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# CTRLP: Smallpress Poetry Publication in the Digital Age

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## Ctrl P: SMALL PRESS POETRY PUBLICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Dr. Joan Digby, LIU Post

Over the past few decades the publishing industry has undergone a sea change. Many of the most well-known publishing houses have been purchased and consolidated into giant corporations making author access to editors remote and difficult. Most firms will now only accept manuscripts that come through agents. This creates a further barrier, particularly for authors who cannot afford to go this route. Among these are certainly poets who have always struggled to find an audience and who are the least likely authors to support themselves by their creative endeavors.

That poets live on the fringe is not simply a contemporary issue or a western issue. Poetry has in many cultures been coterie writing—often among the aristocracy who clearly had no need to sell their work. Early Japanese poets calligraphed their work onto collaged papers that passed around court circles. Classical Chinese poets (who had to pass examinations in writing various forms of poetry as part of their training for the emperor's court “Oy vey” as we say in the old country) sometimes engaged in poetic correspondence with intimate friends (such as Wang Wei and Pei Di). Some poets wrote their poems onto the surface of paintings to become a courtly dialogue of the arts. In Renaissance Europe poetry manuscripts also were passed around in intimate circles. By this time, poets also had their work published in books, though they were supported by patrons to whom these books were most frequently dedicated.

The first poet in England to earn his living by publishing poetry was Alexander Pope, who came up with a subscription scheme to fund his translations of Homer. A scathing satirist, Pope caricatured the lesser poets of his age as “dunces” in his epic poem aptly titled *The Dunciad*. He had no use for the “poetasters” who begged for his help and who swarmed around Drury Lane eeking out a pittance doing hack work while searching for a publisher. In eighteenth century London finding a publisher required money, since the printer was also the bookseller, and authors had to pay in order to get their work published. There was no shortage of vain poets in this age of vanity presses. Both the subscription and the self-publishing model have resurfaced big-time in contemporary publishing as I have discovered in doing this research.

In the modern world finding a publisher has continued to be the poet’s epic quest. Even T. S. Eliot dragged *The Wastland* (1922) around until Leonard and Virginia Woolf accepted it for The Hogarth Press, their private press founded in 1917. Throughout the twentieth century, small private presses became essential to the publication of poetry. While they are still essential, profound changes are reshaping every aspect of poetry and fiction publication.

For my sabbatical project, I have undertaken research on the major shift in small press publishing from hand-set letter press first to offset and more recently to digital printing and books made available electronically on line. This includes a major reversal of attitudes on the issue of self-publishing, once associated with vanity and now an accepted strategy for reaching the public without the intervention of controlling

publishing houses. The last few years have seen a most profound change in book production and distribution. My research concentrates on the publication of poetry and short fiction, which is the market that most interests and concerns me.

I have been involved in small and private presses for several decades. Thirty years ago, I published a book entitled, *Two Private Presses* (1988) that explored the work of two letterpress publishers on Long Island: Morris Gelfand's *Stone House Press* and Henry Schneewind's *Four Winds Press*. Both publishers had letter presses in their homes, and both were members of important New York institutions, Typophiles and The Grolier Club that supported and collected fine press printing.

Both I and my husband, John Digby, a British poet and collagist, worked directly with a number of small presses. The Stone House Press published a book of his work entitled *Incantations* (1980), which we supervised in the making. Walter Hammady's famous Perishable Press, published two books, Janet Rodney and Nathaniel Tarn's poetry collection, *The Forest* (1978), and Toby Olson's *BirdSongs* (1980), for which John did the collage illustrations. The Red Osier Press published my book of prose poems, *A Sound of Feathers* (1982), with John's collages. For that edition we also made rag paper covers at Dieu Donn e, an important hand-made paper factory in New York. These experiences are all in the background of my research because working with small presses exposed us not only to the aesthetics of letter press printing but also to the limitations (for example the difficulty of printing sharp lines on heavily textured papers or using colored inks) inherent in these productions.

