Small Press Review · *Frederick Busch**

Steaks

The publishing business is a business like the butcher business.

Bennett Cerf said it, and he was in a position to know. He and his associates made the Modern Library a success, offering good writing and the opportunity for self-education to a generation. He got rich doing it. He published *Ulysses* in America, suing the United States government in 1933 to lift a ban on one of the most important small-press books in modern publishing history. There's no need to rehearse the heroic story of the publication of *Ulysses* by Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Co. and the pressmen and machines of M. Darantière of Dijon. But it's worth remarking that the small press was resorted to after the efforts of Ezra Pound and others, to secure large-press publication, had failed.

In a nutshell, that is the story of the small press, as I understand it. It is the vanguard of publishing art—run by lovers of paper and type fonts, and sometimes language, as well as by writers-manqué—and it is the last resort for those who cannot publish elsewhere. The two functions are honorable, historically valid (think of Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau) and publicly useful. No one will be surprised to think of small presses this way, though I've said it coldly, and most utterances about the small presses are declaimed by cultural cheerleaders; one usually is reluctant to speak coldly of these presses, just as one is reluctant to criticize health foods, talkative children, and petitions that include the word "justice."

But it's important, I think, at the outset of this meditation on recent fiction from the small presses, that the two factors be linked. The small press is an outpost in the darkness and is needed by literary pioneers, and it *sometimes* is necessary to a readership. A lot of federal money, and sometimes separate state money, as well as private-foundation money, is spent by the small presses to publish poetry and fiction. Government exists to put milk in babies' mouths, medicine in the bodies of the sick,

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*This is the first in a series of commissioned reviews.

courage in the hearts of the affrighted, and art in the minds of the nation; the generosity of our government, with our money, toward (however indirectly) our artists, is at least good, and is probably an even happier circumstance than I'm saying it is.

And there's little point in complaining about how the government money is given out. It is, and we know it, given politically by politicians, whether they are novelists sitting for the National Endowment for the Arts, or poets awarding CAPS grants for New York State. I have sat with such bodies. I have been that year's rural white male, sitting with the black woman, the brown Hispanic male from the city, the European-American lesbian from the suburbs, and so on; I have been one of those chosen for political, not artistic, grounds. And I have witnessed the fights to award money to So-and-So because she is of the requisite racial mixture, while Thus-and-Such was given nothing because he was not only white, and not only male, but actually employed. But these political fashions pass. The idea behind giving money to artists, with few strings attached, is a decent and civilized one. (The most politically fastidious of us can always decline it, let us remember, should we get an objectionable grant.)

But I wonder how much money, offered in support of the arts, is not given directly to artists so they may live, and work at their trade, without having to work at someone else's trade; I wonder how much of it is given to secondary organizations, like orchestras, and community chorales, and, yes, small presses. And what I'd also like to know is how the presses, which do not pay the writers since the currency they offer them is publication itself, use the money that writers might use: how do they choose what to publish? In other words, I'm asking what they feel responsible to, when they publish. And I suppose I'm wondering what their authors think their authorial responsibility is, as well.

If small-press publishing is small business, it still is business. But it's a business with a difference. Most businesses, those of publishers included, have to sell products to make a buck. They try to offer steak if that's what people wish to consume. It usually is. Steak is, finally (unless you're a graduate student, an instructor in English, or a poet trying to live only by your work), boring. It is our least imaginative cut of meat. It has no flavor, it has little texture; when you chew it, your tongue has to be reminded that its services are required; you don't need imagination to eat steak, and that's why so many people cook it and why so many people order it up. And that's why what James Laughlin calls "the

uptown publishers" want to provide so much literary steak: it's good business; the consumer, having little imagination, wishes to devour only it. Fair enough. Business is business, butcherwise or otherwise. If you don't wholesale steak, then take your product elsewhere.

If the product can't be sold, then you might have to give it away. At the moment you do, you drop out of the butchery business—or, at least, the purveying-of-steak business. Now you're in the small-press business. Funded as it is by governments and foundations, the small press doesn't have to sell: it can operate at a loss and, in its circles—we all come and go through those circles—a business loss is a sign of success. It means that you, the money-losing entrepreneur, are dealing in art-meat, not steak. It means that, by association, you're artistic. It means that, unlike, say, Ecco Press at its beginning, and some others, you are not really trying all that hard to sell enough copies of the fiction you've printed to break even or make enough money to do the next book. If you want to publish another book, you ask the politicos on the book committee for help.

