



Alliance of
Independent
Authors



ALLi Member Handbooks

Author Safety Guidelines for Self-Publishers

Author safety: how indie authors can protect themselves online and off

The shocking assault on novelist Salman Rushdie this summer has highlighted how all authors may be vulnerable to attack from those who disagree with their work or want to intrude on their lives. ALLi was already working on an author safety handbook, but this incident has prompted us to issue advice sooner rather than later

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On an ordinary August day, novelist Salman Rushdie was about to give a lecture at the Chautauqua Institution in New York, US, when a man stepped forward and stabbed him multiple times, gravely wounding him and also injuring his interviewer, Henry Reese.

For more than 30 years, Rushdie, an Indian-born British-American, has done his work under a widely publicized assassination order. It was issued in 1989, a year after he published his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ruled that the novel was blasphemous and set a fatwa with a bounty of \$3m for his assassination.

Riots, bombings, other killings ensued around the globe. Rushdie endured years of government protection, secret homes, seclusion from his readers and strict security measures. Over time they became more relaxed and he began a gradual return to public life.

Some have said his decision to speak at Chautauqua without a regiment of guards was careless and foolish. But he knew the risks, and he made the decision to espouse the quality of life he was determined to live, to assert his belief in the value of intellectual exchange about difficult topics.

It takes great courage for a writer to persist in spite of mortal threats intended to intimidate, silence and terrorise him, as Rushdie has done. It is little wonder that he has become a role model for writers right now. Because it isn't just the world-famous who are subjected to threats and harassment and worse, for speaking truth to power, or voicing opinions others don't want to hear.

Online and off, we are all vulnerable to attack these days if we speak out, from online trolling and harassment, threats and insults, all the way to stalking and physical attacks. Too many of us know what it is like to receive a social media message from someone who says they intend to rape or kill us. Some of us have actually experienced such incidents outside the online space.

And self-publishing authors, because they are highly visible as both author and publisher of their work, may be the most vulnerable.

Author safety: survey by Book Angel

In 2017, spurred by reports of social media harassment, the *Bookseller* and *PenAmerica* conducted surveys about safety in publishing. Neither of these surveys focused on authors in particular. Earlier this year, Book Angel, a book club, became concerned when one of its writers mentioned disturbing experiences with safety and personal data when fans were harassing her. Several other writers joined in.

While most fans are not a problem, some of the group had come close to reliving the Stephen King novel *Misery*.

Book Angel says: "This behavior seemed a lot wider spread than we suspected. In one writer's group we worked with, every member had been subjected to harassment. More worryingly, no one had said anything because they all thought they were the only one."

That's when Book Angel decided to investigate the depth of the problem. It ran a survey from 1 February to 31 March 2022, and asked about author harassment, stalking, privacy and other related factors. **The results are here**. Some headline findings were:

- A total 63% of respondents thought that less than 25% of authors had been harassed, but the survey found 73% of them had.
- A total 28% of all respondents had suffered serious safety issues because of their writing, including physical threats and criminal action.
- The serious threats include arson attacks, kidnapping attempts, assault or theft at signings, and pursuing authors' families in their day-to-day lives. Identity theft and credit card fraud were also reported.

Because of this, ALLi decided to compile a brief handbook of advice on author safety issues. We wanted to encourage everyone to take simple but effective protective steps, while also recognizing that it was not wise to give too much "oxygen" to these concerns. We certainly don't want to provoke anybody to attack authors, online or in real life, when they might not otherwise have thought it was possible. Then came the attack on Rushdie—which clarified the need for it.

The guide is still in production, but here are some key points.

No panic

First of all, balance is crucial. The Book Angel survey found that many authors turn opportunities down because they fear an invasion of privacy. But many of us do not.

ALLi news editor Dan Holloway reported on the issue in a recent column:

“As writers, we are an infinitely diverse community, and our expectation of safety when we share our words varies greatly across location, across community, and across genre.

“When we think we are getting into debate over whether writers should be ‘allowed’ to write about communities they are not a part of, we can easily forget that in many countries LGBTQ+ writers, for example, can only write about their own experience by breaking the law and placing themselves in direct danger.

“And the science fiction and fantasy communities have been keenly aware of the risks posed to women who write in these genres since **Gamergate**, a harassment campaign in 2014 and 2015 that targeted women in the games industry.”

