

The following discussion is copied and pasted from the British and Irish Poets discussion list, and can be found in the list's archives, which are displayed publically. The discussion took place between 19 October and 26 October 2017.

The discussion subject was titled 'Re: (was) The Liverpool Poets: Is now Publishing', but soon moved on to a discussion about poetry ebooks versus print poetry books.

At the time of writing this (16 December 2017), the discussion can still be directly linked to at:

<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=ind1710&L=BRITISH-IRISH-POETS&D=0&P=84078>

However, it has sometimes been the case that moderators of the British and Irish Poets discussion list have made linking directly to discussions there no longer possible.

Text that appears within square brackets are explanatory additions to this facsimile, to clarify in certain instances to whom a particular response is addressed or for other explanatory purposes.

Tony Frazer

OK. First there's some confusion with regards to nomenclature. Print on demand is a method whereby the book is available through online sellers, and is printed (one at a time) to meet the customer order. The publisher does nothing other than to establish the title, and place it on the printer's computers. As far as I'm aware no-one in the poetry world uses pure p-o-d (including Salt in its heyday), and the biggest users of the system are the self-publishing intermediaries such as Lulu. There are also only 3 real p-o-d suppliers, I think, in this country, and one of those is Amazon's closed environment, CreateSpace.

What just about everyone IS doing is using Short Run Digital Printing (SRDP), whereby we print our books using digital presses, where the unit costs are higher than offset litho but where we can viably order, say, 10 copies at a time. To get a decent unit cost via offset litho, you need to print a minimum of 500 copies (I've heard that this may have dropped to about 400, but the point still stands). It will be no surprise to you that few poetry books sell 500 copies. (I've been told that a sale of 500 is good going for a poetry small press in the USA, for instance, where the population is 5 times larger.) What many people miss in the midst of these numbers is that there is one other important factor, which is WHEN the stock is sold. The great advantage of SRDP is that fact that one is able to respond to sudden demand by quick restocking, and not have cash tied up prior to that. Because it's lack of cashflow that cripples all small businesses, and carrying large unsold stock—cash tied up doing nothing. The other advantage is that, if you have a successful title—one that sells out its 500-copy offset run—you face an awkward choice: let it go out of print, or re-order another 500, when demand might actually be only for another 50. With SRDP you can respond to the demand. I believe Carcanet uses offset litho for its initial print-runs, and then restocks thereafter using SRDP, if necessary.

I'd have to place a spreadsheet here to explain the issue most easily, but, if you compare 2 situations:

1) where in month one, you buy 500 copies offset-printed, at, say, £1 per copy, and then figure on that chart when the sales occur at, say, 60% of retail, and see when cashflow is positive.

2) you go SRDP, print 100 at, say, £1.75 per copy, sell some of those, reprint 25 a month later to meet demand, etc, etc.

It only makes sense to go offset if you can sell 500 copies relatively quickly, or if you have regular demand for your titles from bookstores. If you're Faber, or Picador, for instance, one copy in every Waterstone's would justify the initial offset print-run.

Shearsman uses a mix of SRDP and P-o-D, with about 35% of sales going through P-o-D. I have stock of all Shearsman titles, but not large stock—and in some cases, mostly very old titles, I only have one or two copies. I can restock within 3 or 4 days, and quicker if necessary, which is good enough to respond to unexpected demand. To give some classic examples from the Shearsman list:

1) a book by a writer who will remain unnamed has sold all of 17 copies over several years, and that includes 10 that the author bought. The author is not well-known; the book is interesting, albeit showing some of the difficulties inherent in a first collection. If I'd printed that through offset the losses would have been substantial.

2) Some books just sell in trickles, all the time. No sudden burst of sales, ever. These are often by classic authors: in my case the Spanish poets, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and Rosalía de Castro, which Shearsman published in bilingual editions 10 years ago, sell on average 2 copies every month, without fail. (Sales over 10 years come to around 290 of each title.) These are mostly through the p-o-d channel and sell, I imagine, to students of Spanish literature who are struggling with the original texts. No yellowed and ageing stock, but freshly printed copies all the time (or recently-printed if sold by me direct).

3) You might recall that Helen Macdonald won the Costa Prize three years ago. She then wrote an article in The Guardian about the 6 books that had most influenced her writing on nature. As I recall, only 2 of these were in print, and one of those was R.F. Langley's Journals, published by Shearsman in 2006. Up until that point the book had sold a highly respectable 600 copies or so. In the month after Helen's article appeared, I shifted another 250. Not long after that the New York Times reprinted the article in the US, and a whole bunch more shifted through the American P-o-D channel. The book has now sold close to 1,400 copies. If I'd been wedded to offset printing, I'd most likely have lost those sales by not being able to respond to the demand in good time.

