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## Youngsters realise their writing dreams

Small Hong Kong-based publishing houses are helping youngsters realise their writing dreams

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At 16, Jesse Chan Yu-heng is an old hand at producing his own books. "I have a thing about creating my own products and dream of people appreciating what I've made," he says.

In primary school, Jesse began drawing strip comics for friends to pass around, and went on to make a DVD of himself teaching magic tricks. But he has found that what appeals most is creating stories. Which is how his family came to fork out HK\$20,000 to publish his debut novel this year.

As part of his graduation project at Victoria Shanghai Academy, a private high school, Jesse approached independent publisher Red Publish ("research on publishing houses was part of the project," he says) to produce his campus romance, *Sugary Tears*.

"I thought of approaching conventional publishing houses but I didn't have enough time - self-publishing is easier," he says. Youngsters such as Jesse and their parents are increasingly turning to small, independent publishing houses to fulfil dreams of having a

book to their name, to impress school admission panels or simply to express pride in the young writers and give them a sense of achievement.

"It's very hard to have your book released through big publishing houses, the major reason being market demand," says Nancy Yung Wai-sum, director of Red Publish. "Conventional houses either reject you or cut and change so much [in order to ensure sales] the work loses much of its original character.

"Those who approach us mainly want to produce a book for personal use - some parents see it as a way for their children to create a good impression and improve their chances of getting into select schools, while others want to make their children happy or help them feel accomplished." Among the eager parents is Chu Hoi-yin, who recently released *Richard's Poems*, a collection of Chinese free verse by his 12-year-old son, through Ink Publishing.

His son Richard Chu Chun-hin writes regularly, creating Chinese free verse alongside illustrations, so Chu decided to compile them in a book that could serve as a memento to share with family and friends.

"It's the same concept [as] sharing it on Facebook, which is very popular nowadays," says Chu.

"But having something solid and tangible is simply different. It's hard to describe the feelings when I first saw the book, but I definitely reckon that he has become an author and achieved something at a young age."

The young authors produce a variety of genres. Besides novels such as 13-year-old Clemence Yung Hui's sci-fi tale *Out of Love* and essays by four students from Diocesan Girls' School, junior foodies can enjoy 11-year-old Madison Lau Tak-ying's *Secrets To A Smile* and *My Cookbook* by James Scott from South Island School.

Madison's mother, June Lee, was ready to back her daughter as soon she expressed a desire to publish her own cookbook. "She was really excited and I think it's a good idea," says Lee, a fashion entrepreneur. "She always cooks - when she is happy, sad or stressed. And she's been throwing parties and cooking for her friends every Friday and Saturday for two or three years now.



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Jesse Chan with his novel, "Sugary Tears"

Photo: Warton Li

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"She started cooking when she was around three when we bought some instant cooking mix that we could make together. After a few times, she decided she wanted to cook from scratch."

She gave her daughter the home economics textbook that she had used while in secondary school, but Madison has picked up culinary skills mainly from watching cookery shows on the television and checking out recipes.

Through a friend, Lee managed to find a publisher, BMA Publication, which agreed to release her cookbook after tasting several dishes created by the young cook. But the venture was no cakewalk.

"Initially, the publisher was to pay for the whole book, but later on decided they couldn't finance it. They said cookbooks are the most expensive to publish," says Lee. In the end, she paid for her daughter's project. Madison hopes her book will "show everyone that if you follow your dream, one day you will be able to grasp it in your hands", and plans to donate earnings from the book to the charity, Make-A-Wish Hong Kong.

She made herself write down all the recipes - including lamb curry, cheese penne and pizza - and type them out between homework and mid-terms. It was a lot of work, especially when she decided to make it a bilingual production, but she managed to submit her manuscript on time.

A book aimed at young readers and anybody who wants to cook from the basics, *Secrets To a Smile* is something of family production - featured alongside the photos of ingredients and cooking process are illustrations by her father.

Lee says her heart swelled with pride when Madison's cookbook first came off the presses because it involved so much hard work - the youngster spent her entire Easter holiday preparing dishes for photography, cooking from morning until night for a week.

"I see change and growth in Madison after publishing the book - all of a sudden she told me she wants to do chemistry in high school because it helps her in cooking. She's really into cooking and realises that's her real passion," says Lee.

"She has become more sociable and sensible, too. She's not so afraid of speaking to people she meets now; in the beginning when the publisher got her a few interviews with media people she was so shy she didn't say a word.

"Now she knows what it means to take responsibility and understands a little bit about what adults do. She was so sick for two days before her book launch, but she still showed up."

Inspired by her idol, celebrity chef Heston Blumenthal, Madison has now set her sights on producing a book on molecular gastronomy.

Printing houses such as Red Publishing see potential in self-publishing by young writers and launched a creative writing workshop, Living English - Book Worm Book Publishing Workshop, this month to cultivate the niche market. Aimed at students in grades three to five, it takes them through the process of writing and publication, from generating ideas, building character to rewriting and revision. "By the end of the course we'll compile stories by participants into a book and publish it for them as a souvenir," says Yung.

At Ink, the focus is entirely on custom publishing. Sherman Lee Siu-hang started the business last year after spotting a demand for such work. Having experienced the pain of rejection by conventional publishers, who set a high threshold for entry, Lee spotted an opportunity. "We always have parents trying to publish their children's works, especially during the book fair period," he says.

But publishing books written by children often requires more work than those by adults.

"In making children's books, we usually want a more charming design. From the lettering - we use cuter fonts which we have to buy specially - to the design, which is more colourful, we discuss with [parents] and tailor the product to their wishes," Lee says. "The major problem is there may be lots of wrong words, making it harder to edit. More often than not we need to edit both style and grammar, which many kids are weak in."

Because it accepts printing orders for a few as 10 copies, Ink Publishing attracts many personal projects. "Our advantage is it's cheaper to order from us; and as we don't do distribution, it's ideal for people who only want to give their children's work a nicer presentation or package it as a gift to family and friends," says Lee.

"However, as we help all books get their ISBN, the international standard book number, people can search online, find the little author and get to know more about their work. It's also for better storage. And when their stories are more attractively packaged, youngsters are more motivated to keep writing."

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Jesse's first attempt at self-publication is giving him plenty of incentive to keep writing. He kept 50 copies to distribute to friends and relatives, all but 100 of the 500 books printed have been sold, and he has created a website and Facebook page to sustain interest. "I'm leaving for

Britain soon to take my A-Levels and hope to publish one or two books before going to university," he says. "I'm almost finished with my second book now, which I hope will come out in March or April."

Although his first novel is self-published, Jesse reckons the process will pave his way to becoming a professional writer. "I'll improve my writing, and hopefully catch people's attention," he says.

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