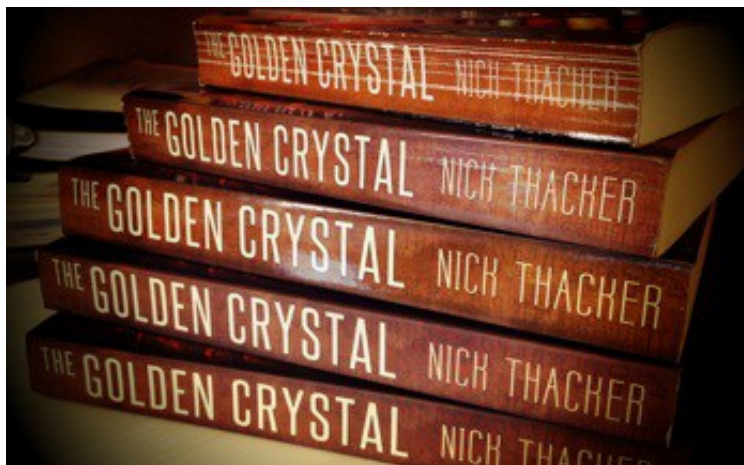


CREATESPACE, LIGHTNING SOURCE, LULU – WHERE SHOULD YOU SELF-PUBLISH YOUR BOOK: THE ULTIMATE RESOURCE



I've been going around and around with numerous book printers over the past three years. Ever since I got the crazy, half-baked idea in my head that I wanted the “control, speed, and cost-effectiveness of self-publishing” rather than the traditional way to do it, I've been through the ringer with pretty much all of the well-known “indie”-book creation shops.

Specifically, I've been down into the depths of customer service, user forums, technical spec sheets, and more with the top three: **Lightning Source International**, **Lulu**, and **CreateSpace**.

What do I have to show for it all?

Well, in case you weren't aware, I have a professionally-designed, well-produced and edited version of my first novel, [The Golden Crystal](#), available on Amazon, complete with print copy, Kindle version, and an audiobook edition (on the way!) produced through Audiobook Creation Exchange (ACX.com).

But the point of this post isn't to talk about this total process — it's to talk about one specific aspect of the book-to-market journey: *where to print (produce) your masterpiece*.

What is the *best option* for beginner, intermediate, and veteran self-publishers? Is it the same place for each of these skill levels? What option produces the best quality books with the most control over the process?

And, perhaps most importantly to some, *which option is cheapest?*

This is the post I've wanted to write for a *long* time, and one that I wished was written *before* I got started! Ready? Dig in!

The rules

Here's how it will work: I'll introduce the companies — I'm reviewing three — and then I'll break down my experience with each through a few different criteria:

1. **Ease-of-use.** This criterion will refer to how the overall process — from conception, through the upload/customization process, to the finished proofing and shipping — went at each firm. It will be a comment on the respective technical requirements, time needed, and more.
2. **Price.** This criterion is pretty straightforward — how much did the process cost, specifically in terms of dollar amount (rather than ROIT or Return on Invested Time, which is sort of covered in the “Ease-of-Use” section)?
3. **Quality.** What did the final product look, feel, and *seem* like? Could you tell it wasn't printed “the real way,” as my mom would put it?

For the sake of simplicity, or if you're just here to get the bottom line for each option, I'll go ahead and do an “overall score” thingy, from 1 to 10, with 1 being “Wow, I can't even believe this crappy excuse for a company even made the list,” and 10 being “Holy book-printing, Batman, we've found our supplier!” (Or something like that — you choose)

Here we go:

Introducing LSI

[Lightning Source International](#) is owned by [Ingram](#), one of the largest book companies in the world, and LSI happens to be the printer of most of the material you'll find a bookstore at least here in the States. All of this means that they're owned and operated by a company that's been in the book business a *long* time, for whatever that's worth.

While they used to apparently only print for publishing houses in bulk, LSI recently added a POD (print on demand) option for small fries like me (or maybe to just make more money...).

Introducing Lulu

[Lulu](#) is based in Raleigh, NC, USA, but has been growing steadily for the past few

years, with numerous thousands of books being added to their catalog each month. They are focused on providing a POD service to the end-user-as-author, which is my fancy way of saying that they're mainly trying to capture the market of freshly-minted authors who'd like a vanity copy or two for their coffee tables.

In recent years they've added different binding and cover options, as well as a growing list of size options for printed books, and they're also one of the few services to provide a way to print hardcover books.

Introducing CreateSpace

There's a good chance you've already heard of [CreateSpace](#), the Amazon giant's own POD arm in the self-publishing world. Purchased by the bookseller giant in 2005, [CreateSpace was founded in 2002 as CustomFix](#), a POD DVD service, and has since expanded to include options for print-on-demand books and CDs.

They are the exclusive recommendation from Amazon when it comes to servicing POD books, and there's a strong chance that if you've purchased a self-published book from Amazon in the last 5-10 years, it's come from CreateSpace.

The Bottom Line(s): Comparing and Measuring the Self-Publishing Print Services

With the fancy introductions out of the way, let's jump now to the main show: comparing, contrasting, and measuring each of these venerable and useful services so we can get to the bottom line.

Metric #1: Ease-of-use

I found that both CreateSpace and Lulu had great, navigable, and user-friendly systems, with CreateSpace *barely* edging out Lulu. CreateSpace has both a "Guided" step-by-step process, very similar to Lulu's, and also an "Expert" streamlined, single-page GUI for faster upload, prep, and submission. I've used all three, and I like CreateSpace's Expert process, but I like the CreateSpace "big, giant, button" version when I'm comparing the two Guided processes.

The screenshot shows the Lulu website homepage. At the top, there is a search bar with 'All Products' selected, a 'GO' button, and a 'Help' link. Below the search bar, there are navigation links for 'Publish', 'Print', 'Sell', 'Hire an Expert', 'Bookstore', 'My Lulu', and 'Forums'. A 'Publish Books' banner features the text 'Your Story, On Demand' and 'Publish for free, in bookstore-quality, with just a few clicks.' A 'Start publishing >' button is prominent. To the left of the banner are icons for 'Books', 'eBooks', 'Photo Books', and 'Calendars'. Below the banner is a 'Cost Calculator' section for a 100-page book, showing a manufacture cost of \$4, a Lulu cost of \$2, and a total of \$14, with an 80% discount. The 'We've got you covered.' section lists binding options: Perfect Bound, Saddle Stitch, Coil Bound, Casewrap, and Dust Jacket, categorized into Paperbacks and Hardcover. The 'Sizes galore' section lists various book sizes from Pocket Book to Large Square. A 'Need Help?' section offers assistance with editing and cover design. A 'Buy More, Save More!' banner promotes bulk order discounts. A 'Publishing made simple.' section highlights 'Select Options' for sizes, bindings, and more.

However, I have to give credit to CreateSpace for going the extra mile to make things dead-simple: an extra point to them for offering two processes.

The screenshot shows the 'Start Your New Project' form on the CreateSpace website. The form is divided into three numbered steps:

- 1 Tell us the name of your project *** (Required). A text input field is provided. Below it, a note states: 'You can change your title at any time before you submit your project for review.'
- 2 Choose which type of project you want to start ***. This step offers six radio button options: Paperback, Audio CD, DVD, MP3, and Video Download.
- 3 Choose a setup process ***. This step offers two options: 'Guided' (A step-by-step process with help along the way.) and 'Expert' (A streamlined single-page experience for those familiar with the process.). Each option has a 'Get Started' button.

On the right side of the form, there is a 'Refine Your Work' sidebar with links to: Ask the Community, Create a Preview, Get Ideas in Resources, Book Editorial Services, Book Illustration Services, CreateSpace PDF Submission Specification, and a Search Site field.

And yes, there's a reason I didn't really include LSI when it came to discussing the "online submission process" — LSI might as well not have one. Seriously, guys, come on: have any of you ever even *used* the Internet? The process, when not too archaic to even use is frustratingly difficult to navigate (don't even get me started — have you tried setting up a new project? You have to create a "New Client" and go through *that* process first, which includes printing, signing, and faxing legal documents back and forth! Ugh.)

When you finally do get set up as a client (which is really just a publishing imprint, anyway), you then get assigned all of 4 representatives: a POD Client Services Rep, an eBook Client Services Rep, a Credit Representative, and a Sales Rep. Wow! My *one* book and I feel important!

The screenshot shows the Lightning Source website. At the top left is the Lightning Source logo. The navigation bar includes: Home, Benefits, Process, **New Client**, Products, Services, File Creation, Corporate, and International Sites. A sub-menu under 'New Client' shows 'New Client Guide (Compass)'. The main banner features a stack of books on the left and the text: 'Freedom in print-on-demand starts here.' with a 'Create New Account' button. Below the banner are five cards: 'What's POD?', '+ What's in it for me?', 'How does it work?', 'How can I use it?', and 'What can I print?'. Further down are sections for 'International Market Strategy', 'Global Distribution Channels', 'POD IN COLOR', and 'Ingram Content Group'.

