



# LAUGHING BEAR 96 NEWSLETTER

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April 1997; edited by Tom Person; Copyright © 1997 by Laughing Bear Press; ISSN 1056-0327; Estab. 1976  
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<http://members.aol.com/laughingbr/lbp.htm>; \$12/12 issues, \$14/Can., £12/UK & Eire, \$22/other

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## The Surviving Small Press: The Paradox of Older Publishers

As feedback has come in on the Directory of Publisher Organizations project I proposed in issue 94, it has become apparent that publishers who've been in business awhile don't feel publisher organizations have much to offer them. At the same time, they say the directory is a good idea – it'll be helpful to new publishers.

Actually, since the issue on the directory came out the people who've responded have been officers of organizations and publishers who've been in business over 20 years. See "Feedback" for some specific comments.

That leaves the bulk of *Laughing Bear* subscribers, most of whom have been publishing at least five years, apparently not involved with organizations, though many of you found this newsletter by way of COSMEP.

COSMEP was the first and, when it went under, the oldest large scale independent publishers' organization in the United States. It was founded in the late 1960's when small publishing was a much different proposition than today.

It's probably hard to imagine for someone starting out now, but just 10 years ago desktop publishing,

scanners, and laser printing for home computers were out of reach. In 1990, the gigabyte was just a theory.

Twenty years ago there were no PCs. And when COSMEP started up in 1968 there wasn't even commercial computerized typesetting.

To give you an idea of where computers were then, a friend of mine who worked on the Apollo space project says the vast mainframe computer system that sent man to the moon had 64 kilobytes of RAM to work with.

Up until the 1980's, small press was very much a process-oriented endeavor. By that I mean creating the book (designing, typesetting, printing) took so much time and effort that taking a book through the process and learning the skills to do so were the big challenges.

Small publishers started out with a desire to learn and love of the process in common. They also were predominantly literary publishers, and at that time there was considerable subjective censorship practiced by typesetters, printers, distributors, and booksellers.

The need for skills, promotion, and defense of rights made an organization like COSMEP inevitable. But it is also important to remember

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## Feedback

I've received several good suggestions on how the directory should be compiled and organized, and some insight into the nature of publisher organizations today.

Len Fulton of Dustbooks (publisher of the *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*) has offered any help he can give with the directory. He's already run an announcement for the project twice in *Small Press Review*, which has resulted in several valuable leads to organizations.

Fulton was COSMEP's chief founder and served as chairman in 1968, 1969, 1970, and 1973. He dropped out in 1975. "I wasn't even a member again until Richard Morris talked me into it in 1995," Fulton wrote. "Oddly, in its last couple months I became chairman again ('96) to help see it into its grave! I guess it was appropriate."

Fulton currently belongs to PMA, which he joined in 1995 after being elected to the COSMEP board of directors.

John M. Bennett, whose Luna Bisonte Prods publishes chapbooks and the literary magazine *Lost & Found Times*, isn't involved with any publisher groups, but finds that *Taproot Reviews* fulfills

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## **Paradox** *(continued)*

the publishers shared a common interest in the production of books, and there weren't how-to books on the subject or college classes. To pursue that interest, they had to band together.

The situation now is quite different. If you want to publish a book, you can buy any number of guides or take a night school class, typeset and layout the whole project on a PC, and find a short run printer in the phone book.

The driving force behind self-publishing is writing about a subject that moves you or that you know enough about that it can help others. The variety of small press books has become limitless.

The focus is on what to do with the book after it's printed. Promotion and sales are the challenges. And a fast turnaround is the goal.

When virtually all small press books and magazines were literary, there wasn't so much urgency in getting them out as in doing them well. Meaning that a book of poems will be just as fresh in six months or a year, but a restaurant guide may well be obsolete if it takes that long to get on shelves.

The role of the publishers' organization has changed just as radically as the needs of members. The common interests small publishers once shared, literature and the craft of bookmaking, no longer apply to the extent they once did.

Self-publishers often do their one book, get it out of their system, and lose interest. The majority of organizations have accepted that or can't come up with a way

to do anything about it, so everything's geared to the newcomer. They think the only way to keep going is through perpetual recruitment.

They are forgetting, however, a prime axiom of staying in business: In everything from retail selling to magazine subscriptions, return customers sustain the organization and help it to grow.

Attracting new members to an organization is expensive. It is by far preferable to have a majority of long time members to bring in newcomers and provide guidance, experience, and expertise to the membership mix.

I don't see that happening very often. More likely, the organization will become so recruitment-oriented that they comfortably offer the same programs and speakers year after year as new, thus driving off members who've been through it all before and gotten bored.

One person described the situation well: "Once a member gleans all the info needed to 'get started', he or she after that can only be a resource".

While few people who've been doing publishing for awhile don't mind helping someone new, there has to be something in it for the experienced member to keep them in the organization.

Which brings us back to publishers who've been in the business for several years. The consensus I've heard from them is that they feel left out.

All except one do not belong to any formal organization, but they are all very supportive of the directory.

