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INTRODUCTION

Sisters in Crime was officially formed in 1987 as an activist group, with a goal of supporting the work of women crime writers and addressing imbalances in the publishing industry. Since then, our mission has expanded, focusing on our core values of advocacy, equity, inclusion, and community.

The Sisters in Crime Monitoring Project has depended on a network of dedicated volunteers to track reviews of books in newspapers and trade publications to determine what percentage involves the work of women authors. Results are compiled and analyzed annually; reports from 2005 to the present are available in the Sisters in Crime archives (https://www.sistersincrime.org/page/history-behind-monitoring-project).

This year, Sisters in Crime designed the Business of Books Survey as a companion to the Monitoring Project to collect information directly from members regarding their experiences as readers and writers of crime fiction. Our goal was to gather and share meaningful information about the current publishing landscape, start thoughtful conversations about visible trends, and identify potential opportunities for members. In addition, we believed that gaining a deeper sense of Sisters in Crime membership identities would help us better serve our organization.

The survey was open for several weeks during May and June 2021: invitations were sent to all Sisters in Crime members, asking them to provide information about the previous year’s activities (2020) in five sections:

- Reading Activities
- Writing Activities
- Comparison of Traditionally, Indie and Hybrid Published Authors
- Author Activities
- Member Identities.

Responses were submitted anonymously, respondents were allowed to skip any questions they preferred not to answer, and a free-response box was offered with every question. A total of 754 members took the survey, which is an overall SinC membership response rate of 19%.

An executive summary follows, after which more detail and additional results are provided for each of the individual sections.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Top five categories read in 2020: detective, amateur sleuth, private investigator, adult mystery/crime, and suspense.
- Most members read between 25 and 49 titles annually. Quite a few members noted that 2020 was an unusual reading year for them, noting that in some instances they read more than normal, while others read less than normal.
- The top three sources for obtaining titles: Amazon, independent booksellers, and libraries.
- Most members noted that price is the biggest factor when determining their preferred reading format.
- Paperbacks and ebooks led the pack in preferred formats.
- Personal recommendation led the pack with an overwhelming 71.3% of respondents indicating that this was the most persuasive way to discover new books. Also noted were the number of virtual events in 2020 that led members to discover new authors. Many noted that they are hopeful that virtual events will not go away in the future.
- Members read and write reviews on two main sites: Amazon and Goodreads. Reviews on Amazon (62.2%) and Goodreads (48.7%) account for the majority of reviews that are read. Newspapers only made up 29.1% of where members find reviews, which might be indicative of the decrease in newspaper coverage of books and the decline of local newspapers. Blogs (24.5%) and magazines (21.1%) still provide some review reading as well. Members also provide reviews via social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.
- Over 60% of respondents have published mystery/crime books: 35% have written between 1-5; 25% have written 6-19; and 7% have written 20+. In addition, 20% reported writing short fiction.
- Of authors published in 2020: 48% identified as traditionally published only; 38% identified as independently published only; 13% identified as both traditionally and independently published (hybrid).
- The majority of authors reported making less than $1000 per year.
- Though traditionally published authors are less likely to be at the lowest end of the earnings scale for 2020, the percentage earning at the higher end, 50,000+ in 2020, was almost identical for each publishing type. (13% for traditional, 12% for independent, 14% for hybrid.)
- Since 2016 the number of SinC members who identify as LGBTQIA+ has doubled. Those who identify as disabled significantly increased in the same amount of time, from 12% to 21%.
SECTION ONE: READING ACTIVITIES IN 2020

Sisters in Crime has two primary categories of members: professional and active. Professional members have indicated that they are primarily interested in the business of publishing, whether that is as a writer, librarian, bookseller, publisher, editor, agent, or academic researcher. Active members are those who have an interest in promoting the purposes of Sisters in Crime and include readers and fans.

Both membership categories were invited to answer the survey, and the first seven questions were designed to elicit responses from both member categories.

Twenty-five categories of mystery and crime fiction were presented to survey takers. Multiple categories could be selected. Several readers noted that they read widely across categories and do not feel limited by subgenres.