Anyway, going through their process isn't impossible, it's just close to the worst thing in the world. I had to go back and forth with the online FAQs for *hours* before I finally decided that yes, in fact, I *have* submitted my book successfully and one should magically show up in the mail in a few weeks. Further, it turns out that if you don't have your book ready to go — and I mean *ready to go* — you shouldn't bother uploading it: you'll just wait around for a few days (which is eons in this world, folks!) to hear something like, “your cover features transparent images,” or “images inside your book are showing up at too low resolution,”* both of which are cryptic (I didn't use any transparent images on my cover, and the interior images were created at 300 dpi) and almost totally unmentioned in their FAQ section or elsewhere online.**

*This stuff is *exactly* why I didn't end up using IngramSpark, the pseudo-Lightning Source company that's apparently going to take the self-published author and indie author world by storm. My take: they've got some serious work to do in getting their platform to work properly. I had a difficult time getting communication back from them, *and* had to eventually give up since I couldn't get my book properly uploaded. That said, once they do get the kinks worked out, it's way cheaper than their parent, LSI, to upload and revise books. Keep an eye on this company — they might be my go-to solution in the near future!

****By doing my own research into Adobe InDesign (the industry-standard professional layout tool I used to finalize my book's cover and interior files), I found out that I can "Pre-Flight check" my files, telling me where exactly these demon image-spirits were showing up, and then how to fix them (apparently I enlarged the files at one point, bringing down the total output resolution to lower the LSI-required dpi). I got everything fixed, but my word — if I wasn't a professional graphic designer and web guy in another life, with ready access to Adobe's Creative Suite (Photoshop, InDesign, etc.) — I'd have been *totally* lost. I wasn't lost at this point, but I was a little pissed — more on that later! (\$\$\$)**

So, bottom line: Lulu and CreateSpace both are easy to use online systems for uploading, choosing options, and finalizing your book projects, and both have active online communities, with CreateSpace clearly taking the cake here. I gave an extra point to CreateSpace for the interaction you'll get online (I never went 24 hours without a user- or staff-response on the forum! Way to go!), and for offering me a no-BS one-page form for getting my book ready to go. LSI, you suck at all of these things. Please fix them.

Lulu: 7/10

CreateSpace: 8/10

LSI: 2/10

Metric #2: Price

Okay, here's the rub: if you're here for price alone, you're going to be happiest at CreateSpace. Lulu is close in price, but I wasn't happy about the reduced royalties they give you by selling through Amazon (obviously these aren't part of the deal with CreateSpace since they're owned by Amazon), and the exorbitant rate they'll charge your customers in order for you to get a reasonable royalty.

While both offer similar pricing structures, LSI is again out there on their own. When you upload a book to Lulu or CreateSpace, the price is... free. Only when a book is printed do you need to pay (and even then, you're getting money from the customer who bought the book, and the only thing you're paying for is the printing price or royalties in Lulu's case). Yet when you upload a book to LSI, you're paying... about \$75.

Yeah, seriously. Below is a screenshot of my Accounts Receivable Invoices (Search & View) section (yeah, that's the *actual* submenu item name — I wasn't kidding about the stupid GUI, huh?) at LSI's website, where I tried and eventually succeeded to

upload the correct files and have my novel proof printed (note this is just the bottom three or so results — there were five total!):

Invoice: 12667817 ISBN: 9781304346049 - The Golden Crystal

Trx Number	PO Number	Trx Date	Due Date	Trx Description	Invoice Amount	Amount Remaining	Currency	Secondary PO
12667817	*Title Setup *	22-AUG-13	22-AUG-13	Title Setup and Revision Invoices	75.00	0.00	USD	

SKU	Description	Ordered Quantity	Invoiced Quantity	Unit Price	Extended Amount	PO Number	Secondary PO
PreMedia.DIGITAL.bookblock.Posted	ISBN: 9781304346049 - The Golden Crystal	1	1	37.50	37.50		
PreMedia.DIGITAL.cover.Posted	ISBN: 9781304346049 - The Golden Crystal	1	1	37.50	37.50		

Invoice: 12667870 ISBN: 9781304346049 - The Golden Crystal

Trx Number	PO Number	Trx Date	Due Date	Trx Description	Invoice Amount	Amount Remaining	Currency	Secondary PO
12667870	*Title Setup *	29-AUG-13	29-AUG-13	Title Setup and Revision Invoices	40.00	0.00	USD	

SKU	Description	Ordered Quantity	Invoiced Quantity	Unit Price	Extended Amount	PO Number	Secondary PO
Revision.POD-Digital.Book.	ISBN: 9781304346049 - The Golden Crystal	1	1	40.00	40.00		

Invoice: 12669921

Trx Number	PO Number	Trx Date	Due Date	Trx Description	Invoice Amount	Amount Remaining	Currency	Secondary PO
12669921	WEB-2488422-1	23-AUG-13	23-AUG-13	Publisher Proof Invoices	30.00	0.00	USD	

SKU	Description	Ordered Quantity	Invoiced Quantity	Unit Price	Extended Amount	PO Number	Secondary PO
1304346048	The Golden Crystal	1	1	30.00	30.00	WEB-2488422-1	

My best guess at deciphering this is:

- The top of the list shows my initial attempt at uploading the files — one for the cover, one for the interior PDF — and each was \$37.50! I've seen coupons for this in the past, but alas, when I needed to move on it, there were none available.
- The middle item is my one revision (it was my fault) — I accidentally uploaded the wrong interior file. Instead of the 6" x 9" size, I uploaded the one I used for Lulu to print a mass-market size (around 5" x 8" or something...). Either way, mistakes cost dearly with this service, to the tune of \$40 *per revision!*
- The bottom of the list is the invoice for the proof to be printed — I get to choose between *Rush/Overnight* and *Rush/Overnight* for \$30 — yep, only one option!
- Shipping, freight, proof print, and handling fee (all itemized, though not included in the screenshot) was \$21 total
- "Digital Catalog Fee – POD" was \$12, and I'm not sure what this is, other than the fee they charge for the glory of being included in their amazing system... ?

As you can see, I'm going to need to push a *lot* of books to make up for the expenses here. The question is, *was it worth it?*

We'll have to go into the Quality section to see... cliffhanger!

Lulu: 5/10

CreateSpace: 9/10

LSI: 3/10

Metric #3: Quality

Since I forgot to mention it, I'll talk a little about the different size and paper types that each service offers in addition to the overall quality. When printing a self-published book, there are a few considerations:

- For whom are you printing? Yourself? Your family/friends? The general public? Quality requirements can differ greatly if you're going to keep a copy on your end table in the guest bedroom than if you're going to expect someone to shell out hard-earned dough to buy a copy.
- What size should you print? Mass-market paperbacks "feel" better for many readers, as they're smaller and easier to handle, but trade-sized hardcovers and paperbacks are more "professional," and give that "I'm serious about this stuff" message.
- Are binding options important? If it's a cookbook, workbook, or something similar, the book's ability to lay flat on a surface might be a selling point. Otherwise, the traditional "perfect bound" book option is what you're probably looking for. Saddle-stitch and other options are out there as well, but not as easy (or cheap) to find.

For my books, I wanted to find the three standards: Trade Paperback, Hardcover (also trade size; 6" x 9"), and Mass-Market Paperback (~5" x 8"). I wanted to test all three, but I knew that getting at least one option from each of the places that offered them would satiate this blog post, my curiosity, and hopefully those of you looking for the same information.

Here's what I found:

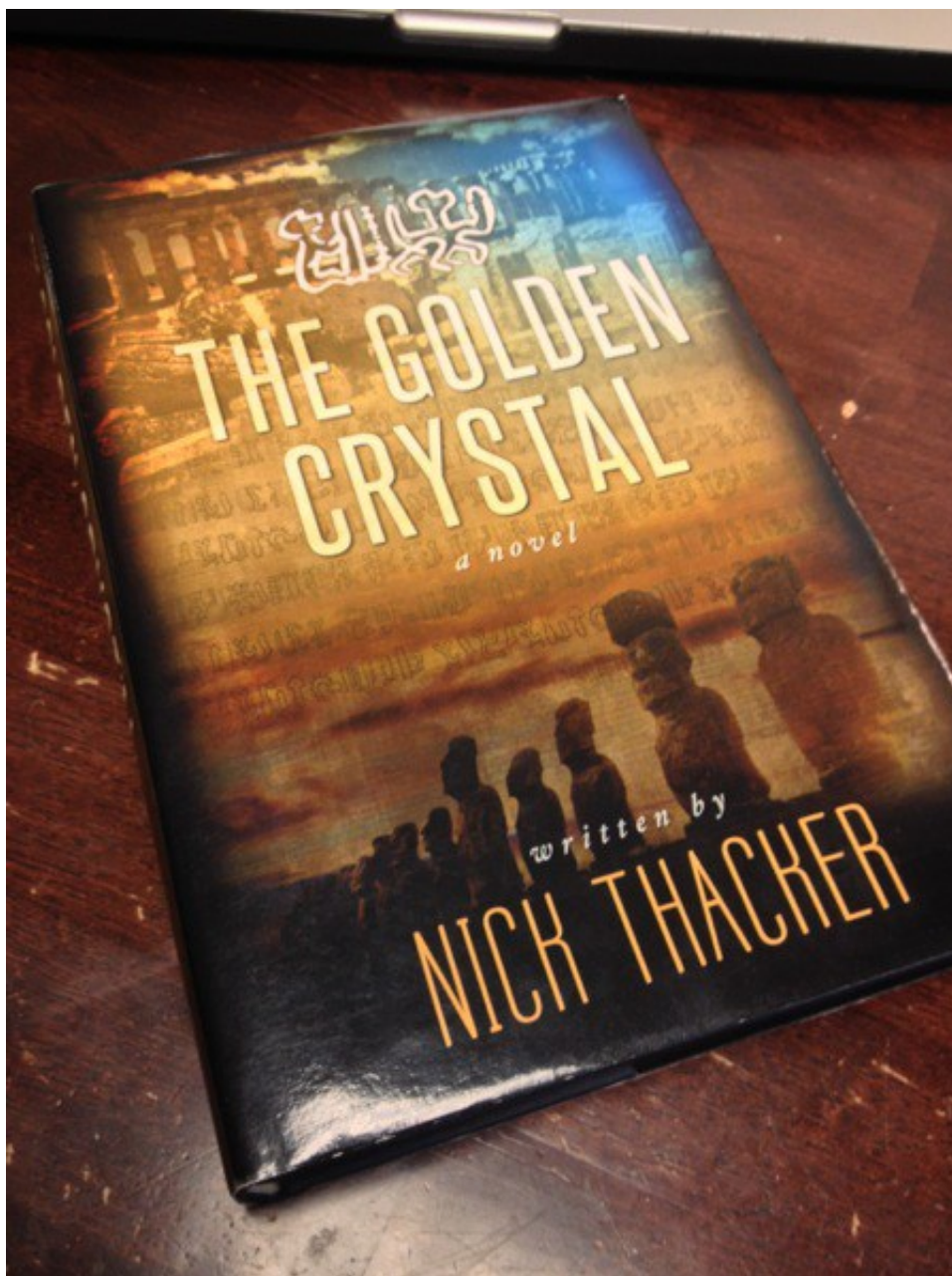
Lulu and CreateSpace, again, clock in about the same as far as trim sizes are concerned. When navigating the depths of the offerings, I didn't find very many sizes that I'd reasonably want to print on *not* offered, and the few that weren't exactly the

