

Sona Books

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“What models do we have to offer, imagine, devise ...?” “How might an editorial poetics of publishing that includes gift economy alter, challenge and create economic and aesthetic resistance or subversion?”

First, I want to honor all of the models that I see in practice now—the generosity of poets publishing other poets is truly amazing. Years ago I heard Anne Waldman say that “poets publish poets” and this was inspiring to me. So I took it on as my duty and my privilege. Running a small press is energizing; it serves others and in so doing, at crucial times, turns the spotlight off of my own work and my own difficulties “getting published.”

For example, back in February of this year I was working very hard on several new pieces of writing. But I wondered if anyone would ever read these projects. I remembered hearing about the “self-publish or perish” effort that I believe is organized by Subpress. So I wrote a letter to about thirty poets I knew or had recently met, inviting them to participate in a “gift-publishing” exchange. I would organize getting addresses out, and Sona Books would document the project on its web-site. Twenty poets said yes to the project and the exchange happened during the fall.

At the same time that I honor these kinds of efforts, I am concerned that one of the byproducts of small press publishing may be that we are not establishing wide or wider distribution networks.

And I wonder, are there traditional marketing and advertising strategies that small press publishers could learn from in order to cultivate various audiences?

With my Sona Books writers, I want their works to be accessible to friends, families, non-writers. By accessible, I don't mean that their works should fit any particular stylistic or content mold. Their works may still be hermetic, obtuse, “difficult.” I mean that I want to do as much as possible to ensure that their works reach a wide audience and, as editor and publisher, I want to provide footholds into the work.

To recognize the fact that wider audiences exist, wider than the folks we see at readings around town, I've used the subscription model to distribute chapbooks. Subscribers to the press usually pay \$20 or \$25 a year to receive four, sometimes five chapbooks a year.

Subscribers are usually family and friends of the writers—just a few subscribers are writers themselves. The subscription base includes university professors, dentists, accountants, painters, educators, film-makers, librarians, graphic designers. Some subscribers are avid readers; some are not. Some might call

themselves intellectuals, some wouldn't. Some subscribers are a complete mystery to me; I'll never know them, nor will I know how they respond to the chapbooks. But some subscribers have asked me personally how to read the books they are receiving in the mail. Some report back to me that the books are beautiful and they know they wouldn't be able to find them at the average bookstore. Most are amazed that the chapbook exists, asking "do other poets do this?" and are very excited to be introduced to a world that seems, to them, rather off-limits and even secretive!

In a nutshell, I want large groups of different kinds of people to hold and touch, leaf through and read these books. I want them to know about all the possibilities there are for literature and writing.

To this end, I have tried to solicit blurbs for the Sona Books web-site from my writers called "How to Read a Sona Book" and only one writer responded to the request. It seems that writers are hesitant to explain how to read what they've written. Is this because we feel an explanation will make the reading experience less democratic, less interesting or heart-felt? Is it that once we've worked so hard on the writing and on making the chapbook or book, we are too tired to think of "marketing"? Or do we, as publishers and writers, still believe in the mystique of poetry, a kind of neo-romantic belief in the poet is a prophet and those who can discern "the message" are special?

All of this leads me to the following question: Can or should a press be a pedagogical instrument?

I believe my answer would be "yes." I wonder why it is that we accept some basic teachings on how to look at modern and postmodern art by taking classes, sometimes reading up on the art we're about to see, taking museum tours even, but we hesitate to provide others with brief and basic instruction on how to read a postmodern text.

But I am hopeful that by reaching across various divides, and by treating publishing as a pedagogical opportunity, audiences will think about literature in general in our society—literature beyond the safety of the NY Times best-seller list. And for that matter, beyond the safety of its own "experimental" community. It might sound radical, but I somehow believe that small presses may have something to gain by brainstorming ways that traditional advertising and marketing strategies might expand audiences without, of course, sacrificing artistic integrity and without succumbing to profit-making entrapments.

Further, concerning your question on "subversion" and "the subaltern" in publishing, I am interested in publishing models that provide economic support outside of individuals donating their own money to publish other individuals. In other words, economic subversion and publishing as resistance, to my mind, could mean publishing in a way that does not depend on the disposable income of an individual publisher. I am wary of philanthropic publishing; I am wary that it

might lead to a kind of publishing hegemony, where manuscripts published reflect a singular cultural and class sensibility. Has this happened? Does this happen now? Do these small press economics have a homogenizing effect?

Which leads me to a new question: How can publishers step out of their own networks of associations and reach toward writers who have various cultural and economic situations? But I guess before that question, comes this: *Should* “diversity” be a goal among publishers and editors? What kind of diversity? Racial, gender, the culture of “class”? Should a publisher or small press be dedicated to a particular aesthetic or should a small press seek to widen nets of association, breaching style and form barriers that are often culturally informed?

The more people I meet in and around the experimental poetry scene in New York and elsewhere, the more I feel very warmly a part of that community. The friendship and dedication to furthering each other’s work is sustaining, inspiring, necessary. However, at the very same time, I am feeling the need to push against some of the homogeneity of the community. I would like for Sona Books to reach toward others who may be, stylistically and content-wise, on the fringes of the community. And I think that I would like more presses to do the same.

Lastly, concerning contests, I “tip my hat” to those publishers who believe in the importance of extending an “open call” for manuscripts. I even understand why some would charge a reading fee. It seems to me that these contests and open reading periods are utterly necessary; but it also seems utterly impossible! How *are* decisions made? I plan, as a press, to stay away from this model for as long as possible. Yet, ironically, as a writer, I have recently benefited from one such call. But I am completely aware that there are many worthy manuscripts out there waiting to be published; how mine was selected is more than a bit mysterious.

One alternative to the contest model would be the collective, it seems. It’s sometimes comical to learn that three or four of your good friends are submitting their manuscript to the same contest. It feels to me that groups of four poets could start and run a very wonderful collective publishing endeavor that could accomplish the goal of editing, producing, publicizing, and distributing each other’s books. This is a direction in which Sona Books might go. But again, by choosing not to cast a wide net, then how is diversity, surprise, and “the underdog” found and celebrated?

I suppose the answer is that all models are needed. And part of being an editor and publisher is to keep an ear to the ground about alternative models, to listen to the quiet or quieted community members especially, and to constantly be open to meeting new writers, welcoming them and asking to get to know their work.

Jill Magi’s book, *Threads*, will be published by Futurepoem Books in 2006.

