

## Interview with a Publisher Dennis Stovall

excerpt from The Writers' Block on KMUN

Dennis Stovall & his wife Linny have operated Blue Heron Publishing in Portland for 13 years.

**Ginni Callahan** What are some assumptions that purchasers and readers of books have about the industry of books that may not be true?

**Dennis Stovall** Maybe now more than ever there are some myths about the dissemination of information. When we walk into the large super-stores, the initial reaction I think is to believe that we have an amazing menu from which to select, and there's never a thought about how the selection process, that brings books into the bookstores, affects what really is on the shelves there, and what, more importantly, is left off the shelves.

It looks like everything is there, but on the contrary, we're suffering a tremendous loss of access for new literature, particularly for new voices because of the homogenization of culture that comes with the lowest common denominator marketing of books in the superstores.

**GC** I've heard it said that the publishing industry has become essentially part of the entertainment industry.

**DS** Yeah, it really did. Entertainment becomes a key word, I think, in assessing the major publishing houses now. In fact they're owned by Viacom and other large entertainment places, Disney.

**GC** Publisher's Weekly is the magazine to read if you're in the business of selling books. The magazine tells of billion dollar companies and billion dollar books, and it includes tricks on selling books, and generally equates money with success. As a small publisher, is this how you would define success?

**DS** Well, you certainly have to survive. The difficulty for small publishers is actually just survival. Publishing in general is not a business that pays anybody well, certainly not as well as one would be paid for comparable work in any other industry. On the level of small press, though, the success is generally driven by personal motivations—an interest in literature and what one can contribute to culture, as well as making a living.

The problem, though, and I think you've hit on it here when you talk about the money side of things, is that books and culture have become commodities.

**GC** In your opinion, what is the value of books, aside from money?

**DS** Books are a number of things. They are cultural conveyances. They are part of our collective memory, whether it's culture or politics, entertainment, education, they transmit from one to another, from one generation to another, from one mind to another. They give us windows onto our own lives, onto our own culture, onto the cultures of other people, that no other medium does in the same way.

It goes along with what you also said about the entertainment industry and big publishing.

So as long as culture is a commodity, and I think this endemic to American consciousness, money is the way to keep score.

**GC** Beyond publishing, it seems to be a general global trend that money and power of decision is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

**DS** You're right. This is not a problem of just publishing at all.

**GC** What does it mean that a handful of corporations own much of the media and that they control control ideas transmitted through TV, newspaper, books, radio... what does it mean for the people?

**DS** We hold freedom of press dear, but freedom of press is sort of meaningless if the press can't get what it publishes to its readers. The avenues of access to readership are being controlled by fewer and fewer corporate entities, whether it's the large publishers, the large booksellers, or the large media conglomerates who decide what entertainment should be. Each of those in its own way narrows things for all of us.

**GC** So it's in a way censorship of the marketplace, or by the marketplace.

**DS** Yeah, but not in a conspiratorial way, but by allowing the marketplace to decide, that is by allowing only profit margins to determine whether a book or a cultural commodity is worth keeping in place. As long as that's simply bottom-line driven, the losers will be anything that is marginal, which has a smaller audience, or is controversial in any way.

The choices are made on the level of acquisition among the publishers. This will sell better than that, and the criteria is no longer the value of the thing as a cultural artifact or as an educational tool, but only as a profit maker.

**GC** When we lose those marginal writers, in this case, what does society lose?

**DS** I think the center of a culture is defined by what is going on on its periphery. If the edges shrink in, and the circle becomes smaller, there's simply less interchange going on. There are not the multiplicity of voices and ideas that make the stew richer at its center. We may still have a stew, but it has fewer things in it, fewer things that are nourishing.

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**GC** Do you think the free exchange of ideas on the internet balances that out?

**DS** Well, I think it's one of the opportunities for publishing. It's another, at least at this point, mode of really democratic access to an audience. Any one of us can become a publisher on the web.

**GC** As long as we have access to a computer, which raises another...

**DS** That's right.

**GC** Historically, back before printing presses, books were the privilege of the elite. Then came the printing press. And then came American democracy which is based on an educated electorate

**DS** and free libraries.

**GC** Books are absolutely integral to that. So in light of what we've been discussing, books and democracy, how in this going to pan out?

**DS** How it pans out is pretty hard to predict. In the short run, there's a constriction of culture, and that means the experimenters are putting their books in the bottom drawers of their dressers and leaving them there because there's not a market for them.

You made some really good points about the democratization of literacy, I think when you talked about the fundamental role of books in American culture and that's always been part of the vitality of American publishing, that we have mass literacy. It's really quite recent that that's the case, and it really went against that priesthood of intellectual control.

Now, it's not clear that we're creating a new priesthood by circumscribing the marketplace and the access for small presses. This is no longer a priesthood which wants to say a certain thing, but it's a priesthood that wants to make money, so it will say whatever makes money, publish whatever makes money.

It can't be healthy for a culture to be deformed in that way.

**GC** There is another way to finance literature, and that's through funding, which is being reduced.

**DS** There are people who will argue that books ought to survive in the marketplace or not survive at all. The problem is that there are lots of things done on the edges of a culture which can't support themselves in the marketplace, but without which we're all poorer. Even if they only goad us into reacting, make us angry, they at least do something. There are fewer possibilities for those sorts of books when subsidies are denied, or when the subsidies are granted only after censorship of ideas.

The small amount that was ever available through the granting institutions public and private has now been reduced incredibly. It really was very little. By comparison with every other western modern democracy, we are the most backward. We give the least to support culture of any kind. In fact, we almost make a principled stand to say culture is not worth something unless it is a commodity.

The Writers' Block is produced by Ginni Callahan and airs Wednesdays at 1pm on KMUN 91.9FM

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