

Stephen Leather

The thriller writer discusses traditional versus digital publishing, and what he thinks is the future of bookselling.

Philip Jones reports

Stephen Leather is one of a growing band of authors that have risen to prominence thanks to the e-book. In fact, Leather was the first UK Kindle sensation, having self-published three thrillers digitally—*The Basement*, *Once Bitten* and *Dreamer's Cat*—over Christmas 2009 in order to take advantage of the expected surge in device ownership. He has since sold more than 350,000 editions of these titles in e-book format.

Leather is also the author of 24 paperbacks, having enjoyed a 20-year association with his British publisher Hodder & Stoughton. In print, these titles have produced sales of more than 800,000 and a sales revenue of £4.4m. His next book *False Friends*, the latest in the Dan "Spider" Shepherd series, is published by H&S on 19th July.

"My self-published e-books are a small part of my creative output," says Leather. Nevertheless, he has expertly played his hand. Leather says he worked out in advance that Kindle ownership was likely to double that Christmas and that readers would need e-books to download. "I knew that the first thing they would do would be to

start buying books, and that many would go to the Kindle bestseller list for suggestions. I spent November and December marketing the books so that on Christmas Day I had all three in the top five of the Kindle bestseller list." As a result he sold 7,000 copies on Christmas Day, another 5,000 on Boxing Day, and 44,000 in December as a whole. "It was a total one-off and will almost certainly never be repeated," he admits.

His "first mover" advantage has helped to generate a huge amount of interest in his books—both print and digital—much to the pleasure of his publisher. "I was lucky in that H&S has been very supportive from the start, and it was quick to realise that success in the e-book market would spill over to increased sales of my Hodder books. That is exactly what has happened. Selling cheap (but good) e-books has brought in thousands of new readers who have gone on to buy the rest of my books. In effect, my low-priced e-books have been a marketing tool, though it's fair to say that they have also turned into a decent revenue stream too."

The interest in Leather's e-books prompted Hodder to aggressively promote *Hard*

Landing, the first Shepherd thriller, at the same time, leading to e-book sales of about 150,000 copies. In print, the book was published in 2008 and has sold 36,000 copies to date.

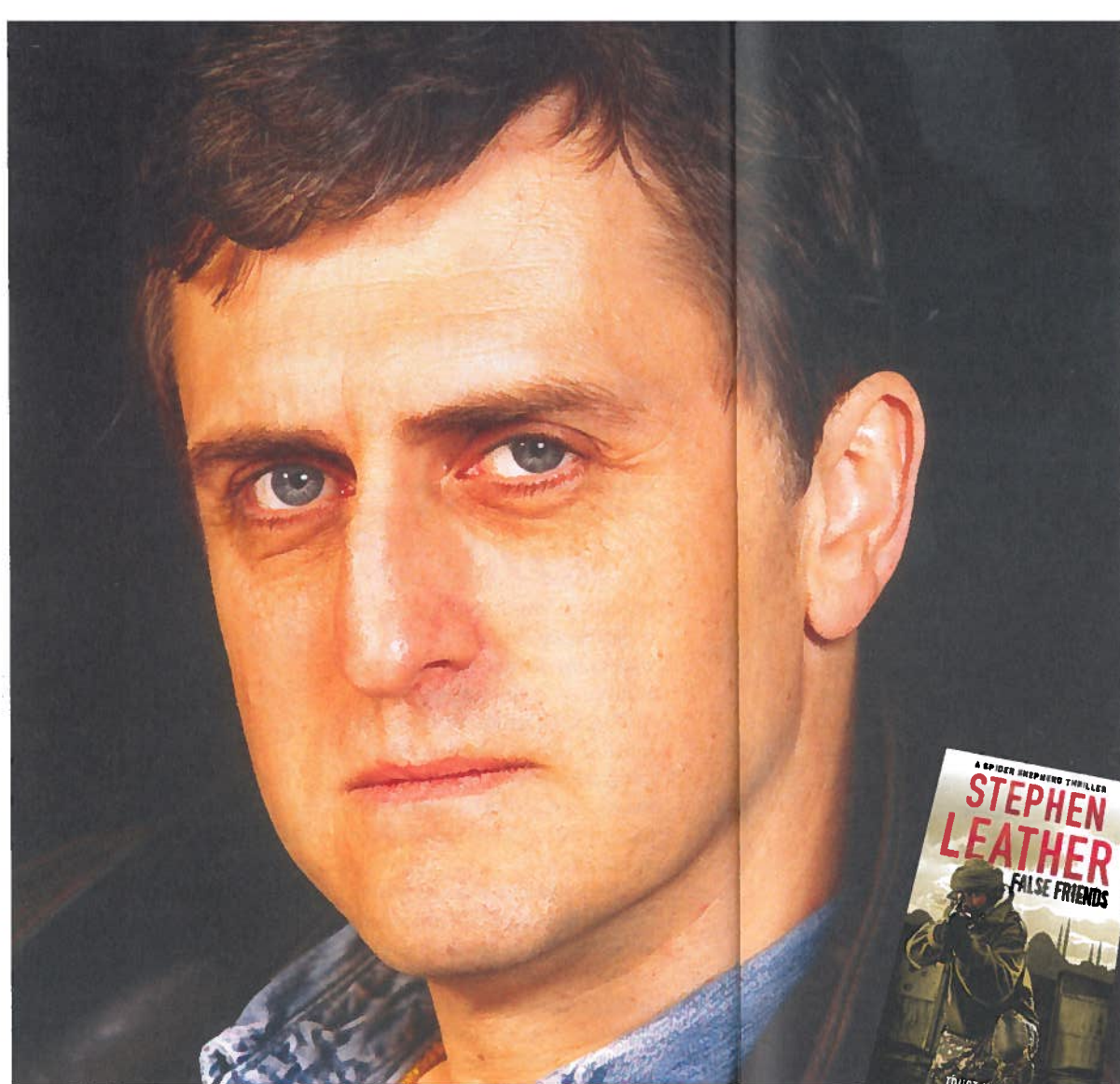
The numbers show how complex the modern author/publisher relationship has become thanks to the sudden growth of digital, and the opportunities this has given authors to self-market their books. Rather like his action-hero Shepherd—a former SAS soldier who becomes an undercover cop, then works for the Serious Organised Crime Agency and is now with MI5—Leather has been around. "I don't know anyone who has as many legs to their publishing career as me," he admits. He self-publishes paperbacks in Asia, has a traditional publishing deal with H&S (but also self-publishes e-books through Amazon and Smashwords), while Amazon publish five of his books in the US—two through its Encore

