



Matthew Kloepfer
December 2009
Independent Press Report

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Fact Sheet

Address:

Soho Press Inc.
853 Broadway
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Email: publicity@sohopress.com (for inquiries)

Website: <http://sohopress.com/>

Founded: 1986

Founders: Juris Jurjevics, Laura Hruska

Focus/Goal: Soho Press publishes a wide variety of literary fiction, looking for authors with distinctive voices, or manuscripts dealing with subjects not widely covered in popular fiction, and to a lesser degree they publish autobiographies and cultural historical accounts. They also “place a high priority on publishing quality unsolicited materials from new writers.”

Description: Soho is always looking “to publish excellent books for readers looking for literate entertainment and off-beat information.”

Activity: Soho Press publishes 35 to 40 new titles each year

Average Print Run: 5,000 copies

Unsolicited Submissions: Accepted. Snail mail only. Submit query letter, first three chapters of book, and plot outline of entire manuscript. Include cover letter listing previous publishing credits.

Simultaneous Submissions: Accepted

Submissions can be mailed to:

Soho Press Inc.
853 Broadway
New York, NY 10003

Note: Soho Press does not want formula fiction, young adult dramas, stock romance, juvenile literature, short story collections, cookbooks, how-to books, self-help, fantasy, or “quick reads.”

Report Time: 1-2 months

Recent Awards: Dilys Award, Alex Award, Spar Award

Recent Publications & Authors: *Year of the Dog* by Henry Chang, *The Edge of Eden* by Helen Benedict, *Village of the Ghost Bears* by Stan Jones

Why Soho?

The story of how I came across Soho Press and why I chose it doesn't make for a very cute or flattering anecdote. After doing four market reports on literary journals, I was sick of browsing the shelves at Quimbys and ready to do something else, something like an independent press report. I Googled "list of independent presses" and found a website that listed maybe two hundred presses, followed by a session of link-clicking and weeding out what didn't interest me. Soho Press' website immediately stood out from the crowd with its easy-on-the-eyes layout and extermination of banner adverts. By looking at their front list and the one sentence summaries on what was being released, a lot of their books seemed to have some sort of traveling aspect to them, which piqued my interest.

Looking back, when I began this project I chose Soho Press with a strictly "this is a college assignment" attitude, and I found myself leaving the interview with Katie Herman and finishing reading the novel *The Edge of Eden* with a deep respect and a far better grasp of what Soho Press was about.

Interview with Editor Katie Herman

Matthew Kloepfer: A few weeks ago Soho Press released Helen Benedict's novel *The Edge of Eden*. In addition to being a story about a marriage hitting a turbulent time, it's just as much about the Seychelles culture— the *bonnonm* witch doctor and *grigri* permeate the story in a way where you're never sure whether the magic is real or if it's all just coincidence. What drew you to publish *The Edge of Eden*?

Katie Herman: Well, first, I should say that I'm not the editor who acquired *The Edge of Eden*, so I didn't make the decision about publishing it. But I did read it when we were considering it and gave my opinion on it.

The first thing that drew me to this novel was the writing. That's always my first consideration when it comes to literary fiction. Helen Benedict brings the characters and setting to life in such a vivid way that you really feel like you're there. The unusual setting was also a major part of what made me think we should publish it. The Seychelles is a place that most Americans know little about, and I think it's fascinating when a novel opens up a window into an unfamiliar world. The setting also makes the novel stand out. There are lots of novels about marriages falling apart. If people are going to pay attention to another one, there needs to be something that makes the novel different.

MK: How long have you been working with Soho Press?

KH: I started interning at Soho Press in the summer of 2004 and was hired full-time in the summer of 2005. I've been here ever since.

MK: From what I can gather, Soho Press has been around since 1987. Can you give a little background info on the company's history?