Doesn't my ranting sound Republican? Doesn't it stink of free enterprise as distilled through the American eagle's right wing, feathers and all? But we must remember that we're talking about two sides of a subject. The one side is art, and that we will read and think about. The other we prefer not to think about, but probably must; without money, paper isn't bought, and fiction isn't printed. The painter Ad Reinhardt said, in one of his marvelous dicta, "Art is art-as-art. Everything else is everything else." I would maintain that the art of fiction thrives by its artists paying attention to the world of everything else. Maybe we ought to pay attention too, to art, and to the everything-else this art should (I would argue) be about.

The many books I've read in preparation for this beating of the literary bosom have, obviously, made me think in a surly and acerbic manner. *They're not trying very hard,* I kept hearing someone say. It was I, of course, who said it. With exceptions, and it is my privilege to note them as we proceed, I think I was right. One of the reasons they seem, to me at least, not to be trying very hard may well be their sense of not needing to: with money guaranteed, they can think of art, or think of themselves, these publishers, as artists-by-association. They can rise above mere business. But *business* for me enforces the idea of transaction between a writer and a reader, an audience; that sense of transaction is often missing for me in the books I've been reading. So I'm going to

invoke the ghost of Cerf, in my own and perverse fashion, and say that if you're not doing business, you *may* not be doing publishing.

What is it, then, that a lot of small presses are offering if they're not bound, by laws of economic necessity, to offer steak? I think they're offering the worst cut of meat. I think they're offering *self.* A writer who can denounce wide readership and money enough to pay the bills and buy books and typewriter ribbons can also renounce the need to entertain his audience. That author can, in fact, renounce audience completely. Judgment on whether to print the book will be made as the publisher decides whether his notions about self are flattered by the book's esthetics or sexual politics. *American Book Review,* which often says, unreadably, the indecipherable about the incomprehensible, will review the book uncommercially—which is to say with no thought as to the timeliness of the notice. If it's six months, or a year, after publication, no one will care (except the frantic author, looking for *some* attention to be paid); small-press books stay in small-press stores forever, collecting dust, in lonely groups of two and three, and readers of such books tend to stumble over them, not venture out in hot pursuit.

The result is reputation, among half a dozen, or a hundred, or a thousand, even—the circle that will include those who will pass upon the publisher's or author's next grant application, and that will include those who will write tenure—or promotion—recommendations for the author or publisher (so many writers and book makers live in some college's cloisters), and that will include those who submit manuscripts to that publisher for translation into a book of small-press fiction.

What the process means is that editors and authors can be careless of the relationship of book to reader. The latter part of the transaction is, more or less, in danger of being eliminated. Books are now published exclusively for the writer, or his close circle of friends and colleagues. If the process does in fact work this way, I don't know how good it can be for the future of reading and writing.

A small press that is operated with an eye on an audience is Joe David Bellamy's Fiction International, which publishes works of fiction as well as a magazine named for the press. A good example of the press's good work is *Gravity,* a book of stories by Catherine Petroski, known to readers of literary journals for some years. Her fiction is concise and provocative, often funny, made nearly as poetry is made, with economic wit. A press that publishes the work of Petroski, and the likes of Elizabeth Innes-Brown, is doing something right. Innes-Brown, the

author of *Satin Palms,* a volume of stories chosen by Stanley Elkin as the 1981 Associated Writing Programs award-winner for short fiction, offers a tough, matter-of-fact sexiness, a lot of smart writing with commas left out where you might expect them, so that there is a feeling of simultaneities—"Down on the golden polyurethaned wooden floor a hundred or two hundred couples sway girls' knees between the boys' two by two and their breath rising hot to the ceiling steel beams"—but that also smacks, for me, of the "experimentation" of the Thirties. I'm reminded of Dos Passos. But I also know that Ms. Innes-Brown is a bold talent. Whether or not she keeps up the hanky-panky with syntax, she is going to write first-rate fiction, as is Petroski, and as is Marilyn Krysl, whose *Honey You've Been Dealt a Winning Hand* wants, I think, to be grouped with these other two books of stories. Her book, quite beautifully made—it's a Noel Young Book from the Capra Press—offers stories that are sinuous, tautly-told, interestingly-imagined, sometimes flawlessly crafted.

