



LAUGHING BEAR 98 NEWSLETTER

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The Surviving Small Press: A New Paradigm

Soon after I joined the PMA E-Mail list (see page 3), Jerrold Jenkins of *Small Press* posted a top ten list of reasons why he thinks small publishers fail (see "Jenkins' Top Ten").

Jenkins is publisher of a high profile magazine for small publishers. I was astounded that he would come back from the American Booksellers Association/ BookExpo America convention to announce over the internet that his takeaway from the event was a list of his readers' incompetencies.

The points he raises are valid if we think of small press as a conventional business, as apparently he does.

Many of his points have been discussed here as ways to be more business-like, but small publishing does not lend itself to absolute adherence to conventional business strategy.

Big publishing doesn't either, for that matter, as the corporations who've bought publishing companies have discovered.

The response I posted to the group was:

"What you say may all be true, but not everyone is in this for the money, or to make a living, or to become

famous. Sometimes it is just self-expression, or even, God forbid, for fun.

"Small press can't be held up to the corporate publishing model any more than a mom and pop corner grocery can be held up to a Safeway Superstore.

"Lighten up. We may be dumb, but we're doing the best we can."

After that, there was a barrage of postings. Some agreed with Jenkins, but most took offense to his list.

The following was posted by Suzanne D'Avalon of *Placidly Amid the Noise* (see page 3, Announcements):

"Ah, a great lead-in for the rantette that's been brewing in my brain since returning from PMA-U." [PMA University is a series of workshops offered at the ABA/BEA by PMA.]

"I thoroughly enjoyed PMA-U, and recommend everyone go at least once, if only for the networking. I did pick up useful information from various sessions, but found a theme running throughout – a theme of 'here's how it's done, here's how to play the game', the 'it' and the 'game' being how big publishers do business, with big distributors and big chain stores.

"My rantette? I don't *want* to be big. I don't *want*

(Continued on page 2.)

Jenkins' Top Ten

In a posting June 6, 1997 to the PMA Email Mailing List, Jerrold Jenkins of Small Press wrote:

I wanted to share some thought I had after stalking BookExpo for four days. It's my top 10 list of why small publishers fail.

1. They put all their eggs into the trade sales basket, and ignore the opportunities of other markets (corporate, internet, etc.).
2. They publish too many books. Most publishers are too eager to publish more titles and forget about marketing the ones they already have.
3. They're lazy. For example, they don't bother to establish personal relationships with the people that matter most – magazine editors, newspaper editors, etc.
4. They're undercapitalized and run out of money.
5. The book is designed poorly.
6. They fail to explore new markets.
7. They don't think networking is important. My own belief is a trip to BookExpo pays for the trip expenses ten-fold.
8. They fail to educate themselves.
9. They don't stay on top of changes in the industry.
10. They think of publishing as a hobby and not a real job.

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Paradigm *(continued)*

to learn how to be like a New York publisher. I do want to make money selling books, I do want to publish books as part of my business.

"The facts are I am under-capitalized, my book cover won't win any awards, I don't have enough time to do everything that *should* be done in the proper order, I balance books and publishing with other facets of my life (and I refuse to label that lazy!), and I don't pursue working relationships with people unless I feel a mutual respect, no matter who they work for.

"I did (and do) my homework the best I can, having read Poynter, Rosses, Kremer, (and Jenkins' BEA comments). In the same manner as most PMA-U sessions, they are teaching me how to play the existing game of publishing.

"I choose not to play, accepting all the known consequences and the unknown possibilities. I'm still looking for a new paradigm of publishing, one that acknowledges the 'professional independent publisher', the 'part-time publisher', that approximately 8,000 folks/companies who apply for first-time ISBN numbers each year."

It was that message, even more than Jenkins' tirade, that made me think.

A paradigm is a business buzzword for a model. It encompasses the inherent beliefs and assumptions based on what has come before, the folklore and the culture of the business.

As an industry, publishing has a tradition of standing apart from sensible business. It belongs more with the arts

than with manufacturing. There's too much risk involved to run a publishing company entirely by business world rules.

A publisher can write a business plan and prepare a mission statement, but no one can predict whether a book will sell or not until it's in front of the public.

Small press started because there was a new breed of poets and writers in the 1950's and 60's who had something to say that wasn't supported by the existing publishing houses.

Poets began publishing their own and other writer's books. They found they enjoyed the creative freedom of publishing whatever they wanted whenever they wanted.

People still get into small press because they have something to say. They pay for the privilege themselves and take the risk, and hope it pays off.

From Jenkins' list, I get the impression he thinks publishing is a full time job for small press people. That would be nice, but for most small publishers this is, as D'Avalon said, a part time job.

I don't know many people who are able to publish without working 40 hours a week at a regular job. The fact is, the only people who can afford to publish full time are those that publish how-to and resources for other publishers.

