

## Small Press Publishing

WorldCon - Denver 2008

### Panel Members:

- David Rozansky (Flying Pen Press, Denver; [www.flyingpenpress.com](http://www.flyingpenpress.com))
- Heidi Lampietti (Redjack Books, California; [www.redjackbooks.com](http://www.redjackbooks.com))
- Lee Martindale (Editor, writer, filker; [www.harphaven.net](http://www.harphaven.net))

### The Official Line:

How do you get in the front door? Could a small press be a better option for the neo-pro? Do small presses allow the author more creative control?

### Notes:

Lee jumped right in as moderator and got the ball rolling. She noted the 10-15 year long trend toward smaller press imprints (this largely being defined as houses which are not corporate owned and are not based in New York).

Heidi introduced herself and her imprint saying that she started Redjack in 2004 because she had a project she wanted to do which "wasn't marketable." She had wanted to get more involved in the actual production side of writing for quite a while and saw a huge gap in short story collections and experimental speculative fiction. So, she opened up shop.

David then introduced himself. He began by working in the magazine industry as a freelancer and later as an editor for trade publications. He has always been something of an entrepreneur, and he struck out on his own in New York. Sadly, his project there went under due to the Twin Towers incident (his project was based in the building and he lost everything). He moved to Denver and found that POD (Print On Demand) tech had made so many advances over the last few years with regard to quality and price that he chose to shift from magazine focus to books. His imprint does a wide variety of topics: mystery fiction, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Speculative, game related titles, business non-fiction, and regional travel.

Lee then introduced herself. She noted that consolidations in the publishing industry make it hard to keep track of who does what where. She said that they are looking for market share and "McBooks." They have a "mill" mentality with regard to content and are often not willing to "think outside the box." She also noted that over her many years in the industry the old way of doing things with an Editorial Board of editors has changed. There are no longer editors on Editorial Boards! There are business people, MBA's, marketing, and PR professionals on these boards and not writers or editors. As a result, publishing with a large press is a "corporate decision" and not a decision with regard to content or artistic merit.

The discussion then moved to how people obtain manuscripts. Heidi produces only two titles a year. She does not do open calls and accepts no submissions. Instead, she goes to conventions, meets people, gets to know them, and then finds someone she wants to work with who has a project she is interested in producing. She feels the publishing process is somewhat collaborative and should be based on intimacy and personal interaction instead of just putting something out the door. She does nearly all her work herself and this also limits the amount of time she has to produce work and take on projects so she is very picky.

David, on the other hand, takes submissions. He has several "imprints" under his publishing house and puts out several books a year of all types. While his full-time staff is pretty much himself and an assistant, reading and editing is outsourced to freelancers with whom he has longstanding relationships. This allows him to put out more titles than Heidi and to have such a wide portfolio. He tends to tailor his "buys" to where he is marketing in a given year. Right now, due to the influx of SF related activity for WorldCon, he has focused his imprints on SF works and had releases of many books with his authors giving readings at a local bookstore and attending WorldCon as part of their push. David said he largely shops for talent and submissions via networking. He attends several major conventions each year and he actively solicits submissions from new authors at these events. He also will hear about people who might fit his imprint through connections and mutual friendships.

In short, the first lesson of this panel is **go to conventions and schmooze if you want to get known and get a deal with a small press!**

Lee emphasized that publishing is a business. Loving words is wonderful, but putting food on the table is important too. That also goes for publishers. Publishers are about making money as much as the next guy and they do so by getting what they feel is a good product and then pushing it out the door. If the small press you are talking to is **not** about making money then they aren't going to sell your work and your name won't get out there. You also won't be making money. So, while you don't want to be lost in a sea of corporate whatever, you also have to be working with someone who wants to see you succeed!

David then said what he's looking for when he meets someone at a convention. He expects someone to BE a writer. In other words, just because you haven't been sold doesn't make you NOT a writer. Have confidence in your work! Be professional. Don't come up to him in a masquerade costume and talk to him about your half-finished epic fantasy novel. Wear at least business casual, give him a business card, take his, and pitch your book. Know your pitch! Know your market! He's going to be impressed if you are prepared and probably will ask for pages. If you have a website with a blog and sample work available for him to check out it's one more good thing. (However, it should be

excerpts of original work and NOT associated with fan fiction. He's looking for original talent with their own voice and take on a particular subject, not tie-in-fiction.)

An author in the crowd, Mark Rich, offered that he enjoys working with small presses. They are willing to work with you to market at a niche audience vs. being all about process and guidelines. He also said they are more open to experimentation and new ideas where large press tends to be set in traditions.

David responded that many authors in big press contracts tell him that they are tired of being "over edited." They will go through three or even five project editors for a single book. One editor will take the query and get the book through committee then leave or be promoted. The publisher will then hand the book off to someone else who doesn't know much about your project and just sees a job. This editor may then move on or up and leave your project on the desk of someone who stops in to fill their shoes and has to make the deadlines and doesn't know you or care about your work at all!