KH: Soho Press was incorporated in 1986 and published its first books in 1987. It was founded by Juris Jurjevics, who had spent many years as an editor at big publishing houses, and Laura Hruska, who had worked with him as an author. Both felt that they had a similar vision of the kinds of books they'd like to publish and how they'd like to publish them, so they decided to go into business together. The mission of the press, as Laura Hruska—who is currently Editor-in-Chief and Publisher—put it, has always been “to publish excellent books for readers looking for literate entertainment and off-beat information. We have always tried to publish books that we have enjoyed reading without regard to their ‘best-seller’ potential.”

I think the biggest changes at Soho Press have been number and types of books we publish. We started out

with just one list, but now we have three imprints, two of which exclusively publish mysteries. Mysteries have definitely become more important to us as our reputation as a mystery publisher has grown.

MK: Soho Press has a Facebook, a Twitter, and a Crimespace account. It seems as though your company is going along with the age of digitalization. How else has the internet had an impact on the company?

KH: The Internet provides lots of opportunities for an independent publisher like us. All the things you mentioned—Facebook, Twitter, Crimespace—are free. Traditional ways of marketing books, like print advertising, are often prohibitively expensive, but the Internet gives us lots of affordable tools for promotion. It also makes it easier for authors to self-promote and connect directly with readers. While we still do other kinds of marketing, we're increasingly focusing on Internet marketing because it's a really effective way to reach either large groups of people or very targeted audiences.

As for e-books, so far they have definitely been a positive thing for us. I didn't expect the Kindle to become so popular so quickly, but it's really caught on. We have been selling many Kindle books, especially of our mysteries, and we plan to make our books available through a number of other e-book vendors soon. Personally, I have mixed feelings on the subject. I love books as physical objects. To me reading a book is a whole aesthetic experience.

I have a Kindle, and it's a very useful tool and great improvement over reading on a computer screen, but it's still not the same as reading a printed book. I hope that printed books will always be around, but I think it's inevitable that e-books are going to become increasingly popular. In many ways, they make books more accessible—you can get an e-book anywhere at any time—which is a good thing. And the idea of being to carry many books with you on a single, book-sized device is pretty amazing. There are lots of potential pitfalls with e-books, such as pricing. The current system, in which Amazon sells many e-books at a loss, obviously isn't sustainable. But I'm confident that overtime this will work itself out.

MK: Soho Press has separate branches called Soho Crime, and Soho Constable. How is it decided which of these branches a novel belongs in?

KH: We actually have three branches: Soho Press publishes literary fiction and narrative nonfiction. Soho Crime publishes mostly contemporary mystery series set abroad (or occasionally in settings within the US that are foreign to most Americans, such as Chinatown or Inupiat villages in Alaska). Soho Constable is a little different. It publishes crime novels by British authors, mostly books that we buy in from the British publisher Constable & Robinson. We started this imprint because Constable & Robinson was looking for an American publisher they could work with to publish their books in the US. We thought their mysteries would be a good addition to our list, so we agreed to work with them and started a new imprint. We publish

Peter Lovesey's Sergeant Cribb series in this imprint because it's set in Victorian England and therefore not a good fit for Soho Crime, where we publish his contemporary mysteries. Other than that, though, all of the books in Soho Constable are books published in the UK by Constable & Robinson. Since the three imprints have pretty distinct focuses, it isn't usually hard to decide where a book should go.

MK: Why the division?

KH: The division is primarily for marketing reasons. When you have a specialized imprint, you can build a brand that people will look for and do group marketing for the whole line. We've built a reputation for Soho Crime as a publisher of intelligent mysteries that show the reader another culture, and the books in that imprint all have a similar design so that they're recognizable. There are people who are fans of Soho Crime and will pick up a book by an author they don't know because it's published by Soho Crime. We keep the literary fiction and narrative nonfiction in a separate division so that it won't get overshadowed by our reputation for publishing crime fiction. It has a separate identity, and we can market it to media and audiences that might not pay attention to a publisher that primarily publishes mysteries. Soho Constable is separate partly because Constable & Robinson wanted these books to have a separate identity and partly because we didn't want to dilute the reputation of Soho Crime by adding a lot of mysteries that didn't fit its the specialization.

