

A Tale of Three Presses (Part Two)

This column continues my *Amphora* No. 152 piece that examined the collector's infrequent impulse to focus on a publisher rather than an author or genre. This time out, I'll look at *McSweeney's* Books, a press I have been collecting since its inception in 2000 and which I believe has done some of the most engaging, eccentric, ephemeral and ultimately essential publishing of the decade.

The story begins with author and cultural icon Dave Eggers, who is *McSweeney's* founder, guiding light and best-selling author. Eggers had been involved in online and print-on-paper magazine publishing in San Francisco when in 1998 he edited and published the first issue of the literary journal *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* (hereafter *McSweeney's*). Much of the style of subsequent *McSweeney's* (and Eggers') output is evident in this first issue, including extensive and amusingly discursive notes on the verso of the title page. The reader gets a detailed breakdown on the finances of printing (in Iceland, no less) and distributing the 2,500 copies produced. Originally sold for \$8, copies now are infrequently offered for up to \$500. (Be careful when purchasing, however, as the first three issues were reissued together in 2002 with a small "second printing" note on the back cover.)

Many readers first became aware of Eggers in 2000 with the publication of his largely autobiographical best-seller and Pulitzer Prize shortlisted novel *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. This book presumably provided much of the capital that launched *McSweeney's* book publishing program. Coincidentally or not with this increased revenue flow, issue 4 of *McSweeney's* appeared in late 2000, signalling a design breakthrough for the journal. The issue comprised a box with 14 separate booklets with separately designed covers. The contributors are a very impressive roster of established writers. The issue is a wonderful combination of innovative design and literary excellence. Since issue 4 there have been 32 issues of *McSweeney's* each with a unique and often surprising design approach. It is the packaging of *McSweeney's* not the content which is, in the words of *New York Times* critic

Judith Shulevitz, "the central drama." One notable exception to design extremes was issue 30 (2009), which returned to the look and perfect-bound format of numbers 1 to 3 in support of Oddi Printing in Reykjavik. After a gap of 22 issues the editorial decision was made to print in Iceland, given the country's economic collapse. It is a rare publisher that makes such production decisions.

McSweeney's Books launched in 2000 with the publication of *The Neal Pollack Anthology of American Literature: The Collected Writings of Neal Pollack*. Rumours persisted that Pollack was an Eggers pseudonym but this is apparently unfounded (not that Eggers doesn't use pseudonyms). Four titles appeared in six months: three slender, one substantial. Shulevitz was scathing in her assessment of this latter book:

The fat one, Lawrence Krauser's "Lemon" is so bad that it may well be intended as a joke—the title hints at the possibility, and the great thing about Eggers as an editor is that he would never not pull a prank just because it was unreadable.

For the record each *Lemon* dust jacket is unique, with a hand-stamped title and black marker "illustration."

By the fall of 2009 *McSweeney's* Books had issued more than 80 titles under four distinct imprints: *McSweeney's* Rectangulars (new fiction), The Collins Library ("handsome reprints of forgotten classics edited by Paul Collins"), *McSweeney's* Irregulars ("irregular books of irregular content appearing at irregular intervals [which] aim to be funny") and Believer Books (books by contributors to the offshoot cultural magazine *The Believer* and translated works). It is not always clear where some titles fit in this construct. As well as *The Believer*, a consistently entertaining cultural review magazine that has 65 issues and counting, *McSweeney's* issues *Wholphin*, a DVD quarterly of short films "that have not, for whatever reason, found wide release."

Humour is clearly the intent of a number of *McSweeney's* Books titles, ranging from the board book series by Lisa Brown (*Baby Mix Me a Drink, Baby Make Me Breakfast...*) to *How to Dress for Every Occasion by the Pope*. In this regard Eggers contributes four titles under the name of Benny and Dr. Doris Haggis-On-Whey in *The Haggis-On-Whey World of Unbelievable Brilliance* series (*Giraffes? Giraffes!, Cold Fusion...*).

Lest readers get the wrong idea about McSweeney's Books, a number of their titles are unimpeachably serious and well intentioned. In yet another sub-imprint, Voice of Witness, the titles *Out of Exile: Narratives from the Abducted* and *Displaced People of Sudan and Surviving Justice: America's Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated* have appeared. For gravitas look no further than the immense seven-volume box set *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*, by William T. Vollman, published in 2003. It is hard to conceive of another commercial publisher that would have taken on this sprawling "critique of terrorist, defensive, military and police activity," even if it was written by an award-winning novelist and chronicler of underclasses around the world. *Rising Up and Rising Down* was shortlisted for a National Book Critics Circle Award. It became much more accessible for the general reader when Ecco Press issued a one-volume abridgement in 2004. Published at \$120, the first edition set is currently listed on ABEBooks.com for \$3,000.

The best critically received McSweeney's Books titles have been written by Eggers: *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentine Achak Deng* (2006) and *Zeitoun* (2009). There is a strong similarity between the books, despite that *What Is the What* is described as a novel and *Zeitoun* as non-fiction. *What Is the What* tells the story of a Sudanese refugee in Ethiopia, Kenya and the United States. The subject Achak Deng describes the creative process in the book's preface:

Over the course of many years, I told my story orally to the author. He then concocted this novel... and though it is fictionalized, it should be noted that the world I have known is not so different from the one depicted within these pages.

Zeitoun is described as a "a work of nonfiction, based primarily on the accounts of Abdulrahman and Kathy Zeitoun." The book describes the experiences of an immigrant family in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans; "it was written with the full participation of the Zeitoun family, and reflects their view of the events." The fiction/non-fiction distinction between these two works (and indeed also with Eggers' *Heartbreaking Work of*

Staggering Genius) seems arbitrary. What matters is that they are powerful explorations of the human spirit during times of great stress that will stand as lasting works of literature.

As a sidebar and a testament to Eggers' productivity, it should be noted that he is also a successful screenwriter with writing credits on two widely released 2009 films: *Away We Go* and *Where the Wild Things Are*. The latter screenplay, written with director Spike Jonze, is an adaptation of Maurice Sendak's classic picture book and resulted in an Eggers' novel *The Wild Things*, issued by McSweeney's Books in two editions, one of which has a fur cover.

There is a strong argument to be made for Dave Eggers as a great writer. That he also has so decisively placed his mark on an extensive book and magazine publishing endeavour makes his achievement remarkable and the entire output of his enterprises worthy of collecting and analysis. Yes, some of McSweeney's Books output is ephemeral if not outright silly, but taken in its totality, the shelves of McSweeney's Books and companion serial works provide insight into the mind of a fascinating writer and cultural icon of our time.

~ Paul Whitney is city librarian at the Vancouver Public Library. This is the second of two columns focusing on the collection of specific publishers. The previous column discussed Blackfish Press and Gaspereau Press.