Number of Books Read in 2020
Many respondents noted that 2020 was an unusual reading year for them. There were several notes that indicated that they read more than normal and an equal number noting that they read less than normal.

While Amazon was the clear winner, independent bookstores and libraries were also significant sources of books for most members. Members also noted that they purchase books from used book websites such as Abebooks and Thriftbooks, as well as purchasing digital audio books from various sources.

Most respondents noted that price is the largest driver of format. Many also noted the convenience of e-books.
Many members noted that they had multiple sources for discovering new novels. It was noted that in 2020, the ubiquity of virtual events allowed members to discover new authors. Many noted that they are hopeful that the virtual events will continue even after pandemic restrictions lift.

Members had a variety of sources for reviews but there was a strong preference for not reading reviews. Members who did not read reviews noted that they would read a preferred author regardless of reviews. It was also noted that some members preferred to form their opinion independent of reviews.
While some members noted that they did not write reviews, the reasons were diverse. Some did not read reviews and did not see the reason to write them. Several members added that they were not comfortable writing reviews. Finally, many members noted that they write reviews on social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were mentioned).
SECTION TWO: WRITING ACTIVITIES IN 2020

The section had a high number of respondents, with nearly 20% of overall membership engaged. Results indicate a predominance of members writing Adult fiction (40.6%) with a slim minority self-reporting as Young Adult (6.47%) or Children’s (2.59%). The large gap (50% not responding) suggests underreporting in one or all of the categories, while supporting Adult fiction as the largest section of SinC membership.

Cozy is represented by the largest number of reporting members as a sub-genre. This is closely followed by Suspense, Thriller, Traditional, and Historical. Paranormal/Supernatural, Romantic Suspense, and Police Procedural are next. This parallels the breakdown of protagonist type with the majority, Amateur Sleuths (typical in Cozies), represented three times more than Detectives. Detectives are closely followed by Private Investigators.

Short fiction is authored by nearly 20% of the respondents.

A solid majority of the reporting membership publish under their own name (80%) with 20% publishing under a pen name and nearly 5% publishing under multiple pseudonyms, which suggests multiple series.

Among the current respondents over 60% are published authors, with the largest portion (35%) having authored 1-5 mystery/crime books. Twenty-five percent have authored between six and nineteen books. Seven percent of the respondents have authored twenty or more.

The largest majority (39%) of the respondents first published between 2010-2019. Just under ten percent started their published career in the last year.
In the past year nearly 50% of those responding published at least one crime-related piece. Twelve percent reported publishing more than one, with 40% not publishing. Among the respondents, the majority (42%) were novels. Short fiction accounted for nearly 25%. Anthologies played an important role, with 14% included as contributors.

Reporting members were nearly equally divided between Traditional and Independently published, with over 20% percent in both categories. The number of participants choosing not-applicable (43%) trends with the number of respondents self reporting as not as yet published (33%) taking into account authors who are published in other years but not last.
SECTION THREE: COMPARING TRADITIONAL, INDIE, AND HYBRID AUTHORS

Sisters in Crime has strong numbers of Indie, hybrid and traditionally published members. Their responses to the survey reinforced many existing beliefs about these paths and contained some surprises.

Findings
In the charts below, these are the color codes used for the bars:

- Traditionally Published
- Indie Published
- Hybrid Published

Who We Are

For the survey respondents who had books published in 2020

- 48% reported their books were traditionally published only
- 38% reported their books were independently published only
- 13% reported their books were both traditionally and independently published during 2020.

Age: You might expect Indie authors to be younger, but age distribution was very similar among the respondents. Indie authors did cluster a bit older with a higher percentage in the 60-69 age group (39%) than the other publishing modes. This may reflect authors with long careers moving to Indie publishing, or possibly a “why wait?” attitude on the part of later-in-life authors who don’t wish to wade through the lengthy process of finding an agent, securing a publisher and waiting for publication.
First book publication: By far the largest number of respondents in every category began their careers as published authors in the years 2010-2019. However, more traditional-only and hybrid authors were first published before 2000. This may indicate a lack of opportunity or maturity in the Indie arena prior to that period, or it may reflect a different traditional publishing landscape prior to 2000. Interestingly, the percentage of responders who were first published in 2020 were almost evenly divided among the three publishing routes.

