

Essay: *The Wide, Wide World of Chapbooks*

Tim Kindseth

Ken Tucker reviewed Bill Knott's *Laugh at the End of the World: Collected Comic Poems, 1969-1999* (2000), which was published by BOA, in the April 15, 2001 issue of the *New York Times Book Review*. In a more recent issue (November 21, 2004), Stephen Burt made several comments in an omnibus review of new poetry titles about Knott's latest book, *The Unsubscriber*, which was put out in October 2004 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Between Tucker and Burt's respective articles—a period of roughly three and a half years—Knott, who arguably reigns supreme among our postmodern pamphleteers, produced several other collections of poems.

Why did the editors at the *NYTBR* fail, or outright refuse, to have those collections reviewed? Sad fact that it may be, unless a work is literally treated as a product to be sold—unless it has been branded with an International Standard Barcode Number—that work will almost never be considered for coverage by a mainstream newspaper, be it the *New York Times* or any number of small regional publications that typically cull book reviews and other book-related bulletins from the same three or four national wire services. The collections Knott released between *Laugh at the End of the World* and *The Unsubscriber* were sans ISBN; neither paperbacks nor hardcovers, they instead were chapbooks, nothing more than faded Xeroxed pages haphazardly stapled together, presumably by Knott himself, with the apparent dexterity of a drunk ant eater.

To be honest, the only reason I even know these chapbooks exist—chapbooks with indelible titles like *Portrait of a Selsamizdat* and *Ear Quire* plastered on their flimsy jackets—is that for two years, following a rather pitiable tour of duty at NYU, I worked for Poets House, a nonprofit poetry archive in lower Manhattan. From May 2002 through May 2004, my job was to organize their annual Showcase, an exhibit held in April that displays, as comprehensively as humanly possible, all the poetry and poetry-related texts published in the United States during a given year. Of the around 2,000 titles I managed to collect for each Showcase, about 300-350 of those were chapbooks. (For exact numbers, consult the Poets House *Directory of American Poetry Books*, which can be accessed freely through their

website, www.poetshouse.org.) Of the chapbooks gathered each year, a few inevitably would be by Knott himself, who would occasionally send me two to three self-published chapbooks at a time in a crumbling cardboard box from an address in or near Boston.

There's always a needle in every haystack, and that's reason enough to try to get your hands on any chapbook you can.

The great majority of the chapbooks that landed on my desk while at Poets House were, like the Knott chapbooks I received, offensive to the eye. Garish, lurid, tacky: you take your pick of equally applicable adjectives. Some were wallpapered with a buttery yellow that would have made Charlotte Perkins Gilman sick had she still been around to see them. Others were caked with frosted clip-art images of cloying snowmen and plump cherubs borrowed from what I assumed at the time, and am still convinced, to be the same antique version of Print Shop I was using to mass-produce Valentines in the fifth grade. Suffice it to say that most of my encounters with chapbooks were mildly disagreeable, if not embarrassing. I say embarrassing because it is one thing to chortle with a work of art created intentionally to appear mawkish and third-rate—I'm thinking of Duchamp's *Fountain*—while it is another thing altogether, emotionally speaking, to deal with something that knows not that it's banal—here I'm remembering a hyperbolically sincere community theater production of *Our Town* I once saw in suburban Dallas. Or, in terms of poetry, think of how easy it is to hoot along with a naughty limerick. On the other hand, snickering at a maudlin, amateur love sonnet penned entirely in earnest—and written with the same banal, strict adherence to metrical regularity required by a proper limerick—can be awkward at best. The difference, I suppose, is simply that of laughing with, rather than at, something.

Not that I didn't bump into tons of chapbooks I could laugh with—or that I didn't feel hesitant to laugh at—during my two years directing the Showcase at Poets House. Take Mike Topp's *Happy Ending*. Published in early winter 2002 by Future Tense Books in Portland, OR, the chapbook itself

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is comfortably diminutive, easily fitting within the perimeter of an average adult palm. It is packaged with a blurb (real?) on the back from Robert Creeley that fairly distills the essence of Topp's epigrammatic verses: "Like, I don't know lots—but Topp's is tops." Concise, driven by an awful pun, and full of small profundity: just like Jack Handey, and just like the outrageous gnomic one-liners Topp excels at, the sort of poems that are good to declaim with utmost confidence after several dark lagers chased with a shot of lukewarm Jägermeister.

