

Behind the Curtains of Poetry Press

Publishing poetry has mostly been an unprofitable business. Today, there are more possibilities than ever to reach an audience, even though your subject or genre may be narrow. Because of modern IT-technology, cost-effective ways to print your work have been developed.

Characterized by size and structure, there are basically four ways to publish poetry in the United States. You could send your book to a trade publisher, to one of the university presses, or you could contact an independent. The fourth alternative, which is called self-publishing, has a tradition going back to the modernistic poetry by Walt Whitman and some of his contemporary colleagues in the 19th century.

The traditional process of publishing a book follows a common pattern: You send the publisher a manuscript, you negotiate a contract and the text undergoes a procedure that brings it to its readers. As a writer, you have to understand that publishing is not just printing. It requires capital to produce, promote and distribute a literary work. Even though some large publishers consider poetry as an investment in their reputations, they mostly won't take the risk of losing money on a book.

Publishing includes editorial services, promotion, advertising, marketing, sales, warehousing and distribution. The publisher has to serve retailers with information and advertisements. Without a distributor, the publisher can't get a book to the marketplace. Large editions or low sales volume generate high costs in warehousing. Besides, effective marketing of poetry often relies on active participation of the poet himself. One crucial factor in the process to publication is the poet's visibility. Since trade publishers print in large volume, only poets who are already known to a sizable audience or major critics through literary magazines, independent presses, self-publishing, readings, or performances should consider sending their manuscripts to one of these presses. The most prestigious trade publishers of poetry are W. W. Norton, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Knopf Publishing Group, Penguin Putnam, and Random House.

Remarkable about W. W. Norton & Company is that it's the oldest and largest publishing house owned wholly by its employees. One of its main areas is poetry. That genre has also for a long time been important for Farrar, Straus and Giroux, which not only has published Nobel Prize winners, such as T. S. Eliot and Nelly Sachs, but also many reputable names in modern verse, like Elizabeth Bishop, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, John Ashbery, Thom Gunn, and Les Murray.

Another large group of publishers is the university press. Because of the financial backbone from institutions, these presses don't have the same need of high revenues as trade publishers. Therefore, they have been able to develop highly regarded poetry series. University presses also have a reputation for keeping books available during a long time. Examples of presses that regularly publish poetry are Princeton University Press, LSU Press, University of Pittsburgh Press, University Press of New England, and University of Chicago Press.

The third category is the independent publisher, a privately held company without the shareholders' demand for profit. Small editions make it possible to specialize in a few categories. The greatest advantage of being an independent is that you can print books of your own taste. Well known are New Directions, Graywolf Press, BOA Editions, City Lights

Booksellers and Publishers, Copper Canyon Press, and Black Sparrow Press.

Situated in California, Black Sparrow Press was one of the first publishers of Charles Bukowski in the mid-60s. The books became an instant success and the firm was rewarded with fame and revenue. John Martin, the owner of Black Sparrow Press, was the man who offered Bukowski a salary for life if he started to write full time. "I knew from day one that Bukowski would become one of the best and most important writers of his day," Martin says in an interview done by Carl Williams of JustBooks. "So did he. We were both right." Like many other independent book companies Black Sparrow relies heavily on taste, when it chooses experimental and avant-garde poetry for publishing.

Another independent publisher is Alice James Books, which has been publishing poetry since 1973. Most remarkable about this company is that it is run collectively and that it focuses on female and New England poets. The company was named for Alice James, sister of William and Henry. Though she was a talented writer, her poetry did not appear in print until after her death.

In a similar way, many small companies have found their own unique niches. There are publishers specializing in avant-garde poetry, obscure poetry, innovative contemporary poetry, free poetry pamphlets, poetry with history themes, visual and concrete poetry, inspirational and spiritual poetry, young adult poetry, emerging poets, ethnic, gay and feminist poetry, Washington state poetry, Great Lakes Regional poetry, Latin American poetry, Irish poetry, and South African poets.

In addition, CD-Roms and the Internet have become important vehicles for poetry. There are small publishers that are positioning themselves by means of new technology, for example, e-publications or audio books. Posttypographika is such an independent publisher that has specialized on experimental poetry, including hyperpoetry (a special kind of online poems), digital, visual, performing, and sound poetry.

In self-publishing, the author has all personal control over both the process and the product by doing most of the work himself. Some small independent presses started this way. What many self-published writers find most difficult and time-consuming in this procedure is how to get the books out to store shelves. Partly for that reason, there are lots of web sites that help writers with production and distribution, for example, via e-publishing or print on demand.

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