Contents:* Book Acquisitions Are Vital; Four Truisms about Book Acquisitions; Ten Suggestions; and Developing Acquisitions Talent: Investing in the Future

B-24, *Book Acquisitions: Author Driven vs. Continuity/Topic Driven and Editorial Strategic Planning, 2009*, 3 pages, \$3

*Contents:* Role of Acquisitions; Which Model Is Best; Plan a Continuity Series; Editorial Retreat; Questions to Ask

PD-1, *Checklist of 96 Book Acquisitions Tips and Suggestions*, 2009, 5 pages, \$7

*Contents:* Responsibilities of Acquisitions Editors; Reasons Why an Author Chooses a Publisher; Commissioning an Author; Contract Signing Kit; Why Authors Write Books; Dealing with Unsolicited Manuscripts; Publishing Proposals; Editorial Measures; Financial Measures; Launching a Book; Successful Association Publishing; Successful Acquisitions Editors; Acquisitions Workload Rule-of-Ten

PD 2, *Twelve Factors Considered by Authors When Selecting a Publishing Company*, 2009, 3 pages, \$2

*Contents:* Publisher's Reputation; Ability to Promote; Cycle Time; Production; Sales Ability; Financial Terms; Contractual Terms

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PD-7, *How to Use a Book Proposal Form to Improve the Acquisition of a New Book*, 2009, 6 pages, \$6

*Contents:* Book Proposals and Acquisitions; Ownership and Accountability; Approvals; Editorial Committees; Proposal Contents; Value of Book Proposal; Sample Book Proposal Form

PD-8, *Tips and Suggestions on How to Use Your Book Contract Advantageously*, 2009, 4 pages, \$4

*Contents:* Contract as an Acquisitions Tool; Purpose of the Contract; Royalty Payments; 25 Necessary Provisions; Provisions Never to Eliminate

PD-16, *Improving Book Product Development Using Total Quality Management*, 2010, 4 pages, \$4

*Contents:* TQM and Product Development; Process; Cycle Time; Customer Focus; Learning about Your Customers; Nine Recommendations for Quality Improvement

PM-10, *Publishing Divestiture: A Practical Guide for Book Managers*, 2009, 5 pages, \$10

*Contents:* Selling a Book Company; Offering Document; Information to Include; Prospective Buyers; Handle Sale Alone; Using a Broker; Steps in Selling

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### ABOUT JOHN B. MCHUGH, PUBLISHING CONSULTANT

John B. “Jack” McHugh, a 30-year veteran of the publishing business, is a long-time successful publishing consultant. He is the author of the McHugh Publishing Guide Series—51 practical papers on all aspects of publications management, which can be ordered at his website. He also publishes the McHugh Expert Interview series—10 interviews with publishing leaders on various publishing specialties, which are available free at [www.johnbmchugh.com](http://www.johnbmchugh.com).

In the book publishing business, McHugh has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary’s Press. McHugh is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality. For a two-year period, McHugh served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute.

McHugh has advised a variety of association publishers including: AASHTO, Alliance for Children and Families, ASCD, ASM International, ASTM, AWHONN, Boy Scouts of America, International Employee Benefit Foundation, NSTA, Police Executive Research Foundation, SAE, SMACNA and SNAME. McHugh has also worked for commercial publishers such as Butterworth Heinemann, Cardiotext, Kendall Hunt, and Llewellyn Worldwide.

Jack McHugh’s specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, organizational design, and startups.

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