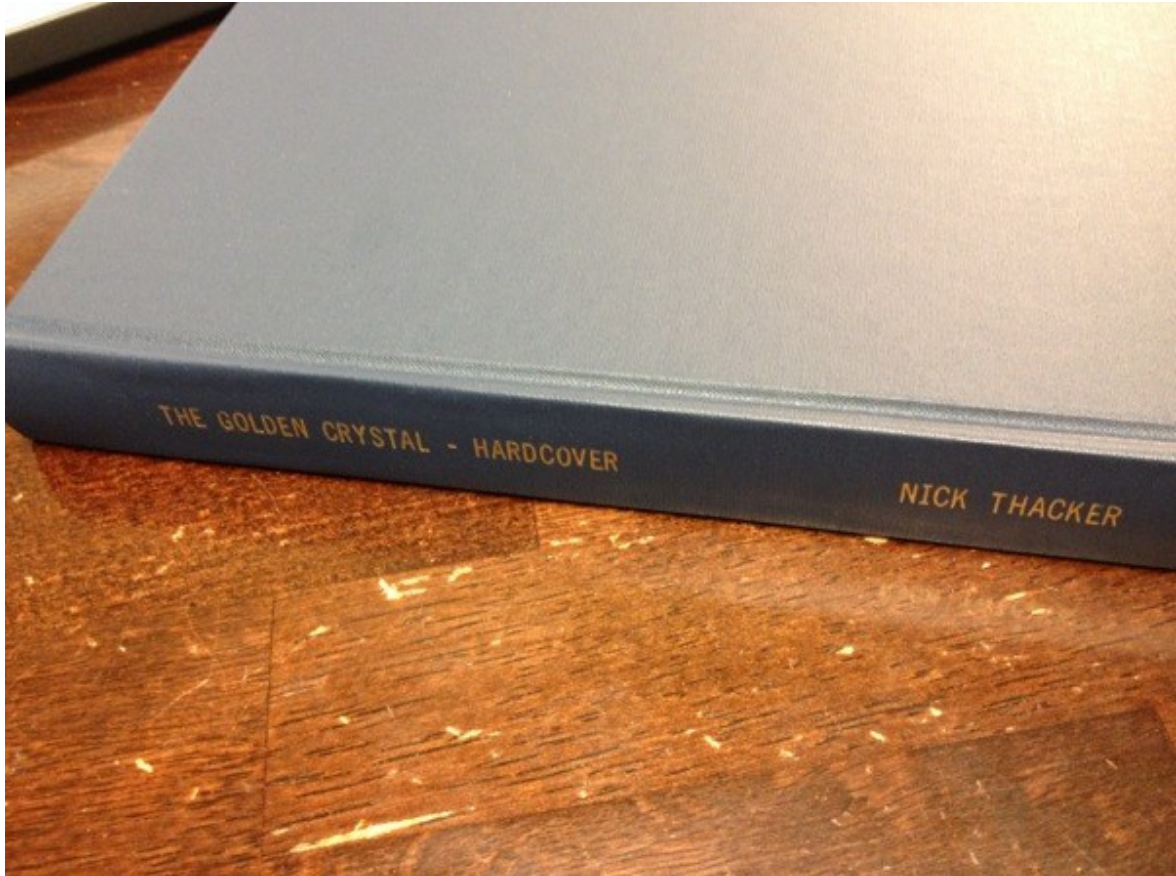
same from one shop to another were awfully close.

I found the standard size range at both to be similar, and I even found some of the European/UK standards available at both. Since I'll mostly print "trade" sized books since I can use the same PDF files for hardcover and paperback, I didn't worry too much about the obscure sizing options, but it might be a game-changer for you.

The biggest difference between the two shops' product offerings was that **Lulu prints hardcover books, and CreateSpace does not**. To me this is a *glaring* omission on CreateSpace's part, though I *have* to believe it's a strategy to keep costs low.

That being said, here are a couple closeups of the hardcover book from Lulu:





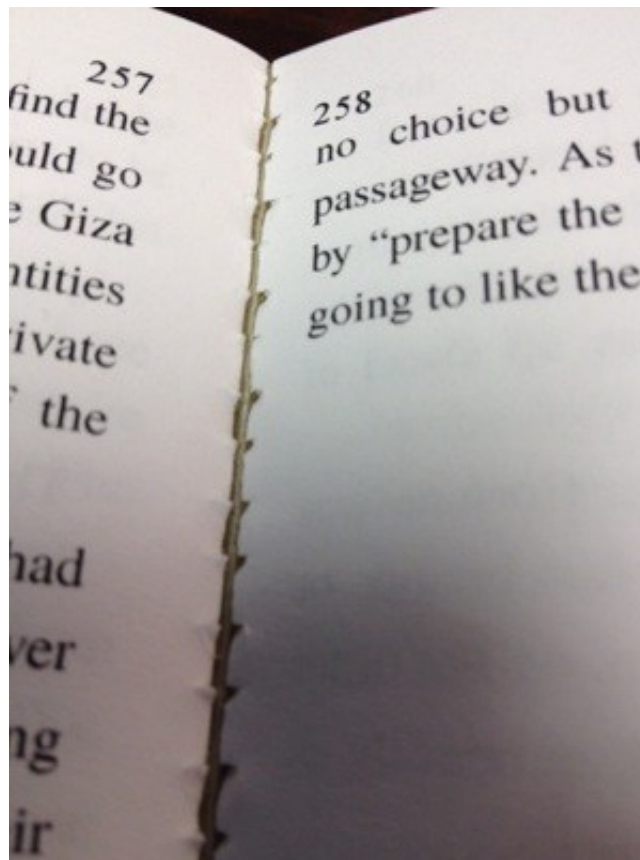
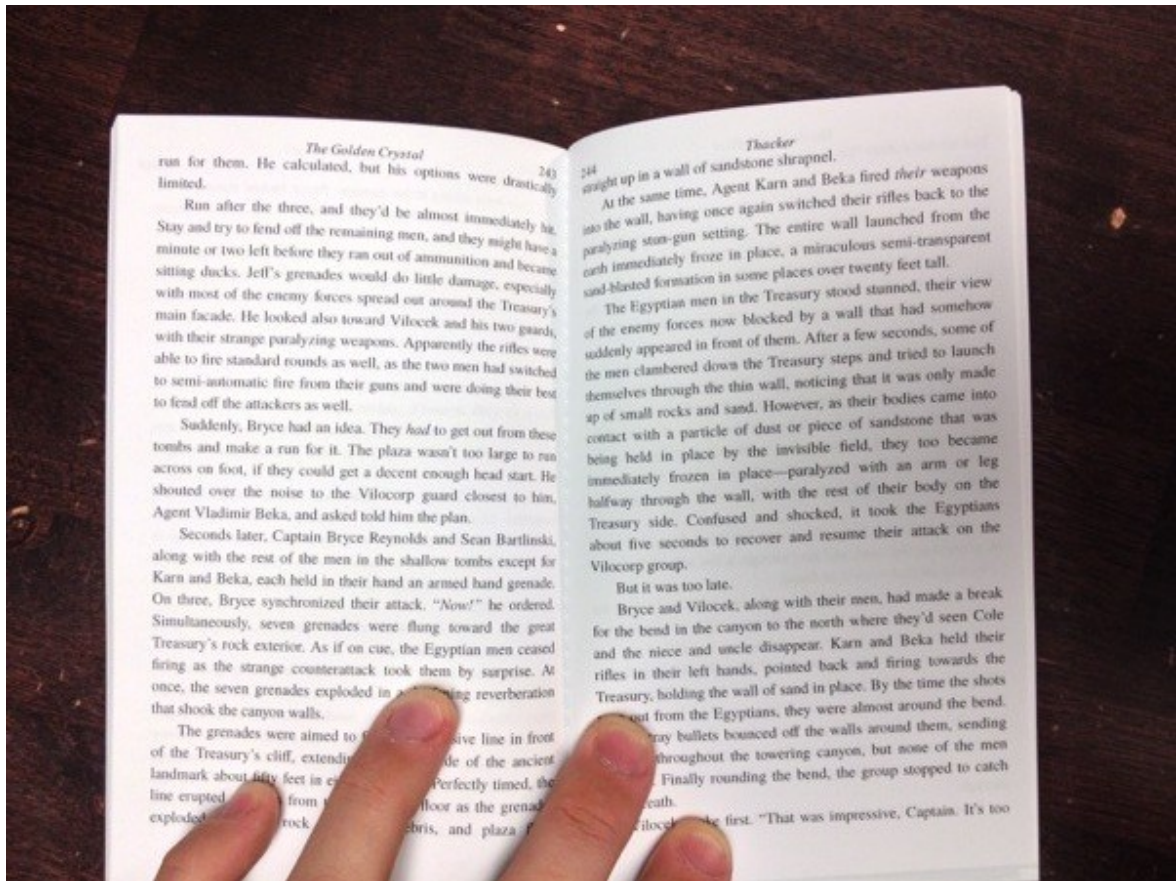
I was generally happy with it. My goal with *The Golden Crystal* was to produce a book that was indistinguishable from a “traditionally”-published one, and Lulu’s hardcover came close:

