



# LAUGHING BEAR 118 NEWSLETTER

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## The Surviving Small Press: The Role of Literary Publishing

*Magazine starting is an act of passion, not one of consideration – careless, heedless, and irreverent. Work out the probabilities and you will never start one.* –Vance Bourjaily

That quote is pulled from *Green Isle in the Sea: An Informal History of the Alternative Press, 1960-85* edited by Diane Kruckow and Curt Johnson. It pretty much sums up the truth about literary magazine publishing and literary publishing in general: It's an act of passion to start a small magazine, but to keep one going takes determination and creativity.

During the years covered in *Green Isle in the Sea*, small press went from isolated small publishing businesses to a movement that is still going – though the majority of presses today bear little resemblance to those of 20 and 30 years ago. Back then small press was predominantly literary. Today most are nonfiction publishers, but it is helpful to remember that the heritage of those literary presses affects every small publisher today.

The market has never been particularly friendly to small publishers, but in the 1950's the Beat poets and writers sowed the seeds for a counterculture that produced works mainstream publishers wouldn't touch. By the late 1960's literary publishers began organizing, pooling their resources, and building their own markets.

CCLM and COSMEP were the most visible organizations to come out of the 1960's, but there were many regional publisher organizations as well. Some disappeared within months and some lasted longer, but they all shared the goal of publicizing small press and opening the book store and library markets. They worked to give small presses legitimacy in the eyes of the media, distributors, and booksellers in ways no single publisher could.



There were programs that used arts council grant money to buy magazine subscriptions for small town libraries. COSMEP had a program for publishers to donate books to a prison project. There were programs in which publishers could pool their mailing lists and then each receive a copy of the whole list. They did co-op

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## Why Your Book Didn't get Reviewed in the Washington Post

If you've ever suspected the big review magazines are prejudiced against self-publishers, it turns out you're right.

Last Spring, Dan Poynter, alerted to the situation by John August, wrote a letter to *The Washington Post* concerning their *Book World* supplement's policy against reviewing self-published books. In the letter he listed dozens of examples of famous and successful authors who have published their own work.

Books like *What Color is Your Parachute?*, by Richard Nelson Bolles; *In Search of Excellence*, by Tom Peters; *The Joy of Cooking* by Irma Rombauer; and *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr. are dramatic examples of how far a self-published book can go.

Poynter sent similar letters to other review publications, including *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, and *H.W. Wilson*. *The Washington Post* was the only one to respond. Months later they contacted him to verify the list of self-publishers and asked him to rewrite the letter for The Forum in article form. You can find it in the Post's online archives. Go to <http://www.washingtonpost.com>, and search the archives for Dan Poynter, August 8, 1999. It'll cost you \$1.50 to read the article.

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## Literary Publishing

(continued)

mailings and held co-op events; there were even co-op printers and distributors.

The organizations sponsored readings and book fairs across the country. They got small publishers into the American Bookseller Association and American Library Association conventions. They made it possible for small presses to advertise in *Publishers Weekly* and got *Library Journal* to pay attention to us. They even infiltrated the NEA and local arts councils to fight for small presses to have the same access to grant money as university presses.

In the mid 1970's the growth of small press created a new market for printers – short run printing. It wasn't easy to find printers who would print 500 to 2,000 copies of a book for a reasonable price. For a literary press at the time, 1,000 copies of a book or magazine issue was a large press run. The story from the printers was that doing a short run of a book cost too much in overhead, so they'd give you a bid on a larger run and offer a small discount for the materials.

As small press blossomed, however, the increased demand for short run printing finally resulted in specialized short run printers popping up around the country. Larger printers began taking on smaller projects, in some cases setting up a separate department to handle short run jobs.

This is just my observation, but it seemed like in the early to mid 1980's literary presses began changing. With computerization, selling to book stores got more difficult. The chain stores only ordered what distributors had to offer because it was easier for them to handle billing and inventory that way. And the smaller, local book stores began to either computerize to compete, or disappear.

In the 1970's and earlier, you could take your books or magazines personally to area book stores and ask the owners to take them on consignment. Then a month or so later, you'd go back, see what sold, collect your money, and restock the shelves. There are certainly disadvantages to consignment selling, not the least of which is the time and effort of doing the rounds of as many stores as possible and being your own salesperson, but at least the books got into the stores.

When it got harder to sell literary magazines and books, some publishers began looking for other ways to get money. Unfortunately they decided to cannibalize their writers by setting up awards. The writer would have to pay a reading fee to submit their manuscript.

Awards and reading fees have been around for a long time, and some are very honorable and do help a writer's career. But in the late 1980's and into the 1990's little magazines sprang up that did nothing but sponsor award after award. And others were launched, little more than a few photocopied sheets stabled together, that did nothing but advertise contests.

The most extreme example of an award I saw was one that had five prizes ranging from \$5 to \$50. The reading fee was \$10. This went beyond vanity publishing, where you pay to have your work published. In this case you paid for just the *chance* to have your work published, usually in a magazine or book that was thrown together and distributed only to the contestants.