Letter press printers are extremely interested in the details of typography, layout, paper and ink. The books, produced with great care and passion, are objects interesting in themselves both visually and texturally—as well as for the content. They are expensive and time-consuming to produce. While Hammady had some support from The National Endowment for the Humanities, Gelfand supported the entire cost of his production. It is understandable that such books could only be produced as expensive limited editions. Many small presses were and still are able to produce upwards of one hundred copies; others with elaborate covers, tipped in artwork, hand-stitched bindings may only produce a much smaller edition. For the sale of these books the small presses generally had lists of collectors, which meant that the books were not in wide circulation in the marketplace, although Small Press Distribution (SPD) founded in 1969 became a critical agent as I shall later discuss, along with new marketing strategies including direct advertising in social media by authors and independent presses with online shopping.

Time, cost of production, and market price are key issues for small presses. They have certainly influenced changes in production that have become pronounced in recent years. Over decades there have been significant shifts, first from the reduction in number of letter press productions to an increase in “offset” printing. An excellent example of the persistence of letter press poetry is the Adastra Press founded by Gary Metras in Easthampton, MA in 1979. Between that date and now he has produced approximately one hundred titles of hand-stitched letter press books in print runs between 100 and 400. This is an ambitious number (which he planned to reduce), and his editions generally sell

out because of his quality of production and choice of poets. A poet before he became a publisher, his work is meticulous and sharply focused on the text, using only black and white line drawings when he chooses to use illustrations. Despite the fact that it is difficult now to cover printing costs, he takes a strong stand against charging reading fees, a common practice among off-set and digital small presses that hold contests and charge reading fees in order to support book production. “If a publisher charges a writer a reading fee, contest or not, this returns the industry to the early book store/printer model where the business owner makes out doubly and the writer pays out doubly. A horrendously unfair state of affairs. Any publisher, of whatever level, for whatever reason, who charges the writer any sort of fee for the privilege of rejecting his writing is unethical. And let’s face it, the rejected writers are the super-majority. It is they who are paying for whatever publication is awarded” Metras is outspoken on his commitment to letter press poetry and therefore a perfect yardstick of objection to many of the changes in small press production that I shall discuss in this report. He is classically old garde: “Since I use technologies of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, twenty-first century electronic tech seems out of place for what and how I do Aداstra Press. Nor do I have a web site for my own writing and publishing. I do release new book announcements through e-mail, in addition to snail mail. Besides, Aداstra titles are all on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and my distributor, Small Press Distribution, has an active and influential web presence.” <https://entropymag.org/adastrapress>

The persistence of SPD in spite of many small press publishers who do have their own websites, with links to social media and shopping carts that makes direct purchase

possible is important to a full understanding of the present state of small presses. As Metras expressed it quite cynically in the same article above, “the model we now have; it is not based on literature per se but on sales; it is no longer the cream rising to the top because there is no whole milk; it is all skim milk.” With the proliferation of small presses manufacturing books by offset or digital printing, the sales problem is finding a market since the readership for poetry is probably smaller than the number of writers trying to be poets! Teach poetry in any high school or college English class and you will find a classroom of terrified students who say they don’t know how to read that “stuff” because it is full of symbols that only English teachers understand. I have fought that battle for 48 years, so I can understand how difficult it must be for shopping carts at small press websites to get filled.

Small Pres Distributors has a long history of connecting people who do want to read poetry, and other genres published by independent presses, with books they might enjoy reading. Founded in 1969 by a San Francisco area independent publisher, Peter Howard, it is the only distributor in the United States “dedicated exclusively to independent publishers of literature.” Although it is a non-profit distributor (strange in itself) sales in 2016 topped two million dollars, representing the sale of 200,000 books, 60% of which were poetry. “In 2016-2017, SPD’s customer base was comprised of 28% online booksellers, 26% wholesalers and jobbers, 17% independent bookstores, 9% university and college bookstores, 7% direct to individuals, 6% direct to libraries, 3% to chain stores, and 4% other (mostly foreign sales).”

<https://www.spdbooks.org/Pages/Item/212/About-Factsheet.aspx>

These figures strongly suggest that however pro-active and tech savvy small presses may be, it is handy to have a book distributor with experience and contacts in the marketplace.