One advantage I've not mentioned so far is drop-shipping. This is an order to the printer to send a batch of books to a third party. I do this a lot, where it's more cost effective to do so than have the books sent to me and then onward ship them to the third-party. It means I get the printer's discounted freight charges from UPS, rather than the list price. I also use SPD in California to wholesale my US titles, and drop-ship stock to them from a California print facility. This means no shipping across the Atlantic—an enormous advantage.

Sorry if this is boring...

Tony

Peter Green

Thanks, Tony for that overview of POD and SRDP processes and the economics of poetry publishing. I suspect I am another poet whom you have tactfully un-named

[Peter Green had inserted his address and phone numbers here, which I have removed]

Jeffrey Side

Tony, have you thought of only publishing free poetry ebooks? You'll get more readers a month that way than you would probably get in yearly book sales. It would save you having to apply for funding. I realise, though, that there is still a stigma against poetry ebooks—especially free ones. But if poetry publishers really believe poetry should be widely read, then perhaps that is the way forward.

As far as I can tell, Geoffrey Gatza was a pioneer in that. I started doing it from his example. So hats off to him.

Tony Frazer

I've done it, Jeffrey. And I make free samplers available in PDF form for all titles.

I no longer need funding—the press pays for itself, and has done since 2007. I no longer subsidise it in any way, other than by providing my time free of charge.

Tony

Jeffrey Side

Couldn't you convert your publishing operation into an all free ebook affair to maximise readership potential? Perhaps (if you are not already done so) you could convert all the poetry books you published, say, ten years ago into PDF format and make them available free. I certainly would download them—or the ones that I liked. If you did that and found it worthwhile, it might encourage you to publish all your books in PDF format only, and for free. What do you think? Does that sound too outlandish?

Tony Frazer

First, that presumes that the authors, who own the copyrights, would be willing to do so. Second, it scuppers possible republication by another house, or indeed by myself in a new edition, and/or undermines future collected/selected editions by the same author. Third, I like hard-copy books. Fourth, if the press has no income at all, I can't cover the press overheads.

Don't get me wrong: I've nothing against what you do, or what Geoffrey Gatza does. But Gatza also publishes regular books, just like Shearsman, and has a huge list. If anything, Shearsman's going in the opposite direction, in so far as I'm starting a new list next year to republish out-of-print books that I think should still be available—where I can obtain the rights.

Tony

Jamie McKendrick

I'd like to speak up for those dinosaurs among us—well, literate dinosaurs—who still like books. Books, bookshops and libraries. As it happens, I bought a Shearsman book three days ago. I think publishers and booksellers and where possible writers are worth paying for.

Best,

Jamie

Tony Frazer

Thanks, Jamie!

Tony

Jamie McKendrick

De nada! It was a Spaniard.

Ricky Ray

As a lover of both books and ebooks, thought I'd offer my opinion, though it's complex and contradictory. As a consumer, I find myself more and more drawn to e-format, and by that I mean epub, mobi and azw3 (kindle), not PDF, which tends not to render well on some mainstream readers. PDF is fine for reading on the computer or tablets, but I personally don't do much collection reading there, and groan or toss the book aside when I'm constrained to PDF. I still buy physical collections new and old all the time, but in most cases, I'd rather carry it along with 5,000 poetry collections on my e-reader than carry a single book. Except when I'm on vacation, which is another story. So in my daily reading I've relegated physical books to toilet duty.

As a poet, however, if I were to have a collection accepted and published in e-format alone, a part of me would feel as if I hadn't published a book at all. I know it's untrue and nonsensical, but the feeling persists nonetheless, partially due, perhaps, to the fact that I don't think most reviewers, prize committees, etc., let alone family members, will spend time with an e-only book. On the other hand, I would hate to have the book confined to physical format and would like it published both physically and electronically, which I could then share with my network according to their reading preferences. Whether the ebook is distributed freely or sold is another matter, but I'm a pirate when it comes to file "worth" and sharing, so I'll just nod to my download finger on that.

And then, as an editor of a journal, I'm avowedly non-print, mostly because journals tend to sit unread and get shuffled along to the recycle bin or trash, and I don't want that ecological weight on my conscience.

