

# YOU ARE WHAT YOU READ.

Getting into the  
Alternative Press

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## Quixotic visions of small presses

by David Black

There are few images in our cultural iconography more compelling than a burning book. Yet, when public or policy attention turns to the problems facing a "free press," it is newspapers, magazines, radio and television around which the bucket brigades are formed.

Though the electronic and print media reach more people and show more obvious polemical give-and-take, the endless difference of opinion over what is good and true has developed between the bound and printed pages of that far older medium, the book.

Take for example the case of an anonymous woman in fifteenth century Germany, who entered a deserted printshop and corrected the language in a typeset Bible verse. Instead of Genesis III:16 reading "...in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be thy husband, and he shall rule over thee," she substituted "and he shall be thy fool" for the last phrase.

For her bold entry into publishing history, and her rewriting of cosmogony, the revisionist typesetter was killed after copies of the altered text were discovered.

Contemporary small publishers rarely risk execution for their crimes against the status quo. Defined generally as companies with fewer than twelve employees, earning less than

\$5 million on production of thirty or fewer books a year, the small press dies a slower death punctuated by the constant pain of debtload, creditors and bad reviews.

For example, a small press like Summerhill of Thornhill published excellent books on aboriginal and Canadian studies before collapsing last summer, its resolve broken by a \$400,000 bad loan and the death of its president. Another larger "small" house, Lester Orpen Dennys, bowed to the triple-whammy of debt, the GST and recession.

A third house, Hurtig Publishers, founded by economic nationalist Mel Hurtig, published *The Canadian Encyclopedia* to much praise only to choke on the red ink it swallowed in producing the Junior edition. Unfortunately, the sad story of Canadian publishing needs more than one disastrous summer to tell.

The post-World War II boom that put a Chevy in every garage also put many books into the hands of Canadians enjoying greater access to higher education. In the 1950s, Canadian publishers of various sizes earned lucrative agent's fees as brokers for large foreign (mainly American) companies.

Profits from foreign titles subsidized Canadian titles in the days before the Canada and Ontario Arts councils. This profit, however, would warp the publishing industry as it has the film and television industries, offering a dis-

incentive to support higher-cost, lower-volume titles by Canadian authors.

From the 1960s onward, foreign publishers began to establish their own directly-controlled subsidiaries in Canada, or to ship directly to bookstores without using a domestic publisher's

**"Working on a small press today is to operate a samizdat — a Russian word meaning underground press."**

services. Where in 1969, 34.8 per cent of books sold in Canada were published by Canadian firms, in 1980 only 27.6 per cent of book sales revenues were generated by Canadian-authored books.

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