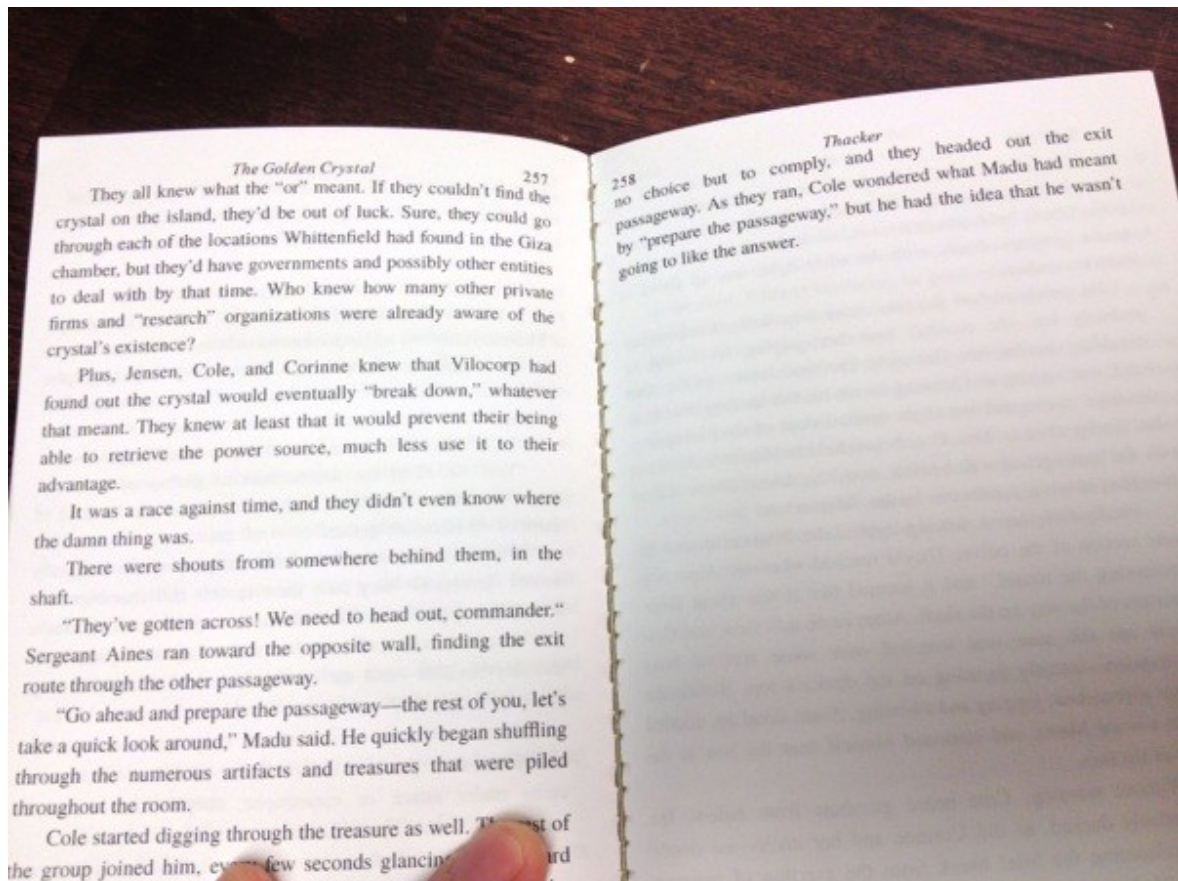


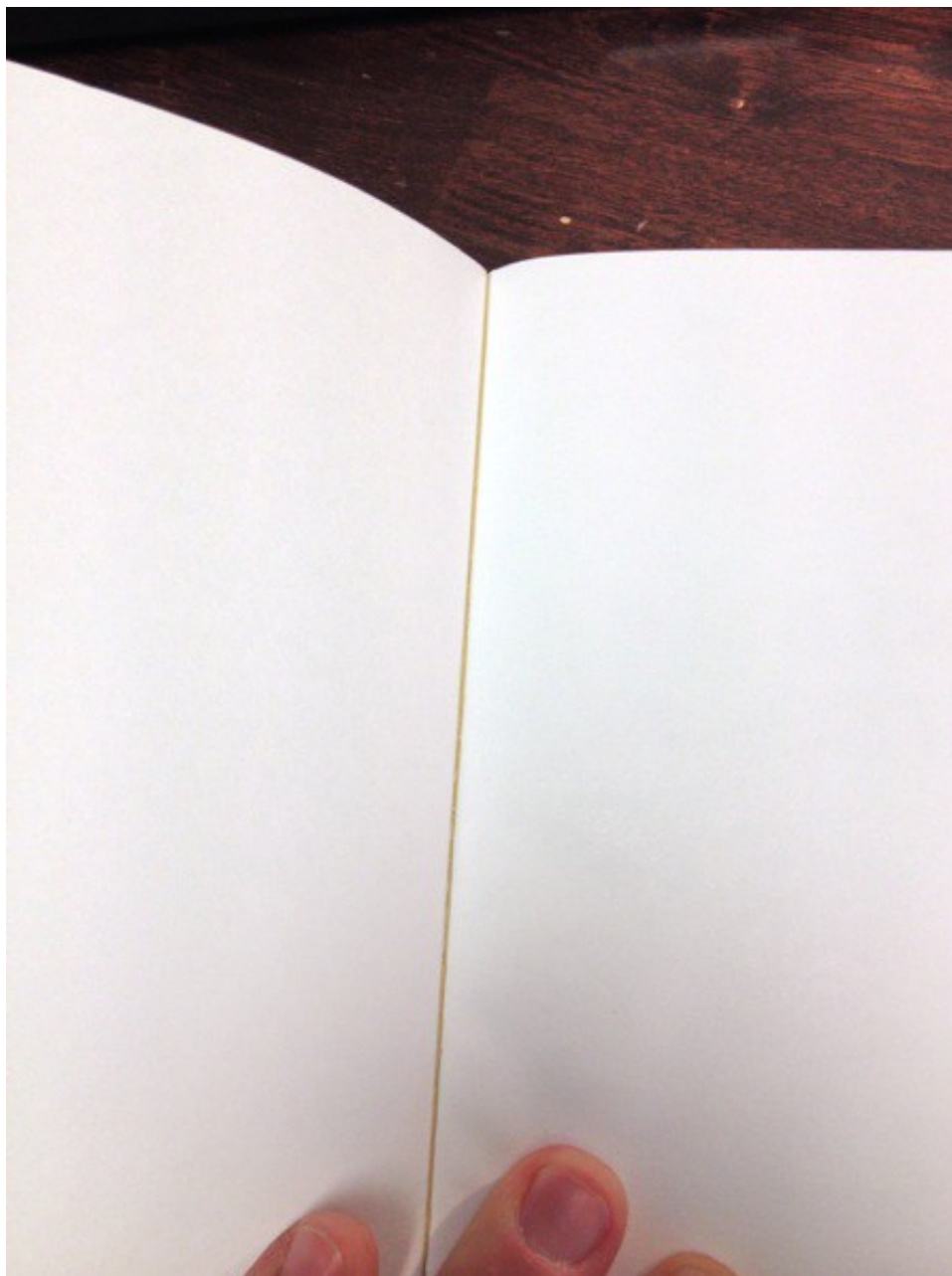
There are still some things I'd like to see from them, however:

- Overall, it “feels” lighter in my hands. Not sure why...
- The paper is a little “creamy.” I like cream-colored paper, but Lulu’s is *just* dark enough for me to question it.
- The case wrap is a shiny, glossy plastic-like paper, and I’d love some different options, though I’m splitting hairs at this point (hey, every great list has at least three items, right?)

