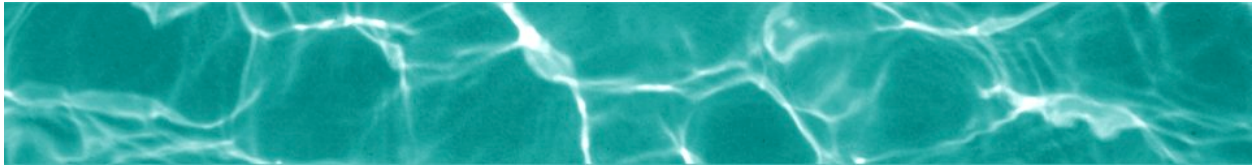


# **Unbridled Books**



**Jesse Jordan**  
**Fiction Writing & Publishing**  
**Jotham Burrello**  
**5/11/06**  
**Independent Press Report**

# **Unbridled Books**

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# Unbridled Books

## Fact Sheet

**Multiple Addresses** Listed Below

**Phone & Fax:** 888-732-3822

**Email:** Multiple; available through website

**Web Address:** [www.unbridledbooks.com](http://www.unbridledbooks.com)

**Distributed by:**

The Intrepid Group

1331 Red Cedar Circle

Fort Collins, CO 8052

**Founded:** 2004

**Founders & Editors:** Fred Ramey and Greg Michalson

**Focus/Wants:** Unbridled Books publishes fiction, memoirs, and creative non-fiction. They make it very clear that they prefer stories that are language and mood driven, something that “touches our hearts and our minds at once.”

**Description:** Unbridled refers to itself as “editorially driven”, but also” providing real commercial support”. This seems an accurate description, as Unbridled is a very personal project to Misters Ramey and Michalson, who both have extensive knowledge of the challenges and necessities of the publishing industry.

**Activity:** 3 books published in 2004 (1<sup>st</sup> year), and 9 published in 2005.

**Most Recent Initial Print Run:** 30,000 copies

**Unsolicited Submissions:** Accepted

**“Please note: We do not accept unsolicited *electronic* submissions.”**

**Submissions should be mailed to either:**

**Greg Michalson**

200 North 9th Street, Suite A

Columbia, MO 65201

*Or*

**Fred Ramey**

2000 Wadsworth Boulevard, #195

Lakewood, CO 80214

**Recent Publications & Authors:**

*Insect Dreams: The Half Life of Gregor Samsa* by Marc Estrin, *Wolf Point* by Edward Falco.

## Why I Chose...

### Unbridled Books

I came upon Unbridled Books through NewPages (<http://newpages.com>) and was interested immediately. When reading the *About Us* section from Misters Ramey and Michalson, it becomes apparent very quickly that these are two gentlemen who have been successful within their field- and within larger houses- and are now striking out on an independent endeavor.

I was excited because I feel that this is the perfect situation for an emerging writer. A new publishing company looking for new authors, and headed by two editors/publishers with real industry experience and success.

When I contacted Mr. Ramey he could not have been more agreeable or helpful. He quickly sent me the novel I'd requested- *Song of the Crow* by Layne Maheu- and then completed the interview in a timely and honest fashion.

One of the main things that I gathered from my interview with Mr. Ramey was a very clear idea of the ideas and values of Unbridled Press. They are exactly what any author would want, in that they are fiercely independent in the kind of voices and stories that they want, while at the same time being very pragmatic about issues such as marketing, distribution, and the time and support that each novel truly needs.

Overall, Unbridled Books have shown itself to be a unique mixture of the artistic and the commercial, and any author published by this company should count themselves as very lucky indeed.

## **Interview with Fred Ramey, Founder and Publisher, Unbridled Books**

***Song of the Crow* by Layne Maheu is one of Unbridled Books newest releases. It is the slow, lyrical telling of Noah and the flood as seen by the narrating crow of the title, and steeped in the ethos, myth, and culture of the crow as created by Maheu from his research. It is a very original novel, one that may perhaps scare off many publishers because of marketability fears. What was it about the novel that drew you to it?**

Claude Levi-Strauss defined myth as "a bundle of relations". That perfectly describes what I think SONG OF THE CROW to be: a tale told in such a way that all the aspects of its narrative face are also views of much that is outside of the story. I don't know that I wholly understand the story even yet, though I've read it many times. Each time through I see more about what it is to be human -- and that is *always* what attracts me to a manuscript, its ability to make me think and to see. Add to this Maheu's astoundingly beautiful and evocative language and I'm hooked.

