

Sheba White

January 3, 2005

Coffee House Press defines itself as "a nonprofit literary publishing house" and as a "national literary arts organization with a reputation for presenting award-winning writers in beautifully designed books" (Coffee House Press Release, 2001). Because it is small, and because it is very heavily funded by many cultural and arts organizations, including, but not limited to, the NEA, the Lila Wallace/Readers Digest Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation, and unlike larger presses whose sole mission seems to be making money, Coffee House Press has a very pointed socio-cultural mission, which they declare to anyone who visits their website (www.coffeehousepress.org) or who reads their press release.

The mission of Coffee House is to promote exciting, vital, and enduring authors of our time; to delight and inspire readers; to increase awareness of and appreciation for the traditional book arts; to contribute to the cultural life of our community; and to enrich our literary heritage. (Coffee House Press Release)

Begun in 1984 by Allan Kornblum, who still remains the press's publisher and has final say on all of Coffee House Press's manuscript acceptances, the press publishes roughly twelve to fourteen books each year of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. Although, according to their senior editor, Christopher Fischbach, the number of non-fiction titles that Coffee House Press publishes has grown smaller and smaller over the past ten years, possibly due to Publisher Allan Kornblum's assertion that "the industry seems too obsessed with nonfiction these days. Certainly nonfiction is of interest. But if I want to get a sense of an earlier era, I read the poets and novelists of that era first. It's in stories and poetry that real truths are revealed." He further noted, "Small presses are shouldering an increasing responsibility for finding the poets and novelists who are writing the stories of our time" (Kirch).

On occasion, they also publish anthologies. But this is rare, possibly due to their press release observance that

with over one hundred fifty books on our backlist, our authors are becoming important source material for academic anthologies, particularly when the editors are addressing multicultural themes. We are proud of the fact that

almost every new anthology focusing on Asian American, African American, or Hispanic American literature now includes work first published by Coffee House Press. We believe this is indicative of the enduring contribution literature makes to society. (Coffee House Press Release)

So, how can a small six-person operation possibly maintain such a mission in the face of recent arts funding cutbacks and corporate media buyouts or mergings of smaller publishing houses? Coffee House, noted Christopher Fischbach, senior editor at the press, could only survive because of grant funding, (Fischbach, personal interview); so it seems nearly impossible that they did survive, and have been doing so for twenty years now.

What happened is this: Coffee House Press received one of five coveted slots for the first NEA advancement Andrew H. Mellon Foundation grants (50,000) given to publishing houses in January of 1991, noted Kathleen Norris in her 1992 *Poets & Writers Magazine* article on small press publishing (23). In fact, Norris added, Coffee House Press "relocated to the Twin Cities in part because of these new opportunities for funding" that were streaming into the book publishing community in

Minneapolis during this time, which included grants to two other Twin Cities publishing houses: Graywolf and Milkweed.

Because of this philanthropic start, or perhaps because of its current philanthropic funding, Coffee House has consistently situated itself as a cultural institution within the world of publishing. To note, its press release states that

We serve many communities with our publishing program. We provide a service to writers through the process of editing, publishing, and promoting their books. We provide readers with challenging literary titles that are not available from major commercial houses. We offer a service to minority communities by presenting the work of gifted writers of color. We offer a service to teachers by supplying them with materials they can use to enrich their classes. And we offer students the writers of today, helping them to imagine a better future. (Coffee House Press Release)

These may seem like lofty goals, but the press does take their mission seriously, as can be noted in their

choice of words: "literary arts organization," "literary heritage" and "publishing program."

To note, my encounter with Coffee House Press occurred when I received a broadsheet as an undergraduate writing student "of color" that emphasized the press's republication in the late nineties of several previously out-of-print books from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, the works of Black Arts Movement writers like Rosa Guy and William Melvin Kelley, long out of print, were part of the press's Black Arts Movement Series.

What's more, in conjunction with several arts grants and the college that I attended, Coffee House Press helped to provide a residency at the college for Rosa Guy, which provided the writer with a wider, if bizarre, forum to reintroduce her classic book *Bird at My Window* to an entirely new audience. Such devotion to a book originally released in 1966, and to authors purportedly past their prime, is unheard of in commercial publishing channels.