My paradigm for small press can be put into a Top Ten list like this:

1. Small publishers have something to offer that can't be found in the mainstream of publishing.

2. We have a history of writers including Virginia Woolf, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman who published their own work. We have the small press legacy of the Beat poets and the underground publishers of the 1960's, which led to COSMEP. And the desktop publishing revolution opened small press up to anyone.

3. Small press has grown because publishers go out of their way to educate themselves in all areas from design to distribution.

4. Small press is not a full time job, it's a part time career.

5. Small press is a community of dissimilar people with one interest in common. Publishing. They gather at book fairs, through organizations, always eager to share information.

6. Small publishers are resourceful. They learn to take what they've got and find creative ways to compensate for whatever they lack.

7. Small publishers are natural entrepreneurs. If the time ever came that the press made enough money to live on and they could hire people to operate it, they'd get bored and do something else on the side. Probably start up another press.

8. Small publishers are anything but lazy. They have a drive to keep busy, keep learning, meet deadlines, and create. They have a purpose.

9. Small press is not competitive. Everyone has something unique to say, and their own way to say it.

10. Small press is a way of life, not the means of making a living. Even if you leave and never publish again, it'll always be a part of you.

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PMA E-Mail Mailing List

I mentioned this briefly in the last newsletter. This is an internet service through which you can receive messages posted to the service from hundred of publishers. You can respond to messages or send your own.

Any publisher, member of PMA or not, can take part in the mailing list. Go to www.pma-online.org to find out how.

There are about 900 publishers taking part in the list. Messages range from requests for information on ISBN's and foreign rights sales to personal quarrels and gripes about how PMA is run.

To PMA's credit, the board doesn't waste a lot of time being defensive about the challenges. They keep their input to the list pretty much limited to announcements of events and programs, and offering advice on publishing questions.

If you have e-mail capability, you should give the list a try. I think you'll find it a valuable resource.

Once you join you can expect to receive about 50 messages a day. PMA cautions that it could be up to 100.

After a few days, you'll be able to reduce your reading by deleting many of the messages unread. You'll learn to recognize who has something to say and who just has too much time on their hands.

If the volume of e-mail gets overwhelming, there is also a digest version.

This list is the most valuable tool I've found for keeping up with current concerns in small press. I think you'll enjoy it, too.

Announcements

- **Placidly Amid the Noise** (Suzanne D'Avalon, ed.; PO Box 16914, Colorado Springs, CO 80935) publishes how-to, health, and cookbooks. Also available right now is a free leaflet "10 Commandments for Small Publishers".

- **Gregory Kolovakos Seed Grant Recipients** (Council for Literary Magazines and Presses, 154 Christopher St., Ste. 3C, New York NY 10014-2839) for 1997 have been announced by CLMP. The 3 literary book publishers who received \$2000 grants this year are Paris Press, Thorn-gate Road, and RedBone Press. Next year's grants will be to literary magazines. Write for details.

- **The New York Review of Books** has a web site at www.nybooks.com. Includes reviews, essays, classifieds, and *Review* history.

- **ASA Children's Book Awards** (African Studies Association, Emory University, Credit Union Bldg., Atlanta, GA 30322; africa@emory.edu) is inviting submissions for the 1998 awards. Write for eligibility requirements. Books must be at least 50% about Africa.

- **Aardvark Literary Agents** (Charles Neighbors, pres.; 3908 Harlem Rd., Ste. 104, Amherst, NY 14226) is looking for new fiction writers. Send complete manuscript with SASE.

- **Roosevelt Paper Company** (800-523-3470; www.rooseveltpaper.com) has released their annual July to July wall calendar. Call for a copy. The photos are great.

- **Small Publishers Co-Op** (2579 Clematis St., Sarasota, FL 34239) offers printing at very low, co-op prices.

- **Blue Mesa Review** (David Johnson, ed.; Dept. of Eng., Univ. of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131) invites submissions of all kinds for its Spring/Summer 1998 issue. The theme is Love & Sex in the 21st Century. Deadline: Sept. 30, 1997. Send SASE for response; ms. will not be returned.

- **The Kidney Stones Network Newsletter** (Gail Golomb, pub.; Four Geez Press, 1911 Douglas Blvd., Ste 85-131, Roseville, CA 95661). Is a new newsletter about guess what.

- **International Titles** (Loris Essary, dir.; 931 E. 56th St., Austin, TX 78751-1724; leint@eden.com) is getting ready for the Frankfurt Book Fair, October 15-20, 1997. Their exhibiting service has been very successful at selling foreign rights for their clients as well as displaying all titles face out and offering extensive pre-fair publicity.

- **Urbanus Magazine** (Peter Drizhal, ed.; PO Box 192921, San Francisco, CA 94119; \$15.95/3 issues) is currently in an "open window" period for submissions of poetry, fiction, essays, and art. Deadline: October 31, 1997.

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