

Carson & McSweeney's Revisited

THIS COLUMN comprises addendums to two previous columns, on Anne Carson and McSweeney's. When researching Anne Carson for my column on her book *Nox* (see *Amphora* 155), I came across a title of hers that I had not previously been aware of as part of her *Wikipedia* entry. The title was not listed in her other publications. The citation read "*Wonderwater* (Alice Offshore) (volume two, a collaboration with Roni Horn) (2004) Steidl."

Curiosity kicked in, and after I finished the Carson column I did some digging and discovered that the work in question was part of a four-volume box set comprising collaborations between American artist Rondi Horn and four writer-artists—Louise Bourgeois, Helene Cixous, John Waters and Carson. I knew Bourgeois and Waters and would be hard-pressed to come up with two more disparate artists. Bourgeois, the recently deceased iconic feminist artist (one of whose spider sculptures is installed outside the National Gallery in Ottawa), appears to be worlds apart from Waters, the Baltimore film director and social commentator noted for his immersion in sleaze and bad taste (see his films *Pink Flamingos* and *Hairspray*). Intrigued, I quickly determined that the book was not in print and no copies were listed on AbeBooks.

Rather than search further online, I decided that the book would be one of the titles I would look for in London on an upcoming visit. A new focus for a visit to a book capital is always a good idea, likely to expand book knowledge and to introduce you to new and intriguing bookshops.

I should have been aware of Roni Horn, and I am certain in hindsight that I have seen her work in galleries. Her artistic projects are diverse, including large installations, photo-based work and well over 20 books and as many catalogues. I checked for *Wonderwater* at the excellent shops in the Tate Modern, the Whitechapel and Serpentine galleries. (The latter two, I determined, were run by Germany-based Walther Koenig Books, which claims to be Europe's

largest independent bookshop.) A number of other Horn titles, including a couple published by Steidl, were present, but no *Wonderwater*.

While visiting Cecil Court I noticed a new shop, Tenderproduct, with contemporary art and books. No Roni Horn, but I was directed to Zwemmer's at 80 Charing Cross Road, which I had visited in the past. It turned out Zwemmer's is no more but the retail space still specializes in art books and is run by Koenig, which has apparently cornered the art book market in London. The staff member could not check the German warehouse because his computer connection was down, but he did helpfully note that some of Horn's books "run into the thousands" and that I should be prepared to pay a lot. He suggested that I check Claire de Rouen Books at 175 Charing Cross, "next to Foyles above the sex shop."

Finding the sex shop was easy, and climbing narrow stairs I entered an empty room with a doorway at the far end marked by a stack of *Vice* magazines. Through the door was a delightful bookstore featuring books on photography and fashion and a surprising number of browsers, given the tucked-away location. Here too were other books by Horn but still no *Wonderwater*.

On the trip home I was feeling a bit discouraged about filling this gap in my Carson collection. I returned to the Internet, and while there were still no copies listed on AbeBooks, a Google search turned up two copies for sale on Amazon.com at \$200 and \$290, respectively. I momentarily balked at paying \$200 for a set published at \$60 six years ago, but I proceeded. No doubt the words of the Koenig clerk alluding to a price in the thousands of pounds tipped the scale.

Two weeks later a near-fine set arrived thanks to Exquisite Corpse in Texas. Revisiting online listings for *Wonderwater* six weeks later when writing this column, I found the cheapest Amazon copy was \$647, with another copy listed at \$999. Alibris had one listed at \$1,100, suggesting the Koenig clerk might yet be proven correct in his price assessment.

The set itself is an intriguing text work, with Horn's four collaborators writing (or "annotating," to use Horn's phrase) in response to prompts from the artist in the form of

single words or a brief phrase. A bonus for the Carson collector is an envelope of drawings by the writer; *Hö comix*. A remaining bibliographic mystery is that the box of the set I purchased is black, while every photo of it on the Internet, all clearly derived from the Steidl catalogue entry, which is still online, is white.

Wonderwater is an example of a title that is likely to be more elusive because buyers (collectors and libraries) with different collection focuses are drawn to it. In this instance it is not difficult to imagine Horn, Bourgeois, Carson and even Waters enthusiasts needing the set. I am not so sure Cixous will attract collecting interest *but* I stand to be corrected.

I recently purchased *The Art of McSweeney's* (Chronicle, 2010) and wish I had had it to hand when I discussed the press in *Amphora* 153. A heavily illustrated oral history on the publisher, the volume captures the motivations and modus operandi of a collective devoted to the pleasures of the book as object. Coming as he does from a generation much more likely to be immersed in the digital world, McSweeney's devotion to books as "things we want to keep" is heartening:

We came together and remain together
only out of a mutual love of words ...
and are committed to the neverending
process of reinventing bookmaking to best
guarantee those words live and last.

The Art of McSweeney's goes well beyond the visual to encompass fascinating details on author relations, editing, design, production and budgeting for many of their titles, including all issues of the journal up to number 31.

Reproductions of late-19th and early-20th-century book covers and title pages from the press "reference shelf" point to the inspiration for the look of many McSweeney's titles. Of particular interest are descriptions of the interactions between designers and printers, most notably Oddi, the Icelandic printer for the majority of early McSweeney's titles. Detailed printing specifications are provided along with the

costing for many of the "bells and whistles" (to use their phrase) that have made McSweeney's productions unique. For example, I now know that leatherette case wrap will cost \$2.30 per unit and a fold-out poster-sized dust jacket with printing on both sides (see the volume under review as an example) will cost \$0.27 per unit.

Of particular interest to the collector are the details behind variant states for some titles. For example, *McSweeney's* number 11 appeared in three different coloured leatherette covers for the simple reason that the printer didn't have stock of one colour for the full press run. It turns out that the orange cover of 1,800 copies will be much more elusive than the black cover of 9,000 copies.

The third printing of Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* in red was 10,000 copies but will also prove elusive (in these parts at least) as most of the print run went to Ohio State University, which assigned the book to its entire incoming freshman class. This is the kind of deep background that sets a collector's adrenaline surging.

All in all, *The Art of McSweeney's* provides fascinating insights into a seemingly quixotic publishing enterprise. Highly recommended.

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~ Paul Whitney is city librarian at the Vancouver Public Library.

REVIEWS

*Through Darkling Air:
The Poetry of Richard Outram*

BY PETER SANGER
(GASPEREAU PRESS, 2010, \$65.95)

IT HAS BEEN EIGHT YEARS since the last publication of the Gauntlet Press was issued. Peter Sanger's study *Through Darkling Air: The Poetry of Richard Outram* has brought the Gauntlet Press, the private press run by Outram and his wife, Barbara Howard, back into people's consciousness.

Will Ransom, in *Private Presses and Their Books*, recognized the Gauntlet Press as a