While Adastra Press, well-served by SPD holds fast to letter press production, other presses have modified and expanded their modes of book manufacturing. CHAX Press in Victoria, TX, founded in 1984 is a good example of a small press that has moved largely to off-set but also offers “hand printed limited editions that expand the art of the book.” Most recently the great shift has been to “digital,” “e-book” publications focused on electronic devices and “print on demand.” To borrow an old phrase, *power to the people* has come to publishing, although Amazon still has a “stranglehold in e-books” (Springer 26). Nevertheless, the number of authors getting their work out there is constantly growing, as is the number of indie presses offering diverse models of publishing.

Some of these changes are visibly apparent in the annual Poets House (New York) Showcase Exhibition. Although the event has taken place for twenty-five years, the first online catalog was only produced in 2013. This was a 95 page book listing all of the publishers and their entries into the show. In 2015 the catalog had grown to 105 pages, and by 2017 to 113 pages. Most noticeable is that letter press publishers declined in number over those five years, while more submissions from small presses—even such presses as Ugly Duckling Presse, known for their hand-stitched bindings—were perfect bound paperback books with commercial glossy covers. Many of the letter press and



hand bound books came from Canada (among the most creative Jack Pine Press of Saskatoon,) and from states in the US associated with crafts, such as Massachusetts, Oregon, Washington, New Mexico, and California (I'm certainly leaving some out unintentionally).

The range of publishers represented by this exhibition is important to understanding contemporary trends. University presses as well as the most important commercial publishers associated with literature: City Lights, Farrar Straus Giroux, Penguin (Knopf), Simon & Schuster/Scribners, and W. W. Norton. All are arranged alphabetically. A booklet of poetry produced by a community organization or a middle school might be side by side with a million dollar business, or, on the other hand, a self-published author with a single chapbook. An overview moves the visitor to obvious conclusions: that inclusion in the exhibition is itself useful in marketing, and that independent publishing is running neck and neck with commercial enterprises. One might call this a "free range" display that is democratic by its nature in leveling the playing field and giving exhibition space to all submitted work, which become contributions to the Poets House vast library.

While all of these entries are quite literally "on the shelf" for this exhibition, many of the works live in alternative forms: as YouTube or publishers' video readings, as digital downloads, or print-on-demand.

In 2006, Motoku Rich, published a startling article in the *New York Times*, entitled “The New Digital Publishing is Scrambling the Old Rules.” It cites a number of academic works showing how trends are “liberating books from their physical contexts,” drawing comparisons with films and music available by downloads at a simple click. While fretting authors at this juncture rightfully worried about “how authors will be paid,” (how much can they possibly be paid for a 99 cent download on Amazon?) in the seven years following this article both authors and small presses have evolved websites, social media marketing and technologies to solve the problem to their benefit.

As a result the relationship between author and publisher has also become somewhat tenuous. “The Author Revolt,” is the title of a February 4, 2014 article in *Publishers Weekly* by Mark Coker. He is the founder and CEO of Smashworks, a distribution company for authors and publishers. His article argues a philosophy that he has made his praxis, that because authors no longer need publishers, the best solution for publishers is to reinvent themselves as “service providers” to authors. This is an evolution in progress, as we shall see from the services listed by small press publishers and self-publishing businesses that do everything from cover and layout to marketing via Amazon. Not to be blindsided, Amazon also has a self-publishing business—Createspace.com—that rivals the others in the marketplace.

Many small presses have evolved a diverse menu of services they offer their authors, would-be authors, and readers. Some of these, such as contests and reading series, help maintain their viability. Archipelago Books (Brooklyn, New York) for

example publishes sophisticated promotional material about its authors to a vast email network that also enables them to solicit contributions. It is, like many of the other small presses, a non-profit organization 501 (c) (3) able to do fundraising to supports its cultural activities. It has a board of directors, an advisory board, a foundation and partnerships with others foundations, an online shop, subscriptions, readings and community events. Its operating expenses are well-covered by its support network.

