

# From postcards to tabloids, small press publishers explore literary alternatives

**While small press publishers strive for accessibility, booksellers say that tires sell better than poetry**

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There's one publishing venture that makes most booksellers nervous, if not downright reluctant, to gamble on: the small, independent publisher. In plain dollars and cents, small presses mean high risk. The success of the book retailer, like any other business, is determined by consumer demand—and that means mass marketability. From a retailer's point of view, this often is the determining factor in stocking small press or not. As Hedi Blanchard, book buyer of the major chain Classic Books, said in explaining their lack of small press accounts, "It's not so much that we're avoiding obscure books—we're just thinking in terms of (its) saleability."

It is no secret that some of the most innovative and experimental writing in Canada today develops out of the small presses. However, it is surprising that up until recently, no one has taken the initiative to fight for the independent publisher's much-deserved place in the literary market. Stuart Ross and Nicholas Power are two writers and small press publishers who have taken matters into their own hands and provided a monthly small press forum. Last December, they launched their first "Meet the Presses" at Toronto's Scadding Court Community Centre.

Since that time, Power estimates there has been about 30 different presses and displays on the last Sunday of each month. Ross, a long-time practitioner of self-marketing as a street seller, said the goal of Meet the Presses is to allow about six to 10 presses to display their publications, hopefully generate sales, and encourage the formation of other presses. Lillian Necakov of Surrealist Poets Gardening Assoc., one of

that Meet the Presses was a trade show of printing presses. Another misconception is that small presses operate like "vanity publishers," who will print anyone's work for profit—at the author's expense. The small, independent publisher, once accepting a writer's work, will cover the cost of printing and usually give the author a percentage of the print run as payment. Ross said that often the credibility of the dedicated small presses suffer because of other presses that don't maintain the same standards of integrity or quality.

Defining small press is another matter in itself. There is a general consensus among publishers and retailers alike that small presses are alternative-oriented in subject matter and form. As Ned Lyttleton of the SCM Book Room explained, "small presses usually publish anything that isn't traditionally covered or accepted by the mainstream commercial publishers because of its subject matter or experimental nature." But there is even a finer dividing point among small presses themselves.

Power differentiates his own Gesture Press, and most of the other publishers displayed at Meet the Presses, as being different from larger small presses such as Coach House and Oberon, because the former publishes "spineless," or unbound, books. But the biggest difference between the two levels of small presses is clearly economics. While the larger "small presses" are often heavily government-subsidized, the smaller, independent publishers must rely on their own revenues because they do not meet certain qualifications (such as book size, author nationality, binding) for

a special appeal is added with colorful hand-painted latex cover with real soup noodles adhered to them. They also offer a "soup and a poem" gimmick, in which, upon request, they will send you a package of soup along with an "appropriate" poem.

Probably the biggest impasse for the small publisher is distribution. "It is a small press's nightmare," said Ross. While trade associations like the Canadian Book Information Centre (CBIC) will display at book-fairs presses who are members of the Canadian Press Association (CPA), the nonaffiliated presses must rely on their own marketing resources. Meet the Presses provides such a medium by inviting the public to peruse small press literature. Although Power said that most of the sales on an average night are modest at \$20 to \$25 for each press, for some, this is the only means of distribution. The top sales for a Meet the Presses night was upwards of \$80, Power added.

Another option for the small press publisher is to sell directly or on consignment to bookstores in Toronto that carry alternative publications. But, as Necakov points out, "there are not enough bookstores in Toronto that carry small presses."

Charlie Huiskens, co-owner of This Ain't the Rosedale Library is one retailer who stocks small presses because of his genuine love for poetry and fiction. "The poetry aisle is there for sheer love," he said. "I'd probably sell more tires than poetry if I replaced them." Although Huiskens favors the small presses because of their innovative nature, he admits that they are an "investor's nightmare." Describing the market as a "small press ghetto," he blames poor sales on the lack of readers willing to take a chance on an author they've never heard of.

William Smith of Writers and Co., which also stocks a fair number of small presses agrees with Huiskens. "Although the quality is good," he said, "customers won't buy writers they've never heard of." As a result,

current by his standards. He said that small presses must take more initiative in their own marketing. "A lot of small press writers need a boot in the pants," he said. "They need to find their own audience." Huiskens said the formation of Meet the Presses is a step in the right direction. "I'd like to see some bigger editors scouting around there," he added.