Each of these books is about coming-of-age, about being a woman, about inventing shapes that can hold such experiences while they are told, often in the first person, in a commanding voice, after considerable pain has been suffered, and—with exceptions—not on my behalf. I am not reminded, for example, except by some of Krysl's work, of Rosellen Brown's early and absolutely brilliant collection, *Street Games* (now remaindered: business, right?), in which a confluence of public and private, female and male, young and old worlds were drawn together by a style that adapted itself to each story's need, told by a voice that changed as each protagonist did. In Innes-Brown's highly-talented case, the authorial voice is all; in that sense, she displays a limitation similar to that of Jayne Anne Phillips, who praises the book on its back cover. (I taught Ms. Phillips, and with pleasure, at Iowa's Writers Workshop; my name is on the back of her book. Another of her instructors (but not mine) is John Irving, who reviewed Ms. Phillips' book in *The Times;* his name is on the back of a book of stories of *mine.* Irving used John Hawkes's *The Blood Oranges* as a source for an epigraph for one of his novels; he also used Ford's *The Good Soldier.* For *Blood Oranges,* Hawkes took *his* epigraph from *The Good Soldier.* Hawkes's name is on an inside flap of a book of stories by me, and it is prominent on the back of Ms. Innes-Brown's *Satin Palms.)* This network I've traced is all about good intentions, and is offered with smiles and a growing suspicion that we are, as writers, perhaps talking too much to only a few of us.

The outright majority of the books I read are books of stories. Stories are close kin to the poem. It is possible that the novel makes its way, more or less, among the commercial presses, and the big-time little presses such as North Point and Godine, leaving it up to the smaller publishers to nurture poems and stories, each form famous for its failure to appeal to large numbers of book buyers. (Or so the publishers say. Explain, in as many words as you need to use, why *The Stories of John Cheever* was a bestseller.) I find that the majority of the stories I've been reading are made quite like poems: Barbara Wilson's in *Thin Ice* (The Seal Press); Arny Christine Straayer's in *Hurtin & Healin & Talkin It Over* (Metis Press); Lisa Thomas's in *So Narrow the Bridge and Deep the Water.* They are short, initmate, for the most part told in one voice (in each book), all about having sex, not having sex, being a writer, failing at love—and the same situations repeat themselves in the same book sufficiently for me to guess that the author is talking about the author. In other words, the story writers, at least many of them represented in the recent small-press books I've seen, are adopting the mode of their kins on the poetry side of the family.

This is what Anthony Hecht says about poetry and prose fiction right now:

> While novelists must labor under the compulsion to *invent,* to create fictional personages, put them in provocative situations, contrive actions and reactions and eventualities, poets have more and more retreated in undisguised narcissism and documentary literalness until, as things now go, a poet may be congratulated for being truthful, candid or confessional, but he is rarely told that he is, nor is he expected to be, imaginative or inventive. Imagination these days seems to belong entirely to the realm of prose.

And I would add to that final phrase, "the realm of *long* prose." For, and as ever with exceptions, more and more writers of short fiction are abandoning the imaginative world for the world of the self. There are a lot of explanations, or guesses, for why this is happening. I think that a lot of poets imitate a lot of older poets, and recent older poets have been "confessional," or undergoing intense psychoanalysis or simple bursts of madness. I think that a lot of young writers, loving language as they do, have been pursuing the concision of poetry, as they should,

while trying to make short stories. But I think that they have mistaken, after a while, form for matter. Or perhaps too many of us, in "teaching" writing, and I am probably a chief culprit here, have said too long and too loudly that form and matter are distinctions we needn't make. I think maybe it's time to recant. The taut language of the poem need not also be its matter. But we in the schools and we in print have perhaps been speaking or even setting wrong examples. We may well have been saying that the subject of art is art: how many poems have *you* read about writing poems? Short story writers have been writing stories about making fiction too—as, indeed, have novelists. See Barth on Barth. It is but a short path, from writing about writing, to writing about the self as it writes—which leads to writing about the self. At which point, no matter how high-minded the writer's aims when he began, he concludes as nothing less, but maybe nothing more, than someone in bright clothes, shirt open to here and gold chains dangling to there, who's shaking it for everyone else to see as they stand on the literary dance floor and applaud; they are all dancers too, and soon everyone's shaking, and no one outside the room cares very much.