Dan ends with an optimistic perspective. He says we must remember that “even though we are pushed into the public eye, at events or online, for the sake of sales, or into the eye of controversy for the sake of clicks, many of us move in a world that is fundamentally safe. Some of us in the writing community live in fear because of our words, but many of us do not. As a community, we can come together to expand the number of the latter and decrease the former.”



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ALLi's view

At ALLi, we work to support our members. This includes author protection and safety.

We celebrate the freedom of expression and oppose censorship. Authors are opinionated creatures, and we welcome differences of opinion that are expressed with respect. We have an **author code of standards** and **ethical author policy and program** and we encourage members to report violations of these policies.

We also deplore bullying, trolling, harassment and threats, and condemn any kind of racist, sexist, classist, or ageist hate speech or actions. We rarely speak out publicly on individual cases, but we do provide private support for indie authors who are targeted by trolls, so please contact us for support and guidance if you are affected.

Author safety: ALLi recommendations

These are the five key steps we recommend all authors to take.

1. Be informed but not frightened

Make time to read all the recommendations and implement the tips, but do not get overly anxious. The more precautions we all take routinely, the greater the collective awareness will be.

2. If you receive any threatening approaches, record and report them

Keep a record of all incidents (including screenshots).

Tell people: your writing organization, the admins of writing forums you are part of, your friends and family, the police, and the platform being used by the person who is making you feel unsafe. With these last two, keep a record of your complaint or report.

Also, you can tell us at ALLi, whether you are a member or not.

3. Protect your home address

Buy domain privacy for your website as part of your hosting package. It is not expensive and domain registration data is one of the easiest

ways for people to find out your address. **This article explains** why you need domain privacy protection.

Use a PO box wherever your address is required, for instance at the foot of your newsletter. Look for a PO box where you pay only if you receive mail, if that's an option in your country. Ask local writers for recommendations.

Be careful what you post online or elsewhere that might be related to your location. Lots of small pieces of information can add up if somebody wants to find you.

Payment options on business accounts might display your address. Harassers have used Paypal invoices to trace authors' real identities behind business accounts. Check what information is visible on the payment options you choose.

You may wish to use a contact form on your website instead of giving your email address, as this can be easily found and used by hackers.

4. Don't disclose your earnings without anonymising

In the self-publishing community it is common for authors to share their earnings figures on writing forums, in part to explain what they did that might help their peers. It is an inspiring and honest thing to do and much valued, especially by new authors, but can also trigger problematic responses if it is seen as boasting or an indicator that you are financially worth blackmailing.

We recommend that you anonymise the data. For example, you could ask admins on a platform to post the information for you, so that it can still be shared to benefit others.

ALLi always anonymises such data in our communications and will be glad to post anonymised success stories on an author's behalf.

5. If you have adopted a pen-name for safety reasons, take steps to protect it

Use an avatar rather than your real image.

Check how payments will work to protect your anonymity. Publishing contracts for other rights

(such as audio or translation) should clearly state who is and is not allowed to know your identity details. They should include a privacy clause and restrictions over who can access the true identity behind an author's pen-name.

Both ALLi and our literary agent Ethan Ellenberg are committed to checking this issue when looking at contracts.



Author safety and freedom of speech

Salman Rushdie was one of 100 high-profile authors including Martin Amis, Margaret Atwood, Jeffrey Eugenides and Gloria Steinem who signed an open letter some time ago, protesting about “ideological conformity” and the spread of “censoriousness”, including “an intolerance of opposing views” and a “vogue for public shaming and ostracism” in which institutional leaders are issuing “hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms” in “a spirit of panicked damage control” in response to “perceived transgressions of speech and thought”.

Part of the statement ran:

“Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher

is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes.

“Whatever the arguments about each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement.

“This stifling atmosphere will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time. The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation.

“The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other.

“As writers we need a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk-taking, and even mistakes. We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences. If we won't defend the very thing on which our work depends, we shouldn't expect the public or the state to defend it for us.”

ALLi believes the best way we can honor Rushdie and his work is to be brave in our own writing and to recognise that the moment we declare a set of ideas to be immune from criticism, satire, derision or contempt, that's when freedom of thought and free expression become impossible.

The ALLi Author Safety: Member Handbook will be available from December 2022 in the Member Zone and on the Ethical Self-Publishing campaigns page. We encourage you to share it beyond ALLi, to any author friends you feel may need it. Safety goes beyond membership and we want all authors to be safe.