Ricky

Patrick McManus

Interesting following this thread—just makes me realise as a book dinosaur how much larger my house would be without it's thousands of books and all converted to ebooks S P A C E!!!!!!

cheer Patrick old and grumpy

ps might also take a lot of weight off the foundations—very tempting—

Ricky Ray

Also, on the matter of sharing ebooks, there's the library angle to consider. Many of my ebooks, from publishers big and small, come from Overdrive or ProQuest libraries. This includes Carcanet, Faber, Enitharmon, Copper Canyon, BOA Editions, FSG, Norton, Coach House, Wesleyan, Auckland and other university presses, etc. From some brief research I did on the subject, both providers make it fairly easy to distribute through them, and then the books can get picked up by libraries in the UK, US, CA, AU, NZ, etc., often simply by a patron or two within the library making a request for its acquisition.

Drew Milne

Not boring. One of the most interesting and illuminating posts on this forum that I've read.

The poetry world owes you a big thank you for all the work you do, Tony, and it is clear that you do it for the art rather than for the money. A big cheer from me for you generosity.

Drew

Tim Allen

Seconded.

Pierre Joris

Triplicated...

Michael Peverett

Responding to Ricky (though with thanks to all for such an interesting thread):

I'm starting to go the same way as you. Though I prefer reading physical books, I find I now do a lot of reading in places where a smartphone is simply more convenient; for instance, in the workplace, in a queue, in the dark. I'm starting to buy new poetry titles on Kindle now.

Also, I don't have the storage space for a large standing collection of physical poetry books. So my books get moved on to the local Oxfam bookshop very quickly, even if I loved reading them. By the time I buy another book by the same poet, I'll most likely have got rid of its predecessor, thus I can't refer back to it. A library on Kindle will work much better from that point of view.

Alec Newman

Amazon seem to have stopped offering small press poetry books for sale unless the publisher pays a fee (I think they want £25 a month off me). I've also noticed that a few titles represented by Central Books aren't available. Has anybody else noticed this?

Alec.

Tony Frazer

I haven't been asked by Amazon to do this, and a cursory check just now showed a number of Shearsman titles in stock. So, Shearsman appears to be unaffected by any such change.

They did approach me about 5 years ago to move over to CreateSpace, which I would not have wanted to do as I would have to have still maintained my main printer—CreateSpace won't supply sellers than Amazon, and won't permit drop-shipping to third parties. I got away from their approach because the product wasn't good enough. At the time they couldn't offer a printed spine on any book under 120 pages, and I pointed out that 80% of my books were under this threshold and that this was unacceptable. They agreed, apologised and never came back.

Thanks to Drew and Tim for their kind responses.

With respect to Salt, I would second Drew's comments. Chris and Jen did a lot of good there, but in the end couldn't square the circle, so to speak. They needed to pay the mortgage, and put bread on the table, and I don't think one should begrudge them that. They made some mistakes towards the end, certainly, and it's clear that some authors were poorly handled—lack of communication, if nothing else. Looking back, I can see what they were trying to do: essentially, to build a kind of Bloodaxe operation, but with less funding (but lower overheads). I'm not sure that there was room for another Bloodaxe, alas. I did once tell a Senior Figure in UK poetry publishing that I knew exactly what I would have to do compete with his press, and that I thought, given time, I could probably do it. However, in order to quadruple, or even quintuple, turnover, I would need to take on work I didn't like and play a populist game with which I'm uncomfortable. To do all that I would need staff; paying for the staff would blow the increased income. Net result in financial terms: similar to now. Net result in terms of fame etc: probably increased, but who cares?

Tony

Jeffrey Side

[To Ricky Ray] You make some good points. Like you, I was reluctant to have anything I wrote published as an ebook for much the same reasons you have. But after Geoffrey Gatza published my long poem *Carrier of the Seed* as an ebook, and I found out what the downloads were after a few months (over 8,000, I think), I revised my opinion about ebook publication. For me, gaining lots of readers is preferable to holding a beautifully printed book in my hands, that doesn't sell well, and therefore remains largely unread—unless you're Heaney or Ashbery etc.

Yes, it is a shame that, as you say, reviewers and prize committees pay no attention to ebooks. But that will probably change as ebooks become more of the norm. Besides, what does it matter if your book or ebook wins a prize or not? Prizes only help to increase book sales, and ebooks don't need that, as they get lots of readers anyway.

Philip Rowland

Jeffrey, I take your point about potentially reaching more readers, but doubt that downloading an ebook is often equivalent to holding a printed book in one's hands, with the close attention that invites. I'm fairly sure, for instance, that the print issues of the poetry journal that I published at first in editions of 200 copies was read more carefully by those who did read it than by the thousands who've dropped in on the later online issues for—if the statistics are to be believed—around 5 minutes on average.