Let’s take a look at the Lulu paperback version:







For these first proofs, I wanted a general hardcover trade-sized copy and a mass-market paperback. I ended up nailing the size, but Lulu was way off my expectations of quality for a few other reasons:

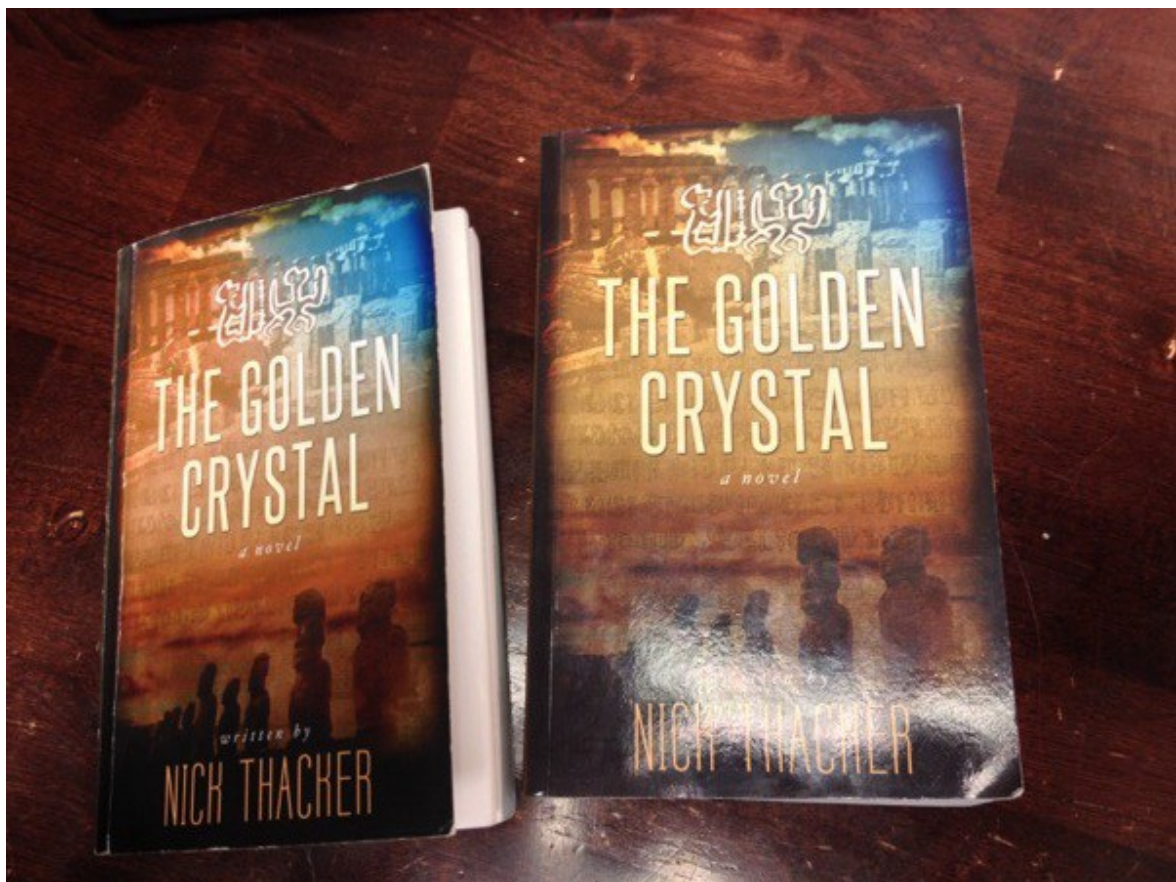
- The paper color (I chose white) was *really* white. I guess I should've known, but I was still taken aback by just *how* bright the paper was.
- Also, the paper's thickness feels an awful lot like copy paper — the weight and brightness of it together seems like I could've printed my own at a copy shop and had it bound for the same effect.
- The glue, which I know has been mentioned online before, is pretty yellow — which doesn't matter to me unless...
- ...the binding cracks *very* easily, making the book overall feel sort of low-

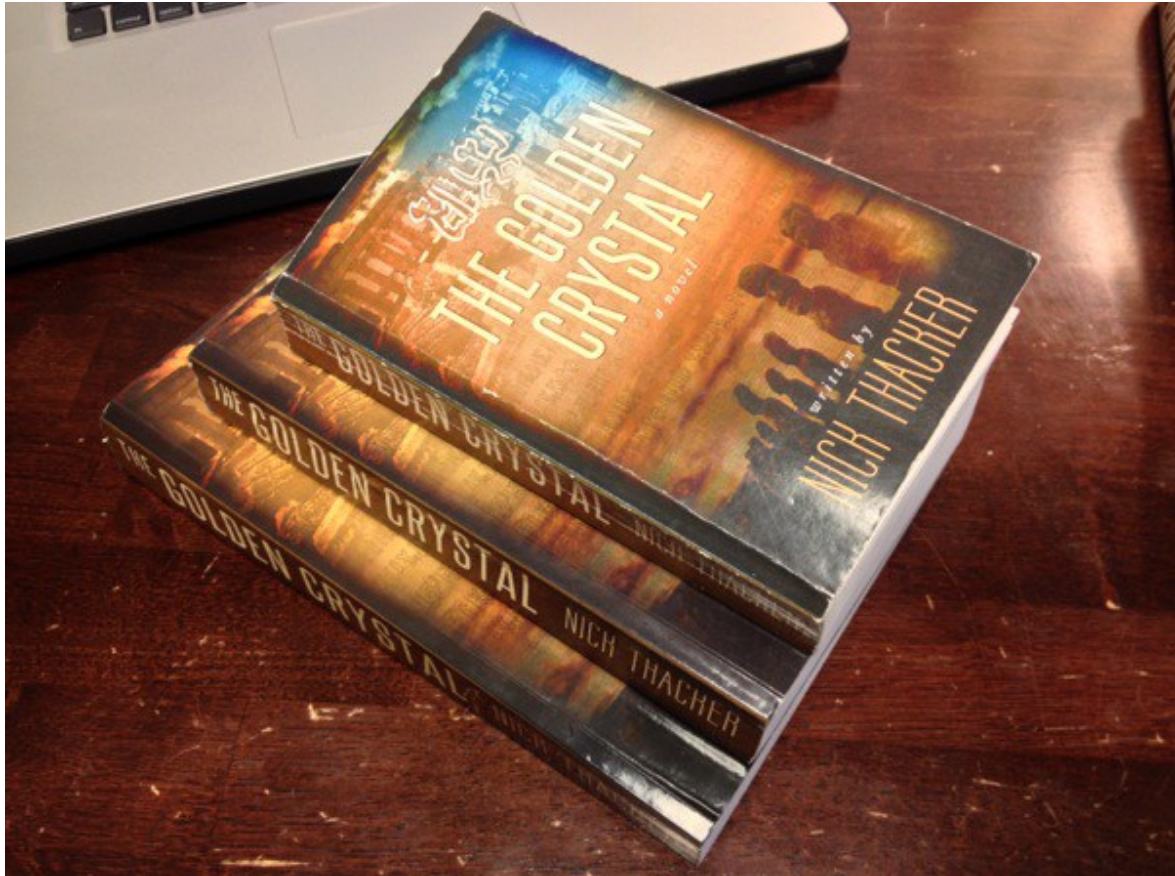
budget.

CreateSpace vs. Lulu for paperback

Since CreateSpace doesn't do hardcover, and I was generally happy with the Lulu proof I got, I didn't order one from LSI — in the future I certainly will, and I'd expect that LSI's will only be better than what Lulu's able to do.

Anyway, my next job was to compare the two front-runners in a growing market of quick POD book companies: Lulu and CreateSpace. You've already seen the Lulu pics, but here are a couple side-by-side and of a few different sizes:





I found very few distinguishable differences between CreateSpace and Lulu's paperback, regardless of size — both feature glossy covers, yellowish glue, cracky bindings (“perfect bound” in case you're wondering what I chose), and *very white* paper.

I don't have any images of CreateSpace's cream-finish paper of *The Golden Crystal* because I'd already seen it when I made copies of my first nonfiction book, *Welcome Home*. I was, to say it bluntly, not satisfied. CreateSpace, it seems, offers you two options:

1. *Very bright white*
2. *Very yellow-y cream*

And that's it. Who knows what the future will hold, but I didn't want to settle for computer-paper quality books.*

*Okay, okay — I'll admit it. *Technically* speaking, “computer/copy paper quality” is actually *better* than what most books are printed on, which is called “publisher grade,” “market grade,” or something else, depending on who you ask. However, I like my computer printouts to look and feel like computer printouts, and my books to look and feel like, well, books. Which means that I don't care if this thicker, bolder

stuff is “better” quality — it still feels fake when it’s printed into a book... hope that makes sense.

Testing paperbacks from LSI

On to the final step in the chain — Lightning Source International. I’d heard that people generally thought LSI was “better” than the aforementioned two printers, but I couldn’t seem to find any hard evidence or examples online anywhere.