I wouldn't say that we favor mysteries, but they've certainly become an increasingly important part of what we publish. Crime fiction is easier to market, especially when we can market it as part of the Soho Crime line. The literary Soho Press list is more of a labor of love.

MK: How do you work with the other editors at Soho Press?

KH: There are six people on staff here, so we all work very closely together. We have three acquiring editors and a managing editor who does a lot of the initial screening of unsolicited submissions. I get submissions directly from agents and some from writers who come to me through a connection. If I find a manuscript that I think we should seriously consider, I give it to Laura, the Editor-in-Chief, for a second reading and then we discuss it. She reads and approves almost everything we publish. Sometimes we'll ask someone else for an additional reading. If we agree that we should publish the book, then I'll try to acquire it. I also frequently do second readings for Laura and the other editor here. Almost everything we publish is read by at least two people on staff before it's acquired. The editors work together in all sorts of other ways too, from giving each other input on jacket copy to brainstorming title ideas.

MK: How do you help authors with their manuscripts?

KH: We often get submissions of manuscripts that are by writers who are obviously talented but that need work in certain areas. If we think a manuscript has the potential to be a great book if certain problems are fixed, we'll often take it on and work with the author to revise it. This used to be common practice in publishing, but now large publishers often won't buy a book unless it's almost in publishable shape when it's submitted. But many talented writers need editing, so a lot of independent publishers are picking up the slack. If a book needs structural revisions, I'll talk about what I think needs to be done with the author or agent before acquiring it to make sure we're on the same page. Once I've acquired the book, I'll discuss revisions in more detail with the author and send written comments and suggestions. The author will have some time to revise, and then I'll reread the manuscript and work with the author to fix any remaining problems. When the larger issues have been fixed, I do a line edit, which deals with more nuts and bolts types of issues—repetitions, awkward phrasing, lack of clarity. The goal is to stick to the author's vision while making the book the best book it can be.

MK: How many prints does Soho Press usually put out for a new book?

KH: If you mean how many copies of a book do we initially print, the answer is that it varies. We base our print runs on advance orders and order estimates from our sales people. We don't have a number for an initial print run in mind when we acquire a book, and we always hope to print as many as possible. Our average first printing for a new book is probably around five thousand copies.

MK: Do you have a method to determine how much money goes into promoting a book?

KH: The rule of thumb that we use is that we can spend a dollar per book on promotion—i.e., a dollar for each copy we print. This isn't a firm rule, though, and if a really great opportunity comes up, we'll often take it.

MK: How many new titles do you put out each year? And of those, how many are unsolicited?

KH: We publish between 35 and 40 new books each year, not counting paperback reprints of books we've previously published in hardcover. This includes the books that we buy in from Constable & Robinson. Of those, only a couple each year come in as unsolicited submissions.

MK: What would immediately turn you off of a manuscript—assuming that the grammar and spelling of said manuscript is fine.

KH: There are certain types of books that just don't appeal to me and that Soho Press doesn't generally publish. I'm not interested in inspirational memoirs about overcoming child abuse or addiction. I'm not

interested in commercial thrillers involving rogue CIA agents and lots of explosions. Authors would do well to look at the kinds of books we publish before submitting.

Aside from a manuscript being completely the wrong type of book, it turns me off if a book has a plot that I see all the time. I get lots of submissions about young Americans teaching abroad and tons of submissions middle aged people suddenly realizing they're not happy in their marriages. Books on these subjects can work, but there has to be some twist that makes the plot original. On the other hand, it also turns me off if the plot of a book is completely over the top and unbelievable. Many authors seem to try to fill their books with bizarre events, thinking this makes them more interesting, but instead they come off as contrived. A cover letter can also turn me off immediately if the author appears to have unrealistic expectations. If an author says that the main character in the book is a middle aged mom and that that's the main audience for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, so surely Oprah will want to have her on as a guest, I'm going to think that I probably don't want to deal with this delusional author.

