

excalibur | October 30, 1991 | alternative press supplement

# editorial

## Self-determined publishing: challenging the mainstream

by Clint Burnham

"Small press" has suddenly become sexy. The Globe and Mail has a review every Saturday dedicated to small press. There's a glossy new mag from the States, all about small press. And Pages, that Queen Street West bookstore of the hipster, advertises on its bookmarks that in addition to Cultural theory, Feminism, and Mysteries, it also carries Small Press.

This is all very confusing. But there are two differing definitions of small press that float around. The first is the industry's meaning, which is really any press that is smaller than multinational publishing concerns like Doubleday and Penguin. So, in Canada, small press frequently is used to indicate the funded literary presses — Oberon, Talonbooks, Coach House. But there is another, oppositional meaning to small press. Most of the presses at the Toronto Small Press Book Fair, for example, are run by one or two people, receive no government funding, and publish magazines, chapbooks, or other things that oppose, both aesthetically and politically, mainstream literary culture.

In this sense, small press is self-determined publishing. Instead of relying on the capitalist divisions of labour, that see a large number of people working for a small number of bosses, and instead of relying on government regulations on what a proper book is and how many must be published in a year to qualify for funding, small press is resolutely amateurish. When Julia Steinecke publishes a book by herself through her Flying Camel Press, she designs the cover, photocopies the guts, folds and staples, and schleps it around to bookstores — tasks that would require at least six different workers, as well as a bureaucracy of management, in a capitalist firm.

Books today are commodities: products whose social nature (labour) is erased in favour of their value in exchange. With small press publishing, writers and artists take the book to be a site for critique of this very degradation of their art. So all the artforms of an elitist aesthete's nightmares — concrete poetry, messy collage, photocopy art, obscure & experimental prose — as well as more traditional realist work from oppressed marginalized groups like Women, Blacks, Asians, Gays and

Lesbians and Natives — combine in an unclassifiable refusal of everything fine and beautiful and "literary".

What can you do? Smart Ross, in an editorial for narc magazine, says: "I'm out of Kitchener, give the following advice for cultural terrorists living under Conservative rule: the fucks can give away The Beachcombers, Knowlton Nash, ... & Coles, but they can't touch us. ... virtue in small ... like narc, Peckerwood, Me ... Feline ... the Pigs, you better buy them, read them ... around ... them, start up your own. Let's go!"

... isn't dead shits in Penguin covers and called a class ... you are ... writing stories, writing poems, creating a space for ... humour ... is that space.



**A fairer Excalibur**

**EXCALIBUR** is in the process of developing a policy to aid us in establishing and maintaining a non-discriminatory media. At present we have a draft policy which we hope to adopt and incorporate into our constitution. We encourage interested members of the York community to read the policy. We welcome your suggestions for improvement.

We are accepting written suggestions or criticism until November 10. For more information and to pick up a copy of the policy, come by our offices and speak to Jeannine or Doug.

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