

Gorsky Press

Erin Coleman



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Table of Contents

Fact Sheet - Page 3

Why I Chose Gorsky Press - Page 4

Interview with Sean Carswell - Page 5

Book Review - Page 11

Gorsky Press

Fact Sheet

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Web Address: <http://www.gorsky.razorcake.org>

Founded: 2001

Founders and Editors: Todd Taylor, Sean Carswell, Felizon Vidad

Focus/Goal: Gorsky Press looks for writers who express their ideas in new and interesting ways. They focus on writers and writing that may not fit into the common categories that the big publishing houses look for.

Description: Besides the books that Gorsky Press publishes, Gorsky also puts out Razorcake, a music 'zine that includes articles about bands and many reviews of albums, shows, books, and other magazines. The press has a certain punk rock musical slant, publishing books that fit into that ethos. Because each of the editors for Gorsky Press also work on Razorcake, write, and have full time jobs, Gorsky is a labor of love that publishes only as many books as they can handle.

Activity: There are currently fourteen Gorsky Press books released since 2001.

Unsolicited Submissions: According to Gorsky's Web site, "We are not currently accepting submissions for new material."

Recent Publications and Authors: All Blacked Out & Nowhere to Go
by Bucky Sinister

Shirley Wins by Todd Taylor

Grrrl by Jennifer Whiteford

Why I Chose...

Gorsky Press

I discovered Gorsky Press entirely accidentally. Gorsky Press also puts out Razorcake, a magazine dedicated to independent music, which I found at a friend's house during a party. I read it pretty much straight through and ended up being that kid at the party who isn't talking to anyone and everybody's pointing at her and wondering why she's there. After I got home, I did laps around the Razorcake Web site, trying to figure out who these people were and why I had never heard of them before. I stumbled across the link to Gorsky Press, and I liked everything I saw. The editors and authors all seemed like people I would probably hang out with, and the final decision to report on Gorsky came when I saw that Sean Carswell has been on several tours with Columbia College's own Joe Meno.

Not a lot of contact information is listed on Gorsky's Web site—no phone number, but as soon as I heard back from Sean Carswell, he was very gracious and helpful. In appreciation for his assistance, now would be as good a time as any to mention that he will be reading at Quimby's in Wicker Park with Joe Meno on July 12, 2008. Come.

An Interview with Sean Carswell, Founder, Editor, and Author, Gorsky Press

First, according to your Web site, you "struggle to give a voice to writers who are willing to take risks, to move their writing beyond easy classifications, to take the reader out of his normal world, and to allow the reader to re-examine contemporary, day-to-day society." What does this mean when you are reading a manuscript? What about a manuscript would immediately turn you off?

A lot of times, when I'm reading unsolicited manuscripts, the mediocrity astonishes me. Rarely do we get manuscripts that I would call bad. I can see the merit in just about everything that's submitted to Gorsky. But I also read a staggering number of manuscripts that are very competent on a technical level, with stories that follow a somewhat interesting arc and characters that are mildly engaging and I'm just left scratching my head as to why the author would have put the time an effort a novel requires into this particular work. What I really like is a novel that immediately slaps me in the face with the author's compulsion, a novel that is driven by a fear or love or joy or angst that is palpable. I want to feel like the novel I'm reading is something that haunted the novelist until she had no choice but to sit down and write it. So it's not really a matter of what turns me off of a book as what turns me on.

What is it like working with two other editors? How does the editing process at Gorsky work?

Todd, Felizon and I all work together well. We also know that only one person can be in charge of a particular project. Felizon has edited the two Patricia Geary books. Felizon is a huge Patricia Geary fan. She knows Pat's work and style very well. I'm amazed at what they accomplish together. There's no reason for another editor to step in there. Felizon also edits my work, and even though we're technically equals in this enterprise, I defer to her authority. I know she knows what she's doing and I'm better off listening to her.

A few years ago, because Todd and I were getting weighted down doing Razorcake and Gorsky, and because we were doing a lot of overlapping work, we split things up so that he edits Razorcake and I edit Gorsky. So Todd hasn't edited a book in a while. I worked with Todd on both of his books. But, again, when we work on that kind of project, we take our roles seriously. Todd works in his role as the writer and I work in my role as the editor. I think it's the only way. I worked with all the rest of the Gorsky authors, also, with the exception of Jennifer Whiteford's book, Grrrl. For that one, a woman named Sarah Isett took over. Though she and Jennifer had never met in person, they had an excellent chemistry. I like what they came up with together.

What have you learned about your own writing from editing other people's work?

When I write, I do everything I can to push editing and publishing out of my mind. I don't want to think about target audiences, what sells and what doesn't, various trends in

publishing, what I told one author or another, any of that stuff. When I write, I want to be fully in the world that I'm writing about. So if anything from Gorsky slides into my writing, it's on a purely subconscious level.

I'm sure there are several ways in which editing articles or reviews for Razorcake and editing fiction for Gorsky are different. Could you talk a bit about the difference in working for the magazine and working for Gorsky?

I don't really do much with the magazine anymore, but when I was working with it, it was very different. The biggest difference lies in how much heart the writer has poured into the work. For a record review or a band interview, most writers type them in one or two drafts and quickly forget about them. I don't have any qualms about rewriting an awkward sentence or even chopping out extra words, sentences, or paragraphs. The columnists seem to care more about their columns, but even there, the columns have to meet a certain word count. If they're long, I start deleting anything I think can go.

With books, though, I put down the razor and pick up the kid gloves. I try to balance positive and negative criticism. I give more general comments about structure, tone, pacing, character development, etc., then leave it up to the author to work on these issues. We also will work on the same story, poem, or novel several times before it goes into print.

