

Publishing the Books No One Wants to Buy

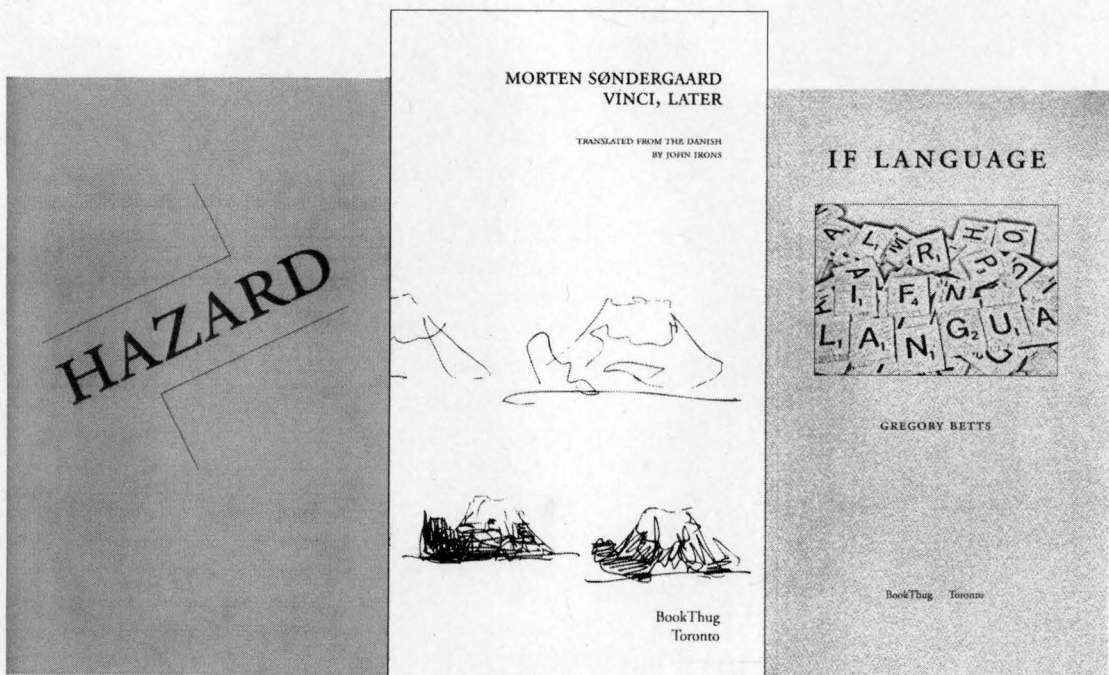
Toronto publisher BookThug's near-total dedication to publishing unknown authors. By Liz Bachinsky

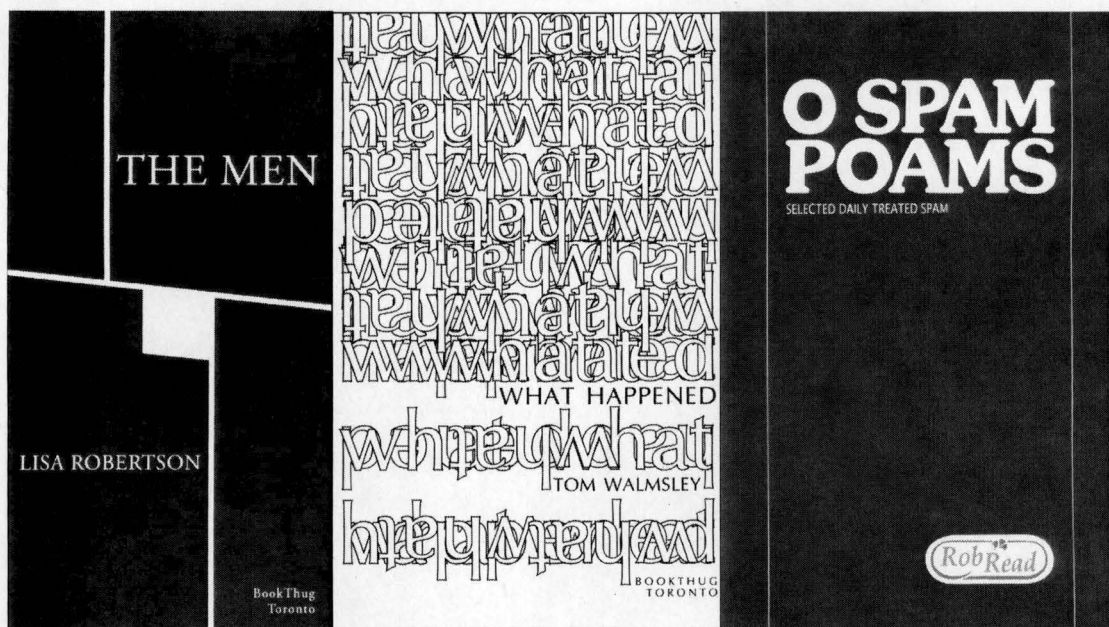
In early 2004, I sent my first full-length manuscript of poetry, *Curio: Grotesques and Satires from the Electronic Age*, to Coach House Books for consideration. I knew there was a poetry editor and typographer working there, Jay MillAr, whose Toronto micro-press, BookThug, had attracted attention from small press enthusiasts across Canada and the United States. MillAr's simple, classically designed pamphlets were a bit of a watershed for poets like me. So, a year later, when I finally received an e-mail from Coach House Books, I was nervous and thrilled. It was Jay, and, miraculously, he wanted to publish my collection. But there was a catch. He didn't edit for Coach House anymore. He'd gone out on his own, wanted *Curio* for BookThug, and might I consider being one of his first "spiney" titles?