First mystery/crime book published—

Total books: Over their careers, Hybrid authors published more books than Traditional-only or Indie-only authors, especially in the 20+ books category. This may reflect highly prolific authors getting published in every way possible. It probably also reflects traditional authors getting their rights reverted and self-publishing their backlists and therefore becoming hybrid authors.
What We Write

Genre: Traditional-only, Indie-only and Hybrid book authors write in roughly similar subgenres. However, traditional-only published authors were more likely to report they wrote traditional mysteries, (31% for Traditional vs. 18% for Indie and 20% for Hybrid). Indie-only authors reported writing slightly more suspense than traditionally published authors, (34% for Indie vs. 24% for traditional and 31% for hybrid). Hybrid authors reported writing much more short fiction, (39% for hybrid vs. 16% for Traditional and 14% for Indie.)

In which mystery/crime genre do you write? (Respondents could pick multiple subgenres.)

Author names: There appears to be little difference in the percentage of authors who publish under their own names across the Traditional-Indie-Hybrid spectrum.
Number of books in 2020: For respondents who had books published in 2020, most published only one book in that year. Hybrid and Indie authors were more likely than traditional authors to have published more than one book, though the difference was not as high as some might have expected.
Marketing Activities and Expenses

There may be a lingering notion in some quarters that Indie and Hybrid authors must work harder at marketing, while traditionally published authors focus on writing; that day is long gone. All our respondents work hard to maintain their author presence.

Author presence

[Bar chart showing the distribution of author presence across different categories for Traditional, Indie, and Hybrid authors.]

Social Media: Similarly, all categories of authors participate heavily in social media.

[Bar chart showing the distribution of social media presence across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, BookBub, and Pinterest for Traditional, Indie, and Hybrid authors.]

Marketing expenditures: All categories of authors spend similarly to support their writing. (Though 2020 may be a poor baseline year for judging expenditures, because there were few in-person conferences, usually a major author expense. Of the major conferences in the crime fiction genre, only Left Coast Crime got—partially—off the ground.)
Here’s a breakdown for further comparison:

**Reviews**

**Reviews in Publications:** Many respondents skipped this survey question. It may be because it was a long question, because they don’t keep track of their reviews, or most probably because they did not receive any reviews in publications.

Percentage who responded to the question:

- Traditional: 59%
- Indie: 21%
- Hybrid: 41%

Because of the disparity in percentage of respondents for each type, the results below are for percentage of total respondents across all types of publication as this gives a clearer picture.

**Reviews by the trades (publications intended for booksellers, librarians and others in the publishing ecosystem):**
In summary, traditionally published authors were much more likely to receive reviews in these trade publications, even though Indie authors can choose to pay for reviews in Publishers Weekly and Kirkus.

**Mystery-focused publications**: Reviews in mystery-focused publications fell along similar lines with the preponderance of reviews going to traditional authors. This may reflect the predilections of these publications, the willingness of traditional publishers to fund and distribute paper or Netgalley ARCs, or a combination.

**General Interest publications**: Reviews in general interest publications were lower across the board and non-existent for Indie and Hybrid authors.

**Reviews by Readers**: Unsurprisingly, all respondents received the preponderance of their reader reviews from Amazon, Goodreads, Barnes & Noble, and reader blogs (in that order). The only significant difference was Netgalley, where 44% of traditionally published authors received reader reviews, as opposed to 6% for Indie authors and 0 for Hybrid authors. This disparity probably reflects the willingness of traditional publishers to pay the Netgalley listing fee.

Traditional authors were more likely to receive more reader reviews. However Indie and Hybrid authors did receive reader reviews in significant numbers.
Income

Lots of publishing, lots of marketing activity and expense. What does it all come down to? A large percentage of authors in all three publication categories made very little money, under $1000 a year. Traditionally published authors were less likely to earn under $1000. Fascinating, the percentage of authors in each category who earned more than $50,000 in 2020 is almost identical. (13% for Traditional, 12% for Indie, 14% for Hybrid.)
SECTION FOUR: AUTHOR ACTIVITIES IN 2020

In the Business of Books survey, 68% of respondents identified themselves as published, and 28% identified themselves as pre-published. For author activities, information was filtered through the published and pre-published lens.