The reason I've brought all this up is I have noticed over the past couple years or so that literary publishing is coming back. That is, literary publishing at its best. I am seeing more and more honest literary journals starting up, or being revived, and publishers putting out books of poetry and fiction that have something to say.

I think a lot of that has to do with the internet. It has given literary publishers, and the rest of us, a market no one could have foreseen even 10 years ago.

When the world wide web started taking off, it looked like literary publishing on it would consist of electronic magazines. That never really caught on, but now I'm seeing publishers using web sites and e-mail to promote and support their printed magazines. And once again, that crazy spirit that got small press rolling in the 1960's and did so much to blaze trails for all independent publishers ever since is taking the lead in the virtual marketplace.

It is not that other kinds of publishers aren't finding wonderful and creative ways to sell books on the internet. It is more that literary publishers, especially magazine publishers, have a freedom to push the limits since they have nothing to lose. And since they also seldom have money, they have to be more innovative.

To me, the re-emergence of independent literary magazines is a sure sign that small press is headed for another decade of growth and revelation. ●

*A couple other books on the history of small press publishing are The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook and The Art of Literary Publishing, both edited by Bill Henderson and published by Pushcart Press. All the books mentioned are available in the book store on the Laughing Bear web site.*

*The 1973 first edition of The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook got me started in all this. It's a collection of essays by and about self-publishers like Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Anais Nin, and Alan Swallow.*

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## Poynter (continued)

*Book World's* response, printed at the end of the article, is they don't have time to give full or partial readings to self-published books to decide whether they merit a review. They said they don't even do so with bound galleys from "mainstream" publishers.

They "relay on the professional system by which those books come to us: in most cases, having been taken up by an agent, sold to objective acquiring editors, vetted by copy editors, and invested in by publishers, each of whom has made an independent judgment as to the manuscript's quality and likelihood of appealing to a general readership. Having crossed that threshold, such a book arrives with a basic presumption of merit, appeal and adherence to professional standards of research, writing and editing. Relying on that presumption, we can assess the book for its likely appeal to *Washington Post* readers."

In other words, they'll blindly consider anything with a big name and pretty cover.

*Book World* did say in their response that Poynter's article got them thinking about the situation, and they "would be happy to hear other reader's views on this subject". The e-mail address to send your response to is [webnews@washpost.com](mailto:webnews@washpost.com).

The lesson to take away from this is to ask a publication about its policies before sending your books, or at least send a press kit with a stamped reply card so they can request a review copy if they

are interested in reviewing it. ●

*Dan Poynter is author and self-publisher of 78 books from Para Publishing, including The Self-Publishing Manual. His latest book is Successful Nonfiction: Tips & Techniques for Getting Published, which will be reviewed in a future issue.*

## CLMP

The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (formerly known as CCLM, which I believe stood for the Coordinated Committee for Literary Magazines) is the only national organization strictly for literary publishers, and it is oldest national small press organization in the United States (it was founded in 1966).

CLMP (154 Christopher St., Ste. 3C, New York, NY 10014; 212-741-9110; [clmpnyc@aol.com](mailto:clmpnyc@aol.com)) is "dedicated to supporting and promoting literary publishing in the United States".

They help literary presses with funding through grants and information on all aspects of literary publishing, including distribution, marketing, and sales. They also publish an annual directory of literary publishers.

Their monograph series is particularly impressive. The booklets each cover a single subject in-depth, and I've never seen a more thorough or better produced series. A couple of the titles are *Textbook Adoptions: A Promising Market for Literary Presses* and *From Doughnuts to Champagne: The Art of Bookstore Promotions*.

The quarterly newsletter, *CLMPages*, covers news of interest to literary publishers, like how much the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) will be providing in grants to literary organizations, the affect the merger of Barnes & Noble and Ingram will have on literary publishers, and literary events across the country.

CLMP also sponsors workshops and takes part in conferences. They are partnering with the NEA in administering the Literary Journal Institute (LJI), which will sponsor national workshops, one-on-one consulting sessions, and the development of a peer mentoring network for literary magazine publishers. ●

## Why All the Ads on the Web Site?

I have lost several subscribers because they say they can get all they need from my web site. So rather than charge for access to the site and assign subscribers a password, I signed up with some affiliate programs to bring in revenue from the folks who visit the site but don't subscribe.

The most useful of these affiliates, without costing you anything, is About.com. Whenever you click on an About.com banner within the Laughing Bear site, Laughing Bear gets three cents. That doesn't seem like much, but there are usually 6,000 visitors a month to the site, so it can add up.

Lands End is a company I've done business with for years. They offer good quality clothing at decent prices with great service. I've never had problems with them either by phone or online.

Next Card is a Visa card I got for myself and Laura. The interest is low and you can get approved within 30 seconds. I am not in favor of using credit cards as a rule, but online you need one and the interest rates are pretty good.

