

What we don't say about small press publishing

Allison Cobb

I recently had a conversation with a woman who used to run a feminist press. She said that one of her innovations was to bring in books that “would sell” as opposed to dry, academic tomes no one wanted to read. I bristled at this. “As a poet,” I told her, “I question what it means to publish only books perceived as ‘marketable’ in a system whose values are often inimical to the kind of work I want to read.” “Oh,” she said, “I love poetry, but there has got to be a model besides book publishing for printing and distributing it.”

The observation is obvious enough. Poets and publishers have long generated alternative printing and distribution models. Nonetheless, I started to think about what she said in a new way. I thought about it a lot for the next several days. Why is it, I wondered, that *The Book* retains such primacy in avant garde poetic communities? These are thinkers who question everything about societal values, about the acts of reading and writing, about language itself. These are people who pioneered the DIY model of printing (I think of Diane DiPrima and Amiri Baraka’s *Floating Bear Press*) and online publishing (*UBU web*). Nonetheless, in my experience, experimental poets enforce amongst themselves the status of *The Book* as much as any other group of writers.

What does *The Book* do? It confers acceptance upon a writer by a certain “public” represented by a publisher. The book represents the fact that a third-party expert, the publisher, believes the work has value (either cultural or economic). It implies that the publisher was willing to invest the time, energy and funds necessary to create the book. In the mainstream market, publishers expect a return on this investment. In poetry, no such economic rationale exists.

But if poetry publishers don’t make back the money they invest in books, how do they make more books? In recent months I have been asking publishers this question. Many work as nonprofits, securing funding from foundations and governments. Some, like *Subpress*, operate as collectives; others use credit or make certain lifestyle choices (work more, travel less) to keep publishing. And, I have learned, a number rely for funding on the poets they publish. One friend I spoke with said he couldn’t publish many of his books without money from the authors, and reeled off a list of names. I myself have given contributions to *Chax Press*, the nonprofit that published my book.

Poets and publishers don’t often talk openly about this economic dynamic. I have been wondering why this is the case. I think one answer is that the cultural status of *The Book* depends on the illusion of objectivity. It depends on the notion that the publisher as an independent expert has discerned value in a poet’s work. Such objectivity is a myth in practical terms. The experimental poetry world is small—though varied and exciting—and small press publishers and poets and readers generally are the same people. We know each other and publish each other’s work.

That’s a good thing—it’s community. The publishers I know don’t publish books because people give them money. They publish books they feel passionately about, and get money anywhere they can, including, in some cases, from the authors. But what happens when the financial relationships are swept under the rug? Poets and publishers collude in maintaining an illusion for the sake of *The Book*. This limits possibility. If we

all pretend the current model that requires poets and publishers to be independent of one another is the ideal one, little space exists to imagine alternatives—alternatives for funding, for publishing, for distributing, even for conceiving of books. That makes me sad. Because the ability to generate creative alternatives is one of the things I value most about the world of innovative poetry.

Allison Cobb is the author of *Born2*, Chax Press 2004, co-editor of POM2 magazine, and co-editor of BabySelf Press.