



## STORYSELLER

How 26-year-old  
Amanda Hocking solved the publishing  
business all by herself.

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By **STRAWBERRY SAROYAN**

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**Amanda Hocking**, the star of self-publishing, was sitting in the front seat of her Ford Escape earlier this spring when she spotted a messenger delivering flowers to her home in Austin, Minn. She watched her best friend and roommate, Eric Goldman, get the door.

“They’re probably from, like, my mom,” she said as she walked up to her porch. “Or my dad. He always sends flowers.”

Inside, Goldman had set the assortment of gerbera daisies and roses on the coffee table.

“Who are they from?” Hocking asked.

“St. Martin’s Press,” Goldman said. “That’s your new publisher.”

That morning, Hocking’s deal with St. Martin’s was announced: \$2 million for her next four books, a series she’s calling “Watersong.”

She casually opened the card. “‘Thrilled to be your publisher,’” she read. “‘Thrilled to be working with you. Sincerely, people.’”

People?

“Well, ‘Sincerely, Matthew Shear and Rose Hilliard,’” she said before trailing off, referring a head of St. Martin’s and the woman who would be her editor there.

If Hocking seems a bit blasé about signing her first deal with a traditional publisher, and a

multimillion-dollar one at that, it’s hard to blame her. Since uploading her first book on her own last spring, she has become — along with the likes of Nora Roberts, James Patterson and Stieg Larsson — one of the best-selling e-authors on Amazon. In that time, she has grossed approximately \$2 million. Her 10 novels include the paranormal-romance “Trylle,” a four-book vampire series that begins with “My Blood Approves” and “Hollowland,” which kicks off a zombie series whose second book will come out in the fall. Her character-driven books, which feature trolls, hobgoblins and fairy-tale elements and keep the pages turning, have generated an excitement not felt in the industry since Stephenie Meyer or perhaps even J.K. Rowling. “She’s just a really good storyteller,” Hilliard says. “Whatever that thing is that makes you want to stay up late at night to read one more chapter — she has it.”

Hollywood feels the same way: the “Trylle” series was optioned by Media Rights Capital, which was involved with “The Adjustment Bureau,” among other films; the screenplays are being written by the woman who cowrote “District 9.”

Given this success, it’s fair to ask why Hock-

ing has decided to go with a so-called legacy publisher at all.

“I’d always known that if I could get the right deal I would take it,” she said. “But I wouldn’t have gotten this kind of deal six months ago.” It’s a deal that pays less than what Amazon, in partnership with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, bid, but there were doubts about whether the big bookstore chains would carry a book published by their competitor. (Also, Hocking says, Amazon wanted to restrict e-book rights to the Kindle and offered a lower rate of royalties than she often gets what has been self-published.) And Hocking wants to reach as many people as possible among the 85 percent or so of the population who don’t have e-readers yet. “For me to be a billion-dollar author,” she would tell me later, “I need to have people buying my books at Wal-Mart.”

Hocking took a bite of a chocolate and looked at Goldman, who also works as her assistant. “Get my mom on the phone,” she said. “Tell her I got flowers. *She’ll* freak out.”

**Hocking, who is 26**, comes across as a hipster schoolgirl. The first day we met, she wore a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles T-shirt, jeans, a giant glittery dime-store frog ring and no shoes,



revealing her electric-blue toenails. She was living in a home the size of a modest Manhattan one-bedroom. Its porch was decorated with a plastic pink flamingo and little pink-flamingo-shaped Christmas lights.

