



Independent Press Report

by

David Nance

May 2008

Soft Skull Press

☠Table of Contents☠

Just the Facts:

- About the Press.....3
- Who’s Runnin’ the Joint.....4
- Submission Guidelines.....4
- Who Soft Skull Publishes.....5
- About the Catalog.....5
- About the Web site.....5

David Nance’s 2¢.....6

Interview with The Richard Eoin Nash.....7

Book Review:

The Good Fairies of New York by Martin Millar.....15

☠Just the Facts☠

About Soft Skull:

Soft Skull Press got its start in 1992 when founder Sander Hicks worked at Kinko's. He used his position to publish his first novel, which was done under the Soft Skull name and under the table. Later, plays, poetry and more books were all published unwittingly through Kinko's brandishing the Soft Skull name. In 1996 Soft Skull was legitimately incorporate in New York. Since then, Soft Skull Press has grown immensely. In 2001, Sander Hicks took a voluntary leave of absence, handing over the reigns to current publisher Richard Nash.

Soft Skull is now one of two imprints under Counterpoint LCC. Counterpoint LCC merged three separate independent presses: Soft Skull, Counterpoint and Shoemaker & Hoard, but Shoemaker & Hoard is now exclusively published under the Counterpoint imprint.

Distribution:

**In North and South America, Asia,
and Australia:**
Publishers Group West
1700 Fourth Street
Berkeley, California 94710
U.S.A.
tel. 510.528.1444
info@pgw.com

UK/Europe:
Turnaround
Unit 3, Olympia Trading Estate
Coburg Rd
London N22 6TZ
UK
tel. 020.8829.3000
claire@turnaround-uk.com

Masthead:

- Publisher, Richard Nash
- Publicity Director, Kristin Pulkkinen
- Shortwave Impressario/ Fringe Pressman, Don Goede,
- Editor at Large, Luke Gerwe
- Editor at Large, Shanna Compton
- Editor at Large, Ammi Emergency

Submission Guidelines:

Soft Skull Press accepts unsolicited submissions but NOT complete manuscripts in the following categories: fiction, biography/memoirs and graphic art. They publish graphic novels, art books, comix, books of photography. They do books about music, and have a plethora of gay/lesbian books, not to mention erotica.

Send submissions to:

Editorial Department

Soft Skull Press

55 Washington Street, Suite 804

Brooklyn, NY 11201

Attn: Fiction/Nonfiction/Graphic Novel Editor (whichever is appropriate)

Soft Skull is no longer accepting unsolicited poetry.

Who Soft Skull Publishes:

Lydia Millet, Bill Hicks, Michelle Embree, George Tabb, Mark Ames, Lisa Suckdog Carver, Maggie Estep, Wayne Koestenbaum, Claro, Genesis P-Orridge, Robert Newman, David Ohle, Ben Greenman, Sparrow, Tim Wise, Matthew Sharpe, Dennis Cooper, Hal Sirowitz, and Amanda Stern

About the Catalog:

Soft Skull's catalog is extensive. On its Web site one can browse using nine different categories of genre, by author, title and reverse chronological order. There's also a downloadable PDF file that is nicely done in red, black and white which showcases a lot of its newer publications. Each book highlighted has a variety of features including cover art, writing samples, a plot synopsis, author bios and author praise. All products may be purchased online.

About the Web site:

<http://www.softskull.com> is where it's at. As mentioned above: it contains the catalog for all your shopping needs. All contact information, submission guideline specifics, masthead bios, events calendar, and links to their buddies' sites are also available in this nice looking, easy to browse Web site.

What's More:

Soft Skull publishes more than forty books a year, and receives more than twenty unsolicited manuscripts DAILY!

David Nance's Two Cents on Soft Skull:

Soft Skull is an independent press. Whatever stigmas may apply to “indie” anything, Soft Skull would be an exception. That’s because Soft Skull Press is pretty exceptional. It is not a charity; it’s a business. Maybe with a lower budget than some bigger corporate publishing houses, but low budget doesn’t mean low caliber. Soft Skull Press is doing quite well as a small fish in a sea of big fish, and it’s still growing.