They see the value in belonging, but there's no group they've found that meets their needs.

Small press, while not always a lucrative business, is a demanding one. Once a press gets off the ground, there's too much to do to invest time guiding others while getting nothing in return.

I belonged to several organizations in the late 70's, but let them lapse as I found they no longer had anything to offer worth paying the dues.

That is possibly more perception than fact, but it is a perception held by a lot of experienced small publishers. And because they drop out when an organization fails to give them what they need, a breed of self-proclaimed experts has evolved to fill the gap.

How-to-publish authors, who seldom have any experience other than self-publishing their book on how to self-publish, write articles for organization newsletters, lead seminars, and occasionally try to bully their way into control of an organization.

Bringing in a speaker is fine, but it can be overdone. Members need to have a voice, too. But it is easier to bring someone in who has proven they can draw a crowd and be entertaining.

Anyway, one purpose of the directory is to prove the perception wrong that organizations have nothing to offer seasoned publishers.

I know that there are useful and thriving organizations out there for novices and longstanding publishers alike. It's just a matter of finding them.

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## Announcements

### • Buy Books By E-Mail.

Author-Publisher Network members' books may be ordered by e-mail. Contact Trevor Lockwood at [trhl@compuserve.com](mailto:trhl@compuserve.com) for details.

### • 2nd Mile Productions

(Darla Sims, PO Box 12280, Mill Creek, WA 98082-0280; 206-488-3698; [DarlaS@msn.com](mailto:DarlaS@msn.com)) offers public relations services for publishers.

### • Mid-America

#### Publishers Association

(address in the "Feedback" article; 888-308-MAPA; [MidAmPA@aol.com](mailto:MidAmPA@aol.com)) is calling for entries for the MAPA 1997 Book Awards. Books must have been published between July 1, 1996 and June 30, 1997.

### • The Amsterdam News

(Grace and Michael Hogan, eds.; Kanaalstraat 66-huis, 1054 XK Amsterdam, The Netherlands \$15US/6 issues) is a newsletter written by expatriate Americans covering Amsterdam's coffeehouse culture.

• **Cypress House** (155 Cypress St., Fort Bragg, CA 95437; 800-773-7782) offers comprehensive services to small publishers, from evaluation to marketing.

• **The Bloomsbury Review** (Tom Auer, ed.; 1762 Emerson St., Denver, CO 80218-1012; \$16/6 issues) remains one of the most widely read and literate review magazines available.

• **Talus and Scree** (Carla Perry, ed.; PO Box 851, Waldport, OR 97394; [talus@webjacks.com](mailto:talus@webjacks.com); \$14/2 issues) is seeking poetry, artwork, etc. Deadline: Aug. 15, 1997. Also visit *The Far Cry*, an internet-only weekly at <http://www.teleport.com/~cbs2/farcry>.

## Feedback (continued)

many of the functions of an organization for its reviewers and those reviewed.

I've read *Taproot Reviews* over the years and agree that it acts as kind of a "virtual" group to its loyal following. Contact Luigi-Bob Drake, *Taproot Reviews*, PO Box 585, Lakewood, OH 44107.

John Dawes and Trevor Lockwood of Author-Publisher Network (contact editor and secretary Daphne Macara, 6 Kevinbrook, West Molesey, Surrey KT8 1RZ England) have offered to help contacting British groups.

Dawes writes, "My main suggestion in response to your call for ideas, centres around making material more pertinent to specific nationalities, areas, groups, etc. For example, I think it would be better to present resource information by country or language, if you intend to include all languages. And, whilst it is relatively easy to 'learn and apply' production techniques, I find that many more individuals are troubled by the 'discover and action' needs of marketing.

"With this in mind I think that pre-production/production processes and contacts are straight-forward, while post-production skills are far more torturous. This suggests adding emphasis upon making contact with other rights, distribution, promotion and selling organizations.

"P.S. Be very aware of the nefarious vanity publishers."

Chris Roerden, president of Mid-America Publishers Association (MAPA, PO Box 376, Ada, MI 49301) is also concerned about charlatans:

"I'm interested in how to distinguish the business that's pushing its own products/seminars, etc. and created a legal nonprofit 'membership' association to attract buyers, from the nonprofit that relies primarily on volunteers, and whose income from events and sales of publications goes back into member benefits. There are days I'm sorely tempted to phone some of these fronts, pretend I'm a novice self-publisher, and see if I'm steered to the 'consulting' practice vs. their organization's membership services."

Roerden took me to task on one of my proposed criteria for distinguishing a legitimate group:

"Conflict of interest between advertising and editorial: I think this is an issue for literary publications but not newsletters put out by associations of publishers, which need the advertising to keep dues down. One way to weed out exploiters, perhaps, is to ask those groups that do accept advertising to spell out their policies."

Len Fulton, for that matter, offered, "If you asked me for advice I would say just put the directory together to disseminate the information and don't dig too far into motives and efficacy!"

I take that to mean it would taking on too much to try to tell the bad guys from the good. And it would a mistake to think I could remain detached enough to do so fairly. I agree.

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