Which, in turn, leads us to Terry Stokes' *Intimate Apparel,* published by Release Press in 1980, and supported for the writing or publication by the National Endowment for the Arts, and by the Taft Foundation, and by Yaddo. That's a lot of support for seventy-six pages in which are to be found sixteen pieces of prose. Now, you've got to like Terry Stokes, for he's written some very good poems, and there's a picture of him in the book that shows that he looks like a nice man. But it's hard to be as nice as he seems to be once you've read his book. Clearly, Stokes isn't aiming for the rendering of fictive people in their worlds. He's talking, talking, talking, always in the same voice, about the personae who tell this book for him. He is, really, making longish lyrical poems, but with justified right-hand margins and a language more slack than he'd permit in his poems. The stories grin and chortle, and they tell you that sometimes there's a skull beneath the skin. I like Stokes' poems and his voice—he can be very funny—but I really dislike these stories because they're self-indulgent. Maybe another reason for the merger, at whatever literary-historical point, of certain poems and certain stories, each about the self, is that they are easier to write than anything else.

I don't know if Richard Grossinger found *The Unfinished Business of Doctor Hermes* easy to write, and I don't know how easy it might have been for North Atlantic Books to publish this "Cosmic Shootout at the

Arabian-American Revival Church," as it's subtitled. But I wish it had been a lot more difficult to get hold of. The book was agony to read. It smacks of vanity publishing at its worst—and we might consider just how many "small presses" are really unpublished (unpublishable?) writers who, with federal aid, can slip themselves between soft covers. It is a book of either essays, this *Doctor Hermes,* or memoirs, or short stories; the units are about religious and artistic gobbledy-gook that would not yield to my efforts. The book says, "In order to impress the young mad revolutionary girl, Jon takes her to an abandoned haunted house. They sleep there. At midnight they find a wild horse in the fields. He wants to jump on it, to prove he can. He does, or he doesn't. There was a horse, or there wasn't." Everything, you will recall, is random, imagined, and/or relative—or it was, among my freshmen, last time I asked. Savor this line: "By jumping out the window, in his mind, she has done a brave and heroic thing." There are commentaries to this work, appended by the author. NEA money paid for some of what the front-matter calls "This project," which is a good way out of having to decide what to name such a bastard-child as this.

It's always good to have more Jerry Bumpus. He's a fine writer. He's not at his best in *Special Offer,* a book of stories from Carpenter Press, and I suspect that's because the subject here is Jerry Bumpus; when he invents, he's wonderful. But I'd think seriously about adding this book to my collection anyway if I were a librarian with some money to spend. North Point Press weighs in with three novels, two by the Provençal Jean Giono, whose *The Song of the World* and *Blue Boy* are less interesting to me as book-length works of fiction than they are as marvelous big cauldrons of images and impressions that evoke the south of France, but that do not make a novel happen. There is also North Point's rescue of Gilbert Sorrentino's *Crystal Vision.* Sorrentino has been celebrated recently for *Mulligan Stew.* This *Vision,* I'm sorry to say, is not of that book's caliber. A novel told in dialogue, it is second-rate Sorrentino, essaying at the coarse-sounding wisdom and humaneness his readers find in his best work, which is the work of a poet capable of full-length fictive invention. There is a certain pomposity to the final *"New York 1975-1976"* because we are forced to think of *Ulysses* and its final *"Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914-1921":* Friends, how could one of us even so presume?

I must mention a book called *When a Lady Shakes Hands with a Gentleman,* which is just published by Red Dust. It performs one of the essential functions of the small press book, which is to make available

fiction from abroad which we might not otherwise see or know about. (The same, of course, could be said of much native fiction, and the spates of lesbian short fiction I've been seeing, and naturally all those books about the travails of teaching in college: "Well, I've had it. You know, I left an excellent job at Princeton to come here," says a character in a recent small-press novel, who then goes on to perform cruel service to black people by ranting about helping black people in second-rate colleges. It's a well-meant novel written with real pain, and it isn't very good, I think, because it's a vessel bearing a message more important to the author than the vessel could ever be.) In *When a Lady Shakes Hands with a Gentleman* we have short work by Insingel (the Netherlands), Ollier (France), Leutenegger (Germany) and Bokov (Russia, by way of John Calder's efforts in London). The Insingel and Ollier seem to me especially noteworthy, and I was happy to know about the work of the others. If it weren't for Capra Books, and New Directions (small-press thinkers with great hearts) and Red Dust and North Point and Godine, there would be too many of our fellows' work lost to us because we do feel the same pain as they but in different languages.