Topp's poems, while comical, are benignly so. Equally quirky, yet more disturbing, were the chapbooks I encountered that were roughly themed around the consumption of human meat: Tom Smith's *Trash: The Dahmer Sonnets* (Red Moon Press), *Cannibals of North America* (2000, Kapow!) by Juliette Torrez, and the most disorienting of the bunch, Noel Black's *More Ways to Cook and Eat Celine Dion* (Angry Dog Press). Bodacious and obscene, these are the kind of titles you just don't come across on the fall and spring lists for Alfred A. Knopf or HarperCollins. Nor do you come across the bona fide pornography of chapbooks like *Behind the Barn: The Found Poems of 'Jodi Blowjob.'* A Mr. Dan Wilcox (pun certainly intended, or so I hope) wrote that meretricious gem, and Wilcox's tiny press A.P.D. in Albany, NY, published it. Stamped on the back cover is the rather revealing price of fifty cents, about the cost of probably sixty seconds of televised skin at some seedy Times Square peep show.

To be sure, several endowed literary organizations produce quality chapbooks, or what most would consider to be a tad more refined than a series of poems about a cannibalistic predator stalking victims near Milwaukee. The Poetry Society of America, for instance, inaugurated, in 2003, an annual chapbook competition to be judged by a constellation of stellar, high profile poets. The competition is actually two: the *National Chapbook Fellowship*, which is open to anyone in the United States who has yet to publish a full-length collection of poems; and the *New York Chapbook Fellowship*, open to New York City residents under the age of 30. Past and future judges include such luminaries as John Ashbery, Eavan Boland, Robert Creeley (if only Mike Topp had applied), Carl Phillips, Henri Cole, Jean Valentine, and Li-Young Lee. Specific guidelines can be found at PSA's website, www.poetrysociety.org. Like PSA, New York City's Center for Book Arts publishes one or two chapbooks through an annual competition. Toward the end of 2002, for example, they published a short series of poems by Rachel Zucker titled *Annunciation*. Zucker has since gone on to publish two well-regarded, full-length collections with the venerable Wesleyan University Press in Middletown, CT, *Eating in the Underworld* (2003), starring Persephone, and *The Last Clear Nar-*

ative (2004).

Then there are literary collectives like Ugly Duckling Presse (www.uglyducklingpresse.org), which was internationally itinerant for a while but is now ensconced in Brooklyn. Ugly Duckling, under the spirited guidance of Matvei Yankelevich and with a well-oiled letterpress, has produced a steady stream of well-wrought, frankly beautiful chapbooks over the last few years, including the titles in a series pragmatically labeled 6x6: each chapbook in the series contains six poets and measures six inches by six inches. Several of the poets in these chapbook anthologies have begun to make names for themselves and now have full-length books they can tack on to the old CV: Sam Truitt's *Vertical Elegies 5* (2003) was published by University of Georgia Press; Joanna Fuhrman's *Freud in Brooklyn* (2000) and *Ugh Ugh Ocean* (2003) have both been published by Hanging Loose Press; and Arielle Greenberg's *Given* was published by Verse Press shortly after I became the Showcase director at Poets House in 2002. Ugly Duckling's chapbooks, regardless of the content inside, which can be too cleverly modernist at times, are all worth owning as art objects in their own right.

Similarly attractive are the slim letterpress volumes published by Gary Metras of Adastra Press in Massachusetts. What I consider to be one of my most pleasant and serendipitous finds among the chapbooks I handled at Poets House, Jim Daniel's *Digger's Blues*, was published by Adastra in spring 2002, and it immediately baits the eye with a rich, monochromatic navy blue cover. Daniels had another chapbook, *Greatest Hits: 1976-2001*, released in 2002 by Pudding House Publications (www.puddinghouse.com). Run by the inimitable, and seemingly indefatigable, Jennifer Bosveld, Pudding House is based in Columbus, OH, and channels most of its efforts into a "Greatest Hits" invitation-only series, where each chapbook in the series has ten or so "greatest hits" poems by its respective author, prefaced with a brief autobiographical account by the poet of his or her publishing career, general themes, and anything else the poet believes to be germane to the reading of his or her poems. Believe it or not, Pudding House has for several years published over 100 of these "Greatest Hits" chapbooks annually, making it irrefutably the single largest producer of chapbooks in the United States.