Jeffrey Side

Philip, like some readers of some books, there will be some readers of some ebooks who don't read them as carefully as others would. Surely it all depends on the individual reader and the particular ebook's content. If not, then as a literary culture we have a serious problem.

I think, eventually, any reluctant ebook readers will become acclimatised to the technology—if the history of the eventual adoption of technology by the public is taken into consideration.

Philip Rowland

Hi Jeffrey—(brief, belated response): You're probably right that "any reluctant ebook readers will eventually become acclimatised to the technology". But don't you sometimes feel there's a difference in the quality of

the experience of reading on-screen and in (book-bound) print, the latter more conducive to “deep” reading, perhaps? Or perhaps my eyes/brain are not fully acclimatised... (as the grammatical slip in my last message could also indicate)!

Best,

Philip

Jeffrey Side

Philip, I don't necessarily see such a difference—at least not in terms of “quality”. There is, of course, a different physical experience between reading a book and reading on-screen. The most obvious being that you can feel the texture of a book in your hands while reading it. For some, this, in itself, is the sole reason why they buy books. As to the psychological experiences that the contents of a book induce in one while reading it and those induced while reading on-screen, I can't say I've noticed a difference. But that might just be me.

Besides, now that devices for reading ebooks can replicate exactly the look of printed pages (even in sunlight), I think their “on-screen” display is no different than that of a printed page. With PCs the difference still pertains, but almost everyone now downloads ebooks to reading devices. Such devices also weigh less than a thick paperback book, and so are effortless to hold. I've read books, the enjoyment of which have been ruined because they are too thick and heavy. An example of which is *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. It's so thick and heavy, that reading it is unpleasant for me.

I think we have reached (or are fast approaching) a point when such devices will be the preferred choice for reading. Books will still exist, as there will still be a market for them, given that many people like the physicality and look of books. But whether books will sell as well as they do (or used to do) is another question.

Ricky Ray

As Jeffrey says, the look/experience of e-readers like Kindle feel so close to that of a physical book that I become just as invested as I would in a bound volume. Reading on computers, however, does still feel different for me and so I tend only to consume articles, individual works, etc., there. And then there are the technological advantages: the ability to modify the font size/type at will, to look up words in multiple dictionaries with a touch of the finger, to highlight and save to a document of highlights, to flip between creative works and reference works on the fly, etc. I'm not sure about it becoming the preferred choice for reading anytime soon—the vast majority of people I see reading on the subway, for instance, use physical books, as does most of my reading network, and the publishing industry has so much invested in keeping the medium alive... and the cost of most ebooks which, unlike books, have no resale value, I personally find unconscionable—one reason I'd rather see publishers like Shearsman expand to e-libraries: publisher gets paid but consumer reads for free (or taxes).

Also, on the ebook downloads, unfortunately downloads don't equal reads or even a cracking of the book, but still I agree about the potential reach. I had another life in music and free music downloads didn't translate to listens either. Many downloaders simply hoard without consuming, but then if they participate in sharing networks, interested parties find the media through them (and I was surprised at the volume of people interested in my poetry materials in this manner, including obscure stuff), which brings up another important point to consider in terms of exposure: a decent-sized segment of the potential audience won't go to a publisher's site to find books, but if they're available on distribution platforms, authorized (e.g., Overdrive/Proquest libraries and Amazon) and un- (e.g., Soulseek and torrent sites), they'll eagerly engage.

Philip Rowland

Re. “the technological advantages: the ability to modify the font size/type at will, to look up words in multiple dictionaries with a touch of the finger, to highlight and save to a document of highlights, to flip between creative works and reference works on the fly, etc.”, I was reminded of the counter-argument—the case for the disadvantages of being able to do all that—put forward in Nicholas Carr's book *The Shallows*. Which I don't have to hand, but might try to dig out...

Ricky Ray

Thanks for the reference, just obtained the book and looked over his synopsis and I'd agree that the internet can (and often does) lead to lessened engagement, but having these functionalities centralized on an e-reader actually makes me more engaged. I could look up words, highlight etc., with a book, but I almost never do (yes I'm a lazy sod ;-), and now I routinely peel back the layers, so I suppose in my case it's down to temperament, at least in part. And too there's the access to materials I could never afford otherwise... that said, I hated the idea of e-reading and resisted it for years, so you can probably smell something of the zeal of a convert in my assessments. :-)

Jeffrey Side

Ricky, yes, ebook downloads don't equal reads. I can only make estimates as to how many actual readers of my ebooks there are. This is very unscientific, but if one of my ebooks is recorded as having had, say, 10000 downloads a week, I assume that even though 10000 downloaders didn't actually read it, that number of downloads allows for still quite a lot of actual readers—possibly even more readers than would buy a physical version (i.e. a book) of that ebook a week. I'm talking about poetry books, though, not popular fiction books—the latter, presumably, sell well, anyway.

