

special section INDEPENDENT PRESSES

# Chapbook Renaissance

## The Little Book in the Age of Digital and DIY

By Kimiko Hahn

**C**HAPBOOKS have come a long way since their invention in the fifteenth century. Sold by traveling peddlers known as chapmen, these “cheap books” (*chap* having an origin similar to the modern-day word *cheap*) were an inexpensive way to convey lurid news, cautionary tales, or moralistic lessons—sometimes all at once, as in the case of sermonizing accounts of sensational murders. In short, they were meant as pop ephemera—the Renaissance equivalent of supermarket tabloids.

By the mid-twentieth century, in Europe and the United States, chapbooks had become part of the counterculture, as writers—with the help of mimeograph machines and saddle staplers—took publishing into their own hands, a subversive act that wound up galvanizing significant literary movements such as Beat poetry, the New York School, and Language poetry, to name a few. As those modest early works grew in value, the craft of chapbook production grew more sophisticated. (The first chapbook

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I ever bought, for \$1.50 at a hole-in-the-wall bookshop in 1974—Marvin Bell’s *Woo Havoc*—now sells for upward of \$90.) By the end of the twentieth century, the chapbook had become a form of high art whose handcrafted, high-quality means of production and limited distribution often made the volumes both expensive and enduring.

But even as the chapbook’s artfulness has risen to ever-higher levels, the form has stayed true to its subversive roots. With the culture of the low budget and the homegrown becoming ever more appealing in our difficult economic times, and established outlets for literature seemingly diminishing, chapbook publishing, with its do-it-yourself spirit, is on the rise.

**A** FEW years ago I noticed something odd: In the contributors section of a literary journal, a writer included in his bio that he had been a finalist for a chapbook contest. “Finalist” struck me as an exceedingly modest credit for what I considered an already modest form. As I saw more mentions of chapbooks in lists of credentials and announcements for awards, I began to realize that such a credit makes a difference in a realm as small and competitive as that of contemporary literature. Chap-

books, it seemed, were taking on greater importance.

Then, last year, Lou Asekoff, a friend and colleague in the City University of New York system, where I teach, told me that a number of his students had transformed their MFA theses into chapbooks as gifts for one another. This caught my attention, especially against the backdrop of a publishing industry that had become more consolidated and commercial. With my curiosity piqued, last spring, along with several literary arts organizations, I helped organize a three-day festival in New York City, the Celebration of the Chapbook. The festival hosted representatives from indie outfits such as Ugly Duckling Presse, Forklift Press, Belladonna Books, Booklyn, and Portable Press, whose chapbooks’ aesthetics ranged from letterpress refinement to a decidedly disposable look.

The festival recalled for me the form’s rich history among literary luminaries. T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” was published as a slim volume by Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press after it appeared in a literary journal—and she typeset it herself. In America, Walt Whitman self-published *Leaves of Grass* and Emily Dickinson stitched her poems into small volumes, or fascicles. Robert Creeley put out—by mimeograph—the first edition of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, later published in the City

Lights Pocket Poets series. These all are stirring historical examples of writers' taking production into their own hands.

But what's happening now, in this tumultuous time for the publishing industry, when so many houses are shutting their doors for good? For an old lefty like myself, there is an interesting side to the current crisis: Due to a true revolution in the means of production, digital technology has given writers the power

## Chapbook Publishers Looking for Work

### Centennial Press

[www.centennialpress.com](http://www.centennialpress.com)

### Cherry Pie Press

[cherrypiepress.blogspot.com](http://cherrypiepress.blogspot.com)

### Finishing Line Press

[www.finishinglinepress.com](http://www.finishinglinepress.com)

### Firewheel Editions

[www.firewheel-editions.org](http://www.firewheel-editions.org)

### Ibbetson Street Press

[ibbetsonpress.com](http://ibbetsonpress.com)

### Mudluscious Press

[www.aboutjatyler.com](http://www.aboutjatyler.com)

### Parallel Press

[parallelpress.library.wisc.edu/  
chapbooks/poetry/submissions.shtml](http://parallelpress.library.wisc.edu/chapbooks/poetry/submissions.shtml)

### A Small Garlic Press

[www.asgp.org](http://www.asgp.org)

### Sunnyoutside

[www.sunnyoutside.com](http://www.sunnyoutside.com)

to publish their own chapbooks even more cheaply than a Beat poet armed with a mimeo machine. Poets and literary writers can spend less time griping about who is or isn't getting their work accepted in traditional outlets and more time disseminating work they feel deserves a platform: publication through public action.