**I guess I should also ask, did you even have any fears about it because of its nature as a novel that may be hard to categorize?**

I always have that fear about the books I'm most drawn to. The booksellers want to know where to place the book in the stores and reviewers want to know what the book is like. No place on the finished book will the word "novel" appear -- though we *will* use the word "fiction" -- because the book, as I've said above, seems so much nearer to myth or to fable than to the more familiar novel form. We don't publish genre fiction, and once you move outside of those familiar forms, narrative can go to some surprising places. My worry about such indefinable works is always a marketing worry.

**I found *Song of the Crow* to be a patient, individual novel, as much myth and religion as biology and Ornithology. The last question I have on this subject goes to the marketing**

**plan. Is it different marketing a novel like this as opposed to one that's easier to categorize? (i.e. family drama, satire, etc...)**

Yes, as I've implied above. We are not categorizing it. We are engaging in outreach to various markets: fable readers, fantasy readers, ornithologists, non-evangelical Christians, Jewish readers -- all in addition to our more traditional literary market. Because he is a carpenter, the author has built book displays for bookstores, each of which holds 5 copies of the finished book and is crowned by the flying crow that appears on the cover. This book will have to be discovered and it will sell by word of mouth. We made the cover as simple as possible (even though the story is complex and the language ornate) in the hope that the image of the book will become familiar. That image is a handle. We've worked on our language in a playful way: we're calling it "a soaring debut" and we're using a cut-line, which we've never done before: "A wing, and a prayer, and a promise when the waters recede." And finally we are hoping to use the internet to generate real buzz nationwide. This effort will be elaborate and expensive and will involve many people.

**It seems that Mr. Michalson and yourself, from the time of MacMurray & Beck through Blue Hen/ Putnam and up to now with Unbridled, have a passion for discovering new novelists. Why do you think that is?**

Greg and I see this as our calling. We want to give to the best authors we can find a launch that proclaims them at once literary and commercial. And then we want to help develop their careers -- in the belief that eventually, when their art fully matures, we, too, will benefit. We'll have their entire backlists in print in paperback. This is really a very old-fashioned way to approach publishing. We actually still edit our authors and we have patience both with their individual works and with their careers.

**You're one year into Unbridled Books, and it appears to have been a full and successful year. I was wondering how, if at all, the press has changed in this one year? What have you discovered that you're trying to do better going into the future?**

We're actually two years in, now -- marketing our Fall 2006 list. Our first list was in Fall 2004. Over that time we've expanded our staff and worked hard on our communications. We've also begun more internet-based promotions (including my occasional "from the publishers" blog) and have begun a campaign to take the concept of the "literary" novel back from the Island publishers whom we think have somewhat watered it down. Greg and I do have a track record, and the first year or so was consumed with making the reviewers and the booksellers conscious of where we've landed. They seem to know now, and the company seems to be gaining momentum. With the work we've done on in-house communications, our productivity is definitely rising, too.

**You have worked with Putnam and are now back with an independent press. What are the struggles/joys of running an independent press?**

The greatest struggle in running an independent press is convincing everyone in the book-delivery system that we have the wherewithal to support our titles for sell-through and the capacity to continue delivering titles of equal quality. The greatest joy is watching as a book that we've worked on as editors, production managers, champions begin to garner the reviews and the bookseller support and thus the momentum that a truly good and beautifully packaged book can earn. Greg and I both came from academia, and I think we both are rewarded by the concrete feel of a finished book, well edited and well packaged in our own callused hands.

**Also, what are the struggles/joys of working for a larger house such as Putnam?**

Putnam gave us the clout to see manuscripts early, because agents felt that we would pay larger advances than do independent presses. (This was not actually true.) But it was a bureaucratic maze. And its three-season approach didn't give our books the time they need to find a market. As New York has turned farther and farther toward novels that can sell *quickly* in the scores of thousands, we've begun to earn the opportunity for first looks here, as well. What is worse as an independent is not having the same presence with the bookstore chains that we had at Putnam. What is better is that we know the sales patterns of the kind of books we handle and we can lay the marketing money down at the right time and in the right place. A large corporate, commercial house doesn't have that luxury because their train moves too fast and its cargo comprises too many books.