programme and three Jack Nightingale titles via its 47North imprint.

He says the multi-pronged approach was "quite deliberate". "It's a bit like going to the roulette table and betting on zero, double zero, black and red. Whatever happens, I'm going to win." Leather admits he is in a unique position to take advantage as the tectonic plates shift around him. "In a way the timing was perfect for me. I'm old enough to have a long backlist but young enough to be able to produce a lot more books."

BOOK DATA

Publication: 19/07/2012
Formats: HB/e-book
ISBNs: 9780340924990/
 978144708356
Rights: World
Editor: Carolyn May
Agent: Julian Alexander
 (not for Shepherd titles)



PERSONAL FILE

- 1956 born in Manchester
- 1974-1978 read Biochemistry at the University of Bath
- 1978 joined the *Daily Mirror* journalist training scheme. Has also worked for the *South China Morning Post* and the *Times*
- 1987 début novel, *Pay Off* (HarperCollins)
- Currently writes two novel series for Hodder: one series features Dan "Spider" Shepherd, a former SAS soldier turned undercover cop. A second series of supernatural thrillers, launched in 2010, features former police negotiator turned private eye Jack Nightingale

823,000

SALES SINCE RECORDS BEGAN

£475,000

VALUE TO BOOKSELLERS LAST YEAR*

False Friends took about two months to research, six months to write and another month to edit. Leather has a contract with Hodder to produce three more, publishing one a year. "Spider" ages in real time but he's not yet 40, so there's plenty of life left in him. They take about six months to write, and because of the nature of the books there's no shortcut." In between that, Leather is writing the Jack Nightingale supernatural detective series. "I am productive, it comes from my years as a journalist when I would produce several thousand words of copy a day, every day."

Leather concedes that the e-book boom has, ironically, made it even harder for each book to get attention. "Following my success, pretty much every person who has written a book has rushed to self-publish. The vast majority are pretty awful and sink without trace, but there is now so much rubbish out there that it's hard for a new writer to get noticed.

"The problem now is that Amazon and Smashwords really don't care about the quality of the books that they sell. You can literally put anything you want up for sale—from your laundry list to the worst poetry imaginable. That means that a lot of self-published writers don't realise how awful their work is, and think that the only reason they are not selling is that they are not doing enough marketing and self-promotion."

Unlike some authors who have dabbled with self-publishing, Leather does see a future for publishers even though he, like many, uses the prefix "legacy"—"Legacy" to me just means that they have been around for a while!" And they will be around in the future: "They are like huge oil tankers ploughing across the ocean. They are so massive that they are very hard to turn and they react very slowly. It is difficult for them because the business

was unchanged for many years, and when change came it came very quickly. I saw it coming and was able to adapt, they got taken by surprise. But they are changing, slowly but surely."

But the role of bookshops and agents he is less sure about. "If you had asked me that 10 years ago, I would have said that touring around bookstores was a vital part of marketing an author's work. These days I'm not convinced." Readers, he says, have moved from bookstores to the internet, and he has moved with them. Chains, he thinks, are dead, though independents will survive if they can figure out

how to sell e-books. Agents, he says could be replaced by publishers. "The biggest mistake publishers made was to do away with their slush-piles and only take submissions from agents. That is already changing."

As for self-publishing, he believes the bubble may be deflating. "I have a pretty good idea of what's happening at Amazon, and generally it's not going to be great for self-published authors. I think the established publishers will tighten their grip on the e-book bestseller lists. I have a strategy for dealing with that—but I'm keeping it under wraps."

STEPHEN LEATHER'S TOP FIVE

	Hot Blood Hodder, 9780340921692 Dan "Spider" Shepherd travels to Baghdad in an attempt to save his kidnapped friend.	BOOKS SOLD 71,000 SINCE 2007
	Soft Target Hodder, 9780340834091 Shepherd infiltrates a group of corrupt armed police in an elite unit ripping off drug dealers at gunpoint.	BOOKS SOLD 61,000 SINCE 2005
	Cold Kill Hodder, 9780340834121 "Spider" uncovers a plot by a terrorist cell bent on death and destruction. Time is ticking...	BOOKS SOLD 58,000 SINCE 2006
	Nightfall Hodder, 9781444700640 A private detective suspects real evil is at work when people close to him start to die horribly.	BOOKS SOLD 57,000 SINCE 2010
	The Bombmaker Hodder, 9780340689561 A former IRA killer's daughter is kidnapped and she is blackmailed into building a huge bomb for the perpetrators.	BOOKS SOLD 56,000 SINCE 1999

*ALL OF THE FIGURES QUOTED ARE COMPILED USING NIELSEN BOOKSCAN DATA AND EXCLUDE E-BOOKS