And though Soft Skull is not a charity, the good folks there are still doing community service internationally by supplying us with good books. Maybe some people think that independent presses print books that are just for girls who wear flip flops or boys who wear combat boots, but that isn’t the case here at all. Soft Skull has sharp political commentary, books on art, history and music, and of course literature.

As a writer, I would definitely recommend sending Soft Skull a manuscript IF:

- ☒ I really felt like I had something worth saying. Just because it’s indie, doesn’t mean it’s a freebie. They’re not going to publish a book that they don’t think works well or will be successful.
- ☒ I wasn’t necessarily expecting a sum of money up front for a manuscript. That’s not to say you’re not going to get paid. They look at their authors as an investment. Their investment only pays off if your book sells well initially and keeps selling: it’s a symbiotic relationship.
- ☒ And if I had read some of the books published by Soft Skull, liked them and believed my own work would fit into the grand scheme of things. Besides, why would you submit to someone who you know nothing about? They could publish nothing but Ku Klux Klan romance novels. You thought that “Darlene and the Grand Wizard” was a fantasy story.

Interview with Richard Nash, by David Nance: April 2008

DN: What do you do if you get a manuscript that doesn't quite knock your socks off and still needs work?

RN: Non fiction is much easier to figure out what a book *can* do and help it get there. In fiction, at least for me, it's virtually impossible. Because the process of creating fiction is so emotional, personal, idiosyncratic, that there is really just no way to know what else can happen. I know that agents do it and editors do it, but I just don't buy it. If you start trying to restructure a novel as an editor, as an outsider, you can just cause havoc. This whole Gordon Lish school of rewriting novels: I'm not a part of it. It's not fair for me to say what others can and can't do. I know how I operate, and how I operate is: if I don't know exactly what it is the author wants to do then I'm not going to be able to edit it.

I feel my job as an editor is to maximize the authenticity of the author's voice. If the voice is "blue," I want it to be the bluest blue in the world. That's really how I approach editing. I can't make something from blue into red, and certainly don't want to.

I have a finite amount of time to work on a project. Eighty-five percent of what I do in a book is completely unrelated to the editorial. It's dealing with the cover, dealing with marketing points, dealing with positioning it in the market place, dealing with talking to sales reps about it, dealing with writing letters to book sellers about it. There's so much more to do with the book beyond the editorial that it's just not realistic for me to engage in a kind of "rip it up and start again" sort of editorial process.

But you're also in a situation where either you put a book under contract or you don't. And it's very risky given the number of incredibly good books that are out there. It would be bizarre to put under contract something that you're not sure about, and not put under contract something you are. For better or for worse, it's not as if we're sitting around with an empty pipeline of novels to publish, and so when something comes in that's not really there, you're not going to put that under contract when there's people who do have something that's really there. Otherwise

you're getting into a process of editing something when you're not under contract. And that's taking away the amount of time from the people whose books are in the schedule.

My ultimate responsibility is to do the best possible job with the books that I have. I would be stealing away my powers to my existing authors if I were to devote it to something that isn't there yet.

DN: That's like what they're telling us in school: that a lot of independent publishing houses have a mantra of "we publish authors, not books." Is that the way ya'll do things?

RN: Yeah, very much. The time might yet come that an author I've published before sends me something and I say "we're not going to do it." That hasn't happened yet. Literally every author with whom I've had a previous relationship, we have published their next book.

I just published Lydia Millet's third novel (with *Soft Skull*). One was an older manuscript that had never been published before; she sort of shelved it and went on to other books. She did three novels with other publishers, and then she came to us with what was an earlier unpublished manuscript and her next manuscript, and we did both of those in 2005. I just did the most recent book two months ago. I'll publish Lydia Millet till I'm cold in the ground. I'll publish Matthew Sharpe till I'm cold in the ground. I'll publish Lynne Tillman till I'm cold in the ground.

That's not necessarily an absolute; it's kind of a default. We're going to commit to the author's career.

Individual editors and corporate publishers would like to be able to do the same thing. But their hassle is that their overhead is now so high, books are expected to clear much larger number of units and sales. It makes it harder for them to keep backlist in print.

It's becoming a bigger and bigger challenge for agents. I was just chatting a few weeks ago with Ira Silverberg, a wonderful agent. Particularly wonderful in that he's represented a number of more experimental writers. Ira was saying that it's getting harder and harder for them to have their author's backlists in print.

