

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Is a Small Press Worth It?

Chiwan Choi · Thursday, October 4th, 2012



It was the day. I mean the actual day of the book release, a party scheduled for that night at La Cita, the great bar in downtown LA where we'd released our first book, the debut poetry collection from Kim Calder and launched Writ Large Press. That party, that book release, had been such a great success, with family and friends and downtown neighbors who'd come to support us. We sold a great amount of books (about 150 copies), made new friends, and impressed people with the quality of our first title (both in regards to the content and the design). Simply put, we felt like we knew what we were doing and the future looked fantastic.

But now, it was the day. The day we were to release our second book. Invites had gone out. People were eager. [Aaron Henne](#) is a beloved local playwright and teacher and his fans were ready. The bar has brought in extra staff to work that night because literary crowds drink gallons. We know what we're doing! If only the books would arrive...

I had been on the phone with Aaron all week, filling him in on the status of the books.

"Still not here," I kept saying, trying not to freak him out by letting him sense how freaked out I was.

That morning, it was the same.

"Still not here," I said. It was followed by a silence from both of us.

"Okaaaay," Aaron finally let out.

"I'm sure it will be here," I said, "in the next couple of hours."

And they were. Some time between all the pacing around our 700 square foot apartment and way too early in the day glass of wine, the books arrived. I ran down to the UPS truck and hauled 5 heavy boxes back up to the apartment/office. I dialed Aaron's number and waited for him to pick up as I began to tear at the tape of the first box.

"Is it there?"

"They're here," I said. "The books are here."

"Oh my god," he said. "How do they look?"

I lifted apart the top of the box and tore away the [packaging](#) paper up top, revealing the beautiful cover that Judeth had designed. I let out a sigh of relief and realized how much I just needed to laugh.

"They look horrible," I joked, "miserable. All wrong."

"Um..."

"Just kidding," I said. And we joined each in our laughter.

Then I opened the book and started flipping through the pages. My skin was suddenly covered in cold sweat. I flipped through the pages again.

"Oh wait," I said. "Not kidding."

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In less than three weeks, we are releasing our fifth title, *History of Butoh*, poetry by Khadija Anderson, a poet and butoh dancer who lives in Altadena. It is that time of being nervous, frantic, and helpless, while still trying to get through the course of our individual days doing what each of us do to make a few bucks and pay the bills. The order for books have been put in and we're waiting for another paycheck so we can get these limited edition CDs that the poet's DJ son from Seattle has made for us.

It's been about two weeks since we received the stunning proof copy, made the necessary changes and corrections (because no matter how many times we proofed the manuscript before sending it in to the printer, some glaring errors stare at you in the face as soon as you hold a physical book in your hands), and resent to the printer. Now we are waiting, trying to let go of all this anxiety, trying not to get overwhelmed by the feeling of impending doom that hovers for weeks before each of our book release. We don't want to eat 200 books and about a 1000 bucks again, as we did with the botched initial printing of *You Already Know*, courtesy of a missing blank page (yes, a missing blank page that threw off all the rest of the pages).

Sometimes it gets too much. Each year Judeth and I ask ourselves if it's worth it, all this stress and hustle to publish literary books not inspired by tweets or memes in the middle of Los Angeles. I often joke with people who congratulate me on my own books, on how well I'm doing with all the book touring and all, that oh yes, the way things are rolling now, I'll be raking in DOZENS of dollars in no time!

Is that worth it?

It feels like we're trying to make a bathtub of gold appear out of a big bucket of nothing, especially when we're holding off on paying rent for a few days so we can pay the printer, when we are trying to hustle and beg our way into a location for book events without paying. Trying to build up excitement and interest for the book release party in a city where, we are told, people just don't give a shit about literature, and, you know, are afraid to come downtown. As Mike the Poet, a writer we'll be publishing next year, says, "Urban alchemists. That's what we are."

Is it all worth it?

At his one Los Angeles stop during his current book tour, Junot Díaz was asked about what he latches on to that allows him to continue the often painful act of writing. "I want to leave some art behind," Diaz said. "For my community. They deserve it."

Yes. We want to leave some art behind. That's what makes it worth it. After we are all gone, the books will be here. That will have mattered. And who knows, if we continue to hustle, publish the writers we love, release gorgeous books, and throw in some Steve Jobs-like vision and mix it with some Marlo Stanfield/Stringer Bell ruthless scheming, we might yet be rolling in those dozens of dollars. And even a dozen more.

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