WordTech Communications LLC, publishers of 50 titles a year, focuses most specifically on its business paradigm: “We are unique among poetry publishers for the emphasis we place on bringing poetry to a buying audience—in short, for the emphasis we place on selling books.” Its unique criteria for poets is their active engagement in marketing and promoting their books at readings and other public events. Savvy poets have already undertaken many steps in that direction and are comfortable with this work. In order to be taken, an author must pre-order 125 copies of the book and guarantee sales of at least 12 copies per year. <https://Wordtechcommunications.com>

Other business-model presses use the methods abhorred by Metras: reading fees, contests with money prizes and publication of winning authors to draw in money. Writers are often willing to pay a small fee to have their work reviewed by well-known judges, particularly if they have the chance to be published or make money on the gamble. Omnidawn Publishing holds contests in several categories, broadside, poetry book, and chapbook, with prizes between \$1,000 and \$3,000. Some of the enticing perks include 100 free copies, color cover and advertising. Their submission guidelines are extensive,

but they boil down to format, easy on-line submission, fees, and the option for credit card payment via PayPal!

Publishing formats have become more diverse and technological. Mike Young's Magic Helicopter Press of Santa Fe, with a home page on Facebook) is a most suitable name for an operation that spins its blades into this new space: "We publish across platforms, mediums, and 'the universe,'" Our paper books are collectible items (sold through SPD, my note) . . . . Our e-books are experiences aware of their digital space. We also publish experimental multimedia projects: poetry videos and poetry video games. But we call them all books. We are literature with feet—for open mics and reading tours—and fingers—for online workshops and collective projects. But we call it all live. We are literature with a *passiflora caerulea* for a rotor. We land on your head."

[https://www.pw.org/small\\_presses/magic\\_helicopter\\_press](https://www.pw.org/small_presses/magic_helicopter_press)

Young's flight pattern is hardly typical of most small presses although there is clear acknowledgement of changes in the publication environment. Among recognizably the top five indie presses in the United States is the Coffee House Press, which was founded in Iowa in 1972 by Allan Kornblum as a letter press operation and, in their own words on the website, "has grown into an internationally renowned nonprofit publisher of literary fiction, essay, poetry, and other work that doesn't fit neatly into genre categories. Through our Books in Action program and publications, we've become interdisciplinary collaborators and incubators for new work and audience experiences. Our vision for the future is one in which a publisher is a catalyst and connector." Even for this "traditional"

indie press, the language of the website links the press to the current vogue of “entrepreneurship,” the buzz word of contemporary marketing. Experienced publishers supported for many years by the National Endowment for the Arts, they have a blog, support events to promote their authors around the country, encourage donations by “readers like you” (my phrase) and have continued to produce first rate books as publishers who fully understand their role as service providers for their authors. Any poet alive would be thrilled to have a manuscript accepted by this press embracing the new vision of publishing.

Publication by subscription is as old as Alexander Pope, as I indicated earlier. The digital age model offers no leather bindings (although Main Street Rag has their own bindery for custom editions) but takes its cue from listener supported radio and viewer supported public television. Octopus Books, founded in Portland, OR in 2006 by Zachary Schomburg, editor and publisher, is a small outfit publishing four books a year as well as chapbooks and ephemera. It invites membership in familiar media language:

“Octopus Books is an independent press that relies solely on the support of its readers. The best way to support us and to keep up with our latest releases is to become a member. We can’t do this without you. It is your generosity that makes it possible for us to continue discovering and publishing the books of our favorite contemporary poets.

**MEMBERSHIP. \$15/month.**

As a member of Octopus Books, you'll receive our newest title four times each year along with some ephemera, including letter-pressed broadsides, limited edition chapbooks, a newsletter, and anything else we can come up with that you might like.”

The casual, youthful tone of the press, like many others, points to another characteristic of new wave small press publishing. Many of the editors, designers, and media experts cut their teeth on college literary magazines. Anhinga Press was founded in 1972 as an extension of the Apalachee Poetry Center and is still very much focused on working with local colleges and schools, “making our books available as textbooks for students and networking with other arts organizations as good citizens of the arts community . . . .” <http://www.anhinga.com.org/about/>

Among the long-established small presses, college magazine work often triggered the dream job of becoming a publisher. The recent difference is that the editors and staff now come not only from literary backgrounds but from digital art and design with considerable computer and marketing expertise. That is why Octopus Books founding editor, Mathias Svalina, can be described on the website as currently off “biking from town to town.” The author of *I Am A Very Productive Entrepreneur* explains everything. He undoubtedly rides with a laptop and is well able to work from any watering hole.

