

Tarpaulin Sky Press



Kevin Kane
Independent Press Report
May 2010

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Fact Sheet

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Contact Info:

Address: Tarpaulin Sky Press
PO Box 189
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Email: editors@tarpaulinsky.com

Distribution: Small Press Distribution

Founded: 2006

Founder: Christian Peet

Focus: The press focuses on genre-bending work in the gray area between writing mediums. This hybrid approach allows for impactful, original, and trans-genre work to find a way into the hands of readers.

Description of Press: Originally founded to provide a place to publish authors who were published in *Tarpaulin Sky Journal*, the press grew to include new authors. The press takes care to create books both beautiful and functional as either trade paperbacks or hand-bound editions. Much of the work produced by the press and its authors defies easy categorization, but the work itself remains striking in scope and originality.

Average Print Run: 600

Titles in Print: 15

Activity: Six books published per year.

Submission: Unsolicited manuscripts accepted during the open reading period. Refer to website for updated information.

Recent Publications and authors:

2010 *man's companions* by Joanna Ruocco

2010 *Recipes for Endangered Species* by Traci O'Connor

Why Tarpaulin Sky Press

I have been reading the work put out by *Tarpaulin Sky Journal* for years. The quality of writing and willingness to take risks found in the writing prompted me to explore Tarpaulin Sky Press. As the editors demonstrated by their choices of authors in the journal, the press attempts to push the boundaries and categories of writing. They seem to look to story-telling more as an adventure in the infinite possibilities that exist in the written word than in catering to a specific market. As Christian Peet, the founder of both the press and journal, states: “‘There’s no market for this’ is just not a phrase we use around here! The ‘no market’ market is our market.” I like that. I like that a press doesn’t care really about trends as much as they care about putting out books that they believe in. That’s something to get behind.

Interview with Christian Peet, Founder and Publisher of Tarpaulin Sky Press

Kevin Kane: How long is the process of acceptance of a manuscript to publication?

Christian Peet: Anywhere from one to two years, usually. If the manuscript has been around a while and most of it has already appeared in journals, then we try to get it out sooner rather than later. If it's brand new, then we give it a little more time.

KK: How does Tarpaulin Sky approach marketing? Do you have a set amount of money for marketing? What sort of techniques or devices does the press use?

CP: We don't have a set amount of money—but we try to be as smart as possible with the little money we have. I try not to buy ads at all, if I can help it. The returns are too low, especially compared with the “free advertising” we can get online and in print via reviews and awards and (bless them) SPD [Small Press Distribution], etc. Exchange ads are also cost effective; we try to swap ads with as many lit journals as we can.

Another way to look at it: when's the last time you bought a book because you saw a quarter-page ad in *The Chronicle* or in *Poets & Writers*?

Speaking for myself: never. An ad that size runs around \$750 in *Poets & Writers*—just for example—and for that same amount of money we might send out 150-200 review copies to reviewers, bloggers, teachers, etc., and still leave copies for various promotions and freebies. Not to say that a classified ad listing an open reading period isn't a solid investment. I've found this to be more effective, and part of the reason has to do with target audience. I think the majority of people who read the above magazines do so because they want to get published, not because their looking to buy books. On the other hand, reviewers, bloggers, teachers, and the like, are actually interested in writers other than themselves.

KK: Since the Press started originally as a place to publish books by contributors to the journal, why switch it to its present form and how has it evolved to accepting open submissions? How does that affect the editing process?

CP: I wanted to expand the reach of the press beyond the journal. Otherwise it might have become a closed-circuit, or incestuous, or something like that. It also makes financial sense—again, returning to questions of motivation, many people will spend \$20 to send out their manuscript but won't spend \$12 or \$14 to buy a book. That's not the case with everyone, of course--or even the majority—the best manuscripts we receive are from people who are very familiar with the press. The selection process for the journal is completely different than it is for our books. The

journal is presently edited by a large group of people. The book manuscripts, one and all, are read by yours truly. Once I have a group of manuscripts that I'm in love with, I often ask other writer-friends and editors for their input.