In the name of fun and nostalgia: *Beat Angels,* edited by Arthur and Kit Knight, one or both of whom teach at California State College in Pennsylvania and received, quite properly, time off to produce this, the twelfth volume of a series called *The Unspeakable Visions of the Individual,* available from Box 438, California, PA 15419. This is a wonderfully various and charming compendium of souvenirs from the Beats—some fine photographs of Ginsberg, Burroughs, Kerouac, Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman, along with a lot of romanticized self-sniffing (the Beats did preach getting drunk on the self), and perhaps the archetypal on-the-road photograph (of Neal Cassady, of course). This is a useful source-book and, I think, important for college libraries to own.

Worth noting is the fact that college libraries have always been the source of substantial purchases from presses as disparate as New Directions, Black Sparrow, and The Spirit That Moves Us. As grant money for the publication of what I'm calling non-steak dries up, so will money for libraries who like to purchase what isn't steak. It is possible that, given shrinking funds on either end of the small-press process, the publishers, from Pushcart to Treacle, may begin to vie for manuscripts that seem appealing to people who will buy books. Whether this competition, should it occur, would result in the publication of baloney on white bread, the usual steak, or something more exotic, remains to be seen.

In *Beat Angels,* there is a selection from John Clellon Holmes's journals of 1948. One of his entries says, "Kerouac came over last night stark raving mad with a new theory about the sexual regeneration of the world." I suppose that a burning question for Joe David Bellamy, and for some of his contributors, and maybe even for John Gardner himself, might be posed by Kerouac's theory: Is this Moral?

I once sat in a friend's living room after the publication of, and attendant fuss about, *On Moral Fiction* while John Gardner told Donald Barthelme that, after long reflection, he'd decided that Barthelme was in fact a moral writer. I must decline to tell you how Barthelme responded. But I can tell you how Bellamy, the head and founder of Fiction International, responded to Gardner's critical essay. Bellamy made book. He made what he calls "An Anthology," *Moral Fiction,* which he edited. It's obvious that I think the book takes too seriously John Gardner's taking of himself too seriously. Jonathan Baumbach, Frederick Exley, David Madden and Thomas Williams are among the writers whose short responses to Gardner are amusing and interesting. The "Writers' Forum" in which they appear gives one the sense that a lot of people are annoyed by *On Moral Fiction* (especially, I wager, those whom Gardner didn't think important enough to call immoral). There is also some interesting fiction by, among others, Joy Williams, Lamarr Herrin, Curtis Harnack and Clark Blaise. There are also "critiques," in which Gardner's pronouncements are, again, treated with overmuch solemnity—a very tame showing, those critical essays. Given the nature and mixture of the fiction and literary prose within, there is little sense of *Moral Fiction* as the "Anthology" its cover says it's supposed to be. An obvious omission is John Gardner. He is neither reprinted nor represented by something new. The book, then, is a little like a corner of a large room at a literary cocktail party; some of the writers are grumbling together about an absent colleague they might not wish to attack if he were there. The stories are mostly good ones, but they are artful prose, not "moral" and not "immoral." There is, I'm saying, little sense of editorial vision controlling this sloppy job which seems to have been put together with an eye on the main chance. It's not, really, about Gardner. He serves as its nude centerfold. The anthology, or issue of *Fiction International* served up as anthology for the sake of classroom adoption, is really about—that's right, business.

So here is someone at a small press trying to move his product with a clever gimmick. Fiction International is attempting business as usual,

butcher business on the street where no one happens to sell steak. I'd call it hash, and I'd frown a bit. But there's energy, at least, behind the Gardner issue of Bellamy's magazine. I suspect that if he had discerned the deeper questions behind Gardner's essay, Bellamy might have been able to put together a more honest and useful book. And I suspect he'd have sold a batch.

There is no question that the Government under Reagan will be cutting budgets for the arts. The small presses will suffer, and fiction will possibly suffer the greatest deprivations—you need more ink and paper and presstime for fiction. There will be less small-press fiction available. That means there will be less bad prose, and less self-aggrandizement. But it also means that the three or four books out of a hundred that we really shouldn't be without, in libraries and on our own shelves, will quite possibly not appear in the near future. This is a time of emergency for the small press, and some folks will starve. And maybe—I'm speaking here of verbal food—some should.