"It is interesting to note that even with this digital world being all about us, chapbooks are being made," says Michael Basinski, cu-

rator of the Poetry Collection at SUNY, Buffalo. "They are somehow more legitimate than an electronic form and more beautiful, alive, and filled with the spirit of the poem." *Rain Taxi Review of Books* editor Eric Lorberer noted the unique appeal of chapbooks in a lecture on the history of the form, delivered earlier this year at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. "By virtue of its intimacy, the chapbook conveys a sense of personality better than any form of publishing I can think of," he said, citing poet Bill Knott's original covers—one fashioned from a rejection letter, another whose title is written in Magic Marker. Not only does the book possess lasting value as an object, it also can act as a calling card for emerging writers looking to build community.

I ADMIT that in the past I had thought of the chapbook as either an art book or a vanity publication. Now I see the extent to which it is part of a burgeoning do-it-yourself culture, and a growing part of independent publishing. At readings and on their Web sites, you will find writers selling their own, often handcrafted, small collections. Several independent book publishers such as TinFish Press and Sarabande Books are also producing chapbooks, and some have even seen those slim volumes garner quite a bit of recognition and sales. Frank Bidart's *Music Like Dirt*, published by Sarabande as part of its Quarternote Chapbook Series, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize—the first chapbook to receive such an honor. Both Bidart's collection and Louise Glück's chapbook *October*, also part of the Quarternote series, sold in impressive numbers for poetry. (Bidart's sold 2,352; Glück's, 4,863.)

At a time when writers fear that

the few major houses that do publish poetry will stop acquiring new work—or cease publishing the genre altogether—independent presses with chapbook series have become a more attractive option for poets submitting their work. The Poetry Society of America receives six hundred to seven hundred manuscripts each fall for its two annual chapbook contests. Finishing Line Press publishes an average of 130 chapbooks each year, selected from both unsolicited submissions and the winners and finalists of its two contests, which together receive roughly 1,200 submissions annually.

Since the Celebration of the Chapbook, a number of teachers of various grade levels have shared with me how they use the form in the classroom. Micheline Soong, a college professor in Honolulu, has her students compile their own poems or essays into chapbooks. Nicole Cooley, my colleague at Queens College, assigned her fiction class to read *One Story*, the single-story, chapbook-format journal. She reported that her students thought the no-frills design and modest production value gave the reading experience an immediacy, as if the object were a portal straight into the current literary moment. I've heard of other instructors ordering from Ugly Duckling's translation series, which includes such work as the twenty-four-page poetry collection *East Slope* by Su Shi, translated from the Chinese by Jeffrey Yang. In my graduate workshop, I required students to find a chapbook on their own and make a presentation on what attracted them to a particular volume: aesthetics, the work itself, the author's bio, and so on. One student downloaded a PDF chapbook, printed it out, and sewed it together. Another brought in Croatian writer Ana Božičević's hand-stitched volume

*God, Sebastian, Amy* (Flying Guillotine, 2009), which was printed in an edition of seventy-four, with three unique covers. A few weeks later I bumped into one of those students at our college bookshop, his cap and gown in one hand and an extra-long stapler in the other.

One question that emerging writers often ask is, "If I get my work published in a chapbook, can I still send it to first-book contests?" So far, the answer is yes. The form is still in a kind of in-between zone as far as most guidelines are concerned. However, despite the ambiguity of their stature among "book-length" collections, chapbooks are being reviewed and promoted. *Rain Taxi* and the newly minted online magazine *Chapbook Review*, as well as the blog North Punk Press Reviews, for instance,

provide coverage of chapbooks, and many independent booksellers, such as McNally Jackson in New York City and Quimby's Bookstore in Chicago, reserve special displays for them.

