

So what's all this talk about "death"? Especially with more than 200,000 books published every year in the U.S. alone.

Books Are Not Dead. They're Not Even Dying

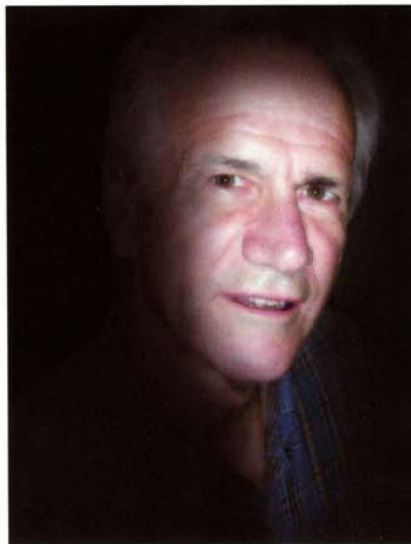
Notes on publishing from a small press publisher

BY JACK ESTES

I've heard people aren't reading so much anymore, but as far as I can tell—and I've been into publishing for 14 years now—they're reading as much as ever. At least they're reading *my* books as much as ever. I'm the publisher of a very small press called Pleasure Boat Studio. The weird name was inspired by a Sung Dynasty Chinese poet, Ouyang Xiu, who explained in an essay that his wealthy friends have pleasure boats where they like to spend their spare time. He, however, likes to go to his studio and work. So he calls his studio his "pleasure boat studio."

Since I have a full-time job as a sociology professor, I don't need to sell hundreds of thousands of copies to continue publishing books. I would love those kinds of numbers, of course, but they're not essential for my survival. I'm maintaining my business, and my sanity, by keeping the overhead low. I mean l-o-w. Way down. I work hard getting reviews, encouraging authors to go out and sell, getting reviews, using e-mail announcements, using social networking, getting reviews.

I'll send a copy of a book to nearly anyone who seems remotely interested in writing about it. I've even sent copies to people who promised only that they'd post their review on amazon.com or bn.com. I send to bloggers large and small and to anyone in a book club who might be interested. I'm not fussy. I want the word to get out. Do you have a large



family who reads your blogs? Great. Here's a book. And since I believe in the value and significance of the books I publish, I am confident that sending them out will garner good words—and good words tend to flow.

The key to sales lies in the authors. If the author is arranging readings and other events, contacting friends through e-mail and Facebook and Twitter, trying to find different (i.e., nonbookstore) venues for giving talks—then that book usually has a life. One of my authors is shy, but her husband isn't. He'll introduce his author wife to anyone, even the person at the grocery store checkout station; and I'm pretty sure all of his colleagues have bought his wife's book. It's hard work. The bonus is, however, that a publisher is inclined to accept a second book from such an author... even a publisher bigger than I.

When people ask me what kinds of books I publish, I often joke, "The kind that don't sell. That's my only real criterion." Relative to the "big guys," it's pretty much true. With fiction, I figure a break-even point at about 400 copies; with poetry, about 250. That varies slightly based on how many of the books are sold at full price. Mostly, I sell at a 55% discount to distributors and online retailers and a 60% discount to wholesalers like Ingram. A book that sells 1,000 copies is, for me, a bestseller.

So what's all this talk about "death"? Especially with more than 200,000 books published every year in the U.S. alone. I think we need to re-examine how we define success. If 60% of the books sold every year are written by the top 10 authors (as I heard recently), that's daunting. If 98% of all books don't sell a single copy in a year, well, that's scary. But most of the small press publishers I know want to get a few good books out into the world. They love the books and they love working with authors. Those are my motivations, too. I see my authors as friends, not cash cows. Most of my authors are first timers. It's not easy to write a book and find a publisher. I can't believe how many good manuscripts are submitted to me and how few of them I can accept.

If you are writing to be published, if that's your goal, you're probably writing for the wrong reason. If you're writing to get rich, you're really writing for the wrong reason. Publication—and wealth—are rare and incidental side effects. Writing is for oneself, for one's soul. Publishing is exposing that soul to a reader. When you release a good book, you're changing the world. Really. And just maybe, you can make something of a living at it, too. ■

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