Coffeecup Software makes the HTML editor I use as well as a very good image mapper, style sheet maker, gif animator, and java applet programs. Coffeecup is a very responsive and friendly company out of Corpus Christi, Texas. They always come up with new features to amaze me.

WebCards are a great promotional tool if you have a web site. They are postcards with your home page one the front and your message if you like on the reverse. I send them to prospects for the newsletter, as renewal notices and for general correspondence.

I will continue to find affiliate programs to support the web site, but only those I feel comfortable with dealing with myself. ●

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## You Want To Be a Poet? By Dan Lukiv

Do you want to be a poet? If you do, I hope you don't mind hard work – writing, re-writing, reading poetry, re-writing, reading about poetry, re-writing, reading what critics say about books of poetry, re-writing, reading newsletters (like the *Laughing Bear Newsletter*), re-writing, taking creative writing courses, re-writing (Any pattern here?).

Hard work implied:

"It's what made tennis great Billie Jean King wear out several pairs of tennis shoes every week when she was young, practicing on the court every day until after dark.

"It's what made basketball immortal Bill Russell – already a star – study moves made by other NBA players, then practice them endlessly until they became his own.

"It's what made Margaret Mitchell go through countless rewrites of *Gone With the Wind* in order to get everything just right.

"Great practitioners in any field make it look easy, so bystanders murmur in awe about talent. What the bystander never sees is the agony of effort, study and practice that made the final performance appear effortless – the fruits of professional attitude [I call this hard work]." (*Writing and Selling your Novel*, Jack M. Bickham, Writer's Digest Books, 1996)

To further quote Bickham, author of *The Apple Dumpling Gang*, and about eighty other novels, "'Talent' is what people say you have after you have worked like hell for years to improve yourself."

In different words: Lift weights – big muscles follow; apply the advice of the previous paragraphs – talent follows.

Again, do you want to be a poet? •

*Dan Lukiv is a poet, writer, and educator in British Columbia.*

## Announcements

• **PublishingOnline.com** (John Moore, assoc. pub.; 206-439-9257; <http://www.publishingonline.com>; [johnm@publishingonline.com](mailto:johnm@publishingonline.com)) is a publisher and re-publisher of electronically delivered books. They are looking for independent publishers interested in capitalizing on their electronic rights by letting PublishingOnline.com digitally publish and distribute their books on the internet.

• **The Marketing Tips Newsletter** (<http://www.newera2000.com>) is a free electronic newsletter that has lots of good tips for getting the most out of your web site and online marketing projects.

• **Poetry Bone** (Howard Austerlitz, ed.; 12 Skylark Lane, Stony Brook, NY 11790; <http://www.geocities.com/poetrybone>; \$4.50/sample, \$8/2 issues, make the check out to "Howard Austerlitz") Issue 3 is just out and features Simon Perchik, Carol Firth, and many more poets. Sample poems from the issue are available at the web site. Uses poetry only, no more than three at a time.

• **Readers Speak Out** (Ron Richardson, ed.; 4003 50<sup>th</sup> Ave. SW, Seattle, WA 98116) is a free two page quarterly newsletter of questions and answers about problems and issues facing teenagers today.

• **Bookmice.com** (<http://www.bookmice.com>) publishes fiction and nonfiction electronic books for women as well as personalized electronic children's books. They are accepting manuscripts.

• **Indie-Press Listserv** (<http://www.eGroups.com>) is a fast-growing new e-mail group for independent presses. A listserv lets you receive e-mail messages from a group of participants and lets you post messages to the group. CLMP is involved in this project. At the web site, the group you want to join is titled "indie-press".

• **HotAuthors.com** (<http://www.hotauthors.com>) is a new web site devoted to fighting illiteracy. It features exclusive preview excerpts of upcoming books by famous authors like Stephen King, Mary Higgins-Clark, and Jackie Collins. Visitors can sneak a peek and give their own gift in return by making a small donation to Literacy partners in exchange for manuscript copy directly from the authors.

• **The National Endowment for the Arts** (Nancy Hanks Center, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20506-0001; 202-682-5428; <http://arts.endow.gov>) is accepting applications for fellowships for creative writers in the areas of prose and poetry. Write or go to the web site for the "FY 2000/2001 Literature Fellowships Guidelines". The deadlines for poets are in mid-March.

• **PrintBid.com** (<http://printbid.com>) is a new web site that helps you find a printer, for free. Enter your requirements and Print-Bid.com will compare your needs with their directory of printers to come up with the best match for your needs and budget. If nothing else, it's a great place to start looking for a printer.

Advertising: Insert ads, in the form of flyers to be inserted in newsletter mailings, are welcome. Send 200 copies of the ad with \$50, and the ad will be mailed with the next issue of the newsletter. Contest and other events or promotions that solicit money in the form of reading or other entry fees will not be accepted.

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