By 2005, this same plucky young Thug (who had so boldly snatched my manuscript from one of Canada's longest-running and most respected publishing houses) had been publishing independently for over seven

years. He had designed and printed more than 25 chapbooks of experimental writing and, with his wife Hazel, a number of issues of an avant-garde literary magazine, *BafterC*. He was the author of three collections of poetry: *The Ghosts of Jay MillAr* (Coach House, 2000), *Mycological Studies* (Coach House, 2002) and *False Maps for Other Creatures* (blewointment, 2005). He was also the owner and proprietor of Apollinaire's Bookshoppe, an online bookstore that specializes in "selling the books no one wants to buy"—which is to say the shop specializes, almost exclusively, in poetry. But, in 2005, there was one task MillAr had yet to accomplish: the publication of a proper trade title, perfect bound, with a spine.

To get a sense of the spirit of BookThug, one need only think of early CanLit publications: Souster, Layton and Dudek's Contact Press; Brick booklets stapled into covers cut from brightly-coloured construction paper; bill bissett's mimeographed blewointment titles; bp Nichol's tiniest of gronk comix.



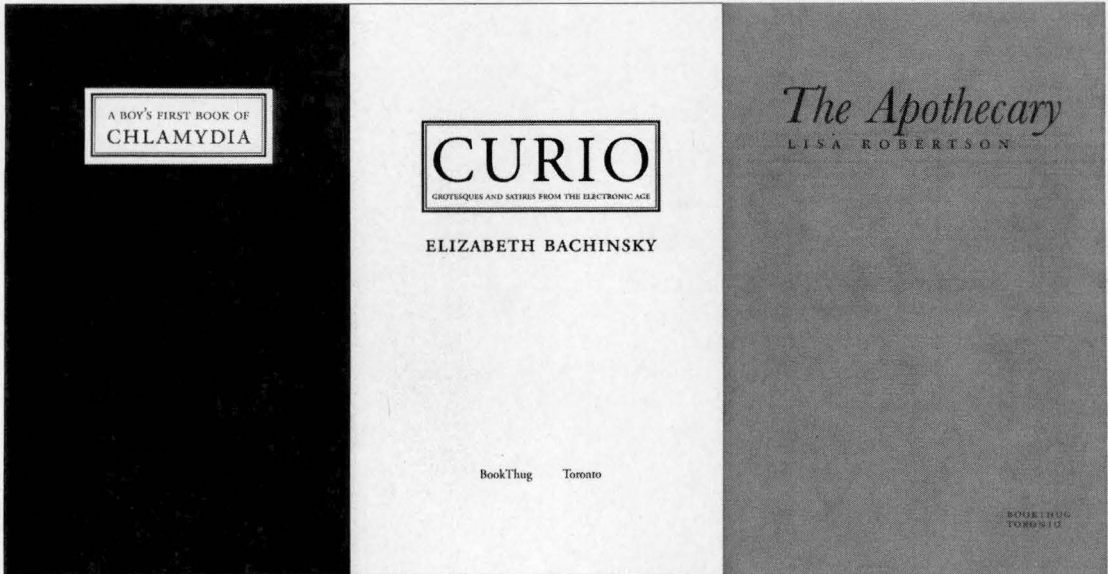


All that delightful ephemera made by, with, and for friends. Today, BookThug is a full-grown press with over 50 titles to its name, including works by such well-known poets as George Bowering, Lisa Robertson, Margaret Christakos, Steven McCaffery and Christopher Dewdney. But what separates BookThug titles from publications by other small Canadian publishing houses is its near-total dedication to publishing unknown authors. So, while you may have heard of Quebec poet Nathalie Stevens, you may not have heard of mathematician and poet Hugh Thomas from Frederickton or the infamous Toronto small press junkie daniel f bradley. But, for the nominal price of a BookThug subscription, it's easy to discover them.

MillAr, who is first and foremost a poet, became interested in book design in his mid-twenties, when he realized that anyone, anyone at all, could be a publisher. From there, he says, "it evolved into a pleasant obsession to make books." So, these days, you'll find Jay, along with his wife and two small boys (those understanding souls) camped out in a living-room fort made of the sorts of books MillAr finds interesting or curious, poetically speaking. Books that say something to him in

terms of what poetry is or could be. And, in among that joyful bunker of books, you may also stumble upon a poet or two. For MillAr part of the pleasure of publishing lies in collaboration. "I like working with poets," he says. "They usually have interesting ideas of what their books should look like." And so it goes.