For those who enjoy slipping on white gloves to experience how the form has evolved over time, exquisite and historically important volumes can be examined at libraries across the country. The New York Public Library; SUNY, Buffalo; Emory University in Atlanta; Poets House in New York City; University of California, Santa Barbara; and University of Missouri all house special collections. Performing their own forms of chapbook promotion and preservation, workshops such as the Center for Book Arts in New York City; the Creative Arts Workshop

in New Haven, Connecticut; and the Seattle Center for Book Arts champion the fine art of book making, offering classes and space for the craft to thrive, and the Counsel of Literary Magazines and Presses offers advice on practical matters such as distribution.

During this difficult time for publishing, writers and readers can join the chapbook renaissance. In fact, we can become latter-day chapfolk, promoting a particular genre and aesthetic by publishing writers we admire, carrying books around in our pockets or car trunks, or posting e-books online. With so many different styles flourishing and an increasing number of writers at work, taking publishing into our own hands—literally—is not only a good thing, it is a radical thing. ∞

## DIY: How to Stab-Stitch Bind a Chapbook

**1.** Format and design the pages of your poetry or prose manuscript using steps 1 through 4 of the "How to Make a Saddle-Stitched Chapbook" instructions on our Web site: [www.pw.org/content/diy\\_how\\_make\\_saddlestitched\\_chapbook](http://www.pw.org/content/diy_how_make_saddlestitched_chapbook).

**2.** You should end up with all the pages folded vertically in the center. Cut the pages along the center fold so that they become individual pages (fig. A).

**3.** Order the pages chronologically, then clip the stack on the top and bottom with binder clips to keep it in place. (Protect delicate cover stock with an extra sheet of paper between the clip and the cover.) Score a line on the cover a half inch from the bind edge (fig. B).

**4.** Using an awl—or, if you're just practicing, a hammer and nail—punch three holes, each a quarter inch from the spine edge: one in the middle, one a half inch from the top edge, and one a half inch from the bottom edge (fig. C).

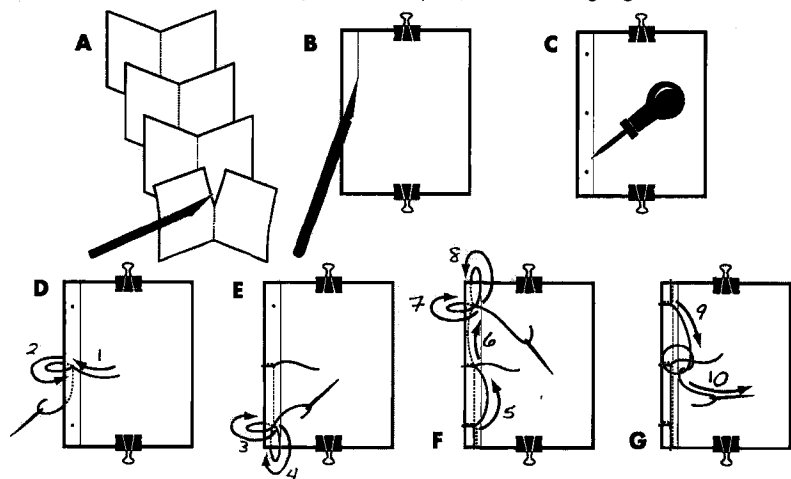
**5.** Choose a sturdy thread such as book-

binding thread (available at specialty stores), waxed thread, or crochet thread—any kind that doesn't snap when you pull hard on its two ends. Thread a needle and push it through the middle hole from front to back. Then sew the thread around the spine, leaving a four-inch tail for a knot (fig. D).

**6.** Stitch down to the bottom hole, around the spine, then around the bottom of the book and back through the same hole (fig. E).

**7.** Sew up to the middle hole again, then to the top hole, around the spine, and then around the top of the book (fig. F).

**8.** Bring the thread back down to the middle hole and tie off your thread (fig. G). Now that you've made a basic stab-stitch binding, create your own variations: For instance, put the holes closer together, use more or less than three, or vary their placement for a zigzag look.



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