

Why Publishing a Chapbook Makes Sense

BY JEANNINE HALL GAILEY

Maybe you've published some poems in good literary journals, you've started giving readings around town, and you're ready for the next step. You have a lot of poems in your repertoire, but aren't sure exactly how to get your work into the hands of the public. Now is the time to consider putting together a chapbook. This article describes the benefits of publishing chapbooks and how to go about it, including advice from chapbook publishers and writers with successful chapbooks.

What is a poetry chapbook?

Definitions abound (one is even included in the FAQ section at the beginning of *Poet's Market*,) but today's chapbooks are primarily defined by length (usually fewer than 30 pages) and production (usually limited edition, sometimes handmade.) While some are beautiful book-arts products, perfect bound with high-quality covers, like those published by Washington State Chapbook Press, Floating Bridge or Tupelo Press, a chapbook can also be a stapled-together affair produced at the local copy shop.

As for the means of production, there are many chapbook presses out there (New Michigan Press, Concrete Wolf, Floating Bridge, Finishing Line Press, Pudding House Press...). But you can also self-publish a chapbook to sell at readings.

Chapbooks used to be mainly an emerging poet's way of getting their work out to the public, but these days, presses like Sarabande Press have created in-demand chapbooks for well-known authors such as Louise Glück and James Tate as well. Dorianne Laux, for instance, recently published a chapbook, "Superman," with Red Dragonfly Press.

Why a poetry chapbook?

The benefits are multiple. First, the task of putting together a chapbook collection of poems—thinking about organization, which poems to include or exclude, polishing up poems you meant to revise but never got around to—is great training for putting together a full-length book. Sec-

ond, learning to market and sell your own work—getting over the embarrassment of asking bookstores to carry your chapbook, or telling friends about your chapbook publication—is essential for any poet, because the usual marketing machinery of publishing (talk shows, end-caps at Barnes & Nobles, advertising campaigns) doesn't really exist in the poetry publishing world, which is run on slim margins by a very few overworked but dedicated people.

Kelli Russell Agodon, whose sold-out chapbook, "Geography," was one of Floating Bridge Press' best sellers, talked about how the experience of having a chapbook had benefited her. "Having a chapbook has helped me by opening new doors. It has allowed me to have opportunities such as teaching or reading at poetry festivals and conferences that may not have been open to me if I didn't have a book. It also helped me understand the publishing process a little better before my full-length collection. Also, crafting the chapbook really allowed me to focus on one particular subject."

Lana Ayers, editor and publisher at Concrete Wolf, a chapbook publisher, details further benefits. "Chapbooks provide an opportunity for authors to produce tightly woven or themed collections. And since most chapbooks, are less expensive than full-length collections, it is easier to convince a reader to take the plunge. Also, the shorter length of the collection can be less intimidating for readers new to poetry. So chapbooks are an all-around great opportunity for both poets and readers to get acquainted."

Kristy Bowen, editor and publisher at Dancing Girl Press, talks about why she started publishing chapbooks. "I also have a love for the chapbook itself as form, a small morsel of poetry that can be devoured in one sitting. Also, they are an affordable way to get new work into the hands of readers with very little fuss. I'm interested as well in how to expand the traditional notion of chapbooks further into the realm of book arts."

Writers have different motivations for publishing chapbooks—fascination with the form, building a relationship with an audience, or finding a home for a particular set of poems. Dorianne Laux described her decision to publish a chapbook after several highly successful full-length collections.

"I met Scott King, of Red Dragonfly Press, while I was at the Anderson Center for the Arts for a writing residency and he was producing letterpress broadsides. He later asked if I'd like to do a chapbook. At the time, I wasn't sure if I had enough poems on a theme to make a book, but said yes anyway, not wanting to miss a chance to work with Scott. It took me about a year to come up with the poems in "Superman," which are all loosely based around pop culture figures, icons and objects of the 20th century. I wasn't yet ready for a fifth book of poems and so a chapbook seemed a great way to have something in the interim. But more important was my desire to have a beautiful book, hand set on gorgeous paper

and sewn together, something that would be a small, elegant gift I could give to friends. It was also a way to bring attention to this small press and its poet/editor, Scott King, who had taught me so much about the quality of labor that went into reproducing a page of words before the invention of carbon paper, mimeo and xerox machines, computers and desktop printers. It was exacting, dangerous and dirty work, performed amidst smoke, sparks and fire by some anonymous typesetter bent over in a greasy smock, delicately choosing the next stately letter with the deafening clatter of the molten lead foundry pounding against the drums in his ears. It's also wonderfully ironic to have a book about 20th century characters like Cher and The Beatles produced using a 16th-century technology!"

So now you're intrigued. But how, exactly, do you put together a chapbook?

What does putting together a chapbook entail?

The good news is that it's a lot like putting together a book, but a more compact, and perhaps, more tightly themed collection. Usually, writers have obsessions, and those obsessions manifest themselves over time. You'll find 20 poems on superheroes, for instance, or on abandoned gas stations in the Midwest. Or you'll find 20 poems that tell their own story.

