



BONG FORTIN Photo: MALCOLM MCLEOD and TAN HOWE YANG

No publisher? Do it yourself

A growing number of writers spurned by publishing companies here are taking the plunge and printing the works themselves

By TRACY QUEK

UNIVERSITY student Johnny Tay hopes to one day have his name mentioned in the same breath as comic greats Stan Lee, who created Spider Man, and Charles Schultz of Peanuts fame.

But all the 10 publishers he approached with his first offering turned him down.

"I was told my drawings were not up to scratch," said the avid doodler and scribbler, who has never taken a professional drawing class.

So, the 23-year-old published it himself.

It cost the first-year business student at Singapore

Management University \$2,000 for 2,000 copies of the first instalment of his children's comic series, *Anema Age Of Robots*.

There are others like him who are also publishing their writing themselves, a situation the industry often refers to as the "vanity press".

Book distributors such as Market Asia, APD Singapore and MPH Distributors say they are seeing a growing number who do so and then work with distributors to get their books into shops.

Ms Joyce Tan, executive director of the National Book Development Council of Singapore, says no one has

tracked the rise, but based on what those in the book industry tell her, it has turned into a trend in the last two years.

Mr Johnson Lee, director of Market Asia Distributors which mostly handles locally-penned works, like the Mr Kiasu series, said: "Four or five years ago, there was hardly anyone asking us to distribute their own work. But in the last two years or so, I've been getting up to 40 such books every month."

His battered old desk is cluttered with piles of such efforts, whose subject matter and genre run the gamut — children's books, cookery books, self-improvement issues, fiction and poetry.

The writers hail from all kinds of professions and all age groups, but none is a full-time writer. They spend upwards of \$2,000 getting their manuscripts printed.

Dentist Johnny Lee, 56, was so keen on being published, he set up a company, Instrument of Truth, to take care of this. He has since put out four works of fiction, at a cost of \$10,000.

The father of two grown sons said he felt an irresistible urge to write the year he turned 40. "I started to write to share my experience and feelings with others. I knew publishers would be picky, so I decided to do it myself."

But those in the industry advise that publishing is risky, with no guarantee of a return.

So why take the plunge?

Most have something they want to get off their chest and are tired of publishers telling them they do not make the grade, said Mr Ilangoh Thanabalan, product manager of book distribution company Pansing Distribution.

Some want control over

editorial changes and the design aspects of their book. Others believe they can earn more by side-stepping publishing houses.

Dr Patrick Low, 44, a human resource training consultant and part-time lecturer at the Management Development Institute of Singapore who has published three books, said his work would never have appeared in print if he had not done it himself.

Those 2,000 copies of Mr Tay's 30-page comic have sold out. He has printed a further 3,000, available at outlets such as Times the Bookshop and Popular for \$2.20.

"If I hadn't risked publishing myself, I wouldn't have had this beginning," he said.

He is launching Part 2 next month. "My goal is to tell good stories and develop a true Singapore comics culture," he said.