This attention to emerging ethnic and experimental authors, including ethnic and experimental authors that were long ago passed over by the commercial houses, is what distinguishes Coffee House Press most for me.

In a recent *Minneapolis Observer* article Allan Kornblum stated: "In addition to pioneering new subjects,

small presses play a vital role in discovering new authors, and providing a long-term home for many important writers who will never command a large audience New York publishers look for." He went on to say: "And personally, publishing a book by a fifty-something writer keeps alive the delicious dream of that magical fresh start for me and for every baby boomer."

To note, in their fall 2003 catalog they continued their commitment to their Black Arts Movement Series by reprinting and re-introducing *Echo Tree: The Collected Short Fiction of Henry Dumas*, a Black Arts Movement pioneer who was killed by a New York Transit Authority policeman in 1968. There are also collections of poetry from well-known poets like Andrei Codrescu and Wang Ping, and also lesser-known works by poets like Jack Marshall and Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, which won the 2003 Bay Area Book Reviewers' Award and the American Book Award respectively.

When asked by the *Minneapolis Observer* what Coffee House Press does that distinguishes it from other publishers Allan Kornblum stated:

I'd rather talk about what Coffee House, Graywolf, and Milkweed do that distinguish these Twin Cities publishers in the national literary community. Every book issued by these

presses is characterized by exceptional editing, design, production and marketing. Treading on ground first mapped by the late Bill Truesdale with New Rivers Press, Coffee House, Graywolf, and Milkweed actually set the standard for excellence for literary publishers. And when Minneapolis was noted as the most literary city in the United States (and St. Paul as 10th), I was proud of the part these small presses played in attaining that ranking. (1)

As it stands, Coffee House's total book sales average around 70,000 books each year. At somewhere around \$15.00 per book, this would mean that the Press's gross income would be slightly over one million dollars each year.

The Press annually receives, on average, around 5,000 manuscripts, which, noted Kornblum, they could only get through by the graces of four or five interns on staff. This is despite the fact that in the past twenty years since Coffee House first began it has increased its net income "from 27,800 its first fiscal year to \$238,000 this past one" (Kirch).

They do accept unsolicited manuscripts, according to the *2004 Novel and Short Story Writers Market*; however, it is important to remember the numbers of manuscripts that they are receiving against the number of people they are staffed with. A recent *Poets & Writers* September/October 2004 noted, "Unsolicited manuscripts are read year-round, but the press prefers to see a 20-to 30-page samples with an outline before getting the entire manuscript. [And that] Response time (on samples): [is] four to six weeks" (381).

For writers who are thinking of submitting to Coffee House Press, it's also important to keep in mind what Christopher Fischbach has stated as the type of books that Coffee House Press is looking for: "I think that we are known for our distinguished, strong, independent, and, sometimes quirky editorial vision" (*Poets & Writers*, Sept/Oct 2004). More information about Coffee House Press is provided on the fact sheet.

Fact Sheet

Coffee House Press
27 N. Fourth Street
Suite 400
Minneapolis, MN 55401

Fax: 612/338-4004

Phone: 612/338-0125

Web: <http://www.coffeehousepress.com>

Publisher: Allan Kornblum

Senior Editor: Christopher Fischbach

Design & Production Manager: Linda Koutsky

Marketing Director: Molly Mikolowski

Office Manager & Development Asst.: Megan Richter

Marketing Assistant: Lauren Snyder

For interviews or e-mail queries contact:

fish@coffeehousepress.org.

For marketing or promotional materials contact:

Lauren@coffeehousepress.org.

Submission Instructions: Query first with 20 to 30 pages of a manuscript, double-spaced, with and an outline. Query with SASE. Response time may take up to six months. Once accepted, a manuscript takes up to 2 years before publication.

Payment/Terms: 8% royalty on retail price, 15 publisher's copies. (*Novel & Short Story Market* 381; *Poets & Writers*, Sept./Oct., 2004)

Sheba White
Fiction Writers & Publishing
Jotham Burrello

Press Report: The Interview
January 3, 2005

*The following interview was conducted on Wednesday,
December 8, 2004 at 2 pm via phone with Christopher
Fischbach, senior editor at Coffee House Press.*

Sheba White: *Could you tell me how long you've been with
Coffee House Press?*

Christopher Fischbach: I started as an intern in December
1994 and was hired as the senior editor in August of
1995.