KK: Speaking of editing, what is the editing process like at Tarpaulin Sky? Working closely with authors on multiple drafts or do many of the books arrive ready to print?

CP: I can't imagine working on multiple drafts. That's what I do as a teacher! As a publisher, I want just the opposite. I want the book to cry out, "I'm ready. I've never been so ready, Christian. Publish me, now!" Preferably, it comes with finished InDesign files as well.

I'm kidding about the InDesign files—but Kim Gek Lin Short's manuscript for *The Bugging Watch & Other Exhibits* came pretty close, though. The layout was even set for 5"x7", like many of our books. Did it sway my decision to publish it? Maybe. I know I didn't need to ask Kim to change a word, that much is sure. Gordon Massman's book, on the other hand, is a distillation of his life-long project, *The Numbers*, now at some 3,000 pages or something. So, turning such a project into a 200+ page "selected works" did take some editing on my part—a couple years' worth. I didn't need to edit the poems, just choose my personal favorites, I guess.

KK: Since some of Joanna Ruocco's stories appeared in the *Tarpaulin Sky Journal* #15, what was the process for accepting the manuscript? What caught the attention of you and the other Tarpaulin Sky editors about the story collection *Man's Companions*?

CP: I think I called Joanna and accepted her book before I'd even finished reading the whole collection. It was just a blinking neon sign: "Perfect!" And it made me laugh in a way I hadn't laughed, reading a manuscript, since reading Danielle Dutton's *Attempts at a Life* (another neon sign). So, to answer your question, there was no process involved with Joanna's book. I sought no second opinion. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'd already had a long conversation with Joanna's lovely mother, just by the by—can't remember why—before I even mentioned the book to anyone else at Tarpaulin Sky Press.

Regarding its excerpts in the journal—that actually happened after the fact. I couldn't wait for the book to come out, so I just had to put some in journal in the meantime.

KK: Tarpaulin Sky obviously has no problem putting out story collections even as many voices in publishing decry the fiscal possibility of short stories. How does Tarpaulin Sky combat this and have you noticed any changes? And how do you feel about the possibilities of story collections in the future?

Short stories vs. poetry, I'm not sure which one is a bigger financial loser. We just put out books that we (or I) like. The rest is a matter of hope. And occasional despair. Truth is, though, one of our better sellers is a collection of short

stories—or, at least, it often gets presented as such—*Attempts at a Life*. The thing is, few of our titles are what they seem, anyway, so that’s part of the appeal, I think. That’s our niche. Some of our short stories are more like prose poems. Some of our collections of prose poems work as novellas. Another novella is a genre mystery that cannot be solved (perhaps because it is written by poet Joyelle McSweeney).

“There’s no market for this” is just not a phrase we use around here! The “no market” market is our market, and we’re doing just fine, thanks to said market. Granted, we’re not looking for the next blockbuster piece of crap, either, so all things are relative; but while other presses, big and small—but particular “big” —are collapsing all around us, we’re growing. Part of this is a secret recipe, but part of it is simple: our books aren’t like “everyone else’s.” Heck, most of the time they’re not even like each other.

KK: What is the approval process for new manuscripts?

CP: Once a manuscript is picked, I usually call the author. I do this for a couple reasons. I like to hear how happy they are because it helps to offset the bum feelings I have about “rejecting” hundreds of manuscripts for every one that we publish. Also, I like to see what kind of vibe I get from the author—because one just never knows—will they be easy to work with, or do they seem a bit uptight? Are they flakey? Do they sound like they’re on a lot of medication? These are good things to know. In the last couple years, I’ve taken to calling and saying that we’re “really interested” in their manuscript, but I don’t say that we want to publish it until we’ve chatted a bit. If I get a good vibe or, at least, if the author doesn’t frighten me, then I give them the good news. So far, I haven’t had any regrets. Gordon Massman, of course, was the most difficult phone call. We’d emailed for years, off and on, since *Tarpaulin Sky Journal* published him in Fall 2003, but I still wasn’t convinced that he wasn’t a serial killer. I’m still not convinced, actually, but Gordon’s very nice on the phone. And having spent some time with him at events, now, too, I can verify that he’s also quite lovely in person. I’ve certainly never seen him kill anyone.

