

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Should We Start a Small Press Cartel?

Chiwan Choi · Thursday, November 8th, 2012

On Saturday afternoon, I attended the launch of the [Indie Shelves Initiative](#) at what is quickly becoming (if it already hasn't) the most important bookstore in Los Angeles, The Last Bookstore. It's a project that Billy Mark of the bookstore, Mike Sonksen, and myself started meeting about, planning, and discussing early in the summer. Our goal was to create a space within the bookstore to continually feature the many indie presses of this city and the fantastic local writers, mostly published independently.

I was happy to see the big turnout. And the reading itself was exactly what we were hoping, an eclectic mix of writers of all genres and backgrounds. And along with [the very nice LA Weekly piece written by Joseph Lapin](#) regarding LA's thriving indie presses (and which included Writ Large Press), it feels like a momentum and an opportunity is brewing.

One of the scariest things about joining forces and combining efforts with other people in the same business as you, whether it's selling coffee or publishing books or superstar basketballing, is that your success will get diluted. But as I like to say, we're over here fighting to get the biggest slice of a nothing pie. But in many ways, we don't have a choice.

Last year, I started thinking about creating some sort of indie press cartel. At the time, I was trying to think of ways to cut out the distributor and become our own ad-hoc distribution network. Small presses in New York could help a small press in San Francisco get their books to the east coast. And so on and so on. I still think it's a great idea, even if it would require huge amounts of work and other logistical problems. But I think it goes beyond mere distribution.

As is, we don't really have a market. We are fighting for crumbs, for dollars that aren't going to major new releases or old books that just got turned into some film starring six versions of Tom Hanks. We have to create our own market and to do that, we have to mobilize as a collective. It serves no big purpose to get a copy of our book on some shelf here, another copy squeezed into some back shelf over there, telling customers that we too are part of this market. We have to carve out our own space and present ourselves not as an option to buying the big book, but almost as a completely different activity.

But just because we're being touchy-feely collaborative, it doesn't mean we should give up the competitive spirit, both against the established players and against each other. I remember the writing workshop I used to attend, how my best friend in the group, who also happened to be the best writer in my opinion, and I would battle every week to see who had the better piece.

The whole idea of carving out a new indie press market instead of trying to fit into whatever tiny hole the big presses allow us is to control what we produce, how we do it, how we sell it and to dictate where it goes. Instead of trying to make a netbook that competes with the existing leaders of

the market, you create an iPad and disrupt.

As important, in the way Writ Large Press thinks, is for us (meaning indies presses) to continue competing with each other at the same time we are collaborating. Try to outdo each other in the events we put on, the writers we find, the books we design, the marketing strategies we use, the new territories we reach.

And then share it all.



Last year, we were happy to be part of [the Smokin' Hot Indie Lit Lounge](#) that the great Kaya Press [organized](#) at the LA Times Book Festival, a group table where many different publishers could take turns showcasing our authors and books. And now The Last Bookstore has shown us their game with the Indie Shelves Initiative. Because in that writing workshop I was talking about earlier, my friend and I would always end the class in an agreement about who was better and then go have beers.

Writ Large Press is mulling over some plans to outdo those two. And after that, somebody else will. And we'll say, "Damn, you beat us this round!" And come back with more innovative ideas that will ultimately benefit all of us in creating and establishing our collective presence.

Small presses – GAME ON! Who's with us?

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