As you say, it is the sharing networks and interested parties that, at this stage in ebook history, account for their wider dissemination. I think that as time goes on, ebooks will gain more "credibility", and become widely available everywhere online.

I'm optimistic about the future of ebooks as a technology, because I can't see people living 800 years from now still arguing the case for books as being the best and only way written material should be read.

Jamie McKendrick

With the reference to Ivan Illych on the Occitan thread, I was wondering if he might shed light also on this topic. It's so long since I read him but I have the impression that his arguments about the vernacular were also arguments against the crushing force of commodification and the market, and the advocacy of different ways of valuing and exchanging both things and culture.

I know I've been talking along with others about the diminishing market for books and about contracts etc. but I'm also aware that poems belong to another order and should hold on to that otherness. As Tim said, none of us began (or continued) writing poems expecting to earn money from the art, so I fully respect Jeff's recommendation of free ebooks, and Ricky's argument for both books and electronic media, as one way of dealing with this, even if I haven't accustomed myself to any new format. Poetry needs to defend itself against a ghastly hierarchy of presses, prizes, and token prestige which threatens to overwhelm it.

The sense of poetry being other comes to the fore towards the end of Antonio Machado's Retrato:

Y al cabo, nado os debo, debeisme cuanto he escrito.
A mi trabajo acudo, con mi dinero pago
el traje que me cubre y la mansion que habito,
el pan que me alimenta y el lecho en donde yago.

(At the end of the day, I owe you nothing, but you owe me for what I've written./I go to work, and pay with my money/the clothes I wear and the house I live in./the bread that feeds me and the bed I lie in.)

The Spanish without accents, and the English just a crude 'literal'. The poet here pays for his daily requirements by doing his work (in M's case as a school teacher of French). The poems he does for free, would seem to be what the first line claims. Though it's a debt he speaks of, it's not money he means, it's something other. His working life renders unto Caesar what is Caesar's but his poems are of a different order.

While I'm actually interested in the sub-species of economics in publishing—and would very emphatically add buying from independent bookshops, who are also crucial contributors, to Drew's recommendation of buying books from the presses's websites—I think poetry needs to hold out robustly against this notion that the market is what determines its value. If anything it's its readers who do so, and by what channels those readers, few as they may be, come to it is of very secondary importance.

Jamie

Robert Hampson

I thoroughly agree with all of this.

Robert

Jamie McKendrick

That 'nado' should be 'nada'. Mistakes in English, Latin and now Spanish. Maybe I'll have more luck with Languedocian.

Jamie

Jeffrey Side

Jamie, I agree with you also.

I remember when I first started publishing free poetry ebooks, one poetry book publisher told me that, strictly speaking, what I was doing wasn't really publishing, and that only publication in book form would likely be considered as legitimate. He also said that free poetry ebooks would be seen as placing too little value on a poet's work, and, therefore, wouldn't attract that many submissions from poets. He added that free poetry ebooks (indeed poetry ebooks in general) would most probably not be eligible for nominations for the various poetry prizes, or even be likely to be reviewed by the "serious" poetry magazines and journals.

This pessimistic outlook has proven true. I used to get upset by it, until I realised the potential of free poetry ebooks to reach many readers. In the end, I came to see that the important thing isn't being nominated for poetry prizes or getting high profile reviews, but simply getting poetry out there to as many people as are interested in it free of charge.

Jaime Robles

This is a very complex issue, and ordinarily I wouldn't address it because emails will never allow for an adequate understanding of the publishing industry in all its hydra-headed glory. But since Tim asked something about why are we all blokes, I figured I'd throw in some confusing comments.

My credentials are that I have worked in every form of publishing from small to fine arts to mid-size to corporate publishing.

The following comments are not meant to comprise an argument or thesis of any kind, and are just random reactions to comments made and grossly simplified.