Once such matters are cleared up, Tarpaulin Sky Press and the author sign a pretty standard contract.

KK: I’m curious as to what prompted you to start the Press? Did it involve feedback from the journal? What was the process like to get it running?

CP: I just wanted to be able to publish books by journal contributors who were sitting on manuscripts. I asked Jenny [Bouilly] and Max [Winter], first, for their manuscripts. They sent them. Tarpaulin Sky Press was born. Getting up and running was a wild experience. It happened in a day. I’d lived in the country, in very small towns, until I moved to Brooklyn, NY. After living there about three years, I was feeling pretty adjusted to leaving my apartment, so I took the subway to Borough Hall early one morning, went to the courthouse and got a business license. It took about 10 minutes. Except for having to walk across the street to get the paperwork notarized. You can’t do that in the

courthouse. You have to go to the newsstand on the corner of Court and Montague. The newsstand guy is also a notary public for all of Kings County. Go figure.

I had no money to speak of, being an adjunct at Brooklyn College and at Hunter College, but I took what money I had and sunk it into the press. It was a big risk, but I guess I've made some decent decisions along the way, because Tarpaulin Sky Press has only grown. We didn't even have design software in the beginning. The interior for our first book, Jenny [Bouilly]'s book, was designed entirely in Word, if you can imagine such a thing. It takes forever, of course, but it can be done! Now we have high-end software and stuff. We even have a handful of different designers doing our books now—Cristiana Baik and Kristen Nelson did two of four Spring/Summer 2010 titles, and they and other new designers on staff will be doing some of our forthcoming books as well.

KK: How do your roles as writer, poet and professor interact with your role as founder and editor of the Tarpaulin Sky Press and Journal? I'm interested in how these inform your various processes besides obviously the need for spectacular time management.

CP: Tarpaulin Sky has received the better part of my every day, and 16-hour work days are par for the course. That said, I think Tarpaulin Sky has influenced my roles as writer and professor, rather than the other way around. I used to read all the submissions to the journal, along with the other editors, and I still read all the book manuscripts, so this has certainly influenced my own work as well as the work I teach. As a writer, I get to see what's happening, right now, in poetry and prose, before it's even public. And that's exciting. And inspiring. And it can be cautionary as well: I know that my work doesn't need to reference Derrida, for example, because he's pretty well covered at the moment.

As a teacher, I've been really lucky in that I've never had to teach Comp, but, instead, have had a steady schedule of various Literature and Creative Writing courses—and, moreover, my most excellent department chairs usually allow me to teach whatever I want. So, with a few exceptions here and there, I've taken the opportunity to teach work by living authors. It creeps me out (and it probably shouldn't) to make my students purchase Tarpaulin Sky Press titles, so I avoid that, but I do occasionally *lease* our books to my students, with the option to buy. My classes draw on books and journals from indie and university presses all over the country. When we discuss Whitman, for example, it's via Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everything with Lungs*. Stein via Heidi Lynn Staples. Woolf via Danielle Dutton. That kind of thing.

Things are a little different than they have been, however—I'm teaching less, and I'm working less for Tarpaulin Sky. I'm doing more freelance to book and web design (more money, less time) than I am teaching. Also, Colie Collen has replaced me as Tarpaulin Sky's Editor-in-Chief, and she is now overseeing a ridiculously huge staff, while I'm limiting myself to the role of publisher only (it's not the most exciting position, but it's the only one for which I've yet to find my replacement). My primary focus, this year, is finishing up a book about my nephew, who,

at seventeen years old, was sentenced to twenty years in prison for crimes he did not commit. To anyone reading this interview, I beg you, check out the new website established to follow his case: JeremyBarney.org

KK: What are some of the joys and rewards of running a press? What are some of the struggles as well?