**Do you feel that independent presses have a specific role in publishing?**

Independent presses are not ultimately so limited by the income requirements of corporate companies. The economies of independent publishing allow a book to pay for itself at a much lower level of sales. This enables us to handle books that are hard to categorize by authors no one has heard of, books that don't seem to have "comparables." This makes independent publishing, I think, far more important in a literary cultural sense than corporate conglomerates can ever be.

**Where do you see Unbridled Books in ten years?**

In ten years, I hope Unbridled Books is not only a home for new authors of real literary importance but also home for young publishing professionals who want to keep the literary lights lit in a way that buyers of novels can see them.

**With that, if Mr. Michalson and yourself continue your track records of success, would you welcome becoming an imprint of a larger house, or do you see it as more of a competitive situation?**

"Welcome" is a strong word. We'd be willing to talk about becoming an imprint of a larger house, but we learned a lot about the pitfalls of doing so in the brief run of BlueHen Books. The kind of independence and security a larger house would have to offer us for that to work isn't, I think, something that larger house would likely be willing to put on the table.

**To wrap up, I was wondering if you could try to explain what it is about certain novels that gets you excited, that makes you want to publish them?**

First and always it is the writing -- prose that acknowledges the revealing aspects of language and not just its momentum. Then it is a story that we've not heard before. But that story must be about characters we can become engaged with. The characters must be whole in the author's mind and then whole on the page. All of this is, of course, pretty phenomenological -- what is well-turned prose? what is a whole character. Greg's tastes and mine are quite different, but the literary values we hold are the same. A book must appeal to both of us for Unbridled to take it on.

**Also, what are the things you see in a manuscript that turn you off and make you move on?**

Sequential first-person narration almost always pushes me out of a manuscript -- in fact, first-person usually does. It's the hardest point-of-view to execute and it looks to the new writer the easiest. Stories in which adult behaviors are being explained as the result of childhood trauma also turn me away. And I'm not much drawn to cold ironies or to narratives that examine themselves. And the first cliché -- either of phrase or character or situation -- finishes a book for

me. And last, we'll go pretty far into the darkness, but if a novel simply despairs, if it cannot find ground for an affirmation, it's pretty likely that we'll pass.

I hope all that helps.

Regards,

Fred Ramey

## Unbridled Books

**Book Review – *Song of the Crow* by Layne Maheu  
2006  
Initial Print Run – 30,000**

*Song of the Crow* by Layne Maheu is a lyrical telling of the myth of Noah and the great flood as seen through the eyes of a crow. From the first page the audience is immediately aware that this is a very unique piece, as we see that our narrator is a crow, freshly hatched and imbued with a mystic and poetic nature.

The narrator watches from above as the “beastman” Noah fells the trees, the homes, of the forest. The crow is drawn to him and repelled at the same time, always watching Noah with curiosity as he works and prays, burns offerings and cries out to the “God Crow” to spare the Earth. The narrator follows Noah and the Ark as it reaches completion and the flood waters rise. He then finds himself a stowaway on the Ark through the long, arduous journey to survival and “the new paradise.”

The reason the novel ultimately does not work, however, has nothing to do with its experimental nature. The book fails because of the story’s obsession with the worldview and psyche of the crow, the writer’s dependence on his own creation. What at first is intriguing, enriching the overall feel of the novel, becomes saturated and distracting.

It is obvious that Mr. Maheu has researched crows and blackbirds extensively, beginning each chapter with references to them from etymology, pop culture, biological studies, poems, classic novels, and others. What he does with this research then is create an entire world and culture for the crow, complete with tales and myths, spirituality and the common animal drive for food. The novel is replete with the individual songs of different crows, the importance of the

songs, their meanings and histories, etc... And while at the beginning of the novel the detail of the crow life is strong, it soon becomes repetitive and somewhat self-serving.

As Noah and his mission take shape the audience finds itself wanting more and more of the story, only to have it interrupted by long stretches of poetic waxing on the wind, the beauty of the songs of different crows, the hardships of the life of a crow, and so on. The crow goes from being the interesting narrator and unique insight into the story of Noah and the flood that we expect, to the focus of the novel, causing the story to slow to a near stop.