Because a steady 2,000 copies a year, which we would consider a reasonable number; especially in an author that had had two or three of them at that point. That's good business for us, but it's not thick enough revenue for the corporate publishers.

DN: I read about your cooperation with Counterpoint (corporation) on a wordpress.com article: you talked about "being under the wing, but not under the leash" of this corporation. Is this helping Soft Skull?

RN: Did I say that? That's pretty good. That sounds grand to me. But, yeah.

The kind of books that we can do has not changed at all. We're absolutely still publishing the same kinds of books. A nice difference between where we were before and where we are now is that we can publish those books on time. And we can make sure that we know the author is going to get paid. We know that the author is going to get paid on time. We know that the printer is going to get paid on time. Not that we necessarily love the printer like we love the authors, but you don't pay the printer on time, they don't print the books on time. When your books are late, and fall behind schedule it gets really messy. And when it gets messy, that's not pretty, and it's not good for the authors.

So that's my take on the situation, at least for the moment.

One thing I would certainly say is that publishing is in a real state of flux right now. And independent publishing, because we're not a bunch of people with deep pockets. We're corks bobbing on the wave, and we just have to be the smartest corks we can be.

It's definitely an industry that's trying to figure out the future as quickly as it can. And it's not an industry that's known for its ability to change quickly. The music industry is obviously changing most of all. So we don't want to go the way of (some) record labels.

DN: With everything going digital, do you think the future of publishing is going to change any time soon, like with digital books or something like that?

RN: Yes: how soon is kind of hard to know, and how quickly. I would say this calendar year, a good 5% of our revenue would come from digital downloads. Three years from now it could be as high as 30%. Or it could take ten years to get to 30%. I don't know. It's hard to predict, but it's happening.

In the long run, independent publishers, I believe, will benefit from it more than corporate publishers. Self publishers or really tiny publishers will probably benefit from it the most.

It's all about the barriers from entry dropping. You know, what are those things that stop you from being a publisher? The first barrier to entry dropped maybe ten or fifteen years ago with software like Adobe Page Maker and Cork. It basically meant you could create the thing that you needed to send to the printer for almost no money. It used to cost an enormous amount of money to deal with typesetting, all that sort of stuff. Then all of the sudden almost anybody could do it.

Out of that was born a lot of independent publishing. Like Soft Skull and Akashic and zine culture.

At the moment what you've got is another barrier which is that it used to be the only kind of way in which you used to print a book was using off set printing, big printing companies, where the cost of printing 500 books was the same as what it cost to print 1,500. It just wasn't cost effective below 1,500 copies.

Now you can get the unit cost of say two dollars a book to print for as low as 300 copies. Which basically means you can design and print 300 copies of a book that looks like any paperback for the cost of illegally downloaded software plus \$600. Whereas 15 years ago you were looking at \$5,000 to be able to do that. So that just really takes the democratization of publishing up another notch.

And the third thing is going to involve, and it's probably going to be the longest and most complicated and the sloppiest and the most froth, and that's going to be "Well, do we even need to have the book to be a physical printed object?"

What I believe will evolve is something approximating the Radiohead model of last year. Where independent publishers will adopt two or three simultaneous formats: one will be a limited edition, high end, fancy-schmacy version of a book. Then the conventional trade paperback like we have right now. And then a digital download that could vary from being free to maybe four or five dollars.

In that situation, what also happens is, you're less dependent on national retailers like Borders or Barnes & Noble. Not that they're necessarily Satan's evil minions...

DN: I was thinking evil, yeah...

RN: ...or anything. They're not. But it's very difficult for independent publishers. You're in a situation with the problem of returns where you're printing 5,000 copies of a book just to sell two and a half thousand. That's not good for the environment for one.

If you're in a digital download universe, it's just a question of you promoting the book effectively as possible. Getting links to where the book downloads from. And those links could be independent book sellers where they get a percentage, basically an Amazon referral fee. Or they could be bloggers. They could be anyone.

In terms of the limited edition sort of thing, that's sort of like you're building a relationship, like a literary journal has a subscription. I could see a lot of the limited edition type things being sold on a subscription basis. Which is fantastic because it helps the publisher know how many to print.

