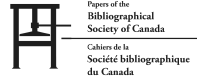


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REVIEWS

Georgina Colby, Kaja Marczewska, and Leigh Wilson (eds.), *The Contemporary Small Press: Making Publishing Visible* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 281 pp. US \$126 (Softcover) ISBN 978-3-03-048783-6

Review by MARCIN MARKOWICZ
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The Contemporary Small Press: Making Publishing Visible is a collection of essays edited by Georgina Colby, Kaja Marczewska, and Leigh Wilson. The title, appealing in its broadness, promises more than the volume delivers with its focus narrowed to the Anglo-American context. There is no denying, however, that this collection of eleven essays makes a valuable contribution to the field and will be of interest to print culture researchers regardless of the contexts they work in. The nature of the collection is eclectic in the absence of an overarching narrative that would have tied all the essays together and made the volume more coherent.

Eclecticism has its own advantages, however, and in the case of this collection, the advantage lies in the variety of perspectives on the small press offered to the reader. The most prominent topics explored throughout the volume include the dynamics, tensions, and interrelations between (alternative) small presses and the mainstream, the small press and institutionalization, the small press and self-publishing (chapter seven), the materiality of small press publications, the combination of passion and pragmatism in small press publishing politics (chapter ten), the small press and editorial activism, and the power of small press publishers to expand the field of cultural production (chapters nine and twelve). In its entirety, the collection illustrates not only “the challenges that the contemporary small press makes to literary culture” but also the

ways small press publishing “may be thought about and investigated” (8–9).

With its focus on the fin de siècle American press Way & Williams, Craig Saper’s opening essay seems like an odd choice for the collection on the contemporary small press. One of Saper’s arguments, however, is that the practices of the early modernist press remain visible today as small presses continue to approach publishing as an art and publications as primarily aesthetic objects. His discussion of publishers as “hinge figures” is notable for its insistence on uncovering the historical significance of publishers as shapers of taste and producers of literary meaning (39). Also, Saper’s employment of the term *sociopoetics* in the context of small press publishing may prove inspiring for researchers in the field. Regarding methodological and theoretical frameworks for the study of print culture, Nick Thoburn’s piece on “the specific materiality” of “the small” in small press publishing (chapter four) and Leigh Wilson’s discussion of the limitations of individual evaluative judgement on the example of Frank Raymond Leavis’ *Scrutiny* (chapter eleven) will be equally valuable (74).

The second essay in the collection, Kinohi Nishikawa’s “From Poet to Publisher: Reading Gwendolyn Brooks by Design,” is a marvellous piece that traces Black American poet Gwendolyn Brooks’s journey from mainstream publishers through regional publishers to self-publishing. Drawing on archival material and analyzing the design of Brooks’s works across the years, Nishikawa argues that Brooks had always been concerned with the design of her books. Accordingly, he views the poet’s need to reclaim the agency over the book design – rather than her alleged turn to radical poetry, which, in fact, had always been radical – as what ultimately made her self-publish her later works.

There are two essays in the volume that explore the affordances and limits of federal support to small press publishing. In “The Gentrification of the Small Press: CLMP and the DIY Tradition,” Kaplan Harris focuses on the ways in which the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses – an American federal body established in the 1960s – has helped literary magazines and small publishers minimize “operational risks” (97). The

essay is an informative account of what CLMP does to help small publishers thrive in a precarious environment. In this regard, it will be of interest not only to American small press publishers unfamiliar with the work of the council, but also to anyone from outside the USA interested in what can be done to facilitate the work of small publishers. Interestingly, Matvei Yankelevich, a small publisher with first-hand publishing experience in the USA, exposes certain shortcomings in the CLMP policies. In his essay, Yankelevich illustrates the “paradoxical pressures” (119) put on small publishers who are expected to remain authentic while reaching certain levels of professionalization by, for example, becoming “apolitical” (127). Ironically, Yankelevich argues, by becoming apolitical many small presses risk losing their authenticity. Moreover, with the CLMP’s insistence on “quantificational measures that determine ‘quality’ and ‘excellence,’” it further prioritizes professionalization over authenticity (127). As per the “tools for professionalization” CLMP offers, Yankelevich argues that they often have little bearing on the reality of small press publishers or even remain inaccessible to many. Read together, Harris’s and Yankelevich’s essays provide a compelling dialogue on the CLMP.

In “Small Presses and Their Reader Communities,” Rosamund Davies analyzes how publishers – in this case, three UK-based small presses: Knights Of, Peirene Press, and Galley Beggar Press – build their communities of readers via narratives created with the purpose of forging a certain kind of relationship. While notable for its attention to the community-building potential of contemporary small presses, the essay would have been more revealing had it included greater detail on the kinds of reader communities formed around the presses and, perhaps, more insight from readers themselves.

Ultimately, the subject of small presses and (in)visibility that resonates from many contributions to the volume is thoroughly discussed in Melanie Ramdarshan Bold’s “Leading the Way: Women-Led Small Presses of Inclusive Youth Literature.” In this well-researched essay, Ramdarshan Bold analyzes the output of three small British publishers –

Alanna Max Books, Knights Of, and Lantana Publishing – and successfully argues for their importance in countering the marginalization of voices and perspectives in the field of youth literature in the UK. The strength of this chapter lies in the author’s comprehensive analysis of statistical data relating to the three presses and their titles, including the gender and ethnic identity of authors, illustrators, and protagonists.

Overall, *The Contemporary Small Press* is a rich collection of essays that illustrates the historical and current significance of the small press. It will appeal not only to researchers and publishers, but to anyone willing to explore the topic.

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