

How2 Forum: Small Press Publishing

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Thinking about the possibilities and actualities of small press publishing and its importance for new writing, I've been looking at the unplanned steps that brought me to this world.

Throughout much of my early writing life (even—or especially—while taking creative writing workshops as an undergraduate), writing in general and publishing one's writing in particular were presented to me as elite activities available to only a few, who were chosen by remote and mysterious powers, capricious gods to whom one might sacrifice assiduously with only a faint hope for benevolence, let alone reward.

That is to say, my early writing life evolved outside the context of a community. While I knew other young writers (my classmates, mostly), we often felt ourselves to be wandering in solitude outside the gates of a promised land. Occasionally one of our number would be selected for 'flying up', publication in one of the few academically recognized and nationally/internationally circulated periodicals that everyone, even our parents, had heard of. The rarity of this kind of event served, on one hand, to reinforce its own preciousness: a club that wouldn't have us as members carried an appeal we recognized, in a distorted variation on Groucho Marx. On the other hand, the seemingly static and impassive world of 'real' publishing created a suspicion that there must, surely, be more that could be happening.

Part of my confusion came from the fact that the writers who were most interesting to me were not given much attention in the academic world (at least at that time): the Beats, the New York School, the Black Mountain School, the Language poets, various queer writers and writers of color and feminist writers. But, while I discovered that many of these writers had gotten their start publishing in very small, community-based publications, I still didn't know how to become part of an active, do-it-yourself, engaged group of writers in my own life. I wanted to be part of something larger than myself. I wanted to be part of a conversation.

In the midst of trying to sort this out, I found my way to the MFA program at The Naropa Institute. It seemed different than other writing programs (though I realize there are a number that offer similar things): there seemed to be a sense of urgency and immediacy, people talking to one another across generations and identity groups and affiliations. There seemed to be a conversation in which people allowed themselves to be changed by one another—not utopian, but dynamic.

At Naropa I found a large group of younger writers who were taking it upon themselves to create the world in which our writing would exist, starting journals and presses and reading series and forming affiliations to address our concerns. Like any dynamic situation, there were as many disagreements as there were alliances, and as many confusions as clarities. It was energizing and it was chaotic. And that was the point.

With classmates Jay Schwartz and Chris Vitiello, I started editing *Proliferation* magazine in 1994. Each of us had our own visions for the project, but I think they'd agree with me that we all wanted to be part of creating a forum; more than just putting our own writing into the world, we wanted to be part of shaping the conversation about the work we cared about. And the work we cared about presented difficulties of one kind or another, difficulties that provoked discussions and arguments about what matters in the world of new writing, and in the world.

Working on *Proliferation* pushed me to articulate and commit to my opinions about writing in a way that being a workshop participant or literature student never had. It gave me a sense of confidence and focus. I finally started to understand that I was not asking *permission* to join the world of writers, I was a part of it. And it was up to me to decide what to do with that.

A few years later I started Second Story Books, because I wanted to try solo editing, because I wanted to publish works by individual authors (rather than a journal), and because I wanted a project to explore the various kinds of cross-genre narrative that had become the focus of my attention as a reader and writer.

I published chapbooks because I didn't have the money to print perfect-bound books, but also because I felt an attachment to the handmade book, and to the process of design and production and assembly of each book-artifact. My commitment to the works I was publishing, and their effect on me, was visceral as well as intellectual. I wanted to transfer that commitment through each book-object. I wanted to create a visual, material interpretation of each author's work.

Of course, one of the consequences of time-intensive handmade books is that production runs and distribution are extremely limited. The handmade, hand-distributed book simply can't reach everyone I want to reach.

In the time since I started thinking about such things, I've seen a larger conversation—or series of interconnected conversations—emerge about the things I'm most interested in as a writer, reader, and publisher: cross-genre narrative writing, prose writing, experimental fiction writing; the formal, cultural, and political associations, implications, and consequences of this work. I want the books I publish to be available alongside other books that are part of those conversations.

And so I've had to recalculate the equation of time-effectiveness and cost. I've made the decision to publish perfect-bound books through Second Story. This means a bigger financial commitment, and a bigger commitment to finding distribution channels. It also means greater expectations: that the works I'm interested in will find a place in those larger conversations, that my efforts are a part of making those conversations happen.

I still value the place of the handmade book, the craft and unique-objectness of it, the community-bonding act of a personalized distribution process. I'll always be interested in making such books, but I see this as happening on a separate tier, alongside books that can travel in wider channels.

One root of 'publish' is 'public': maintained for or used by the people or community. To me the point of all this is to be connected, through the work, to more people. To that end I favor, not the elimination rounds of contests and prizes, but the *inclusion* rounds of forums such as this one, conversations that widen out and engage writers and readers as active participants, rather than as silent audience members or glassy-eyed consumers.

Mary Burger is the editor of *An Apparent Event: A Second Story Books Anthology* (2006) and co-editor of *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative* (2004, Coach House Books).