I'm very optimistic about the long term, it's just a question of getting there.

DN: Do you have a method of determining how much money you're going to use to promote each book?

RN: There's a fairly straightforward rule of thumb on marketing in publishing, which is that you spend 8% of the net revenue. "Net" in publishing means net of the bookseller discount. So a \$15 book, you'd be getting \$7.50. 3,000 books at 7.50 is \$22,500. A marketing budget for that book should be 8% of \$22,500, so about 1,800 bucks, let's say. That has to cover mailing review copies, printing and mailing some galleys, a tour if that means helping the author with a couple hundred bucks toward a tour.

One thing that can come up is co-op, payola basically. Payola to the chains or the independents. If you're going to sell 3,000 copies of a book, odds are you're going to need Borders and Barnes & Noble to take a thousand copies each. And for Barnes & Noble to take a thousand copies they are pretty much going to want money for that. 1,000 copies equals what's known as a two week A-Store new arrival, which is their kind of entry level co-op marketing payment which guarantees you face out in a new arrivals section in their top 100 stores in the United States. That's going to set you back. And the number varies according to all kind of different things: the time of year, the kind of book, the price of the book, you know, but it's going to be in the ballpark of a thousand bucks. So right there, on a book, where you're planning on netting 3,000 copies, you could spend 55% of your marketing budget just on the Barnes & Noble co-op, leaving you 800 bucks to print galleys, mail galleys, mail out review copies.

So that's a reason why independent publishers are never going to engage in advertising. Why it's becoming increasingly difficult for a publisher to put any kind of payment towards an author tour.

It's not just Barnes & Noble: if you want to do an event at an independent book store, what they'll often want is to do a co-op to help promote the event. So you give them \$150. In exchange you get your author mentioned in an ad or listing of events on a three quarter page ad of the local alternative weekly. Maybe a 25 word blurb on the local public radio. And a poster in the store.

If you do three of those, that's 450 bucks. That's a quarter of your marketing budget. That's why I say that publishers are so interested in books that sell for three years after they're published. They don't require a co-op anymore. They're just selling without you having to spend marketing dollars. That's what's paying for...well, in effect, those sales are what's paying your salary. But it's paying for marketing that's unrelated to a particular title. Like the \$4,000 it costs to be at Book Expo America. Or however many thousand dollars it costs you to print your catalog, whether you print two catalogs a year, or one catalog a year. That sort of thing.

The money, the 8% number comes from your backlist. It's what you're using to do all that marketing cost that doesn't relate to a frontlist title.

And obviously that's guesswork. You're basically spending the marketing dollars before you know what the book's actually going to sell. Ideally what you're saying is "by spending these \$1,800, I will therefore sell 3,000 copies of the book." The reality is that how a book actually sells can be a real fucking crapshoot.

That's where the sort of scariness of the process happens. What if you've too many books that you weren't lucky with? That you've spent the marketing dollars and not gotten the commensurate net sales? If the returns instead of being 40% like you budgeted on, are instead 47%. The difference between 40 and 47%, which can happen very quickly...can be the difference between losing your shirt and breaking even.

It can be quite intense, but it's fucking thrilling, too.

DN: Do you have any advice for emerging writers?

RN: Oh, Lord. Well...

DN: ...getting talent aside...

RN: My advice is something along the lines of: write because you love it. Don't make writing be what you do in order to make a living. If that happens by some stroke of luck, all well and good. Organize your life as if writing is a vocation, but it's not going to be how you pay the rent.

Organizing your life as if writing is going to pay you rent is just going to generate a lot of fear and anxiety and probably bitterness. But if you're in a situation where your writing is free of the pressure to be commercially successful then you're probably going to write a little better and probably going to be a happier human being. And those are two very important things.

If your writing does in fact turn out to be the thing that pays the rent and pays for the health insurance... then that's what it's like to win the lottery.

