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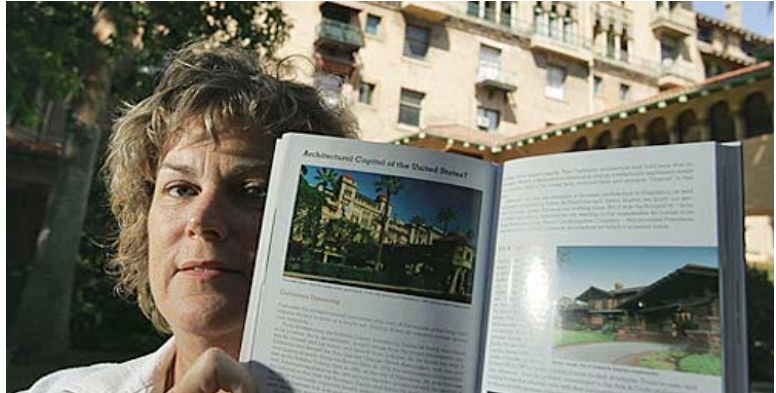
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Locally made book blooms in Pasadena

**A guidebook to the city proves self-publishing can reap success.
Next stop: Santa Monica.**

By Scott Timberg, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Writer Colleen Dunn Bates, a friendly Pasadena woman nearing 50, thought she had a good idea: to put together an upscale guidebook about her city -- a kind of travel book for people who live there. And given the intensely local focus of the project, rather than dealing with a big New York publisher, she decided to publish it herself, producing it out of her den and delivering it to stores from the back of her car.



Colleen Dunn Bates shows the pages in her "Hometown Pasadena" that feature the city's historic Castle Green.

Almost a year later, "Hometown Pasadena" has not only sold 10,000 copies, it has also turned into a small empire: Local bookstores, both chain and independent, Costco and even a hair salon now carry it, and Bates is branching out to other cities. Next week, "Hometown Santa Monica" will appear in stores there, and Santa Barbara and Berkeley will have their turn next year.

Bates' formula for the books is simple: "It's about how to really live in a place, and be in a place, and understand a place, even if you've lived there for 20 years," she said recently. "I've never seen anything like it. My model was to not have it look like a Fodor's guide."

Her insistence on staying local and forgoing major publishers' backing makes sense, said Michael Cader, a book packager and founder of the Publishers Lunch website. "That's how the Zagat guide started," Cader said. "You can go to cities that have 'underground driver's guides' that tell you the back-street tips to get you from one place to another. There's certainly a tradition of very local, very focused books that usually aren't suited to larger enterprises."

Bates' book taps into the growing desire to conduct the business of one's life as locally as possible, in an era of crazy traffic, expensive gas and worries about the effect of a sprawling lifestyle on global warming. As Sara Nelson, editor of Publishers Weekly, noted, books about local topics and niche themes are thriving nationwide, helped in part by digital technology that makes it easier to self-publish books with a professional look.

"I think people are interested in themselves. As everything gets more global, the local stuff seems quaint and personal," she said.

"Hometown Pasadena" features well-illustrated sections on eating and drinking, cultural offerings, and where to take the kids, as well as less-typical features: several pages on the Metro Gold Line, a chapter on public and private gardens, and page-long interviews with key local players, such as architectural historian Robert Winter and Pasadena Playhouse artistic director Sheldon Epps. Bates and her four co-authors also know enough to treat the city as the bull's-eye of a cluster of communities that includes Sierra Madre, Eagle Rock and most of the San Gabriel Valley.

The scale of these kinds of books is often small, at least at first. But like "Hometown Pasadena," some local books have exploded from cottage-industry presses, such as "The Ultimate Hollywood Tour Book," which has sold more than 40,000 copies through author William A. Gordon's press, North Ridge Books.

Appropriately enough, Pasadena's premiere local bookstore, Vroman's, took a chance and devoted an entire table to "Hometown Pasadena." The store's head buyer, Marie du Vaure, calls the book's pace of sales "phenomenal. We were gobbling up her print runs at some point" partly, she said, because the book not only filled a gap, but also because its design was so appealing.

New technologies have also made Bates' independent approach potentially more profitable, said Gary Young, president of the Publishers Assn. of Los Angeles, a group that helps support and educate local publishers and booksellers. Internet marketing can work well for self-published books, Young said. "With a good platform and a savvy Internet sales initiative, many books can do well whether self-published or not."

California, in particular, has been fertile ground for projects like Bates'. San Diego-based literary agent Sandra Dijkstra said that many publishing innovations, especially with small and niche publishers, have been in California. "There's a whole movement, started in the Bay Area, that has its own arena," she said, referring to the array of mostly independent presses that came out of the Beat, counterculture, environmental and self-realization movement, such as City Lights Books, Sierra Club Books and Amber-Allen Publishing.

And, in fact, the magazine world has recently seen the rise of the Ojai-based "Edible" franchise of intensely local quarterly foodie magazines. It now ranges across the nation, including Edible Atlanta and Edible Cape Cod. Bates' decision to publish on her own press comes from her experience with the New York publishing world, beginning in the early '80s when she edited a series of French-originated guidebooks for Simon & Schuster, to her co-writing "Storybook Travels" in 2002 with Susan LaTempa (now the deputy food editor of The Times).

That book, which visited the locations of children's books, including Beatrix Potter's Lake District of England and Pinocchio's Tuscany, came out close to the Sept. 11 attacks, when travel books were a hard sell.

"Some of it was 9/11, some of it was just the nature of publishing these days," Bates said. "That was sobering, and painful. My thing was, I'm not doing that again."

By handling "Hometown Pasadena" herself, she was able to use local talent not only in its creation but in its sales and promotion. One of her co-authors, Sandy Gillis, has kept the book supplied at her hairdresser.

Even more surprising, Bates has gotten the book into a Pasadena Barnes and Noble, despite the difficulty of small presses reaching the chains.

Bates also handles her press' non-bookstore distribution, which for months meant hauling boxes of books into her Subaru and driving them around town.

"I did it all," she said, "and have the chiropractic bills to prove it."

Some of the secret lies in Pasadena itself, the author believes.

"It's a very literary community, very educated," Bates said. "We have, outside of Powell's, the healthiest independent bookstore on the West Coast. There's educational institutions and culture and art and architecture. And food, and neighborhood identity. It has everything that makes for a complete community: There's a 'there' here."

Now, she's putting the finishing touches on "Hometown Santa Monica," which will offer a chapter on beaches instead of gardens, and entries on Venice instead of Eagle Rock, Michael's restaurant instead of the Parkway Grill.

That one, and the two she's planning for next year, on Santa Barbara and Berkeley, will follow the model she's already established. But now that she's left Pasadena behind, she's lost the ability to run these new projects entirely through her existing network. She plans to hire a local staff in each city so that the books really are about their contributors' hometowns.

It's here, said Cader of Publishers Lunch, where projects sometimes get snagged. "Sometimes," he said, "one is perfect. And trying to do more doesn't work."

Either way, it takes the right balance of size, cultural sophistication and local roots -- and possibly insularity -- for a city to be right for one of her books, Bates said. San Diego, for example, is too large and sprawling.

She's looking forward to producing a book on Portland, Ore. "It's one of the most forward-thinking cities in the country," she said, "but it's still small enough to be a hometown."

It also may have something in common with her original model: "Pasadena has a healthy self-image," she conceded. "It's in love with itself, and that helps."

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