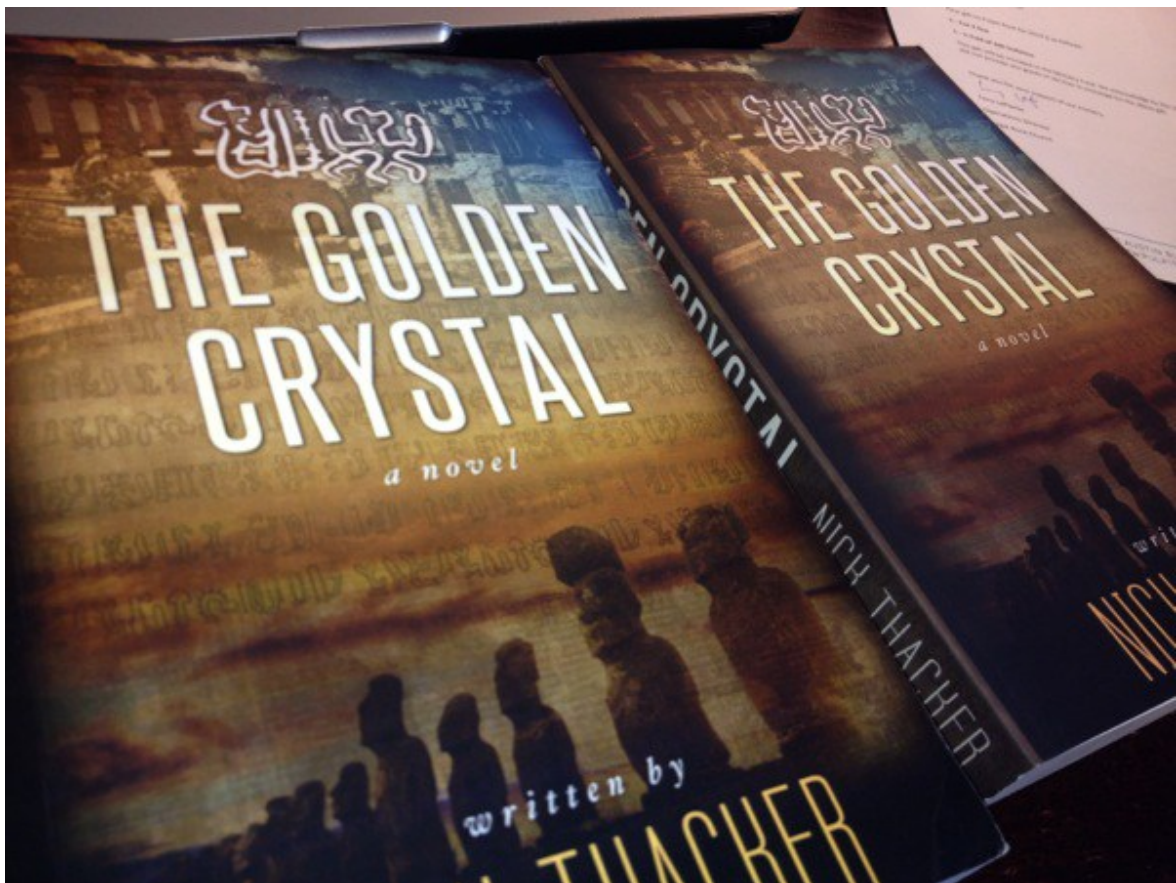
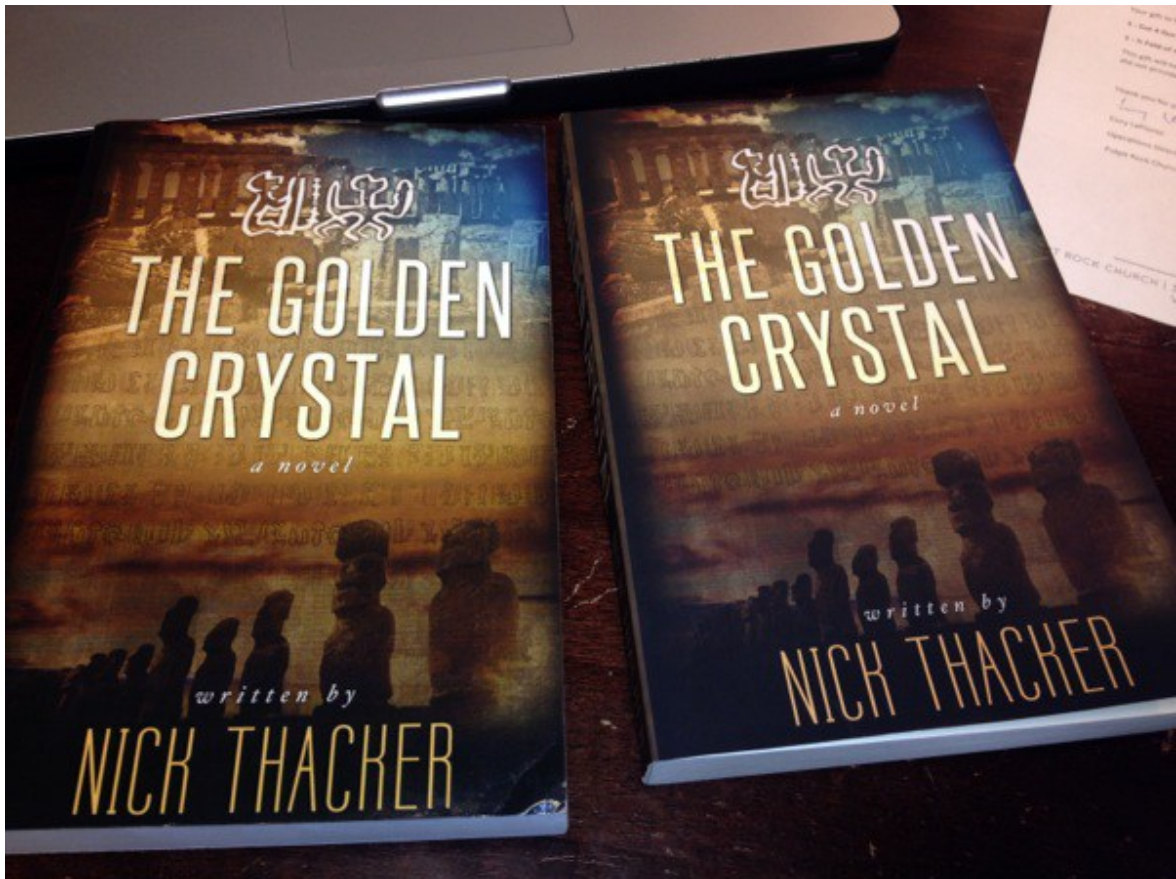
However, I was intrigued by the myriad of options they offered: from *many* more sizes of paperbacks in different combinations of cover finish, paper type, paper color, and binding options, as well as being able to print hardcover *and* paperback, I knew I needed to test them out. Plus, they did the impossible: LSI offered *matte cover* as an option. No way.

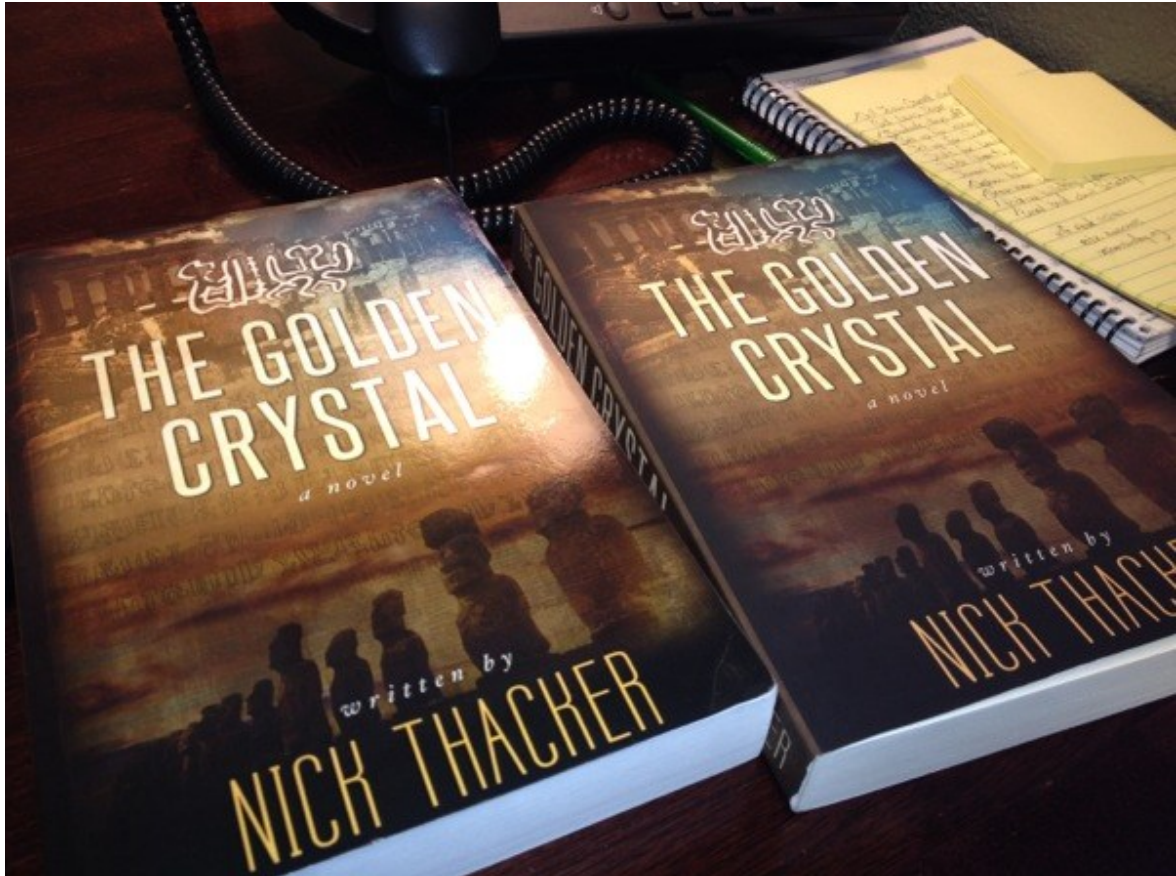
I decided to upload and proof a standard size: 6” x 9” on the dot, industry-standard trade paperback, for two reasons:

