

small press

continued from page 9

The statistics on cultural ownership are no less troubling. Only 3-5 per cent of screen time in Canadian movie houses is devoted to Canadian film. Two to four per cent of videocassettes sold here are Canadian. 97 per cent of film revenues leave Canada, 95 per cent of them for the U.S. Eighty-five percent of records, tapes and CDs sold here are non-Canadian. Seventy-seven percent of magazines sold are foreign, and 95 per cent of dramas aired on Canadian TV are not produced in Hollywood North.

More to the point, 80 per cent of all books authored by Canadians are sold within that twenty-something per cent market share held by Canadian publishers. Small presses like Deneau, Women's Press, Black Rose and Voyageur, and fringe houses like Contra Mundo and Pink Dog Press are primarily responsible for allowing new voices to be heard above the din of cries for the next Jackie Collins or Tom Clancy potboiler.

This isn't to suggest that a trashy read isn't good for one's soul. But if Toronto's House of Anansi had not patronized a young poet named Margaret Atwood, or Cormorant the 1991 publishing sensation Nino Ricci, at what cost is the endless trash? If Anne of Green Gables, or the Noah character in Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* had not lived, would PEI or Christianity mean quite the same?

Working on a small press today is to operate a *samizdat* — a Russian word meaning underground press. But, unlike the radical press of the 1960s, today's small presses have bigger things to worry about than getting busted on an obscenity rap. The federal government spends more money advertising free trade and the GST than it does supporting publishing. The suggested devolution of national cultural policy and programs to the provinces, the end of postal subsidies to publishers shipping books, the cultural provision in the Free Trade Agreement, and the tax on reading are problems that require more than bail to solve.

On the international front, corporate concentration among a very few global companies means there is more and more monopoly in the economy of ideas. U.S. and European publishers, with interests in everything from theme parks to high-tech weapons, crowd out quality books with blockbuster hype and massive advances to bestselling authors.

In the mid-1970s, for example, an estimated 3.3% of U.S. publishers controlled 70% of industry volume. In the mid-1980s, the leveraged-buyout fad touched what had been known as the "gentleman's profession" (sic). U.S. giant Harcourt Brace Jovanovich bought Holt Rinehart Winston for \$500 million, while media baron Rupert Murdoch's Williams Collins PLC of Britain paid \$300 million for Harper & Row. And the drums of bidding wars and hostile mergers beat on.

Yet it is "soul" which saves the small press bacon from endless runs of cookery, celebrity and other non-books taking up shelf space at Coles, W.H. Smith and independent bookstores across the land. Small presses use their minimal overhead, sweat equity, and solidarity with sympathetic authors and retailers to strategic advantage. Government grants and the occasional bestseller help support worthy manuscripts — like new fiction, poetry, social science and economics — that foreign publishers selling in Canada see no profit in.

Desktop publishing, assisted by typesetting software and laser print-

ers, means the smudgy offset process is no longer necessary. But the evolution of printing technology doesn't mean that the culture of the small press has given up its funky, kicking-against-the-pricks attitude.

At the home of Voyageur publishing in Hull, Quebec, authors meet with the publisher over coffee in the kitchen, and politely overlook the dirty dishes in the sink. A corkboard full of press clippings and countercultural trivia dominates the office. Meanwhile, in the Toronto "warehouse", books crowd a Voyageur associate out of her studio apartment.

So, while we can appreciate the free press, let us not forget the freest press — the small publishing industry in Canada. In a world of global corporations, mass culture, and economies of scale, small is not only beautiful, it is indispensable.

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