One big factor left out of the discussion is RISK (did someone bring that up? If so I missed it). Any publishing house takes a risk when publishing an author, especially if that author is not well-known, and that risk is about survival. Publishing a number of books not only increases the risk, it all so increases the stability of the press. One book may fail but another may succeed which means the publisher is still in business. It is also why so many publishing houses produce so many books with track records, either in English or another language. As poets we tend to think because we have created a book by devoting hours of our quickly disappearing lives to its every comma, vowel and consonant that that book has worth. And it does. It has worth to us and worth to those who love us. It may have worth (lots of it) to the editor who chose it out of a pile (and it is a rather large pile) of other manuscripts. But the other very important factor that determines the book's worth in the business side of publishing is sales. Few sales, questionable worth to the publisher's survival. Few sales, questionable worth to other authors the publisher might want to produce.

Most editors like to read. And they specialize in what they like to read. Publishers in corporate publishing have been, until the advent of Rupert Murdoch (can I really blame it on him? Probably), editors in a past life.

Most distributors and publishers provide detailed accounts of books sold, books unsold, and returns (which are the same as losses and difficult to control or predict) on which they base their royalties. Those who don't provide those accounts are usually small publishers, or idealistic starting-out publishers. They also have trouble with royalties.

Sometimes it's difficult to determine the finances behind sales. I'll repeat an example I've mentioned before. Several years ago, UC Press closed its poetry program, which was run by a former poet laureate and two prize winning poets. These editors were committed to the work they chose and the books were beautifully designed. The CFO who crunched the figures said the poetry program was running at a 160% loss. How is that even possible? The CFO did not include endowments to the program, which were considerable. Financially, these beautifully made, carefully chosen books could not make adequate sales on their own without subsidy.

Most academic books these days are produced digitally as a kind of p.o.d., and the state of the art is pretty high, except for museum quality art books, which have always required specialist production teams.

Don't compare the publishing industry with the art market. Apples and oranges. Or more precisely, apples and orangutans. I am reminded of Broodthaers piece in which he says after 10 years of not being able to make a living as a poet and writer, he decided to become an artist.

I like physical books because I can write in them with a pencil.

Got an ongoing problem with publishing? Try publishing someone else's book. Try publishing five of your friends' manuscripts. From reading the manuscript to selling it at book fairs or talking a distributor into taking the books and selling them for you.

As for the unscrupulous ... they exist. We have a fleet of them inhabiting the White House at present (do you have some at No. 10?). Usually they go for higher stakes than poetry (see Broodthaers re: his galleries <http://www.weserburg.de/index.php?id=913&L=1>).

Over and out,

Jaime

Michael Peverett

Books bought and books read don't equate in any format. Anyone who browses second-hand shelves knows that many of the second-hand poetry books show every sign of being unopened. Early in this thread Tony mentioned R. F. Langley's Journals, just one of the many books I've bought over the years and never got round to reading before the time came to send them to Oxfam.

I've read some eBooks attentively. In the early days I used to print them out, though that seems like weird transitional behaviour now.

Attentive reading is rare. When it does happen there's always an air of serendipity about it. I began writing about poetry in order to compel me to attend to the same poem for a long time. Not always the best thing to do. For some poets' work speed-reading is almost better, you see what's worth seeing more clearly in that kinetic glancing way.

Tim Allen

This is a whole subject in its own right Michael—the psychology behind book buying followed by reading or not reading or delay.

If I buy a novel 9 times out of 10 I will read it, if not immediately then probably within two years. When I buy a poetry book this doesn't happen, it is more like 1 time out of 10 will I read the whole thing within a day or two of getting it. The vast majority entail dipping in and out for a month or so from which about half of them will eventually end up being read right through and half of them not looked at again except for reference or whatever—even if I like them. Lack of time is a big factor, but so is overload and the problems demanded by the actual reading—the brain does not work in the same way when reading poetry, it requires its own space.

I think I've told you before that this was one of the reasons I stopped reviewing—it was destroying my ability to read poetry healthily.

Cheers

Tim

Jeffrey Side

Good to hear from you, Jaime. I thought you'd left the list. I didn't know you had worked in publishing. Yes, risk is a major decisive factor for all book publishers, and it does limit what they can make available to the public.

Jeffrey Side

Michael, yes, when I used to buy a lot of poetry books secondhand I noticed their pristinely smooth spines. And in the days of remainder bookshops, their shelves were always full of poetry books that could not be sold. They were still quite expensive though—around £10 in 2002. Had they been £1 more sales would have accrued.

Philip Rowland

Jeffrey—not sure if your comment was referring in part to mine, and this is marginal to the main discussion, but just to be clear: I'm not arguing for books as "the best and only way written material should be read"—or I wouldn't have moved the journal I edit online, to be able to continue getting the work out there, potentially to a wider audience, and for free.

(See <https://noonpoetry.com/issues/> if you fancy reading some really short poems.)