Hocking gave a self-deprecating tour. In the kitchen, she pointed out a hole in the ceiling that her cats, Squeak and Nikki, like to crawl up into so they can nap in the eaves. In her office there was a framed check from Amazon for \$15.75 for her first royalties, from a year ago. When we settled down in her living room, Hocking described what was, for someone who becomes a writer, a not-unfamiliar childhood. “I was seriously depressed for most of my life,” she said. She channeled her feelings into fan fiction. “A lot of stuff I did was different takes on ‘Star Wars’ and ‘Labyrinth.’ I was going to end up with Luke Skywalker and stuff.” What was unusual, however, was her age: she started writing, or at least telling stories, at 3 or 4. “I remember one when I was 8 or 9. It was about a girl and a leopard who rescued people. They were like a duo.” (The plot of “Hollowland” involves a girl and a lion helping people escape the zombie apocalypse.) At 11, her parents separated, and when she got a computer that year, she said, “that was like the biggest lifesaver ever.”

High school was rough, though not outlandishly so. “She says no one remembers her today, but she was in the punk-art group,” said Goldman, to whom she has referred on her blog as “my platonic life mate.” Hocking was also a bit of a loner, Goldman added. “She would always be home writing when people were hanging out.”

By the time she was 17, Hocking had completed her first novel, “Dreams I Can’t Remember,” which she sent to every agent she could find through Google and “Writer’s Market.” All of them — “about 50,” she said — rejected her, mostly with form letters. Today she doesn’t think the agents made a mistake, and blames her query letter as much as the work itself. “I was whiny and depressed and thought life was going to be handed to me.”

She kept at it, intermittently. She also worked

as a dishwasher at Oriental Express, watched her B.F.F. fall in love, dated a bad boy. “He was in a band with some friends of mine — what instrument did he play?” she asked Goldman.

“Second guitar,” Goldman replied. He turned to me. “The band was called Tranquil Chaos.”

As bad boys in bands called Tranquil Chaos tend to do, she says, he broke her heart. Then she was fired. Then her best friend married and moved away. Hocking wondered what she was doing with her life.

Inspiration struck when she caught a clip on YouTube of Blink-182’s Mark Hoppus talking to Fall Out Boy’s Pete Wentz. It was short and simple — essentially, Hoppus encourages all the kids out there to make their dreams come true. “I was like, That’s it!” Hocking said. “This whole time I’ve had a passion and I’ve waited for it to happen. I need to do it.”

It was January 2009, and Hocking started treating writing as a job. Before, it was “something I always did ... like playing video games.” After, she wrote even when she didn’t feel like it. Over the next year, she wrote “at least five or six new novels.” Initially, these were like her earliest books, darker than her current ones, more cerebral and less “fun,” as Hocking might say. They were romances, like her later, published books — but without paranormal elements, and she was still developing her technique. She described one novel, “Reckless Abandon,” as being about “a girl and a guy falling in love, but there wasn’t a lot going on. It was just terribly long.”

After studying bookstore shelves and researching the industry to see what was published, as well as reading lots of Y.A. novels, Hocking figured out that romance was an evergreen when it came to popularity, but that paranormal elements really helped books take off. “My Blood Approves” and its sequels emerged from this recognition. Then, trying to be more innovative, Hocking moved beyond vampires and, in the “Trylle” series, onto trolls. Why trolls? “I didn’t want to write about shifters or fairies. I don’t really like fairies.” At first, she wasn’t a fan of trolls either — “they kind of freaked me out” — but when she ran across a

line in her research that said they could sometimes be attractive, she decided to rethink her position. “They’re not so common, and I thought: No one else is doing this. Let’s go for it.”

She made quick progress. Her actual time spent writing a novel, she said, is two to four intensive weeks. “But I say that and people are like, ‘Whoa, that’s fast.’ And it is. But the series I sold to St. Martin’s, for example, I’ve been really working on it in my head for over a year. So by the time I sit down to write, it’s already written.”

Still, she continued to receive nothing but rejections from New York. “There were a couple days where I was like: I’m giving up. This is horrible. I’m never going to be able to do it.” She sighed. “I sent off my last letters to them at the end of that year.” Her last rejection came in February 2010. It was a form letter.