CP: The struggles are always the same: time and money, which really need no elucidation—and besides, we all have problems, right? The joys and rewards are many, but I'll pick two. The first is personal: no matter how down I may feel about my own work, at any given time, I can point to a shelf full of Tarpaulin Sky Press titles to show for my time on the planet. That's a warm and fuzzy feeling. Here's another, and the most obvious: getting great work out in the world, and seeing the various connections and communities it creates. Whether it's our authors or any of the 300 + people we've published in the journal, work by these people shares roots, has a home under the Tarpaulin Sky banner. New writers whose work is outside the mainstream—or between camps, or whatever—can find precedents and inspiration in what we've collectively assembled; writers who've been at it a while already know they have a place to send their work, and they also have a place to direct others, students, etc.

Also, I'm a total sap, so I tend to like the whole “human part” the best. I know the work we're publishing is good, so I don't think much about it; I tend to worry more about making sure that our authors are happy with the presentation of their work, and then, beyond that, I like to make sure that we're doing everything we else we can for them. The rare times I leave my little hideout here in Vermont, and actually get to hang out with our authors, that's the absolute cake. Our authors feel like family. If Danielle [Dutton] & her hubby, Martin, didn't live so far away, we'd be barbecuing all the time. Comparing potato salad recipes. Playing horseshoes. I'm sure of it. Andrew (Zornoza) sends Elena & I pasta handmade by his dad. And his fresh mozzarella. Even mailed us eggs from his dad's farm—our authors generally being slightly insane, too, just like family.

KK: Still in its early years, what sort of goals do you have for the press? How have these changed since first starting up? Does your interaction with other small presses as a writer and publisher affect these goals?

CP: My interaction with other small presses, as a writer, hasn't affected anything with Tarpaulin Sky, far as I can tell. It's two different mindsets. I don't send out a lot of work. Odd as it may be, given that I'm a publisher, I don't feel the need to publish left and right. I think of most of my work as sketching. Occasionally I send something out. Not because I think it's great, but just because I'm in the mood. Usually only when solicited, and even then, most the time I don't send. Part of that is because of this book about my nephew, which is nonfiction, completely “straight” in its approach, and thus not what people think of, when they think of my own books—*Big American Trip* or *The Nines*—or Tarpaulin Sky's books.

Interacting with other small presses as a fellow publisher, however, is a whole other thing. I can't even think of every press that inspires Tarpaulin Sky, and with whom we conspire. Rebecca Wolff at *Fence Magazine* was one of

my earliest heroes, and remains so. Ditto Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop at Burning Deck—but of course, Black Ocean and Octopus and Tarpaulin Sky grew up together. Where to stop? FC2, Kelsey Street, Leon Works, Palm Press, Slope Editions, Switchback Books, Ugly Ducking Press. Friends, idols, both.

I can't say what the future holds. No huge goals, just at the moment. Just more and more books. And some big Tarpaulin Sky event in Vermont, one of these days, just so I don't have to spend a lot to get there, or take a plane. We had a campout in upstate New York, way back in our infancy. It was pretty great. I think maybe 10 people were there. A contributor met an editor and they ended up getting married, so it was pretty historic for them, even if the rest of us spent more time playing Frisbee than being writerly. I'd like to do something like that again, but with a few hundred people this time, maybe running around some ski lodge. We'll see . . .

Book Review

Man's Companions
Joanna Ruocco
Tarpaulin Sky Press
ISBN 978-0-9825416-3-0
Pages 131
Price \$15

In order to tackle a literary work of any scope, I first need to be hungry. I find I can usually judge what I'm reading by how it affects that hunger. Sometimes a story collection forces me to set it down after reading a piece, too full of images and emotion to continue. Other times, I lightly snack my way through an entire collection. The strength and beauty of the stories in Joanna Ruocco's *Man's Companions* pushed me to devour the entirety of the collection in a few days despite being full from the rich, dense prose.