Sure, plenty of books, like downloads, go unread, and the 'quality' of the reading experience, when it happens, is a quite variable and subjective matter.

Jamie McKendrick

Hi Jaime, it's welcome to have this clear perspective, as with Tony's posts, from someone with an extensive history of publishing, and it's worth having the element of 'risk' made explicit, and explained so sharply. I think that risk has been implicit, though, in a number of the posts. Even the list of recent poetry press closures here make that risk evident.

I'm wondering whether, despite its population being five times that of the UK, things are even riskier for poetry presses in the States. Enzensberger said with remarkable precision that poetry can count on 1,354 readers in every country, the same whether in Iceland or the US. (US has a population 1000x larger than Iceland.) Though a witticism, it made hide a bit of truth. Whatever, those CU losses are quite spectacular.

The question remains—when relatively large amounts of money are poured into supporting poetry presses whether the recipients are using the money wisely and whether the funding bodies, for us the AC are applying the right criteria, and how that process could be wiser or righter.

The reference I made to the visual arts was more by way of contrast than comparison. I'm aware of the differences and of why they're not really comparable, but I don't think there's any harm in looking out from the burrow at greener pastures. Actually in many ways I prefer the burrow.

Of course. It's the possibility of using a pencil that changes things. I should have thought of that. Likewise. I won't use a biro on books...some kind of superstition Joe Orton obviously didn't have.

Just a coda on returned books—those I suppose are what supply the remainders flogged off cheap to outlet bookshops. A thing that pisses off small bookshops who may be selling at £12 a book that people can find a hundred yards away for £2. One bookshop owner I know is reluctant to stock Faber for this reason, but there are other presses doing the same.

Best,

Jamie

Jeffrey Side

Philip, I wasn't referring to your comment but to criticisms of ebooks in some publishing quarters. My apologies if I gave that impression. Thanks for the link to your site. I'm glad we share the same poetic objectives. Do you also write poetry?

David Lace

You can make notes on electronic books too. See this:

<https://computers.tutsplus.com/tutorials/beyond-highlighting-how-to-get-the-most-from-your-annotations--cms-20013>

You can get them with electronic pens attached too... I think. These pens do exist. I've seen them being used on iPads.

Jaime Robles

Hi Jamie,

1,354 seems high. More like 534, I imagine. But that higher figure is an average, I'd guess, including writers over centuries of time and The Kalevala. I'm not sure about risk in the US v GB. We have heaps of poetry publishers, most of whom fall into the no-advances, no-royalties, publishing-for-love category and most of whom are magazine publishers. No aspersions there, from me. I created my first press at the age of 24, and like my partners was totally oblivious to anything about publishing outside of the obvious fact that you turn manuscripts into books. A list of US publishing houses, primarily for magazines but also some book publishers, can be found at the Council of literary magazines and publishers: <http://www.clmp.org/>. Some of these only publish one or two books a year.

The caveat about comparing art and poetry was actually in response to Luke.

Unless corporate publishing has changed its policy, which it does, returns are losses; they are pulped. Remaindered books are those that were left in the warehouse past their sell-by date. Most large publishing houses have limits to how long they will promote and store books.

The NEA (US equivalent of AC) has a general policy not to question artists of any kind because it becomes difficult to determine the line between oversight and influence. They do require a financial accounting of how their money was used, but that's it. This question of oversight v. influence has caused amazing havoc in Congress, which budgets the NEA. Congress is a notoriously conservative body with its fair share of right-wing religious nuts, so every once in a while (say when a "Piss Christ" is made using the money they allocate) all hell breaks loose over the arts program. The NEA is constantly struggling to survive.

Yes, I'm happier with explicit, otherwise I get confused. Sharp explanations have got me lots of trouble over the years, I try to temper it with humor (of a sort). I don't seem to be able to burnish my language, except by writing obscurely nuanced poetry.

And Tim: In the US, corporate publishers have expected authors to do the bulk of their promotion since the 1990s, and since all US corporate publishing is owned by businessmen outside the US, it's probably safe to say that is the policy in Europe and the UK as well. Corporate publishers seldom promote books past a certain formula of cost, which is then figured as part of the production; it is a very small percentage. Legendary editors, like Max Perkins, simply are that: legendary. Tony is the closest thing we have to Perkins, and he's not in corporate publishing. Perhaps such editors also still exist in other parts of the world, like South Asia and Micronesia, perhaps. An author's desirability is partly determined by the extent of their outreach: do they have a website, will they travel to read, will they pick up the cost of traveling to read, etc?