Are you the final person to OK a manuscript, then?

Well, it's a bit more complicated than that. Allan
Kornblum is our publisher. So, he has final say on the
acceptance of books. But he rarely reads the new
manuscripts anymore. Generally, I read the manuscripts
first and bring them to Allan Kornblum for the final OK.

How many books do you put out each year?

We put out between 12-14 books each year: Six poetry
books, one or two non-fiction; but we rarely put out non-
fiction anymore, and the rest are fiction.

What kind of books, in particular, are you looking for?

Books that are experimental, books that are by or about cultures that are underrepresented, that's pretty much what we're looking for.

How long does it usually take to process a book at Coffee House, that is, between the time it's accepted and when it goes to press?

That depends. For poetry it's 3 years, fiction usually takes 2 years.

Do you have a set amount of money for marketing each book?

Usually, when a book is accepted, an amount is set aside. I don't know how much for each book because I'm the editor. I do know that poetry gets less money, in general, and that we usually set aside more money for our lead fiction book that year.

Do the authors have any say in the production process?

You mean do they have any say in the design of the book?

Well, yes.

Well, a design questionnaire is sent out to each author when their manuscript is accepted. They can send us illustrations or art, but that doesn't mean we're going to use it. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. It depends upon what our marketing department decides.

Let's talk about the backlist. I understand that you have a very admirable backlist at Coffee House. In particular, you purchase books to put on your backlist that are out of print, but that the house deems necessary to republish for cultural reasons, I'm thinking of your Black Arts Movement series in particular. How do you choose which books go in the backlist?

Our books stay in print for a long time. You get grant money, so the books get a chance to stay in print as long as they are selling or are successful.

Well, on that note, what does the house determine as a successful book?

It depends on the book. If, for instance, we put out a poetry book and ten years later it's selling 50 copies a

year, it's successful. If, however, you put out a poetry book and you're selling only 50 copies 5 years later, then it's probably not as successful.

How many prints do you make on a new book?

Three thousand for poetry, four thousand for fiction.

And how many books, in total production, do you put out each year?

Somewhere around seventy thousand.

Wow! That seems like a lot for a small press.

It's still not enough.

What do you mean?

I mean that if we didn't receive grant money we would not be able to survive with 70,000 books per year. I don't mean to downplay or bemoan what we do; we do a lot, don't get me wrong, but the fact is that we wouldn't be able to get ahead with 70,000 books each year. It takes more than that to stay afloat against the big houses. It's only

because of the grant money that we receive that we can still keep going.

Two more questions: What is the breakdown of the first print run on fiction books and what is the breakdown of the print run between hard copy books and soft cover books?

With a lead fiction we print anywhere from 4,000 to 6,000 on that first print run. If it isn't a lead fiction book we print anywhere from 3,000 to 4,000 books on that first run. As to the breakdown of hard cover versus soft: once a year we do hardcover, about 500 to 1,000, for mostly libraries and such, are printed each year. But it's become less likely that we do hardcover as each year passes. There used to be this perception that hardcover sells more or gets reviewed more, but that's not necessarily true anymore. And too, that's because the industry has changed so much. It used to be that the larger houses would buy the paperback rights from smaller houses, which would give you a surge of funds to print the next batch of hard covers, but they're doing less and less of that now. And, too, people are buying less hardcover books. We would like to do more hardcover, because generally the margin is higher on hardcover books; but the fact of the matter is that we don't sell

as many hardcover books as we used to be able to do and with the soft cover books we are reaching a larger audience than we ever could with hardcover books.

Well, that's it for now. I should tell you that I really admire the job you're doing. I mean, Coffee House Press has such an esteemed position within the publishing business and it's still amazing that you do such a big job with such a small staff. So, thank you.

You're welcome.

Sheba White
Fiction Writers & Publishing
Jotham Burrello
Press Report: The Book Review

January 3, 2005

Hernandez, Lolita. *Autopsy of an Engine and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant*. 2004. 175 p. Coffee House Press, \$14 (1-56689-161-2).