The tone and slant of most small presses are made transparent on their home pages or mission statements. A great number specialize in particular genres: haiku, prose poems, poems with specific line limits. To site some examples, Earl of Plaid is a digital publisher exclusively devoted to novellas. Editorial Trance is a digital publishing platform for Latino authors in bilingual editions. Possibly the most unique example of specialization by format is the Origami Poems Project, which produces: “collections presented as an ‘origami’ microchip’ that can downloaded from the website”:

<http://www.origamipoems.com>

Many other presses seek work from authors of particular backgrounds: LGBTQ, women, people of color, people with disabilities, emerging poets, people of specific religious affiliations, and finally authors who write about particular subject matter: environmental issues, medieval and gothic, science fiction, fantasy, Surrealism, global political and social issues, to name some of the themes that appear most frequently in mission statements on websites. Increasingly, creative non-fiction and memoirs are emerging as genres sought by small presses, such as Antrim House and Magic Helicopter Press, as well as by larger commercial publishers.

Like our press (though not specifically interested in black and white media—with the exception of Adastra), several small presses also publish literature with

accompanying art and have as one aspect of their mission the cultivation of creative relationships between writers and visual artists . The well-known Marsh Hawk Press specializes in poetry with visual image: [www.marshhawk.org](http://www.marshhawk.org) Cardboard House Press has the dual mission of “increasing access to Latin American and Spanish literature and art for English and Spanish readers” <https://cardboardhousepress.org> Dos Madres Press advertises its commitment to illustrated books in color supervised by artist Elizabeth Murphy and made possible by being a “small batch” publisher. Red Hen Press, has a number of specialized imprints, including Boreal Books devoted to the literature and fine art of Alaska, edited by Alaska’s literary laureate, Peggy Shumaker:

<http://redhen.org/about us/> Iloan Books (whose name sounds unfortunately like a credit company) publishes prose poetry “often with illustrations or photography” and electronically posts “poetry and stories that we are not prepared to print.”

<http://www.illoanbooks.com>

Although my research has not extended to literary magazines, even more numerous than small presses, the creative interplay between literature and art is one of their most typical characteristics. Submitting poetry and fiction to the small magazine (greatly assisted by the comprehensive online directory published by Poets & Writers, and essential organization discussed below) help authors build a publication track record



and expands their visibility in the print and digital sphere. Some small magazines, such as *Caliban*, edited by Larry Smith, since 1986 is purely an online production, recently posting its 39<sup>th</sup> issue, that has the sophisticated appearance of a book, allowing the reader to turn virtual pages. [www.calibanonline.com](http://www.calibanonline.com)

Among the small presses, few publishers of books and chapbooks feature solely on-line productions. Nevertheless, the digital environment enables publishers to produce e-books as well as physical print editions and avoid warehousing books by offering print-on-demand. What a great relief this is for publishers. Stanley H. Barkan, for example, has published more than 400 books during his career as owner/publisher of Cross-Cultural Communications, an indie press for bi-lingual poetry. His paperback and hardbound editions, produced by offset printing were financially “reasonable” so long as he had 1000 copies of each book printed. As a result, he has a house, garage and three sheds filled with books going back half a century! Print-on-demand absolutely necessary of producing large numbers of books to bring cost down.

From the perspective of authors, finding the press that is likely to accept their manuscripts remains the quest, though it no longer involves paper envelopes and return postage. Helping authors find the small press the right small press “mate” is one of the essential missions of Poets & Writers: <https://www.pw.org> which produces an ever-

growing directory of small presses and the “most comprehensive listing of literary grants and awards, deadlines, and prizewinners available in print.” This organization was founded in 1970 in New York by Galen Miller. Although their directories of poets, writers and small presses was once a printed book with its inaugural first edition directory of poets and writers produced by Stanley H. Barkan, publisher of Cross-Cultural Communications, the directories are now on-line offering the widest possible opportunities for matchmaking. Poets and Writers is, to quote from their website,

“the nation’s largest nonprofit organization serving creative writers.

