

In Praise of Books

Denis M. Garrison

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When I first began reading, as a child in Tokyo, Japan during the Korean War, it was paper that fascinated me—the exquisite local stationery we used for our childish lessons; the artisan paper used for sumi-e, origami, and other arts. My senses were engaged even as I slogged through the most prosaic reading. Of course, the following years were filled with school texts and those wonderful library books encased in plastic and marked with each book's history of being read. Towards the end of my school years, in Baltimore, Maryland, I discovered the city's old books stores and their musty, dusty atmosphere permeated my bibliophilia. By that time, I was a confirmed book-lover and a voracious reader. In the antiquarian shops, I became acquainted with the beauty of artisan-printed books, albeit only those in late stages of decay. More important than their material aspects, these books faithfully recorded the voices of past ages—I fell in love with the English language, itself.

In college (Towson State, now Towson University), I majored in English literature, began writing poetry and short fiction in earnest, and ended up editing the college literary magazine, *Talisman*. That was my first experience with publishing, but not much experience really. Other than layout, the whole process was contracted out and funded by the college. In 1975, another poet and I formed our own little press and published a chapbook including both our collections. This time, my experience was far more hands on, but the printing was, again, a sort of black box into which one could not peer. Nevertheless, I treasured the little saddle-stitched chapbook we produced and published. It took several decades to get rid of them all.

The rest of the 20th century, I worked in a government office and my writing was all nonfiction, technical work. During that period, xerography came into full bloom and early word-processors made producing photo-ready pages a simple task. I did a great deal of non-fiction publishing on religious subjects during the '80s and into the '90s using wordprocessing, photocopying, and various binding methods available at the then broad range of quick-copy franchises. These methods worked well despite cost issues since religious publishing in small niche markets can involve a strong demand from a tiny audience. For the first time, I experienced the power of print as my titles got spread around the world and I had to deal with reprint and translation requests. I was stunned to learn by experience how simple newsletters get passed around and spread much farther afield than one could reasonably expect.

In the last year of the 20th century, I turned back to publishing poetry with the founding of *Haiku Harvest*, a print poetry journal as well as an online magazine. From 2000–2006 *HH* went through eleven issues on a somewhat irregular schedule. Ultimately, it was compiled into a single

volume trade paperback and continues to sell as such today. This was a turning point for my publishing efforts. By that time, I had been making websites online for several years, learning in the process a little about the publishing revolution the internet has facilitated. I decided to both publish the journal in a print edition for sale and, at the same time, give it away free online as a digital edition. Why? Well, I wanted the print journal for all the many reasons that books have always been important, but I knew from experience how limited sales would be. With the digital edition, the journal could be read by so many more people, all around the world, for free and, after all, having poetry actually read by people is THE reason for publication so far as I am concerned. Time proved both expectations correct: the print editions sold very little and the digital edition readership climbed to 80,000 in 2005–2006. The journal is archived online (on this blog) and is still being read by even more people.

In 2005, I decided print-on-demand (POD) printing looked like an improvement upon the model I was then using (viz., creating galley proofs of issues using desktop publishing and a software program that printed the two-sided proofs in correct page order; then printing by photocopy). The POD concept eliminates the old “boxes of books getting moldy in the garage” problem that has always bedeviled small publishers. It took me months of investigating POD before I would try it because a number of POD vendors adopted some practices of vanity publishing. Ultimately, I chose Lulu.com for its maximization of author/publisher freedom and control over the product. In 2006, I began doing business as Modern English Tanka Press (MET Press) using Lulu as my printing and distribution vendor. We are still with Lulu today.

The use of POD methods allows my one-man show, MET Press, to publish perfect bound trade paperbacks, paperbacks in a variety of sizes and shapes from pocket books to letter size books, and hard cover books, either with a dust jacket or casewrapped. The quality of physical production matches or exceeds many upscale publishers. The downside of POD books is that printing is a bit more expensive and the cost of shipping and handling, necessarily, is greatly increased when books are being shipped on a single unit basis. Dozens of titles and thousands of sales later, the POD model is still working well for me. Today, several of MET Press’ journals are being published simultaneously as print journals, as PDF ebooks, and as free online digital editions. We keep our overhead very low and our print sales are able to support these journals. The sale of ebooks has been quite slow so far. While Amazon.com claims great demand for their ebooks, we have yet to see many readers purchase our ebooks. However, readers in some countries, for various reasons, find buying a print book and getting it delivered to them between very difficult and impossible, so we have continued with the ebooks just for them. Of course, the readership grows and grows for the free digital editions online. The business pays for itself and we are getting poetry to many thousands, perhaps millions, around the world. We won’t get rich from this business, but we can claim success in truly publishing poetry to a wide and enthusiastic readership. That is enough for me.

One might reasonably ask: Why continue the print editions? After all, they account for most of the costs in our overhead and make just a little more than they cost. Ah, . . . because I love books. I love huge leatherbound altar missals and tiny vest pocket prayerbooks; I love slick

paperbacks with eye-candy covers and carrying convenience; I love hard cover books I can wrap my arms around, or pound on the desk, when I have finished them the first time. If there is one thing that I have heard over and over and over again from our customers, it is: “there is something about the feel of a book in my hands.” I can only nod, because I know that “something” and I love it.

I know some commentators believe print may simply die because everything will be available digitally, on the internet or cell phone or ebook reader. Perhaps generational change will kill print, but not anytime soon. I am by no means alone in loving books. Books are more than just pages bound into a cover. Book designing and cover designing are both professions with highly skilled practitioners. Font design is a world unto itself, as is bookbinding. When one learns how books are made, how pages are designed, how fonts are created and set, one can come to fully appreciate the art of the book. Perhaps many bibliophiles never do learn all these things. Loving books comes from using them in a context of curiosity, inquiry, wonder, delight, and all the emotions known to mankind. Books have taken me forward and backward in time, to lands I will never see, to situations I will never inhabit. Books have allowed me to glimpse the souls of poets and authors in ways otherwise unthinkable. A simple bound volume can act like a time machine or a window into fantastic and exotic worlds.

Yes, every word in a bound book can be replicated digitally and read on electronic devices. The content certainly survives the translation but does the experience survive intact? I suspect it does not but only time and the experiences of millions of readers will ever answer the question. All I can say for certain is that there is something about the feel of a book in my hands . . .

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