1. Since it was expensive to “test” the waters with LSI, at around \$100 a pop, I wanted to receive something that I could *really* be proud of, sell, or give away if it was nice-looking.
2. I already had the files done, minus the spine width for their slightly different paper thickness settings.*

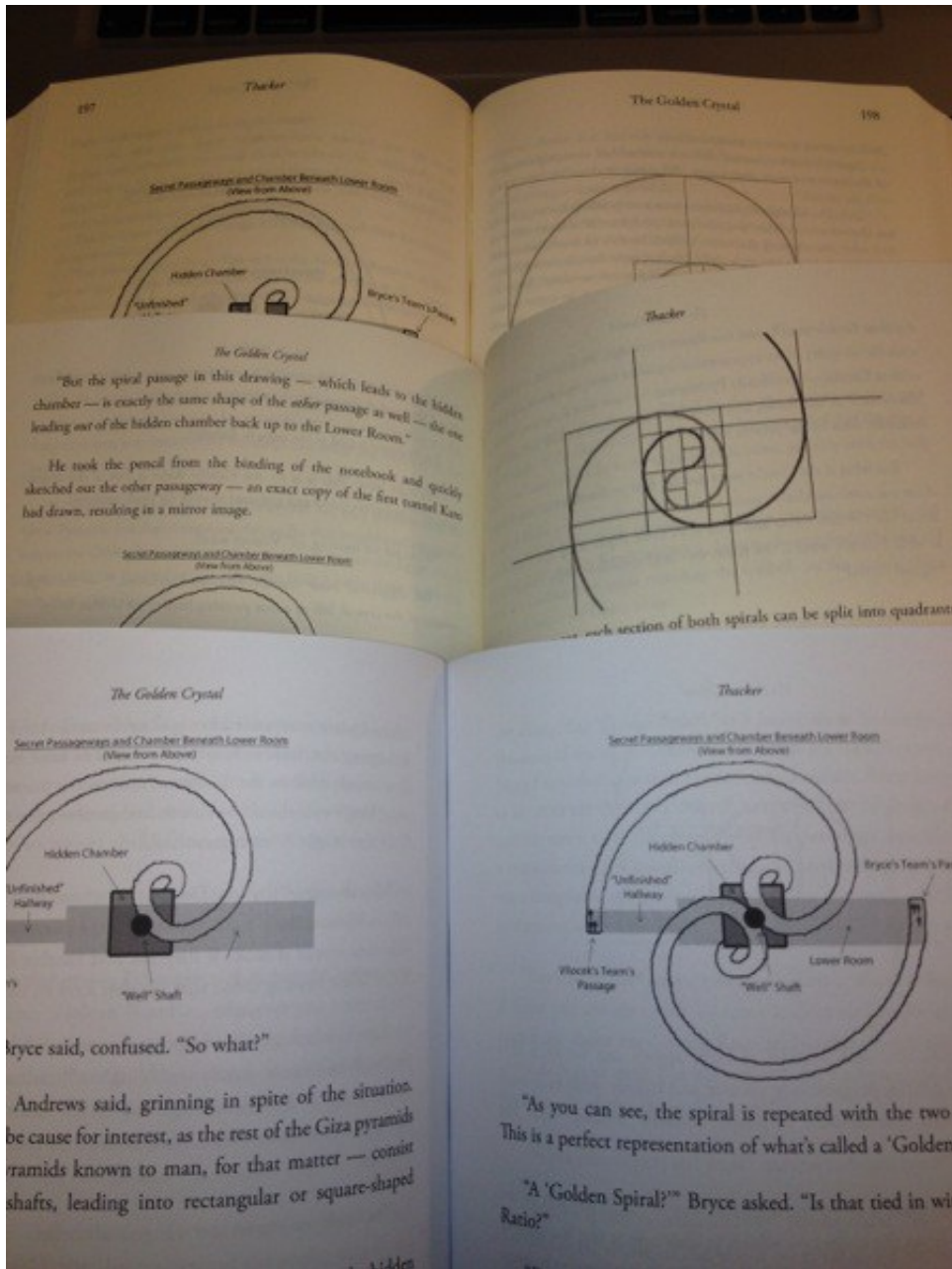
*While I’m on the subject, all three of these printers (and IngramSpark included) offer book cover template generators, with LSI leading the charge with a generator that will automatically grab your ISBN number (assuming you’ve previously purchased one from Bowker and filled in the details) and then fill out the rest of the form automatically. Pretty cool, huh? Here are links to each generator: [Lightning Source Cover Template Generator](#), [Lulu.com Cover Template Generator](#) (need to have an account), [CreateSpace Cover Template Generator](#), and [IngramSpark Cover Template Generator](#) (need to have an account).

The results, if I do say so myself, were stunning. While it’s hard to capture the glossy-vs.-matte covers in images, you can see the difference a little in the picture with my lamp’s light reflection (in each, the CreateSpace version is on the left, and the LSI version is on the right):

