Cultural Daily

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Why Do We Publish?

Chiwan Choi · Thursday, March 21st, 2013

No matter what you do for a living, I guess it's only natural for development in one part of your life to affect how you function in another part of your life. Maybe you give up eating meat, which makes you question your job at a steakhouse. Or you become the caretaker of a precocious orphan, therefore you think you should stop being a hitman.

Well, I'm experiencing something like that right now.

Recently, I made what may be a drastic decision in my life (it's still hard to say how drastic): I decided that, after 25 years of writing poetry, I was done with it. I won't be writing any more poems and I won't be reading from my poetry books at any future events. There were many factors that went into the decision, but here in this column, I just want to talk about how that is making me question my role as a publisher.

One of the factors in my decision is my love/hate relationship with the world of poetry publishing. Actually, it is pretty much hate, with a bit of love sprinkled in now and again. It infuriates me to no end. And it's not about the quality of the publications or about the poems they publish or about how The New Yorker is an asshole who will only publish writers named John Updike with an east coast address. Solutions to such problems are easy—make better publications and reject all submissions from John Updike.

The issue I'm having (and have had since I first started writing poetry) is a philosophical one. Mainly this: *what is the purpose of writing and publishing poetry?*

Obviously, all of us will have different reasons why we do the things we do, and also obvious that the answer I came to made me give up poetry.

Which leads to: how do I reconcile myself and this new take on poetry and publishing with my role as a publisher?

We've been fortunate enough to publish some of the absolute best poetry collections I have ever read. Billy Burgos. Khadija Anderson. Kim Calder. Melora Walters. They are poets that I would admire and praise as four of the best writers working in poetry anywhere in the world. My own book, which we also published, isn't too shabby either.

But if all those manuscripts had come to me right now, today, how would I feel about publishing them?

Look. Basically, what I've been wondering is how publishing helps/hurts readership. Is a writer going to have a bigger readership by having a book published by a traditional publisher or poems published in a subscription journal or is that actually going to make a writer's possible reader pool smaller?

For example, a writer sells the English rights to his novel to the UK arm of a major publisher. The

publisher puts the book out in England, and because it’s an amazing and unique literary novel, it doesn’t sell all too well. Therefore, the publisher decides it would be a losing proposition to release the book in the US because the writer is even less known in the US than he is in the UK.

Now, the writer wants to put the book out in the US with somebody else. He doesn’t even want money for it. He just wants to find more readers in the US.

Guess what? The big publisher won’t allow him, claiming they hold the English rights even though they themselves have no plans to ever release the book in the US. They, as publishers, are actively and intentionally reducing readership for the book.

Obviously, this is a specific case, but it brings me back to the conflict I’m going through with poetry and with my own writing, which is, what do we mean when we say publishing?

I am excited about the books we have in our publishing schedule for the next two years or so. But for now, I have to rethink what Writ Large Press is doing with and for the writers, what it means to publish books, whether we are helping or hurting writers by publishing them.

Don’t get me wrong. All the events that we have been planning and participating in have been great and fit with a certain mentality and philosophy we have tried to live by. We are all proud of projects like the recent Grand Park Downtown BookFest. But it’s just that time right now to ask the one big question we don’t ask ourselves enough, especially when things are going well:

Why are we doing this?

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