And what do BookThug books look like, you ask? Well, for MillAr, who spent a short time working under Stan Bevington of the Coach House Press, simplicity is key. BookThug employs text-based designs that serve as "houses for the text to live in." MillAr's love of literature leads his sense of design. MillAr cites his inspiration, firstly, as the Contact Press of the 1940s and '50s: those wonderful, simple, small trade editions of poetry produced by Souster, Layton and Dudek; and, after that, the Coach House Press, which picked up the torch the Contact Press had lit, with design by Stan Bevington, Victor Coleman and Rick/Simon. From that time period he also admires the wonderfully low-fi productions of bill bissett and blewointmentpress, and the simplicity of what French publishers produce is also a turn-on. "Why can't books just have the title, the author and the pub-



lisher's name on their covers?" MillAr asks. His answer, of course, is that they can. And, of his contemporaries, MillAr says: "I quite like what Gaspereau Press is up to on the East Coast, there's an American press called Atticus/Finch that produces wonderful books, and Jason Dewinetz at Greenboathouse is doing really spectacular work as well. There are others too, but that's what pops into my head for the moment. What I strive for is an aesthetic space where fine press printing and publishing for the trade collide."

Chapbooks are either printed at a local print shop or produced by MillAr himself on a laser printer, and covers for both chapbook and trade publications are always printed in-house using an ink-jet printer. Chapbooks are printed in editions of 100 and copies are assembled by hand, which includes folding, stapling, and binding into wrappers. MillAr will reprint if needed, though for the most part he's found he doesn't have to. Only three chapbooks have ever gone into second printings, and only one has hit a third printing. Trade books are printed at "a giant faceless corporation, Transcontinental Printing," says MillAr. "I started out by printing 300 copies, then upped it to 400 or 500 because that's

what you need to print in order to 'qualify' for funding. But I'm thinking of going back down to 300 copies, 400 maximum."

Jay printed 300 copies of my first book, *Curio*—quite a lot by fine press standards, though not enough to satisfy the Canada Council's minimum requirement for funding that year (400 copies). When my book arrived from Toronto at my home in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, I was impressed by its beauty. However, I quickly discovered there was no way for people to find out about the title unless I told them about it myself. But Jay wouldn't have it any other way. When asked who his main audience is, MillAr responds, "Mostly poets, but also people who are really interested both in what poetry is and what poetry could be. Let's call them Really Smart People with a Sharp Eye." Readers find out about BookThug titles mostly by word of mouth or via today's equivalent, the Internet. So BookThug's readership, like readership of so many small Canadian presses, grows in relation to its authors' willingness to read from and promote their work.

In MillAr's own first book of poetry, *The Ghosts of Jay MillAr* (Coach House Books, 1998), character James Llar has a pleasant

“Everyone needs a Book Thug. In fact, every publishing company should adopt a BookThug, and then we’d see what could come of the industry in this country.”—character James Llar in a “Perfectly Ordinary Dreams,” by James MillAr.

dream about the possibilities of an imaginary press, Book Thug. “Book Thug,” James writes, “had produced a first edition of poems. He had been out of his mind for weeks, planning it into being, and now that the imaginary deluxe edition by some obscure poet who had already received her half of the profit had hit the streets, manuscripts were pouring in from every obscure writer he could imagine. He did not feel cheated in any way that the author had received exactly half of the print run as payment. He had merely built an acceptable piece of architecture for the author’s conception of a language, so both of them had an equal re-

sponsibility to the finished product.” Today, BookThug is no longer a pleasant dream, but a pleasant reality. Hats off to you, Mr. MillAr.

Liz Bachinsky is a Vancouver poet, printer, editor, teacher and the proprietor of Crow & Carrion Press. Her second collection of poetry, Home of Sudden Service (Nightwood Editions, 2006), was nominated for a Governor General’s Award. Her first collection of poems, Curio (BookThug, 2005), is out of print. For a complete list of BookThug titles or to become a subscriber to BookThug, visit Apollinaire’s Bookshoppe at www.bookthug.ca.

THE IDEAL BOOK

Mentioned in *Amphora* 146, the University of Tampa sent along a copy of its newly issued tome *The Ideal Book: Three Essays on Books and Printing*, by William Morris, printed digitally and issued in both soft- and hardcover. Editor Richard Mathews and his colleagues at UTP had fun with the design, using a digital version of Morris’s Golden type to give a Kelmscott look. Perhaps the aspect that would have most pleased Morris is the inclusion of a tipped-in frontis (opposite) that reproduces a 15th century German woodcut, printed on the hand press at the Tampa Book Arts Studio. Fifty numbered copies of the collection were issued to members and friends of the Florida Bibliophile Society. See utpress.ut.edu for details.

