

Joe Blades & Broken Jaw Press at the Turning of the Tides

*Random acts and plastic wrap help a Maritime press rise
from the ashes to celebrate its 25th anniversary*

By Larry Thompson



200 York Street on fire. Photo by Joe Blades (2009) © CARCC.

IN THE WEE HOURS OF April 7, 2009, Joe Blades stood with other tenants in the cold outside his apartment building in Fredericton, New Brunswick, while firefighters poured thousands of gallons of water and chemicals to douse a spreading fire. The fire left the building condemned, its inhabitants homeless, and Blades' Broken Jaw Press without a base.

Later in the day, a shocked Blades would write in his blog: "We watched many firefighters, with two ladder trucks and hoses, chainsaws, axes and breathing apparatus fight the flames [that] climbed up into the wide open space of the attic. Flames were shooting across George Street almost touching the stone of St. Paul's United.

"I have no idea what, if anything, will be recoverable from my apartment and the computers and files, documents of Broken Jaw Press Inc. or my life."

Joe Blades founded Broken Jaw Press in Banff in the winter of 1983–84. He published out of Halifax, Nova Scotia, until 1990, when he relocated to Fredericton, publishing poetry, fiction and literary non-fiction, by both new and established award-winning writers. Over the past 24 years, he has published more than 330 publications, from poetry postcards to trade books.

He would wait four days to gain access to the condemned building to learn that, although the flames did not reach his apartment, water and

smoke had taken their toll on the contents.

"I was very lucky not to have fire," Blades conceded.

As he had stood outside and watched flames shooting out of the building, Blades felt "shock. Definitely shock. I was concerned at how extreme the damage would be. When firemen began hacking into the roof, I knew. Knowing just how much stuff I had in there, knowing the other people in the building. I felt helpless."

Blades found little solace in the aftermath. "Most people can't imagine what it's like—you have to go through and inventory the wreckage." In his case, two disaster recovery people with clipboards carefully catalogued for the insurance company every sodden shred of his life and business. He watched as computers, tools and other electrical and electronic equipment were smashed, made unusable as part of the public safety regulations, all of it adding to the psychological impact.

Boxes of papers and books had soaked up water on the floor for several days. The damage, he said, extended to anything "on the floor, near windows or under light fixtures." He lost "several cubic feet of unsolicited manuscripts" as well as personal journals and records, all part of thirty years of

writing, reading, editing and publishing poetry and prose. Particle board shelving units split apart, swollen with moisture. He lost a considerable quantity of hand-binding papers, Davey board and other art supplies.

Mildew was the enemy, but "you'd need a space the size of an arena to spread everything out to dry," he said.

Blades was able to recover a substantial amount of material, including the contents of computer hard drives. He kept most of the press's inventory in two different storage locations in the city. "What I had in the apartment were copies of the most recent books, the most current releases, handy for shipping."

Many of his own one-of-a-kind books and those of other private presses such as Church Street, Gaspereau, Walking Bird and others survived in zip-lock bags or other plastic wrappings.

Blades had insurance. This helped greatly in that period when he was in limbo, without a home, even clothing. "It takes time to replace equipment, recover files, find a new place to live," he said. "It was a weird time. I had lost a part-time job two weeks earlier and was just accepted in grad school." He describes the time as an emotional roller coaster.



200 York Street after the fire. Photo by Joe Blades (2009) © CARCC

"It [the fire] had a serious effect on what I was going to be doing."

Financial and emotional upheaval from the fire stalled production at Broken Jaw Press. Near-complete provincial grant applications and paperwork were among the papers lost. The stress alone threw Blades off his stride. His stable of writers and poets perceived that the press would be in hiatus after the fire, so they did not complete or submit manuscripts, thus creating a reality from the perception. A manuscript originally scheduled for this past spring only arrived in October.

The emotional roller coaster ride would continue as long as boxes remained unopened from the disaster. Sometimes when he opened a box, Blades would discover that one sodden book had been packed in amidst dry ones, contaminating the whole with mildew. "It won't really be over until every box is unpacked. That's going to be tough." He has decided to build shelves and sort through everything in a separate facility to clear the field for 2010.

The post-catastrophe chaos made some things difficult; finding inventory in storage when orders arrive now is hardly as straightforward as it used to be, Blades said.