Our mission? To foster the professional development of poets and writers, to promote communication throughout the literary community, and to help create an environment in which literature can be appreciated by the widest possible public.

Each year, tens of thousands of poets, fiction writers, and creative nonfiction writers benefit from P&W’s programs, which include its eponymous magazine; a dynamic, information-rich website; financial support for readings and other literary events; and sponsorship of several notable writing prizes and awards.”

As director of Long Island University’s Poetry Center and as a small press publisher, I have found both their grant program and their directory of authors endlessly useful. Since they migrated to online grant applications that process has become infinitely less time-consuming, and as their directory grows, so too does my list of potential readers and authors New Feral Press might seek to publish. For authors, some of the most useful

information on the P&W site is the mission statement of each press, submission criteria with clear posting of fees where they exist, and waiting time for a response. Authors can also find out about festivals in which they might read, contests they might enter, MFA programs in creative writing and much more. For publishers, author statements and publishing history, along with contact information are invaluable. Subscriptions to *Poets & writers Magazine* are so reasonable that even poets without a day job could spring for a subscription. I would only add to this, that over and above the online information, it is also easy to make a phone call and get a warm, helpful response. Talking to people is really useful in decision-making!

In addition to Poets & Writers, the *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses* has been in print for half a century and has been called by the Wall Street Journal “the Bible of the business.” It was founded by Len Fulton (1934-2011) and went through more than 40 editions in print before recently migrating to an online publication edited by Ellen Ferber. At last count the journal provided information about 5,000 magazines and presses.

One well might ask the question, with all of these comprehensive resources for authors, why would anyone be advised to self-publish? And yet the advice is out there, coming even from The Poet’s Press, “one of the longest-running independent poetry presses in the United States. It is self-described as “neo-romantic leaning” with wide-ranging imprints specializing in everything from the gothic and supernatural to the scholarly. They utilize all the contemporary publication and business models but have turned away from chapbooks, giving this advice: “Poets can do just as well on their own

by self-publishing their own chapbooks” (which the editor disdainfully regards as “promoting the careers of MFA candidates and graduates.” <https://www.poetspress.org>

Quite apart from these and other expressions of disdain, it is quite true that many writers have chosen to self publish for good reasons. Timeliness is one. I have recently helped two writers of memoirs go the route of self-publishing because their reflections on their life experience with cancer and immigration are “of the moment” and cannot wait for readers at a commercial press to work their way down the slush pile. In fact, these manuscripts would probably never get to that pile because commercial publishers now require that books be submitted by an agent. Few authors can afford the luxury of hiring an agent; moreover, the quest for the right agent adds yet another layer and barrier to timely publication. It is by far cheaper and more productive to pay the costs of self-publishing and get the book out into the marketplace.

The experience of these writers, working with the help of one of my most creative students (who had already self-published 6 novels by the age of 20) proved so positive that my husband decided to do our own trial with his book of short stories, *Me and Mr. Jiggs*, for which we had not sought a publisher or published ourselves. We gave the manuscript to the student, and she created an account for him with Lulu. Within a matter of hours we received notice that the book was published and already on their website for sale! We ordered a proof copy, which came in the mail in a few days and exceeded our expectation. We then ordered 40 copies with a deep “creator’s discount.” Since we print New Feral Press books ourselves, the experience of having a work that would have taken us weeks available within hours, perfect-bound, with an ISBN number, a glossy cover

that we cannot produce, listing on global databases, made available within 5-8 weeks on Amazon and Barnes and Noble within 5-8 weeks has given us pause for thought as it has many other publishers of indie presses. Of course this book did not come out under our imprint, NFP, and so we regard it as a different species from what we create. For the moment, we remain content to design and print limited editions of 100 copies of small books of illustrated poetry and fiction that live in a very small niche of the digital marketplace.