The book leaves the realm of narrative and chooses instead to trust the poetic tone and our interest in this culture of the crow that Maheu has created to keep us reading. It is a choice, I feel, that most readers will not appreciate.

## Unbridled Blog

On the Unbridled Books website- <http://www.unbridledbooks.com> – there is a link titled *From the Publishers*. This is a blog of sorts where Mr. Ramey and Mr. Michalson discuss issues ranging from their backlog of manuscripts to the nature of fiction and storytelling to the current state of the publishing industry. It is a very insightful section and I have included Mr. Ramey’s latest entry below.

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### Swimming through the Currents

Here is something of the mystery and alchemy — and the real economic danger — of literary publishing.

Awhile back we received an email from a friend of the press who had read one of our recent titles — I think I shouldn’t name the book here. Not many folks had read it at that time. And so we had asked this life-long reader to give us his personal reaction. His response was gentle and as generous as he felt he could be. He thought the book was pretty good, he said. But the reading experience? Well, it was “grueling.”

A few days later, that same book received a starred review in a trade publication. The reviewer called the book “enchanting” and “remarkable.” He said it would cause readers to “marvel.”

Such is the vagary of responses to literary fiction. They’re all personal to the reader.

We never know how a book we publish will land, how most readers will respond to it — even though Greg and I believe in the value of every manuscript we take on. Indeed, we enter the publishing process with the conviction that each book we love will meet a sizable admiring readership who will agree with us. But we never really know.

There are history and surface speed and flavor and wind-direction in the decision to publish — or not to publish — a book.

And so from time to time, while evaluating a manuscript, we talk about the potential it might have for encountering a widely varied response when it reaches the marketplace. This may be a problem that is specific to publishers of non-genre fiction. Working within a genre, an author either delivers freshly to the form or fails to. And an editor should be able to see that as well as the book's end readers can. But a non-genre novel faces an unforeseeable response. And this ultimately cannot be mitigated or even fully addressed by any edit, or by any marketing strategy or publicity campaign.

The unknowable reality here is whether fiction readers will be willing to invest, not just their money, but their aesthetic and intellectual energies into the unfamiliarity that is any particular literary novel.

An author who doesn't work within a form asks readers to give themselves over for a time to a particular voice, style, and purpose, to throw themselves into a palpable current of words. I often hear that the books that Greg and I publish require an investment from readers. Sometimes this is said as a compliment; sometimes it's not. But it's true: The authors we are most interested in publishing all tend to write from the conviction that every now and then beauty has a chance to yield up truth. And that means they're going to lead us into the currents of beauty, which are often treacherous.

Of course, we know full well that books written with such a conviction quite often fall short of the sales levels a commercial house looks for. But we also know that sometimes they do reach those levels. They do so whenever they strike an emotional chord in the public.

Even when that doesn't happen, the conviction that beauty and truth are tied together can offer us with an attractive act of faith. And it is, admittedly, hard for me to see that this offering just might not be attractive to a reader. But it isn't always. Why is that?

Recently, while trying to read a novel that had graced the independent best-seller lists for several weeks, I came to the realization that a great many readers (enough to cause that book to hit those lists) are apparently perfectly willing to muscle their way through a kind of narrative clumsiness, through some simple repetitiveness and quiet familiarity, and really through an inattention to language and to the emotions that are tied to language.

I suppose readers are willing to do this because they have before them the promise that the story alone will entertain them. But pushing myself through the narrative sluggishness that I thought I'd found in that — perhaps entertaining — book seemed to me something like moving through the Slough of Despond. And it wasn't the first time I'd felt that way about a book that was apparently selling well.

Certainly reading such pages takes an investment of aesthetic and intellectual energy. Or do frequent readers of such novels simply skim forward from the moment they know their characters all the way through to the neatly resolved ending?

Maybe *every* popular novel is only skimmed.

Suddenly, that seems feasible.

But it doesn't seem likely.

So here's my question: Why does it seem that the publishing industry can gainfully *expect* fiction readers to muscle their way through a slough of artlessness to get to the heart of a story but rarely believes that readers will be willing to slip into the currents of an artful telling to get there?

And why do so many reviewers seem so often to think about readers in the same way?

Whatever the answers, I figure they aren't as simple as we'd first expect them to be — not when we think about how entertainment actually works.

Fred Ramey