Two months later, Hocking uploaded “My Blood Approves” to Amazon and, about a month later, to Smashwords, a service that makes her books compatible not only with the Nook but also with less popular devices like BeBook and Kobo. (When, in October 2010, when it became possible to self-publish directly on Barnes & Noble’s site for the Nook, she did so.) It’s a surprisingly simple process in each case — much like signing up for Facebook. She took the e-leap because she thought that even if she sold her vampire books, there was going to be a reaction against them before they made it into stores.

The first day, she sold five books. The next, five more. “I took screen shots a lot,” she said. Then she uploaded another novel and sold a total of 36 books one day in May. “It was like: 36 books? It’s astounding. I’m taking over the world.”

Soon she started selling hundreds of books a day. That June, she sold 6,000 books; that July 10,000. “And then it started to explode. In January, it was over 100,000.” Today, she sells 9,000 books a day.

Hocking is at a loss to explain the phenomenon. “I’ve seen other authors do the exact same things I have, similar genre, similar prices” — like many self-published authors, she prices her books radically below what traditional publish-

## SELF-PUBLISHING, WITH A BULLET

Amanda Hocking’s peak rankings on the Amazon Kindle e-book best-seller list.



**No. 2**  
Switched  
(Trylle Trilogy,  
Book 1)  
1/28/11



**No. 6**  
Ascend  
(Trylle Trilogy,  
Book 3)  
1/20/11



**No. 11**  
Torn  
(Trylle Trilogy,  
Book 2)  
1/22/11



**No. 24**  
My Blood  
Approves  
1/28/11



**No. 29**  
Wisdom  
(My Blood  
Approves,  
Book 4)  
8/23/10



**No. 40**  
Fate  
(My Blood  
Approves,  
Book 2)  
2/10/11



**No. 46**  
Flutter  
(My Blood  
Approves,  
Book 3)  
1/30/11



**No. 111**  
Hollowland  
(The Hollows,  
Book 1)  
3/25/11



**No. 144**  
Letters to  
Elise: A Peter  
Townsend  
Novella  
2/16/11



**No. 147**  
Virtue —  
A Fairy Tale  
5/28/11

ers charge; typically hers cost between 99 cents and \$2.99 — “and they have multiple books out. And they all have good covers. And they’re selling reasonably well, but they’re not selling nearly as well as I am.”

The stories themselves are most likely the answer: part quirky girl-like-Hocking characters, part breakneck pacing, part Hollywood-style action and part bodice-ripping romance — they are literature as candy, a mash-up of creativity and commerce.

It’s a formula, however, that took a while for Hocking to concoct. She recalls a moment of truth around the time she was 21. “My whole life I would always read things like I write — lighter young-adult stuff. But I would also read stuff that was darker, like Kurt Vonnegut and Chuck Palahniuk, and that was the kind of stuff I would try to write. Because I was like, these books are good” — worthy, highbrow, of artistic value.

One day, Goldman intervened. “He just said: ‘These books you’re writing are not you. You’re forcing yourself. That’s not who you are. You’re a silly, fun person who likes silly, fun things. Stop trying to be a dark person.’” She paused. “I told him: ‘No, you’re an idiot. Those books are crap.’”

But she took his advice and started writing stuff that resonated more personally. She summed up the difference between her books and the likes of Vonnegut thus: “Theirs are not actually character-driven, they’re not books about people. People are just used to explain an idea. And my books are about people — who might happen to have ideas.”

**Later in my visit**, Hocking agreed to show me the house she was moving into a few weeks later; it was one of her few indulgences, she said. (Another is a model of a life-size Han Solo figure encased in carbonite that cost “about \$7,000,” she admitted shyly.) We drove a few miles, then pulled into a spacious and well-kept area in front of a ranch-style home. Compared with her current place, it was the Taj Mahal: well-kept grounds, total quiet, McMansions on either side.

A conservative-looking woman, Hocking’s real estate agent, greeted us. “That’s what all the rooms are going to be painted,” she said when we entered the dining room, referring to a creamy beige on its walls. “It will be a nice primer for you.”