The Book Review

The Good Fairies of New York by Martin Millar

2006

Soft Skull Press

Martin Millar's third novel, *The Good Fairies of New York*, has vibrantly real characters that struggle to find their way on the hard New York City streets and deal with poverty, society's lack of enthusiasm for obscure art, and rare illnesses. Some of these believable, likeable characters happen to be fairies, ghosts, talking animals, talking inanimate objects, and other magical, fantastic elements. When you come right down to it, *The Good Fairies of New York* is about two people: Kerry and Dinnie. Kerry is a free spirited hippy-chick whose only inhibition in life is the colostomy bag attached to her side that she must wear due to the infection that destroys her intestines. Dinnie is an antisocial fat lump of a man, who happens to be the worst fiddle player in New York until he meets a thistle fairy named Heather MacIntosh.

So *The Good Fairies of New York* is really about these two female Scottish fairies: Heather MacIntosh and Morag MacPherson, who magically appear in Dinnie's apartment in New York City shortly after they are run out of their home town in the glen of Cruikshank in Northern Scotland for attempting to start a Celtic fairly punk band, among other atrocities. Even though Heather and Morag are friends, MacIntoshes and MacPhersons don't really get along, so shortly after their arrival, they separate. Heather stays with Dinnie, who also happens to be a MacIntosh and begins to teach him to play the fiddle. Morag flies across the street to Kerry's apartment and befriends the diseased but loveable girl.

Try to keep up, because this book is also about Tala, the fairy King of Cornwall, England, too. Fairies in Cornwall are experiencing the fairy equivalent of the Industrial Revolution, and the king has decided to force the normally care-free fairies to work in factories, mills and various shops to expand his imperial ambition. The king's platonic twins, Petal and Tulip (son and daughter) are not like-minded with their father, and therefore a revolution takes place led by a fairy named Aelric who goes about causing espionage in the name of Petal and Tulip's usurpation of Tala's throne.

Meanwhile, another group of five Celtic fairies, including Petal and Tulip, manage to wind up in New York as well, which is lucky for Petal and Tulip since their father wants to kill them. They are befriended by Spiro, king of the squirrels of Central Park, but are unaware of Heather and Morag's presence in the city. But between the seven of them they manage to inadvertently start a race war between themselves, the fairies from Little Italy, Chinatown and Harlem.

Please hold all questions, there's still more: While Heather is teaching Dinnie to play the fiddle, Morag is attempting to help Kerry locate the missing piece of her prized Celtic flower alphabet, the triple bloom Welsh poppy, which she will need if Kerry is to win a local community art show and humiliate her ex-boyfriend Cal. Cal is directing a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and he's a real jerk who broke up with Kerry just because she has a tube coming out of her side for the excrement to drain out of. But that darn poppy keeps falling into the hands of Magenta, a young, muscular homeless bag lady who believes she is an Athenian mercenary named Xenophan hired by the Greek states to defeat Persia.

Magenta's extensive knowledge of Greek battle tactics prove useful when King Tala of Cornwall finally tracks his children, Petal and Tulip to Central Park. The Cornwall fairies invade America by crossing the Atlantic on a seven-shades-of-gray moon-bow. Only by Heather and Morag making peace between the rivaling factions in New York and unifying them all in an effort to thwart King Tala's imperial expansion do they make it possible to find the time to match-make Dinnie and Kerry. It all works out in the end, and even the ghost of The New York Dolls' guitarist Johnny Thunders decides to leave his beloved 1958 Gibson Tiger Top guitar in the incapable hands of Kerry, who doesn't even realize how special the guitar is.

If *The Good Fairies of New York* sounds kind of busy, that's because it is. And at times it's a little bit confusing. A bunch of English, Irish and Scottish fairies with weird names drinking, screwing and playing their fiddles and bagpipes while trying to collect rare flowers being held by an insane Greek history fanatic that's running around New York City can be hard to keep up with. Then Martin Millar gives you the history of sacred fairly relics that had been relocated to America by the half-mermaid, half-fairy bride of an age old Scottish bandit hero, and other stuff. What keeps you going is Martin Millar's style, his use of the language and his wit. If the plot description failed to convey the message, let me go ahead and spell this out: this book was funny cover to cover. And even though it was light-hearted to the point where you

knew that the characters who threatened each other's lives would never make good on those promises, it didn't take away any amount of suspense. I was morbidly curious as to what these vivid, alive, personable characters would get into next. *The Good Fairies of New York* is a thoroughly entertaining read.