MK: What would get you excited about a manuscript?

KH: It's hard to quantify what gets me excited about a manuscript because in many ways its intangible. It's exciting when an author has a distinctive and original voice. It's exciting when a manuscript has a story I haven't heard before or deals with a subject that I haven't seen covered by other books. And it's exciting when an author seems to have created a fully-imagined world, filled with complex, believable characters.

Book Review:

The Edge of Eden by Helen Benedict

Soho Press, 368 pages

Hardcover: \$25.00

Helen Benedict's novel *The Edge of Eden* is a story about the hardships faced by an English family who not only finds themselves trapped in a foreign land, but also finds what bonds them together is weakening.

After Rupert is "promoted" from his desk job in London, he, his wife Penelope, and their children Zara and Chloe, relocate to the tropical Seychelles Islands of the Indian Ocean. Once there, the family slowly begins to deteriorate. Rupert and Penelope cheat on each other, neglecting their two daughters, who adapt to life on the islands thanks to Marguerite, their maid. When Penelope realizes how far her once picturesque family has fallen, she tries to pull things back together, but may be too late. Rupert's secretary Joelle, is using *grigri*, a type of Creole voodoo to make him fall madly in love with her, and it's working. Rupert acts trance-like around his real family, spending less and less time at home. Fearing she'll lose her husband, Penelope ventures into the heart of Seychelles to visit the *bonnonm*, a dangerous witch doctor, to fight *grigri* with *grigri*, and get her husband back.

It's nice that in this era of *Twilight*-saturation there's a novel out there with a romantic narrative that isn't just insubstantial mush. The love Penelope feels for her husband isn't one of mindless infatuation, but a love of constant self-sacrifice. Despite being on an island she hates, surrounded by people she hates, constantly longing to return to England, she puts up a façade of satisfaction to appease the husband she so dearly wants back. It makes for a different kind of love story, one where we see just how far a mother will go to keep her family together.

There's more to *The Edge of Eden* than its romance story; it's just as much an anthropological study of the culture surrounding the Seychelles Islands. Benedict's use of beautiful sensory detail create a setting where there's always something new to discover: "Raindrops as big as her fingernails would rest, shivering, on the giant palm fronds, the leathery mango leaves, and cling to the tips of the scrubby grass, suspended for a moment before sliding down to the orange-pink earth." Zara and Chloe spend a good deal of the novel being babysat by their native maid, Marguerite, and her children, who teach the English girls about the islands' rich folklore, how the natives place curses onto each other using *grigri*, and about the mysterious *bonnonm*, a master of the craft who helps people with relationship problems for a price. It adds an element of magical realism, as it's never clear if the *grigri* is actually working or if it's all a coincidence. Is Rupert's descent into an affair the result of Joelle's love potion or a causality of Penelope's bitterness? Either could be argued, and the ambiguity of it all kept me reading.

Benedict isn't afraid to switch the point of view now and again from an 8-year-old girl, to a father

facing his midlife crisis, to the natives that inhabit the island, giving glimpses into Seychelles' economic strife and the poverty that plagues the islands. The author creates a layered history for her characters that result in very real and complex characters. At the beginning of the novel Penelope seemed to be the most spiteful, unlikable character in the novel, though she later becomes one of the most sympathetic characters. When Rupert is selfishly abandoning his family to be with Joelle, he still comes across as a pretty genial guy. The ambiguity kept me wondering: who the hell am I supposed to be rooting for? Like real life, there are no clear-cut heroes and villains in this story.

Benedict's novel succeeds in creating a lush world that balances itself between tropical paradise and sinister netherworld. As the novel progresses, the family inches their way closer to the precipice of their locus amoenus, and it only takes a little push until they are lost in a whirlwind of lies and deceit.