Innovators like Power and Ross have helped to influence two recent York graduates' literary endeavor, *what* magazine. Its success will largely depend on effective marketing strategies. Kevin Connolly and Jason Sherman launched their new literary magazine at the last Meet the Presses forum. Like Meet the Presses, Connolly and Sherman are attempting to break through their own marketing barriers to reach both traditional and non-traditional readers of poetry and fiction. "It's a fallacy that there are no readers of poetry and fiction out there besides writers themselves," Sherman said. "It's a matter of being aware of your audience," he added.

From the intentionally generic name of *what*, to its clean, simple newspaper tabloid format, *what* aims to be accessible to every reader, Connolly said. Sherman described their intentions largely in terms of doing exactly opposite of what most literary magazines do when they have a glossy finish and a pretentious name. "The title doesn't attempt to say anything," he said, citing one person's reaction: "It's like a word that has fallen out of a story."

Connolly emphasized that another major goal of *what* is to take a greater responsibility in turning the literary magazine from a "passive to an active medium." He said there was a lack of effort by most magazines (aside from the actual printing of the pieces) to encourage reader response. "Most magazines just sit on the shelf, and that's it," he said. *what* is unique, in that it is attempting to acknowledge its readership by providing various formats which demand reader response.

The best example of such a format is the ongoing "Workshop Series" which features, upon a writer's permission, an experimental or unfinished piece, for the purpose of reader feedback. "It will be an unfinished work with potential, as opposed to an underdeveloped piece," Sherman said. When asked whether they thought this concept would deter writer participation, Connolly said, "The type of author that would be nervous about the 'Workshop Series,' is not what we want." *what* also intends to continue a regular interview and profile section of different writers, ranging from the young writer to the more experienced. A regular Commentary section will also provide another opportunity for reader involvement.

Probably the most obvious proof of *what's* accessibility is that it's free. "We're trying to get people to read literary works," Sherman said. "We

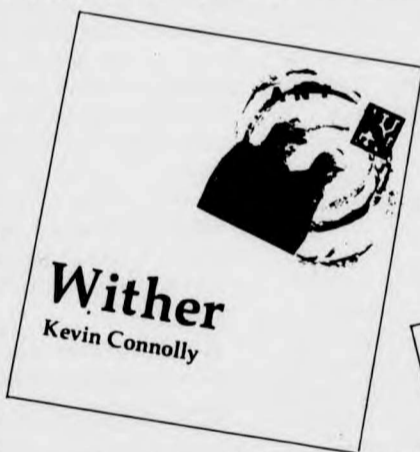


believe the only way is to shove it in people's faces." With a distribution of 5,000 copies throughout the Toronto area and York, Connolly said that they are providing the kind of mass marketing that will help "knock down a lot of barriers." Connolly said one of these barriers is getting into the major chain bookstores that rarely carry small presses.

Connolly and Sherman maintain that they are not aiming for a particular style of writing, rather they are treating each piece "on its own terms." They do have one withstanding criterion: that the work "exhibit a passion and visible commitment," Connolly said. "We look for potential and talent," Sherman added. "We don't want stuff that's self-indulgent." He stressed that work must be "accessible; emotionally, visually, and intellectually comprehensible."

While most writing guides will recommend that you choose a literary magazine that already uses your style of writing, whether it be haiku, free or concrete verse, Connolly said *what* is not a magazine that will only look at unusual subject and form. "We are not a publication with a particular philosophy—we'll consider all works." Sherman added, "Our criteria will come out of our experience, not pure theorizing."

Connolly said they hope to publish *what* six times a year, with the next issue due in November. Presently a self-financed endeavor, Sherman said they hope that revenues from advertising can go towards paying writers for submissions, adding that *what* intends to stay free. Connolly said "it will be its own best advertiser." In the meantime, Sherman said, they are exploring the possibilities of securing



grant eligibility. Necakov, whose own press has only been operating since 1984, said she will print an average of 200 to 300 copies for most titles. In comparison, Diane Martin, sales representative for Coach House Press, which is in its 20th year of operation, said an average first print-run is between 500 and 1,000 copies.