“Cool,” Amanda said, checking out a chandelier on the ceiling. “This is going to be a music room. I’m going to put a piano here” — she pointed to a near corner — “and some high-backed chairs in funky colors. This room will be painted a dark purple. I like color.”

We headed into the living room, which has 40-foot-high vaulted ceilings. The place, I thought, evoked the castles or fantasy worlds her characters often ascend to (in “Switched,” the troll’s castle has “vaulted” ceilings, and a chandelier figures in a major plot point). “My stepdad

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is going to build a bench to go here so it will be like a window seat,” she told me excitedly.

Hocking led the way down the hall, pointing out a guest room, then the room which would be Goldman’s — “I lived alone and I hated it,” she said. “I don’t go out that much” — and finally stopped in the master bed and bath, which included a claw-footed bathtub the size of her current office. “This tub is crazy,” she said.

Downstairs, a room lined with built-in bookshelves would be her new office, and a large room with a stone fireplace the “movie room.” There was also a “craft room” with its own kitchen.

Throughout the tour, Hocking seemed surprisingly mature, comfortable in her own skin. Back in the car, she agreed, attributing this to her writing breakthrough, and to Goldman’s counsel, too. “When I stopped judging myself, that was actually a huge turning point in my whole personality. I realized that it’s O.K. to like things like ‘The Breakfast Club’ even though it’s not critically acclaimed. It’s O.K. to like the Muppets. I’d always been a closet lame person,” she said and laughed. “I think I became cooler when I stopped trying to be cool.”

The next evening, Hocking gathered at Steve’s Pizza with Goldman; her mother, Lorraine Felt, a medical transcriptionist dressed in a light green cardigan and floral dress; and her stepfather, Duane Felt, who works in I.T. and sported jeans, a flannel shirt and a Reebok cap. A local institution, Steve’s is a place that Hocking and Goldman favor, and it was full of local families.

(Hocking’s father, Rick Hocking, a truck driver, lives in nearby Blooming Prairie.)

Settling into a table upstairs in the “game room,” which featured old-school pinball machines and photos of Austin High cheerleaders on the wall, the group ordered two pizzas and talked about Goldman’s 25th-birthday celebration the previous night.

“We bought \$8 champagne,” Hocking said, waving the finger with her frog ring on it in the air. “I had half a flute.”

Duane caught sight of her ring and dubbed it “big pimp bling.”

Lorraine, her curls bobbing, laughed along with Hocking, and then talk turned to the changes her parents have experienced in the wake of Hocking’s success.

Duane told the group he was at the post office earlier that day and overheard someone saying, “You hear about this kid making all this money?” (Hocking was on the cover of both local papers, after the St. Martin’s deal.) When Duane identified himself, a postal worker gave him special treatment.

Lorraine listened and then turned to her daughter. “You don’t think you’re better than everybody else,” she said. “But you are.” She put her arm around Hocking.

“I just write books that are silly,” Hocking replied.

“But they’re relaxing,” Lorraine said. “They’re a break from reality. Readers get to ride along, and they don’t have to think about it.” Indeed, Hocking’s books are the John Hughes version of paranormal romance and action: picture a young Molly Ringwald being drawn into the world of vampires, say, or a “My So-Called Life”-era Claire Danes being told she is actually a princess troll and has to fight bad guys.

Watching this scene, though, I realized that Hocking herself has undergone a change as major as that of any of her characters. In managing to reach people via the Internet first, and then breaking into the traditional book industry that way, she has become her generation’s first literary phenomenon.

The idea brought to mind an earlier moment when Hocking was talking about how she’d never visited New York City — at least since she was a small child and her father passed through on a job and “my mom was sure we were going to get raped and murdered.” So now that she’s made it, would she want to live it up, move away, become a “princess”? I asked.

She shook her head. “When I was younger, I wanted to move out of Austin. But I think if I moved to the city now, I would still just sit in my house and go to Wal-Mart and Kwik Trip. . . . I like my friends, I like my family. I don’t really want to make new ones.” She also likes her fantasies — and can have those anytime, at home, just like her readers. ♦