Or so the thorough documentation at Poets House indicates. Though I would find any contrary claim too dubious to entertain, there is always the possibility that somewhere in this country of ours, someone is publishing more chapbooks each year than Pudding House. As fervid as Poets House's collecting habits were while I was there, and continue to be under the solid leadership of young poet Mike Romanos, I was consistently aware, given the regional focus of most chapbooks, that there might be gaping holes in the chapbook sec-

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tions of each Showcase exhibit. Just living in New York eased the process of finding most of the minute items being circulated in the area. It was as simple as reading the *St. Mark's Poetry Project Newsletter*—an indispensable resource for anyone concerned with chapbooks or small press titles in general—or attending local readings, where chapbooks were often being launched and promoted. Though Poets House did, and does, receive chapbooks from California and states in every region of the country—Skanky Possum, for example, sends from Austin and Tinfish posts from Kanòhe, HI—hunting down every single chapbook being published in, say, San Francisco or Los Angeles, some of which might have a total print run of 20 copies, did not, nor could it ever, happen from a desk bolted to a wooden floor in SoHo.

No less difficult would it be to locate all of the cyberchapbooks floating around on the World Wide Web. Rochelle Ratner, an editor of *ABR*, first introduced me to the phenomenon a few years ago when she passed me a printed copy of her chapbook *Tellings* (2002), which can be downloaded in a PDF file, gratis, from the website for Tamafyhr Mountain Poetry, www.tmpoetry.com. Several poets loosely associated with Marsh Hawk Press, as is Ratner, have chapbooks available on the site. But should we really refer to them as chapbooks? Etymologically, the “chap” part of “chapbook” can be traced to “cheap,” which suggests that, in the strictest sense, a chapbook must be an item that costs something, be it a penny, a ruble, or ten thousand euros. Anything that is available to someone free of charge, as are what I am referring to as cyberchapbooks, should therefore not technically be referred to as a form of a chapbook at all. It is also useful to remember that “chapbook” is an abbreviated form of the phrase “chapman book,” meaning a book sold by a chapman, or a cheapman, on the street—not today, but during that foggy Dickensian era of the penny dreadful. With the utterly tactile roots of the word “chapbook” itself in mind—real men stood on physical street corners selling actual pages of poems, lyrics, and sheet music—it seems counterintuitive, or at least against the na-

ture of the word itself, to call free digital files that can't be held in one's own hand “chapbooks.” Whatever one chooses to call them—and lacking any novel idea, I'll stick with “cyberchapbooks,” despite acknowledged reservations—they thankfully challenge the seriously odd fetish with the cloth and paper-bound books, as physical objects, that has plagued our literary culture for quite some time.

Reading Bob Dylan's new memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004), I was struck by Dylan's obsessive curiosity as a young man, one that did not allow him to stop with the reading of tattered paperback copies of Balzac and Chekhov—and bound books in general—that were easily at his and anyone else's disposal. Rather, he had an insatiable appetite for arcane knowledge that took him to the far corners of the New York Public Library, where in his early twenties he was scouring newspaper articles written during the Civil War and available on microfiche for song ideas and personal satisfaction. Had he been content with digesting what everybody else was busy poring over, I'm not so sure his songs would have bloomed.

Granted, most of what you'll find in chapbooks written today probably won't be as stimulating to the imagination as first-hand accounts of the battle for Lovejoy Station written with slang long-gone. But there's always a needle in every haystack, and that's reason enough to try to get your hands on any chapbook you can, whether you find it at some local reading, at some ruined pawn shop on the wrong side of the tracks, or through some focused browsing on the World Wide Web. As for a third of those, I'd start with the aforementioned *Directory of American Poetry Books* for listings of chapbooks being published today. But bear in mind that there just isn't, nor can there ever be, any absolute source, a “Books in Print,” for the underground.

Tim Kindseth is a freelance critic living in Chicago.