

Creating book markers

There are many benefits to bringing our work together in a book, says Niall Benvie, who looks at how the self-publishing revolution is enabling more photographers to go it alone

How our possessions mock us. Recently I decided to address a long-standing domestic issue: closet-fill. More specifically, the time had come to empty cupboards of old laptops, drives, a scanner and CRT display, SCSI cables and other redundant technology. As I rendered each unusable, I reflected ruefully on the emotional investment I once had in these objects that I was now destroying. In their day, any crash or unfathomable failure to respond caused despair and, more often than not, unwanted expenditure.

At around the time of the clear out, I came across a copy of a book I produced in 2004 for Aurum Press and the National Trust for Scotland, called *Scotland's Wildlife*. It was an illustrated series of essays about our relationship with the land in Scotland, dressed as profiles of 70 or so species with a Scottish story. The photography was very pictorial and didn't reflect the routes my work has since taken, but the book was nevertheless something concrete to show for my career up until then. I didn't throw it out.

Advertisers (that is, cynics who persuade the gullible to buy things they don't need with money they don't have for reasons they don't understand) tell us that we can express ourselves through the things we buy. This is self-serving nonsense: owning something that someone else has designed and manufactured merely casts us as consumers, expresses only our access to cash. True self-expression originates internally, then finds its way out into the world; it is not something that can be assumed or appropriated. You and I are fortunate that we do something with great potential for self-expression; we create photographs that reflect what matters to us. And I believe there is no better way of sending our photographs out into the world – of expressing ourselves – than between a pair of hard covers. This is how you put down your marker and say 'this is me'. This is what defines you and what endures – not the things you buy.

While novels may work better on a tablet than as hard copy, when it comes to books of fine photography the electronic version can't compete with a well-produced print version (not least because of our ludicrous infatuation with looking at things on the tiny screens of our smartphones). E-books have been no more successful at killing off beautiful photography books than iTunes has been at killing off vinyl, although Amazon now plays a large role in determining what is commissioned by the traditional publishing houses. Indeed, without a celebrity endorsement, a TV tie-in, massive social media interest or completely anodyne content, mainstream publishers are scarcely worth pitching to these days. But the

good news is that really good alternative routes to publication do exist.

Self-publishing used to be a byword for an unusually expensive form of narcissism, sometimes with justification. But that has changed in two regards: funding, and the recognition of the need to use professional production expertise as part of the process.

In the last year, two colleagues, Matt Maran (*Hampstead Heath: London's Countryside*) and Neil McIntyre (*The Red Squirrel: A Future in the Forest*) have run successful Kickstarter campaigns to fund the independent production of two fine books with high production values. The nice thing about the Kickstarter model is that it not only alleviates the cash flow shortfall that can drown a project at birth; it also tests its viability. There's no market research quite as 'real world' as putting a pitch online and seeing if people pre-order the book. If it doesn't work here, no amount of hoping and faith is going to make it work through 'normal' publishing channels.

Funding aside, self-published books need the involvement of a professional project and production manager who sees to everything from appointing a designer, choosing and sourcing the best paper stock for the project, hiring the printer, and a whole host of other skills few photographers new to publishing possess. I put Matt in touch with one of the best in the business, David Brimble. Among other projects, he was production manager for five recent Wildlife Photographer of the Year books, and I'd commissioned him to produce some costs for me the year before. David turned Matt's great idea and set of images into a book that is light years away from vanity publishing.

These sorts of projects really put your work out there for all to see. Whatever else Matt and Neil do in their careers, they have each created something rather fine and specific to them; they have put down their markers. Even if your ambition doesn't involve putting your book into the hands of the public, I believe that books produced for your own circle of family and friends – or even just for yourself – have immense value. If nothing else, the images are more readily accessible than on a hard drive (that you will undoubtedly be throwing away one day). My daughter and I recently made her first Blurb book in Lightroom and I was more impressed at the quality of production than I'd dared to be. While it may not have the same production values as the other examples I've mentioned, the project was realised. And that's always a good starting point for the next, more ambitious one.