Most small press publishers are lucky to break even, said Ross, although he himself has turned a profit on his own titles which he sells in the street; he has less success with books by other authors. Understandably, production costs are kept to a minimum—offset printing is often replaced with mimeography or photocopying. Necakov estimated it cost her about 75¢ unit cost to print a small poetry book.

Although a lack of finances may be a limiting production factor, it doesn't seem to limit the imagination or quality of the small press publication. jwcurry of "Room 302" (named after a room in his house where he does most of his writings) is notorious for his unique production and packaging devices. With curry, you can expect anything from a one-cent poetry leaflet or a 25¢ postcard, to special "hand-stamped" (rubber-stamped) editions, which he individually numbers. Another magazine, *Lucky Jim's*, originating from McGill University in Montreal, is typewritten and photocopied, but



Huiskens will only buy outright from Ross and Crad Kilodney, another well-established street seller since the 1970s, and take other works on consignment. Huiskens said that often his customers are inspired creatively rather than financially by the small press section. "They say, 'Oh, this is great, I'd like to do one!' instead of 'Oh, this great, I'd like to buy one!'" As a retailer, Huiskens is starting to feel the pressures of stocking small presses. "I'm not looking forward to seeing more things drift in," he said. "I'd like to sell some books in quantity, like Governor General Award winners, instead of bending over backwards to sell obscure titles."

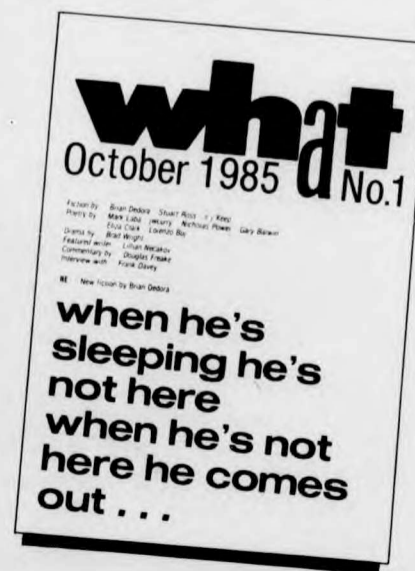
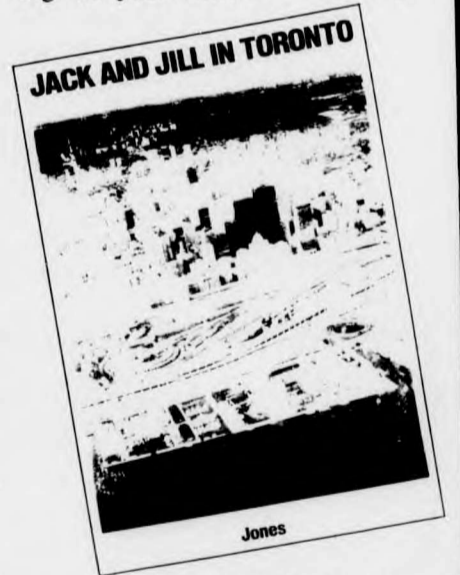
Huiskens also said that because his books are "more on the cutting edge," he loses a large portion of the student market who come in with book lists that reflect titles he stocked years ago, and are no longer



the presses featured on September 28, said, "This is the only opportunity for many of the small presses to sell their publications."

At each Meet the Presses there is an hour of readings from guest poets and writers representing the small presses. These tie in the concept that writing, performing and promoting are all related, explained Power.

Meet the Presses is also an important educational device in debunking the myths and prejudices associated with small presses. "I don't think there is a general impression of what small presses are," said Ross, citing the example of one person thinking



grants from the Toronto, Ontario and Canada Arts Councils.

When asked if they thought they were taking a risk, Sherman said, "We are working in uncertain areas—we are opening ourselves up to criticism on the magazine." He added that *what* intends "to provide an alternative to alternative writing," and insists that "there is still an opportunity for writing which challenges the reader going beyond the mass market approach."

Connolly said the magazine didn't originate so much from a frustration over the existing literary magazines as it did from a "naive belief that people can be reached, if approached the right way."

"There's a lot of dinosaurs out there," added Sherman, "and when we've served our purpose, we'll fold also."