But, turning the tide, Blades is focusing on what will be Broken Jaw's 25th anniversary in 2010. He's looking at publishing a lineup that includes an anthology of Canadian poetry "different from the usual Canadian anthology," what he calls "a Broken Jaw reader."

While recovering from the damage to his life and business, Blades kept busy doing contract work for other publishers and hosting his weekly literary radio show

Ashes, Paper & Beans at CHSR-FM, the University of New Brunswick radio station.

He also participated in National Random Acts of Poetry Week, between October 5 and 11 this year. All through the week, he was out in the city, approaching people and reciting poetry to them. If they were too busy to stop, he'd walk with them, reciting along the way.

"It's been good, despite the weather," he said of his Random Acts week, adding that most people appreciated the gesture, particularly the free book



Photo by Joe Blades (2007) © CARCC.



The interviewer enjoyed being the recipient of a Random Act of Poetry during his talk with Broken Jaw Press publisher Joe Blades. The following extract is from Joe Blades' book titled from the book that doesn't close (Fredericton: Broken Jaw Press © 2008, page 63)

Most poets, being influenced by the body's love of poetry, do not notice the decay that follows comfort and they can get caught in a critic's plot like deer in the forest caught in a hunter's trap.

@ rouge fellow artist-
run centre artist from here
in québec calls my journal
the book that doesn't close

anti
skate and show

of poetry that went with it. As of October 11, 31 poets across the country had given away 1,530 books, “right into the hands of people,” he said. “So much better than distributors.”

In 2004, Blades established publishing contacts in the former Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe when he attended the Belgrade Book Fair. Every publisher at a BookExpo Canada meeting with a Serbian publishers delegation was invited to the fair, but Broken Jaw turned out be the only English-language North American publishing house in attendance. While there, he was invited to speak and made many contacts; he left with opportunities to publish his books in translation. He travelled there again to launch translations of two of his poetry books in 2005, and then again for a book tour in April 2006 and, that autumn, a stint as a lecturer in the English Department of the University of East Sarajevo in Pale, Republika Srpska (BiH).

In mid-October 2009, Blades made a trip to Sofia, Bulgaria, to speak at the fifth International Conference of Central European Canadianists. His subject: “On Becoming an Accidental Canadianist.”

For Joe Blades it was a year of discontent. However, he said, “I’ve got good people around me who do not want to see Broken Jaw stop. There’s a need for it. They recognize it. It’s been really encouraging.”

Broken Jaw Press, he said, is more than just a business, but rather “a performance piece—a lifelong artwork” and one with many years to run.

~ Larry Thompson is proprietor of Greyweathers Press in Merrickville, Ontario.



Joe Blades. Photo by Joe Blades (2008) © CARCC

Broken Jaw presses forward

Some forthcoming titles listed at *BrokenJaw.com*:

Venus Butterfly. By Pauline Michel; Jonathan Kaplansky Trans. (from the novel *Le papillon de Venus*). Intro by Marie-Claire Blaise. Co-pub with White Dwarf, Montreal, QC, 2009.

William Forrestall: Objects for Study. By Virgil Hammock, Leopold Kowolik, & William Forrestall. Foreword by R.M. Vaughan. Art and essays, 2009.

On Broken Glass: Naked Truth, Naked Soul. By Richard Palmer. Poetry plus art, 2009.

En las noches que desvisten otras noches / Durant les nuits qui déshabillent d'autres nuits. By Nela Rio. Jill Valéry, Trans. into French. Bilingual poetry, 2009.

A Fredericton Alphabet (2nd ed.). By John Leroux. Foreword by Peter Pacey. Photos, architecture, 2009.

Antimatter (2nd ed.). By Hugh Hazelton. Poetry, 2010.

El espacio no es un vacío, incluye todos los tiempos. Editor Nela Rio. Antología virtual, BJP eBook 51, May / mayo 2010.

BRoKeN JaW PReSS [PoeTRy] ReaDeR. Editor Joe Blades, 2010.

La luna, tango, siempre la luna / The Moon, Tango, Always the Moon. Bilingual edition by Nela Rio. Edith Jonsson-Devillers, Trans. into English. Poetry, October 2010.

Bones of the Magus. By Tristis Ward. Graphic novel—fiction, 2010.

Links

www.brokenjaw.com/
www.joeblades.com/
brokenjoe.blogspot.com/ www.facebook.com/people/Joe-Blades/644040526
www.myspace.com/brokenjoe
Ashes, Paper & Beans can be heard at www.chsrfm.ca