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The 6 Biggest Changes in Publishing

Kate Gale · Thursday, March 21st, 2013

Has publishing changed much in the last twenty years? You bet. Here are six significant changes.
1. Because the big publishers in New York are diminished and are publishing fewer books, many books that used to be considered appropriate for commercial presses are now coming out from indie presses.
2. The number of manuscripts gushing out of the MFA graduate world has greatly increased. Each of the thousands of graduates has a book he/she would like to see published so he/she can get a job teaching in an MFA program so more people can write more manuscripts.
3. The way books are produced and printed has changed completely.
4. The way books are publicized has changed completely.
5. The way books are distributed has changed.
6. Bookstores are nearly gone.

Publishers

There are still three groups of publishers, but their role in the publishing world has changed. There are the New York publishers, the university presses and the independent presses. The big New York publishers were known for sending authors on book tours, paying massive advances and working with agents. Those publishers are down to the Big Five and they take far fewer literary books than they did before and only a tiny fraction of the poetry being published comes out of New York.

The university presses published many of the books published for an academic market, and they continue to do so, but many of them publish significant lists of poetry and prose as well.

The independent boutique presses publish poetry, short fiction and literary fiction, but the volume has changed. Publishers like Graywolf and Milkweed publish books that sell in quantities one used to attribute to New York publishers.

The MFA gush

At this point, the volume of poetry and prose in search of publication is enormous. The MFA programs in this country create more and more writers who want to get a book published on a regular basis, and there is a yawning chasm between the number of books being written, and the number of books that the publishing world can publish. That gap also includes the number of books being written vs. the number of books being purchased and read.

The young students milling around the annual AWP conference and bookfair are often hoping to find an editor, but sometimes cannot afford to go around and load up on books. We need fewer writers and more readers. I like the idea of MFA programs encouraging their graduates to be

lifelong readers and writers but to find some other way of making a living rather than teaching. Working in the real world is a good thing for a writer.

Book production and printing

Allen Kornblum of Coffee House remembers working with a letter press. He's writing a book on the history of publishing which goes back to cuneiform. By the time Red Hen started in 1994, we had a computer and we mailed camera ready copy of our books and huge four color separations of the cover off to our printers in the Midwest. Now, the book is laid out, with cover and text created in InDesign and uploaded to printers around the world, sometimes in China. When the first printing runs out, we can keep the book in print by printing fewer than five hundred at a time thus saving storage space and printing costs.

Publicity

Publicity involved reviews, book tours, and, in an ideal world, getting media about the book. This has changed in format but not in substance. We still want reviews, it's just that many of those reviews are online. We still print galleys and hand-deliver them to *The New York Times, Library Journal, Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly.*

But we also get reviews online. A review from *The Rumpus* can change a book's future. We still encourage authors to do as many events as possible, not because they sell thousands of books at each event, but because each event is accompanied by a number of online "events" such as Facebook postings, Tweeting, and blogging, and those mentions add up to an internet presence for the book. It's getting the word out there.

I like to see readings with significant pairings. Find out who would be the best advocate for you as an author and for your book and read with them. We still like articles around the author, but those are far more likely to happen online than in print. Publicity has become more author-driven and more personality-driven. Someone who can perform well in public, who looks good on YouTube is likely to get more events which can lead to more internet chatter and thus more sales. It isn't enough to be a good writer, you must also be willing to get out there and perform.

Book distribution

This is the biggest question an author should want to know when dealing with a press. How are will the book be distributed? There are presses with no national or even local distribution. If your market is your local state or county, you may be able to function without distribution, but most publishers are going to need national distribution.

When we entered publishing, there were a number of independent book distributors including PGW, Inbooks, Consortium and Small Press Distribution, all of whom are still around. Now most distribution is done by third party distribution deals. That means a larger press which has something in common with the independent press does their sales and distribution along with their own. For example, the sales reps for the University Press of New England are also responsible for Four Way Books sales. Red Hen is distributed by the University of Chicago Press along with a number of other presses, such as University of Pittsburg Press, Getty Publications, Northwestern University Press, and others. The University of Chicago sales reps deal with independent bookstores, Barnes & Noble, wholesalers, and Amazon, thus making our books available nationally.

Bookstores

Let's talk about bookstores. There is, first of all, the romance of bookstores. I have fallen in love in bookstores. In every city or town I've lived in or visited since I was eighteen, my first act in settling myself was to find the nearest library and bookstore…. Changing Hands, Tattered Cover, Ruminator, Square Books, Politics and Prose, Sisterhood Bookstore, Bread and Roses, Midnight

Special, Duttons North Hollywood, Duttons Brentwood, Earthling Bookstore in Santa Barbara and I've even had a favorite Borders, a favorite Barnes & Noble.

These bookstores anchored my creative and intellectual life, gave me something to think about, put me in a place where I would find my tribe. And in every bookstore, there would be a happening. A moment when I would find some author I had never read, and fall in love. I remember finding Doris Lessing, Calvino, picking up my first Calvino book and thinking "Yum!"

That intersection is not gone. It's just changed venues. But, getting the young book lover to discover your book is going to take more than just getting it into the hands of the right book seller. There is more noise than ever in our culture, more interaction with technology than the written word, and more media to compete with.

Where you want people to hear about your book is the same place where they are going to actually buy it. You want to recreate that moment in the bookstore when the young book lover discovers Calvino. You want your book to be talked about all over the internet, because then when your reader discovers the book in an online review or a blog or a Tweet, they're only a click away from being on Amazon and buying the book.

What should writers do?

It's a good time to be a writer. More good books are being published than ever before. Getting those books out to readers is now in your hands. It was always frustrating to have the success or failure of your book in the hands of a few people in New York who might not understand what it is you were trying to do. Now, the power is in your hands. It's a brave new world for writers and for publishers, and it's an exciting one.

Images: Top, the author's daughter working a Red Hen Press event while in graduate school; bottom, readers browse books at Red Hen's 18th anniversary luncheon.

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