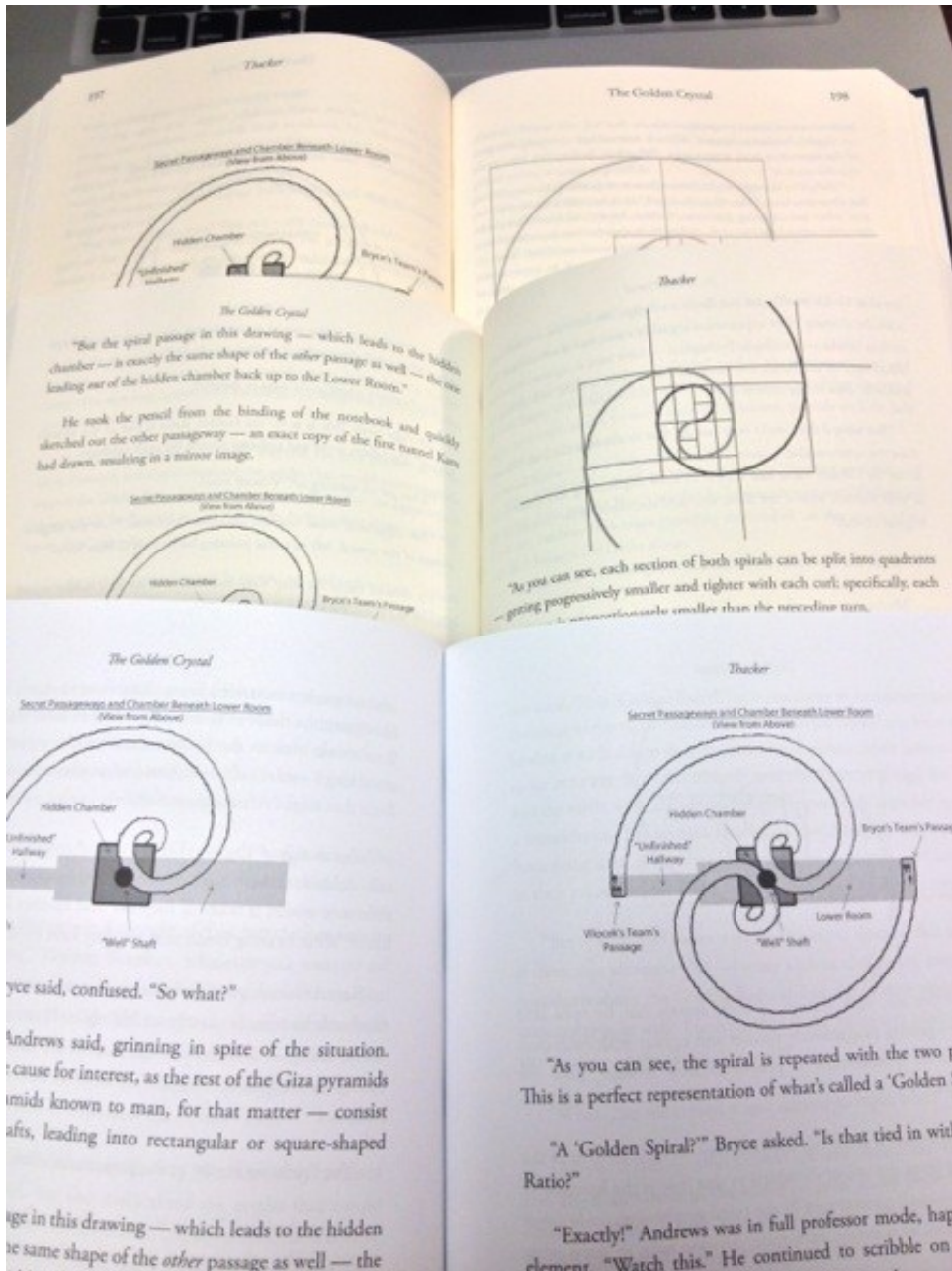




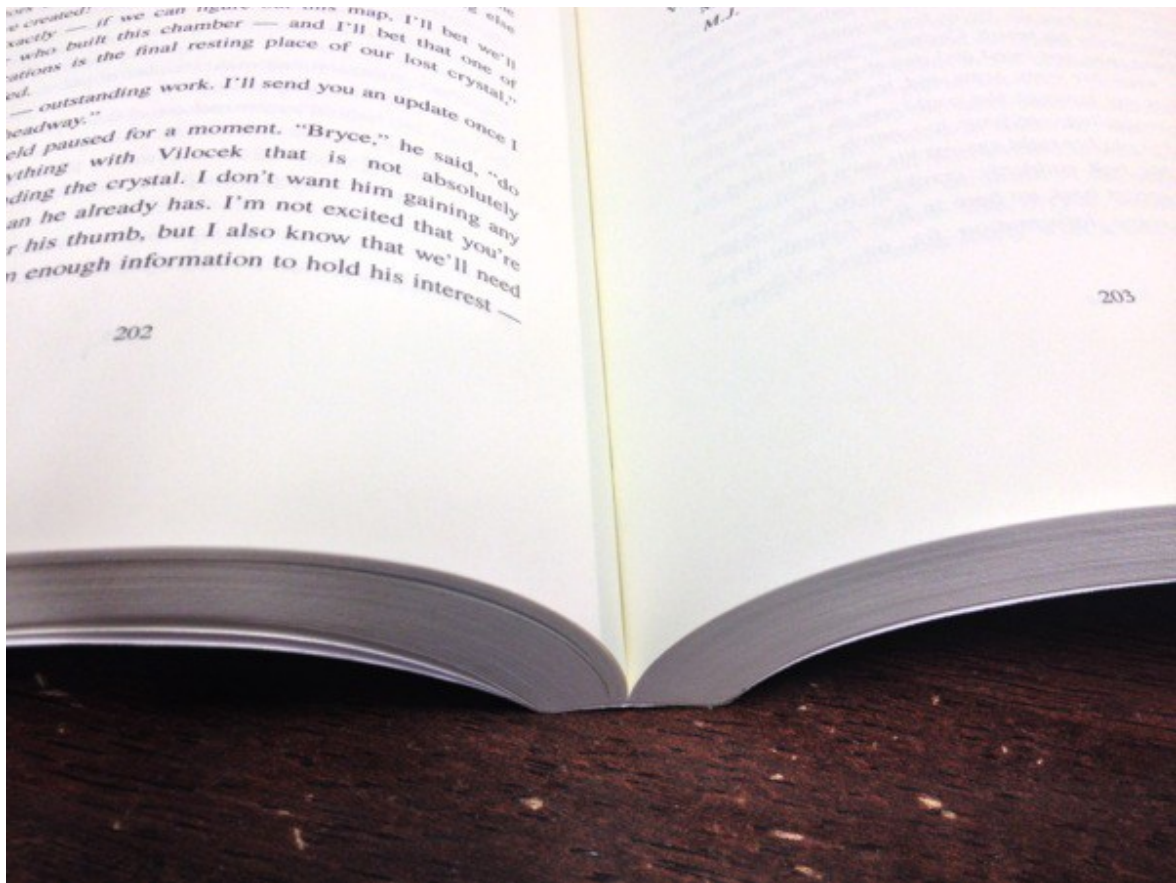
And here are some shots of the interiors, set to the same page (generally — remember, I was working from different size options here). Hardcover w/ cream paper from Lulu in the back, paperback w/ cream paper from LSI in the middle, and finally paperback w/ white paper from CreateSpace in the front. All are 6" x 9":



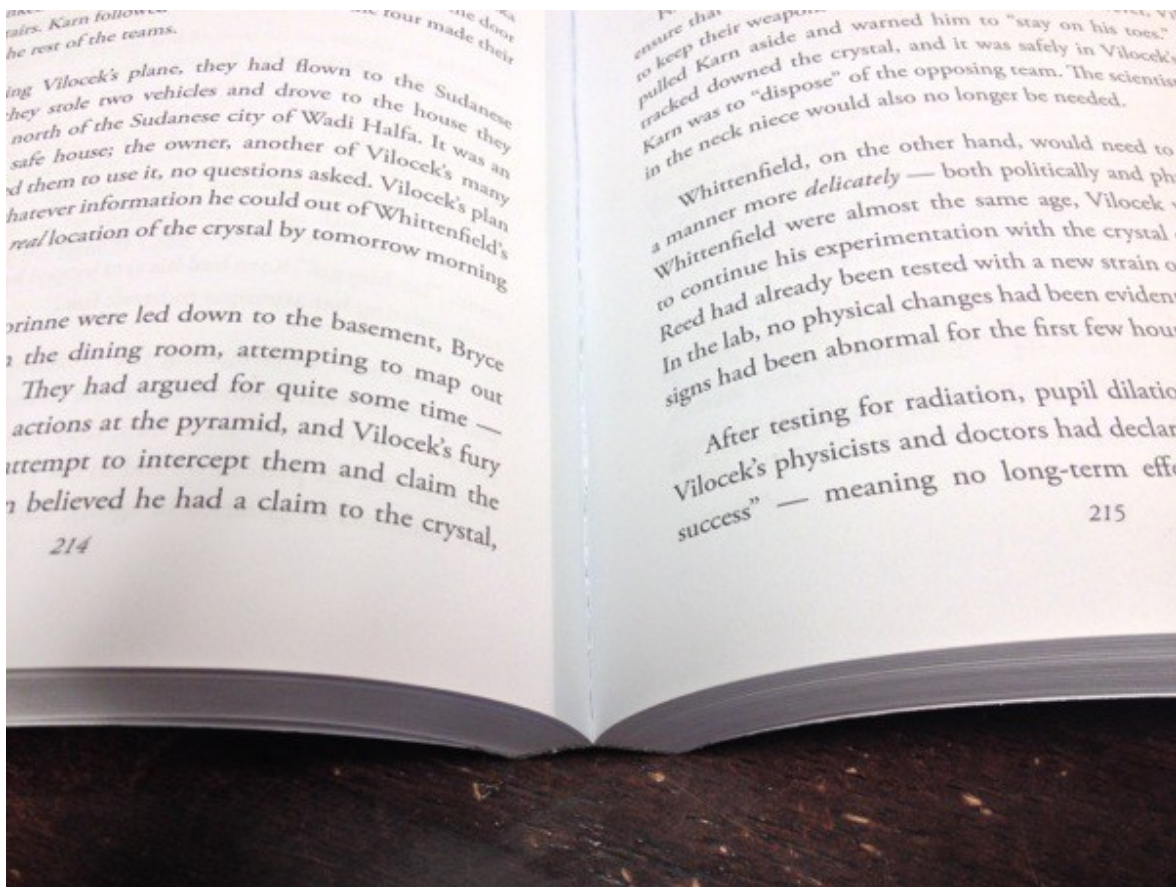
Flash on — in this version, notice the difference in paper thickness between the three. LSI looks the most “normal,” with almost-visible lines from the opposite side bleeding through on the right. I could live with Lulu’s paper, since the color is close, but the CreateSpace white stock is way too thick!



With this one, I'm not quite sure what causes the difference, but there's a clear benefit to LSI's binding:



Over that of CreateSpace/Lulu:



Finally — and this couldn't be done with my photography equipment (iPhone 4s, in case you're wondering!) — there's a *huge* difference to me at least in the quality at which each book is printed. For example, both Lulu and CreateSpace use a type of digital printing that involves laser printing a series of dots at a certain DPI — say, for example, 200-300 DPI (dots per inch), whereas LSI uses a slightly different technology, though I think it's still digital. Whatever the cause, I can actually see the little dots that make up each item — be it a letter or image — on the pages of a CreateSpace or Lulu book.

LSI's inked items, however, when viewed super-closely, are actually thicker layers of ink, and there are *no* dots to be seen. The result is that reading a page of copy in an LSI-created book is considerably easier, in that it's darker, stands out better on the page, and has that “professional” feel to it.

I know this last item, especially without pictures to back it up, is difficult to trust me on, but here's the bottom line: LSI creates *way* better books than either of the two companies tested. Hands-down, no questions asked. If you're after quality, and you don't mind paying a premium for it, LSI is the way to go. For me, this was a **game-changer**. I'm serious about my finished product, and I really wanted to achieve something that's *indistinguishable* from a “traditionally-published” book.

For me, there was no competition. LSI wins the quality game, and since I honestly can't see the quality getting any *closer* to that of a “real” book, I give LSI a 10/10. The other two shops lost favor for me not just because of the low quality, but because when handling the finished products, I strongly believe *anyone* who's handled a book before could tell that these weren't “real.” Here are my ratings:

Lulu: 2/10

CreateSpace: 2/10

LSI: 10/10

What does this all mean?

Well, for me, it means that I'm going to be *very* excited when/if IngramSpark gets off the ground and happens to print at the same standards as LSI, which I believe is very possible. It means that until then, I'm printing with LSI for my final proofs, but I'll probably continue doing edits/test proofs through CreateSpace and Lulu, since they're *way* cheaper.

If you're interested in printing a book to have on hand as a vanity project, I'd

recommend going hardback through Lulu — it's the cheapest option for the high quality you'll get.

If you want cheap copies of a book you're not planning to do much with to hand out to friends, family, and acquaintances at work, *or* you aren't much for technical stuff, go with CreateSpace — it's easier to set up, work with, and use, and there's a larger online audience of helpful people to guide you through the process.

I hope this review was helpful or at least insightful to you in some way — since the currency of the web is sharing and caring, would you mind sharing this post with your network and leaving a comment? Let me know if I've missed anything, and by all means let me know if your results differed!

Happy self-publishing!