It is an interesting piece of irony that the big publishers requiring agent middlemen now scan the arena of self-published books to see which titles are selling well and might be worth buying! Once again, power appears to be shifting to the authors who self-publish. One great example of this is Andy Weir's *The Martian* (2014), a self-published first novel that became a best seller and then a motion picture. Crown picked up rights to the book and then paid Weir a hefty advance for a second novel, *Artemis* that has recently come out in 2017.

While it is highly unlikely that books of poetry will hit the bestseller list or be made into motion pictures, it is quite possible that they will find a readership and possibly a press interested in future collaborations. With respect to timeliness and author control, the most immediate digital environment for getting poetry out on the Internet is by creating a blog and cultivating a following. FeedSpot is a site that reviews and posts links to the ever-growing number of poetry blogs. This is poetry and thoughts/conversations about poetry posted with a sense of immediacy and community, but often without an external editor. Filtering through the growing number, FeedSpot offers to connect

readers to “the best poetry blogs on the planet” and for those that make it into their top 25 they produce a badge of honor that bloggers may post to their sites. So even in the blogosphere, the contest mentality is taking root. <https://Feedspot.com/poetry/blogs>

Even poets with blogs might want to self-publish books, using their blog as a promotional and marketing device to address a potential readership. Alex Daniels, in his article, “Self-Publishing in 2017,” (January issue of *Booklife*) cites a jump of 21% from 2014 to 2015; and with no more recent statistics available, must reasonably presume that the percentages continue to climb. Although his discussion of new opportunities is not specifically focused on poetry, his reference to Wattpad, a company linked to Universal Cable Productions illustrates the expansion of publishing formats into media. The industry, he observes, is moving toward “smarter” marketing that involves indie authors and small presses to sell books through social media, a practice facilitated by Aerio, a service acquired by Ingram Spark, which is now pushing toward more global access to readers/buyers in multiple formats.

Although my research has concentrated on poetry and short fiction, it is an interesting sideline that academic authors of scholarly books are also turning to self-publishing in order to avoid waiting sometimes years to find out whether a manuscript is going to be accepted by a university press. In many fields the long wait means that the publication will already be outdated by the time it gets to print. Parlor Press is self-described as “an independent publisher and distributor of scholarly and trade books in high quality print and digital formats”: <http://www.parlorpress.com/submissions>

With diverse interests in art history, architectural environments, cultural history, literacy, media digital cultures, composition, rhetoric of science, and poetry they function much like a traditional academic press with a review board and caution that they do not accept simultaneous submissions. They challenge the conventional presses by offering a reply within three months. It remains to be seen whether promotion and tenure committees will accept works published by Parlor Press as legitimate or vanity publishing.

In general, the self-publishing book marketplace has grown exponentially since the days when it was mainly associated with vanity and tried to keep a low profile so that authors did not come into question with respect to their publisher or their pocketbook. Now competing self-publishing houses are all over the Internet, giving out free advice and booklets, rating each other, and tempting authors to their platforms. At [www.dogearpublishing.net](http://www.dogearpublishing.net) authors can find a listing of 12 competing firms with links to them and a notice that all are more expensive than Dog Ear. At [www.bookbaby.com](http://www.bookbaby.com) authors can find an environment of help in self-publishing that also includes an invitation to their annual conference with workshops designed to move authors closer to self-publishing with Book Baby.

All of the companies make it possible for authors to have their books edited, designed, printed, and marketed with ISBN numbers and listings on Amazon. In an effort to further dominate market share, Amazon, has its own self-publishing business, CreateSpace as well as the e-book Kindle Direct. All of the self-publishing companies offer a variety of extra costs promotional packages. From the perspective of authors, the most important issues are ownership of rights and royalties and cost of publication. Many

are print-on-demand outfits that may require a certain number of author purchases up front. A number of websites publish lists of the top self-publishing firms. The following (my random order) appear on almost all of the lists: Lulu, Book Baby, BookSurge, XLibris, Virtual Bookworm, CreateSpace, Kindle Direct, Smash Words, Blurb, Author House (UK), Outskirts Press, and iUniverse. It would appear that they cover the galaxy and offer authors much latitude for selection depending on price and services.

