

Hope for the Future

CHARLOTTE ASHLEY reports on the “Book as Object” at Book Camp T.O. 2010, uncovering untapped opportunities for small presses in meeting the needs of “regular readers.”

ON SATURDAY, MAY 15, 2010, the University of Toronto’s iSchool hosted the second annual Book Camp T.O., an “informal unconference” whose theme this year was “Book Publishing Is Going Digital, Now What?” Upwards of 275 participants turned up, representing every facet of the book world from writers, teachers and librarians to app designers, bloggers and inventors.

In its first year, Book Camp Toronto sought to address “the future of books, writing, publishing, and the book business in the digital age.” This year the conclusion was foregone—publishing is going digital. Now what? In this context, the 11:30 am talk on “Book as Object” was fascinating. The room was packed with people. They lined the walls and sat on the floor. Maybe word got around that Anstey Book Binding president Neil Stewart had brought along a free handout, a beautifully bound blank notebook that reads “NICE BOOK CAMP BOOK” on the front cover. More likely I think participants were experiencing a bout of nostalgia. Few of us went into English literature or publishing with the intention of bringing about the obsolescence of the codex, but years of reality checks later that’s what most of us are doing for a living. I think people wanted to hear there’s a future for the object, even if most of us won’t really be working with them.

Certainly, the book-objects brought in by Neil Stewart and his partner (and Folded and Gathered Press publisher) Aurélie Collings were not the sorts of things most publishers could ever create. Stewart is a master printer and fine bookbinder who, 15 years ago, bought

Anstey Book Binding, a bindery with a 128-year history in Toronto. Today Anstey works to order, producing limited, fine letterpress editions for clients that include Gagosian Gallery, Bruce Mau and McClelland & Stewart. The bindery employs 18 people, among them printers, sewers, binders and designers. This is high-end craftwork in addition to publishing. Stewart told us of a limited run he did of Margaret Atwood’s *The Door* featuring a lino block print “keepsake” done by Atwood “in her kitchen with a spoon.” Two were auctioned off for charity and fetched, according to Stewart, \$1,600 (Abebooks.com reports they went for \$2,000 and \$1,800).

This was a stunning price to the non-collectors in the room, but buying private press books needn’t be that expensive. Compared to buying art, Collings rightly points out, these books are downright cheap. Actually, they’re affordable even when compared to front-list trade books. Many private presses have books in the \$65 to \$90 range, including Barbarian Press’s *Rumour of a Shark*, by John Carroll (\$75); Aliquando Press’s *Quest for the Golden Ingots*, by Maureen Steuart (\$65); or Frog Hollow Press’s *Book of Widows—Contemporary Canadian Poets: Volume 6*, new poems by M. Travis Lane (Deluxe Edition, \$60). This is not appreciably higher than front-list hardcovers have come to cost. Consider that John English’s *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau* was \$39.95, while I bought the Modern Library’s *Adventures of Amir Hamza* for \$57 and the new Library of America *Collected Works of Flannery O’Connor* at \$50.

In fact, the print runs of both a private press book and a non-blockbuster trade book might not be that different. These days new Canadian authors can consider themselves lucky if they sell as many as 1,000 or 1,500 copies of their book. In reality, most Canadian fiction trade books sell 200 to 500 copies—well within the range of a limited edition run. Of course, this doesn’t mean all publishing can be replaced by small or private press work, but it does seem to support Stewart & Collings’ thesis that there is potential for a healthy fine publishing industry in the wake of the digital revolution. We all still love books. There are people out there who publish beautiful books (often 100 percent Canadian content, I might add, right down to the paper and cloth). We don’t

necessarily have to pay much more for these books, nor are they any more scarce than most new literature. All we need is to discover some of the books available out there beyond Amazon.

The attendees of Book Camp were not, excepting a few of us, book collectors, and very few of them had ever seen or handled a well-made book. We ogled an edition of Edward Burtynski's *Before the Flood* (one of a run of 100, issued in a handcrafted clamshell box wrapped with Brilliantia cloth over board and accompanied by an archival giclée print signed by the artist) and a limited edition of *The Scream* by Rohinton Mistry illustrated by Tony Urquart (one of 220 published for World Literacy Canada, featuring an original two-colour letterpress print by Tony Urquart on Crane's Lettra paper).

The content of these books surprised attendees as much as the form. When the layman imagines "collectible books" they imagine leather-bound editions of Dickens and Trollope, not experimental works from Canadian artists. As the conversation shifted to archival issues, further questions for small presses emerged. In 500 years, when our digital archives have become unreadable, how will these high-end, book-as-art objects reflect on our society? Will bibliographers of the future paint us as a society enamoured of slipcases and woodblock prints? Are art books and poetry over-represented? Is the bulk of popular literature to be lost?

Again, this discussion reveals another opportunity for small press work. Book lovers want beautiful copies of their favourite books, those books that have time-tested cultural value. This is also in evidence in the popularity of the garish editions such as Barnes & Noble's Leatherbound Classics or Easton Press's 100 Best Books. If I had a horse for every time a customer has come into my shop looking for "a nice copy" of Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy, Lord Byron or Voltaire, beggars would ride. "Regular readers" want good-quality physical copies of classic works of literature. Who better to publish these than the private press? The excellence of the content is already assured. Add fine presswork and you have an object of desire that any reader would be proud to display in their library.

Neil Stewart repeated his assertion that he didn't want to be "all things to all people." Nor does he need to be in the digital world. Advocates of the e-book often point to the increased viability of self-publishing as one of its advantages—the Internet flattens, to an extent, the playing field with regards to distribution and marketing. A book published electronically can be downloaded by anyone in the world. The same technology benefits private presses. They are no longer limited by the lack of a commercial distributor, or of a sales structure that fits the conventional bookstore's discount/returns model. All one needs is a Web site and the means of being paid electronically (easily accomplished with PayPal), and private presses are nearly as accessible to the public as a commercial publisher.

Private presses fit very well into this new personalized world. If the attendees of Book Camp T.O. are any kind of representative sample, there is a big place in publishing for the disposable electronic reads as well as the permanent fine book. Next time they need to buy a gift, they may consider a book object that really is irreplaceable. The giftee will probably just download the latest Ian McEwan or Peter Carey onto their iPhone anyway. Fine books are instead objects to be treasured. ♪

~ Charlotte Ashley collects and sells books in Toronto. Her essay about collecting the works of Dumas (see *Amphora 152*) won the inaugural National Book Collecting Contest.