In the 2004 May/June issue of *Poet's & Writers*, Nat Sobel's "Stories from the Front Lines: 14 Editors Tell Their Tales," quotes Editor R.T. Smith of *Shenandoah: The Washington and Lee University Review* as saying this about what a lot of editors are looking for in good writing:

...work that conveys a strong awareness
of some activity in life that's not
writing—auto mechanics, carpentry,
computer programming, Egyptology,
miniature soldier collecting,
herpetology, chemotherapy. Most of what
really makes the world run, besides
language, is given short shrift in
stories, as if the life of the actual
world is a mere prop. (58)

In Lolita Hernandez's first short story collection, *Autopsy of an Engine and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant*, the mastery and monotony of automotive work is intertwined with the complexity of her characters' lives and the simplicity of their labor in such a way as to create a lyrical and layered collection of the everyday

world of blue-collar workers facing layoffs and closings in Detroit, Michigan circa 1987.

In its dozen stories are second generation immigrants rooting for trapped birds in the factory's foundry—ironically positioned under Cadillac's emblematic wingless ducks—abandoned women who are raising several children and slowly drifting further away from their own sense of identity, femininity or reality amidst the oily, gray drudge of their exacting labor, and men who drink, smoke and flirt, yes, but who also purchase "last gifts" of Italian tiles for their wives, become forlorn for their native trees and, too, lose touch with reality amidst the cloistered gray and crimson buildings of Detroit's Cadillac plant.

Punctuating all of the stories is the work of piecing together what Hernandez describes as "the ultimate luxury car of the nation" (13). The production of the Cadillac line provides an unusual and refreshing musical backdrop to all of the characters' stories, as in this passage from "Death in the Sidesaddle:"

The air was thick with production noises trapped inside aluminum and steel machinery. The squeaks and moans and brrrrrraps and taptaptaptaps and clinks and rrrrrrrrrs of final assembly waited inside still, absolutely still

*air guns, spring compressors, and
hoists, straining to escape the
aluminum or steel skins, the links of
the line chains. (85-86)*

The descriptions immediately bring to mind the mechanization of the human body: the thumping of the heart, the coursing of blood and the sigh of deep thought. Too, the sounds create a lyrical backdrop: There is not one story in this collection that isn't layered by the sounds of the factory. It is an ever-present character throughout and hangs on the edges of each story like a caught refrain. Even when the characters' lives are examined outside of the factory, one gets the sense that the factory has infiltrated their lives to such an extent that they have never left its "Cadillac blue" and "leaden, thick, dreary" atmosphere (149).

This atmosphere is further heightened by the presence of a myriad of warm-blooded scavengers in an otherwise mechanical and cold world of steel and grime. Rats, for instance, figure predominantly in these stories. They are hiding in corners, crossing workers' paths, or openly gorging on crumbs left behind. Like the flightless birds, the rats are analogous to the factory's workers: forever tired, at times bold, at times eerily human, and in some cases, mutated beyond repair: a second generation young woman dreaming in song of a seagull on a

rock, a janitor finding the ocean in flushing toilet bowls, a hood plater who debates the difference between mice and rats while deflecting questions of class and culture at a semi-inquisition on sexual harassment.

The best of this collection: "Yes I Am A Virgin," "Death in the Sidesaddle," "Thanks to Abbie Wilson," and "The Last Car," center on specific characters and are told from third-person narratives and in haunting language that is reminiscent of Jack London or Hart Crane, a pastoral and simultaneously sharp language that highlights the tinny drumming of the activities at the motor plant and the very human blood, sweat and tears that go into such activities.

As such, these stories are a testament to what R.T. Smith inferred by his statement. That is, they are a return to literature that is about someone doing something, a return to stories that examine the layers of our bizarre ordinariness and our collective identities—and away from self-absorbing, self-aware and pretentious narratives—in a forum where most of our daily tragedies take place, work.

It's a refreshing, eloquent and information-packed read, as such, and should be used as a guide stick for future writers as to how to incorporate the world as more than "merely a prop" into our stories.

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