Hi Jeffrey, and thanks ever so much! For all. Yes, I'm back for the mo.

J

Jamie McKendrick

Sharp I meant in a good way! And thanks for this further information and for clearing up my misunderstanding about remaindered books.

Thinking about the Enzensberger Postulate, it suddenly strikes me that the figure 1,354 is probably pretty close to the number of poetry books published annually in the UK. If the publication rate is higher, which wouldn't surprise me, and that indeed is the readership, then we really are in trouble.

Best,

Jamie

Luke [his surname wasn't shown]

Just a note to say that visited a local independent bookstore, and was somewhat disappointed that most of its (small) poetry section was quite conventional. Seemed like you had to attend readings or other events there, to get much of a taste of what can be found on-line. Not necessarily a bad thing, I was just surprised.

Luke

Philip Rowland

Hi Jeffrey—yes (as far as I can). My collection, *Something Other Than Other*, which came out last year from Isobar Press, a small press specialising in English-language writing from Japan, can be found on its site

<http://isobarpress.com/>

along with recent titles I'd recommend such as *Kotan Chronicles*, by Genzo Sarashina, proletarian poetry from the 20s and 30s about the Ainu and Japanese settlers, and a version of *Il Porto Sepolto* by Ungaretti (its impact partly due to the influence of Japanese poetry) by Andrew Fitzsimons, a poet who is also based here in Tokyo.

These are not available as ebooks, but excerpts from some of the books are available online (hopefully leading to purchase of books in some cases!)

All the best,

Philip

Tim Allen

Well yes I know Jamie, but as I said some, poets are just not in a position to do the bulk of their own promotion, however much they might want to. This obviously skews the sales towards those who are poetry activists and networkers, but of course there is no correlation between the quality of the poetry and being a poetry activist or networker—which is not something I've thought about before. Interesting. Just what undiscovered jewels are out there?

Good to hear from you again by the way.

Cheers

Tim

Jamie McKendrick

Jaime not Jamie—but I see it's just a typo.

Tim Allen

Sorry. Yes a typo. Sorry Jaime Sorry Jamie.

Jeffrey Side

Thanks Philip. I'll check that link out.

I didn't realise you were in Japan. Do you know Jane Joritz-Nakagawa, by any chance? She's an American poet who has lived in Japan for many years. She's written a few articles for me, and I've published, as an ebook, a monograph she wrote.

Philip Rowland

Hi Jeffrey—yes, I know Jane Joritz-Nakagawa—not very well, but we've met at events now and again, and read together in Kyoto several years ago. I think she has an anthology of poetry by expatriate women poets coming out soon.

Another Japan-based poet (and translator of modernist and avant-garde Japanese poetry) you might find interesting is Eric Selland: see

http://isobarpress.com/?page_id=161

where there's also a link to a conversation between him and Jane, from 2012.

Incidentally, having mentioned *The Shallows: How the Internet is changing the way we think, read and remember* (2010) earlier in this thread, and now dug it out, here's a paragraph which sums up the author's view on the Kindle:

"When a printed book—whether a recently published scholarly history or a two-hundred-year-old novel—is transferred to an electronic device connected to the Internet, it turns into something very like a Web site. Its words become wrapped in all the distractions of the networked computer. Its links and other digital enhancements propel the reader hither and yon. It loses what the late John Updike called its 'edges' and dissolves into the vast, roiling waters of the Net. The linearity of the printed book is shattered, along with the calm attentiveness it encourages in the reader. The high-tech features of devices like the Kindle and Apple's new iPad may make it more likely that we'll read e-books, but the way we read them will be very different from the way we read printed editions."

Jeffrey Side

Philip thanks for that link. It looks interesting.

I heard Jane was not well. I emailed her yesterday to see how she was, but have had no reply. I hope she is ok.

Thanks for the quote from the book. I can see how such a reading experience could occur with some presentations of ebooks. Some could, indeed, be designed to be like websites etc. At the level I operate on, though, my ebooks are presented in a PDF format, so look exactly like printed books.

I think that an ebook's presentation largely depends on the device you are reading it on. Some people read ebooks on their mobile phones. In such cases, an ePub format is more suitable than a PDF format, because mobile phones have a smaller screen (or reading area) than bespoke reading devices such as an iPad or kindle. The ePub format is not an ideal way to view poetry though, at least not to my taste. But I realise that we live in an age where technology rules, and so I will start converting my ebooks to an ePub format—or to be more accurate, offer both an ePub and a PDF version of them.

I don't know how much longer the ePub format will last, though, as mobile phone screens are getting larger and more suited to a PDF format.