[www.firsttimepublishers.com](http://www.firsttimepublishers.com); [www.adazing.com](http://www.adazing.com)

Most interesting is that people with a long bibliography of poetry books and decades of experience working with conventional presses are now choosing to self-publish. Allan Graubard, a prominent American Surrealist poet, playwright, critic, and publishing professional who has designed hundreds of books and followed them through production has chosen to self-publish his last three books. Having worked for Oxford University Press for some years, his experience extends from academic publishing houses to small presses. In my conversation with him, he brought up time, money, and quality of production as three major factors in choosing a publication route. Despite the number of small presses, in his experience, sending out a manuscript “cold” gets an author nowhere. In some cases, presses that used to be letter-press but now is print-on-demand (he gave the example of Spuyten Duyvil Press) require the author to put money up front for production and purchase a certain number of copies—which, of course, Graubard finds unacceptable. Even with a personal connection to a small press publisher, things do not always go smoothly. He cited Extasis Editions (Vancouver) which cancelled his publication when Canadian grant money was rescinded. After sending a new manuscript and receiving no replay, he made the decision to publish the book himself with a friend,



Thom Burns at Anon Editions (Toronto): *Invisible Heads: Surrealists in North America, an Untold Story* (Anon, 2011)

In one instance, a history of the Chicago Arsenal Group over four decades, Graubard's decision to self-publish was based on the length and complexity of the work, 800 pages in 2 vols, including a great deal of color. "Who would publish this?" he asked. The solution was to collaborate with colleagues who worked on production and indexing and put it out themselves. They did a pdf e-book and a print-on-demand edition using coated paper. Their choice of Lulu had much to do with production quality. As long as the author chooses high quality paper, he argues, they do a good job, with clarity of font improving all the time. Publishing with Amazon or Barnes & Nobel takes 6 weeks or more to be posted to Amazon; moreover Lulu gives authors a more favorable split than Amazon's 60/40. His experience with this company has been extremely positive. (telephone interview, October, 2017).

The same was not the case for Mary Lou Wilshaw-Watt, who is both a fine fiction writer and artist. Recently she has illustrated a children's book entitled, *Lily Cat*, using Lulu's platform. In her words, "the art of the book is lost in creating digitized books." Although she attempted to work with the publisher, she found the process frustrating because "they don't know enough to understand how poor their quality of art reproduction is." From the "contact us" section on the website she found generic responses that were not helpful in solving problems. Instead, she had to search the FAQ section of the Lulu community to find out how other designers and illustrators solved problems. Based on this experience, she has come to regard self-publishing as a means

for people who are tired of reject slips, tired of waiting, and don't care about the beauty of the book to simply get their books printed. (telephone interview, October, 2017)

This is the opposite of the digital book future envisioned by Douglas Holleley when he published his major work, *Digital Book Design and Publishing* to usher in the new millennium in 2000. Although the programs he used to illustrate digital book production—Quark and the first versions of Photoshop—already belong to the past, his aesthetic considerations intended for writers, photographers, and artists still apply. His vision, very much influenced by the history of the printed book looks toward a digital future emerging from classical roots. Many small presses are grounded in this same history, and some, like Jack Pine Press and Katywompus Press, pay extraordinary attention—as does Holleley—to creative bindings. However, during the last 18 years, “artists books” making use of digital imagery and layout have largely taken a separate path from the route followed by the majority of small presses that have become progressively more “entrepreneurial,” and thus, it would seem, from the most recent Poets House annual Showcase Exhibition, less visually original, less hand-crafted, and more oriented toward marketing products made ready for online bookshops.

**Conclusion:** Although my research accomplished during the sabbatical term is far from comprehensive, an overview has come sharply into focus. The expanding digital environment is profoundly reshaping book production, the book business, and author-press relationships. In a short time, Google has already digitized the entire holdings of great libraries and is making available almost all the books ever written. It remains to be seen whether the practice of reading books on line will also shape the future of books

being written as I write. Will e-books pull ahead of print-on-demand? Will poetry become more or less of interest to the future reading public? Will commercial and indie presses survive the growth of self-publishing industries? Will language itself change as authors self-publish without an editorial filter? What, in fact, will we mean by the word “book” even fifty years from now? These are all questions raised by my findings.

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