The title of the collection suggests something encyclopedic in nature—some sort of narrative-based listing of things serving as companions to man. In fact, Ruocco titled the stories with names of different animals, a list extending through the narratives of both normal—“Canary,” “Lemmings,” “Frog,” and more fanciful like “Flying Monkeys” and “Unicorns.” These titles work in subtle ways by using the animals in the titles while examining different facets of society serving as companions such as failure, ignorance, or over-confidence in the characters. In “Small Sharks,” an annoyed husband reads to his wife imperfect sentences from a novel about raising humans underwater. She fails to comprehend what makes a sentence imperfect as the husband fails to picture living underwater. The wife moves beyond his inability to think, “There would be round windows with a million tons of pitch-black water pressing against them and occasionally small sharks with light-producing organelles in their skin would pass back and forth, leaving milky streamers.” In this brief story, Ruocco captures the divide between a man and wife through small details as if small sharks fed at their relationship until something opened up between them.

The stories, even when quite short—many only a page or two long, attack with an encompassing intensity, raw and piercing, leaving little room for bearings or breath. Ruocco's lyric prose pulses and resonates. In the dream-like story “Snake,” two friends stop to sleep as they drive through the desert. While out of the car, the narrator observes a flow of bats springing out of a crack in a rock “like someone just opened a bat-filled fire hydrant.” Just as these bats flow out—too many to count or control, Ruocco piles on observations and details from her narrator as when she thinks about her friend Janie's purse—“It is possible that red snakes exist; they live in the redder rocks of the desert, the red rocks to the south, or else the snakes are from Mars.” The narrator's thoughts pour from her prose, forcing the reader to learn how to react to the onslaught and find a way to adapt.

Though titled by animals, you can't read the stories looking only for the creature named in the title and the different manifestations that surface. As in “Snake” where the red snakeskin covered, the narrator's boyfriend's member, and a translucent dream-snake all show themselves cloaked the thought of the snake. The title serves as an introduction into the ideas we have about that creature and trigger in our mind all the societal, mythic, and unconscious thoughts of that animal. Then Ruocco tells a story apart from but relying on that animal or idea.

In the only story in the collection told by a third person narrator, “White Buffalo,” Ruocco breaks up the narrative with numbered sections. In comparison to the shorter stories, it feels epic, covering a cast of quirky characters running an elementary school. Many of the sections follow Ms. Mencken as she interacts with those at the

school and cares for her ailing father, still abusive even while advanced in age. Ruocco constructs absurd characters, such as the body-building principal talking of his negative space white buffalo tattoo, that come to resemble reality more closely than traditional fiction. For instance, soon after Principal Baxter assumes his position, he runs out of the room and physically tears a drinking fountain from the wall, saying “There will be no more stooping to the level of children [. . .] I have ordered a water cooler for the Teachers-Lounge.” No principal do that, but he might think of it and in the exaggeration of his and the other characters, Ruocco demonstrates not only how strange humanity is but also what happens when people allow their veils of politeness to fall. She pointedly examines what sits just underneath those veils of politeness, divorcing characters from our ideas of falsity and societal mores.

In “Marzipan Lambs,” a woman interacts with the owner of a bakery, both of them losing or having lost their mothers, and rely on each other for strength. The woman withholds from the baker her mother’s passing even as he gives her a new marzipan lamb every week. These lambs fill her fridge at home, drying out over time. Powerful and compact, the stories, like marzipan lambs must be broken down slowly even if devoured quickly. Like those dried ears of marzipan lambs, they must be sucked on and wondered at before they dissolve into understanding. The story collection presents short tales that pleasantly sated my hunger. Yet, every time I set the book down or even closed the cover, I had to go back for more, unable to tear myself completely away. These stories by Ruocco necessitate time and re-reading, making this short volume well worth exploration.