Kelli Russell Agodon's advice for someone putting together a chapbook for the first time? "My advice would be to focus your chapbook on one subject, theme, or story. The best chapbooks look deeply at a topic, but also make new discoveries in their poems throughout the book. I suggest choosing only your strongest poems for your chapbook, then determine if there are certain poems you need to write to make the chapbook stronger and more complete."

Kristy Bowen adds that "sometimes, especially poets at the beginning of their career see a chapbook as a stepping stone to the first book, which it usually is, but I suspect they sometimes see the chapbook merely as a shorter volume sort of tossed together without any real feel of cohesion in the chapbook itself. So what you get is an odd mismatch of the poems they consider best, but without any sort of thematic or formal binding." So what is Dancing Girl Press' editor looking for? "We particularly look for work that has a strong sense of image and music, cohesiveness as a manuscript, interesting and surprising, sometimes unusual, use of language. We love humor when done well, strangeness, wackiness. Hybridity, collage, intertextuality. Manuscripts that create their own worlds."

This brings us to the next subject—how to get your chapbook published.

How are chapbooks published?

You've got your manuscript of 15-30 pages of thematically engaged,

tightly edited poetry together, so now what? Well, many chapbook publishers, just like poetry book publishers, decide what they are going to publish through a contest system. Presses like this include Tupelo Press, Concrete Wolf, Pudding House, and New Michigan Press. If you go this route, you should research the publisher by obtaining at least one of their previous publications, checking out the production and writing quality, and decide if it's a good fit for you. If it is, then you send off your manuscript with a cover letter, a check (usually \$10-15), and a SASE, and hope for the best. Some presses publish runners-up and finalists as well as winners. Be sure to read the guidelines thoroughly, and follow them to the letter.

Some chapbook publishers, like Sarabande Press, only publish through solicitation—that is, they contact the person they want to publish directly—so unless you get a call, you won't be getting your chapbook published through them. Some chapbook publishers will read "open submissions," for a few months a year, like Dancing Girl Press, but these are few and far between.

Of course, there's always self-publishing, and this is an easier (and more affordable) feat if you're attempting a saddle-stitched chapbook than a perfect bound book. You could even put it all up—your poems, the cover art, your table of contents and acknowledgements—on your own computer, using basic publishing software, print it out on your own laser printer, and staple it at your kitchen table. If you Google "make your own saddle-stitched chapbook" you can find a couple of sets of instructions, or if you're lucky enough to have a book arts center near you, sign up for a class.

Marketing a poetry chapbook

Marketing a chapbook is, admittedly, more difficult to market than a poetry book. Many bookstores won't carry them because they are difficult to store and display. Your best bet is to talk an independent bookstore into carrying a copy or two on consignment. Most review outlets don't take chapbook reviews, and chapbooks are not usually eligible for major book awards.

But chapbooks are by nature ephemeral, and that can be an advantage. A limited run means an especially beautiful or well-written chapbook might later become a collector's item, and no writer keeps too many chapbooks on hand—though, unlike books, they don't take up too much space to store. Many people see chapbooks as a more intimate way to get to know a poet's work, and value the fact that the chapbooks may only be around for a short amount of time. Chapbooks are easy to

sell at poetry readings, where the buyer is more likely to want a souvenir of that experience, and on poet's websites, where the buyers are already familiar with the poet and their work. If you have friends with blogs, send them a review copy of your chapbook and ask them to say a few words.

So, remember this—give readings. Be an interesting, enthusiastic reader who has actually organized their work and practiced it a few times. This will increase the odds that audience members might want to buy your chapbook! And, make sure you have a personal website or blog that your fans can come to and find out how to buy your chapbook—whether it's directly from you or from a link to your publisher or even Amazon. Don't make them hunt for it!

Why should you consider publishing a chapbook?

A chapbook gives you a way to connect with your reader. It gives your reader a physical reminder of your work, and sometimes it's a beautiful artifact, sometimes a humble set of copies, folded over and stapled. Creating a chapbook helps you practice organizing your work into a coherent collection. Selling your chapbook orients you in the world of marketing poetry, and, if you do it yourself or watch it being produced, a way to understand the physical work of book publishing.

Because of these benefits, it's more than just a step towards a full-length poetry collection—it's a way for you to build an audience, to put your work out into the world in a considered, deliberate way. Take a look at the chapbook publishers listed in *Poet's Market*, and order some samples to get an idea of the diversity of the production and content of chapbooks available as well as figure out which publisher might be right for you. Before you know it, you'll have something in hand to share at readings and with friends and family.

JEANNINE HALL GAILEY is a San Diego writer whose first book of poetry, *Becoming the Villainess*, was published by Steel Toe Books. She was awarded a 2007 Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Prize for Poetry and a 2007 Washington State Artist Trust GAP grant. Her poems have appeared in several publications, including *The Iowa Review*, *The Columbia Poetry Review*, and *Smartish Pace*. She currently teaches at the MFA program at National University.