Mark responded that this was his experience and that small presses are about building relationships. You get personal calls and can call your editor. It's about connections. The slush pile is often smaller at a small press and they are actively reading that slush for something new! They WANT to publish new people. They want to find the next big thing. In short, they tend to be much more approachable.

The disadvantages of publishing with a small press are that they have little or no advertising budget for your book, they have less buzz and less pull with distributors (though they will push your book for far longer than a large house), they don't have pull with bookstores in the way big houses do with places like B&N, they don't have "standing orders" from places, and they are often mom & pop style shops with small staff.

Lee noted that payment for an author must be very different with a small press. She talked about the way big houses operate with the advance against royalties model. She asked how each of the representatives in attendance works.

Heidi said she pays her authors in a similar manner. She gives advances (though they are considerably smaller than those a large house would give) and does standard rates on books. She feels this is a good model for the author because it keeps the paperwork fairly standard and everyone knows what to expect. After all, it's a business. It gives a clear target of number of sales they need to break even and make a profit. However, she notes that there is a big risk being taken by a publisher -- particularly with a small press who may put everything on the line with each book. She feels that it makes the small press a more "hungry" press. That low risk for the publisher means low expectations where high risk means higher quality because everyone is trying to make the best thing they possibly

can instead of milling out just another book. So, as a result, she does advance but she does take her risk as publisher into consideration with regard to the size of the advance.

David, on the other hand, doesn't do advances. His business is largely POD and he operates on a shoestring budget. As a result he pays authors based on performance by giving them % of sales only. He also noted that he doesn't publish BOOKS, he publishes AUTHORS. When he does something with someone he believes in but it doesn't do so well he isn't going to just dump the author tomorrow and look for the next big thing. He's into making relationships.

As an Author and editor, Lee threw her hat in the ring to discuss the fact that short story writers are often paid a fee per word and then never sees another dime. So, as an author, the idea of shared risk or timed rights appeals to her. However, the idea of no advance is also tough because sometimes the advance is the only money she ever sees for her work. She also noted that large presses often will publish your stories in other countries without notifying you and that you need to be careful with regard to your copyrights and to keep your eyes open. She noted that one short story of hers has been published in 13 languages but she was only ever paid for it once.

Discussion then moved to the POD model vs a large publisher with books on stock. They also addressed how large publishers are now using POD to their advantage. A small publisher looks at POD as a way to grow their business (and yours) over time. Large press now uses POD as sales roll down on a book so they can get around your "in print" clause and keep you and your novel under contract forever.

When publishing, larger print runs mean lower publishing costs and higher profit margins for the publisher. However, it can also mean big buy-backs from bookstores with a large house which will end up meaning you don't cover your advance against sales. The average sale of a small print book for David runs 200 copies (though some sell many more and some not as much). Heidi does an initial print run of 3000 copies for any book she publishes to keep the price under control and within market range.

Lee then inquired with regard to rights with a POD house. How do rights revert when you go with a small POD press? Is it amount of time and things expire? Is it once the initial print run sells out then you renegotiate? Is it written down or mutual agreement that you are released? Lee noted that, as a writer, a timeframe was best for her vs a print run because if books sit around then you can't resell (short stories) until you are released from contract or have to negotiate with two publishers vs having your rights revert after a period of time. Heidi seemed to have a combination approach and David said he went with a period of time.

David then talked about how POD model works. That price considerations are paramount for him with regard to POD vs offset printing. However, he makes up the

higher price of small print batches with the fact that he has zero inventory or warehouse costs.

Lee then mentioned that there is a perception that if you get published by small press you'll never get a deal with a big house. David immediately called it a fallacy. (Aside, Tom Clancy is an example of someone who had his first book published by a small university press because no one wanted it and now it's a franchise!)

David then brought up the concept of the word **platform** and what it means in the industry. In short, this is your target market and your "fanbase." If you have buzz based on a market then you are more likely to be published by a large press. So, if you are published by a small press and show you have a fanbase and steady upward trends in sales numbers you have a **built in platform** for the company to work from. This means less market research for them and less costs in getting you out the door. He also noted that, as a small press publisher, he has no problem in having his authors leave him for larger presses after the runs time out. If he helps get someone started it only means good things for his imprint and good buzz for him down the road. He's also happy to be bought out on rights by larger houses. He also noted for the authors in the audience that a smaller press can give you flexibility with regard to letting you retain more of your rights than a large house (which will often attempted to lock down international rights, commercial tie-in rights, and electronic/media rights with an initial contract so be sure to get yourself a lawyer and/or agent to protect yourself).

Finally, Lee asked each publisher how authors get to know them and/or meet them so they can shmooze!

Heidi said to read the books published by her imprint and see if you have something that would fit in that portfolio. If you think you are a fit after checking things out, then come to a convention and get to know here. If you don't fit her niche, however, don't bother because it's just a waste of everyone's time.

David agreed with Heidi's position on engaging with an imprint's titles before attempting to engage the publisher/editors of that house. He also noted that there were many more agents and publishers at the convention who specialized in everything from reprints of old titles to illustration books, translations, and reissues of classics. He said to come to conventions, get known, have business cards, and be prepared with your finished works before you approach and you're sure to get in the door and at least get a request for pages.