Since the comparison section just addressed money, we’ll continue the conversation here.

Money
Money is difficult to talk about, which is why the survey addressed it several times.

Expenses

There is a discrepancy between pre-published and published authors, but it should still be noted that most authors spent less than $1000 last year. That said, because of the pandemic, there’s no doubt that the amount was less than in other years. The question will remain on different surveys.
Income

Advances

Pre-Published and Published authors are combined for this information. It should be noted that Indie authors do not get an advance, and in future surveys we will make $0 an option. That skews the “under $1000” numbers, but we included them regardless. Here is the breakdown for per book advances:

Writing Income

Pre-published and published authors are included in this breakdown.
Marketing

Agents

Most authors did not work with an agent in 2020.

Did you work with an agent in 2020?

Publicists

99% of pre-published authors did not work with a paid publicity professional. 78% of published authors did not work with a paid publicity professional.

Of the published authors who worked with a paid publicity professional, 11% had the professional paid for by their publisher. 11% funded the publicist themselves.

Newsletters

41% of published and pre-published authors have a newsletter. When we look at published authors, the number rises to 51%. For reporting purposes, we’re focusing on the published authors.

How many newsletter subscribers do published authors have?
40% send newsletters out monthly. 30% send them out when they have news. We did not include quarterly as an option, but will in the future. Of the choices, here’s the breakdown.

![How often do published authors send out newsletters?](image)

73% of respondents use MailChimp. The next most popular program was MailerLite (23%).

**Guest Posts**
15% of pre-published authors guest posted 1-5 times. 82% never guest posted. The graph below shows the breakdown for published authors.

![How many guest blog posts did published authors do in 2020?](image)

How people got on the blogs varies between published and pre-published authors. Authors could select as many options as were appropriate.

For pre-published authors, they were either invited by the site host (70%) or they reached out themselves (42%).

For published authors 81% were invited by the site host, 18% had a publicist help, 12% of the invites were from the publisher, 51% reached out themselves.
Giveaways

**How often did published authors do giveaways?**

42% of published authors never did giveaways. Here’s the breakdown for the published authors who responded to the survey:

**Social Media**

The breakdown between published and pre-published authors is helpful. Again, respondents could choose as many channels as they’d like.

**Conferences and Events**

Networking is an important part of an author’s life. The pandemic affected attendance, but the numbers are still interesting.
For authors, not surprisingly 80% of respondents attended only online events. 8% didn’t attend any online events.

We asked about preferences regarding online or in person events. Most people still prefer in person events (53%) but 47% preferred online or had no preference.
SECTION FIVE: MEMBER IDENTITIES

Knowing and understanding who our members are is vital to serving them well. We asked members to identify across multiple areas: age, race, gender, sexuality, and disability. The majority of our members are 50+ years of age and White. Most are cisgender women who identify as heterosexual. The majority identified as having none of the disabilities we listed. However, there were some significant increases in population subsets within our membership groups. Members reporting a disability in 2016 (12%) rose in 2021 (to 21%). Those who identified as LGBTQIA+ rose from 6% in 2016 to 13% in 2021. Making writers from all backgrounds welcome is a goal of Sisters in Crime, but increasing diversity across multiple areas has been slower than we’d like.

How do we use this demographic information? Foremost, to understand who our members are and what their needs might be, and whether we are meeting those needs. As an advocacy membership group, we also need to know what advocacy work might have the greatest impact for our members. And as an organization committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, member data is an essential tool to help us gather information about our progress in expanding our organization to include readers and writers from all backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

As a complement to the ongoing Sisters in Crime Monitoring Project, the Business of Books Survey brings a wide variety of additional topics into the spotlight. Although 2020 was a highly unusual year, given the pandemic, we found this snapshot of the publishing activities of our membership to be enlightening and even surprising. In some cases, responses served as catalysts for pressing new questions that we will explore going forward. With future surveys, we plan to establish a more typical baseline and to regularly gather information for comparison; the results will help us shape our organization’s activities, benefits, and advocacy opportunities.