That's actually what I love about editing books—being able to watch works grow and develop, being able to watch the authors solidify and clarify their ideas, even to themselves. Like, for instance, when Bucky Sinister first sent me *All Blacked Out &*

Nowhere To Go, it was a single, 47-page long poem. I loved it, but I also told Bucky, "It's great, but what do we do with it? It's too short for a book and too long for a poem." So he kept working on it and working on it. He must have sent me six or seven complete manuscripts that were all held together by the ideas of that original poem. He chopped stanzas up into their own poems, let certain lines grow into to new ideas, ran with various themes. Reading the manuscripts was like watching that movie *The Living Desert*: I saw the cycles of Bucky's life as if it were a time-lapse documentary.

Time and time again, we students are told that publishers don't often buy short story collections because they supposedly don't sell. Obviously, with books like *Barney's Crew* and *Big Lonesome*, you've got different opinions about whether or not to publish short story collections. Are we being lied to? What's your take on the marketability of short story collections?

You're not being lied to. Short story collections are not very marketable at all. We were able to do very well with my short story collections because I have a pretty dedicated following from *Drinks for the Little Guy* and from *Razorcake*, and I also tour like mad. I've done hundreds of readings in dozens of cities over the past few years. Without all those tours and the novel and the magazine, though, I doubt those books would have done as well as they've done.

I knew I was taking a big chance with *Big Lonesome*. I discouraged Jim Ruland from asking me to read his manuscript, but he asked anyway, and I loved those stories too much to say no. I love those stories so much that I decided that it was worth it for me to lose a couple of thousand dollars in order to

give them to the world. Luckily, Jim Ruland has a knack for self-promotion. He did everything he could to get his books into the hands of paying customers.

We didn't end up losing any money on Jim's book, which I'm thankful for. Still, I guess the lesson here is, if you want to sell a short story collection to a publisher, you have to prove that either the stories are so great that the publisher should be willing to lose thousands of dollars putting them out, or that you're willing to do everything in your power to sell those books once they're published.

So you've got Razorcake Fanzine, Razorcake Webzine, Gorsky Press, and Razorcake Records. Where do you see Gorsky going in the future? What kind of long term goals do you have for the press?

The first eight years working on Gorsky has taught us all a lot about publishing. When we got into this, we didn't have much of a sense of what we were doing. I was still working construction, Felizon was a middle school teacher, and Todd was working for a magazine that was on the verge of going bankrupt.

Over the years, we've made enough mistakes and had enough success to now have a solid understanding of how the publishing industry works. We've taken a step back and outlined a five-year plan that should really solidify us as a publishing house and allow us to operate along the lines of some of our favorite independents like City Lights or Manic D Press. Hopefully, we'll also be successful along the lines of those publishers. To do this, we're taking a step back, building our nest egg a little through sales of our back catalog, restructuring the business

end of things, working on grant proposals, etc. From the outside, it will look like not much is happening with us in 2008, but by 2009, we'll be in great shape to get back to our three-to-four-books-year schedule.

We're already working with a few of the authors—two authors we've worked with in the past, two new authors. It's going to be an exciting year.

Gorsky Press

Book Review: *Grrrl* by Jennifer Whiteford

2006

I've been keeping journals off and on for most of my life, though I usually treat them a bit like an obsession with a band—I'll write religiously for a couple of weeks, a couple of months even. Then I'll forget about the notebook and start a new journal a few months down the road. During those rare days when I get the urge to clean my room, I'll stumble across one of these notebooks and end up cross-legged on my floor, trying to remember what had gotten me so worked up I felt like I had to write it down.

Grrrl by Jennifer Whiteford is yet another coming of age book, this one written as if it were in fact a journal. The book is written from the point of view of Marlie, a teenage girl growing up in suburban Toronto. Like every other teenage girl, Marlie struggles to find her own identity, and writes about how disconnected she feels with the suburban world around her, especially the kids at her high school. However, Marlie does find two mentors in her uncle, Ben, and his sometime girlfriend Sheena. Their punk rock lifestyle and soundtrack of their lives inspire Marlie, and when they take her to a music festival in Seattle, Marlie discovers the riot grrrl movement, and uncovers some things about herself along the way.

Grrrl is one of those books that really should come with a mix tape. Marlie constantly name drops the bands that she is listening to, and I think if we could listen to those bands, we could get an even more clear idea of what Marlie is feeling, and

the era and world in which she is growing up. Because the book is written in a diary format, the author doesn't give us so much in the way of sights of people, places, and scenes. Rather, she writes as if she were an adolescent girl, clearly showing us how Marlie interprets them (or fails to).

The book is reminiscent of Joe Meno's *Hairstyles of the Damned* in that the music propels the story forward, and the voice of the character is so unmistakably that of a teenage girl. Female readers in particular will appreciate the emotions conveyed by Whiteford's writing, writing that follows the adolescent journal form to a T, but fails to consistently convey significance.

Grrrl can be appreciated for what it is. Reading someone else's journal isn't always entertaining or inspiring, but those passages that do hit home go all the way. Readers of *Grrrl* should know exactly what they are getting into before picking up the book, but as long as they do, the novel offers a great perspective on growing up as a suburban teenager in the '90s. And for anybody who experienced it, that is priceless.

Reading *Grrrl* is a lot like going through my old journals. There are parts that are outrageously funny, whether because I intended them to be or because of my current perspective. There are entries that absolutely break my heart through the clearly heartfelt emotion expressed on the page. Then there are parts that sound so trivial I am a little embarrassed to be reading them.