

POCKET-SIZED POWER:  
INSURGENT FERMENT AND THE CHAPBOOK

By Mary-Sherman Willis

Hand-held, hand-sized, often hand-made, a poetry chapbook is a short-form book clocking in at 30 pages, more or less. And while sometimes considered a welterweight—first-book contests, for instance, don't count chapbook publication against qualifying for entry—the chapbook as a container for poems can do things a full-length collection can't. Readable in a sitting, its concentrated power allows poems to vibrate against each other under pressure, formally intertwined and thematically united, and often embellished with artwork. As chamber music is to a symphony, a chapbook is to a full-length collection: a paring-down to essentials. Goethe describes the parts of a chamber music group as “rational people conversing.” In a chapbook there's no room for digression or babble—each poem must shine.

Typically saddle-stitched or stapled, sometimes perfect-bound, chapbooks are easy to produce and distribute. As objects, they're intimate, personal, even ephemeral. Emily Dickinson's poetic legacy of 40 fascicles, found after her death in 1886 by her sister Lavinia, might easily have been tossed on a trash pile. Each made up of some 20 pages carefully stitched together, there's no doubt that they were assembled deliberately with poems in an intended order. All she needed to make them was paper and ink, a needle and thread.

Such a nimble publishing form, inexpensive and low-tech, is a perfect vehicle for dissent, rants, and manifestos, and a rich playing field for the avant-garde. A format well suited to small print runs, it is quick to exploit the latest developments in printing technology, wherever writers are impatient with traditional publishing's gatekeepers, its glacial machinery and expense.

This was true when chapbooks flourished in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in Europe, with the advent of moveable type. Popular everyday books were chapbooks. Purveyed by “chapmen,” slightly shady peddlers who sold them on their rounds, these booklets were the social medium of their time and essential to the dissemination of contemporary culture. They were printed out on sheets of cheap paper and illustrated by woodcuts, then folded into books of eight to 32 pages and sewn into paper covers. For a few pennies, the newly literate provincial readers of Europe and even Asia could buy books for children—folk tales, nursery rhymes, popular songs, school lessons—and almanacs, Bible stories, recipes, salacious tales, and poetry.

It was the 1798 publication of *Lyrical Ballads & Other Poems* as a chapbook by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge that set the mode for avant-garde 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets. What better form at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to revolutionize literature and poetry than a pocket-sized booklet for the English Romantic to carry on his rambles through the countryside? As Wordsworth wrote in the *Ballads*’ “Advertisement,” “[t]he majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purpose of poetic pleasure.” Not only were the poems in country vernacular, but they were about country people. Packaged in a chapbook, the *Ballads* would upend the elitist, mannered poetry of the time and recast the citified poet as rustic bard. Wordsworth’s emotional connection to the format endured. Seven years later in *The Prelude* (1805), he lamented the emergence of serious, didactic children’s books in place of the familiar chapbook titles of his youth:

Oh! Give us once again the Wishing-Cap  
Of Fortunatus, and his invisible coat  
Of Jack the Giant-killer, Robin-Hood,  
And Sabra in the forest with St. George!  
The child, whose love is here, at least doth reap  
One precious gain, that he forgets himself.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the chapbook re-emerged as the medium of collaboration for poets and artists at the political fringes. Avant-garde movements such as Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism, Dada in Berlin and Switzerland, and Fluxus in the US set a new standard for small collaborative art books, often created with quality paper and print methods and meant to be collected. Filippo Marinetti's "Futurist Manifesto" (1909), promoting principles of speed, danger, and cacophony, kicked off movements across the continent. Books such as David Bomberg's *Russian Ballet* (1919) in England, the Constructivist collaborations of Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin aimed at the proletariat after the Russian Revolution, and Surrealist Livres d'artiste in Paris (such as Max Ernst's *Une Semaine de Bonté*) were only some of the literary experiments that flourished between the wars. National upheaval and political resistance fertilized creative production of these small books.

Post-war, the artistic avant-garde regrouped in Europe, and in North and South America, using the chapbook format to rebuild links beyond national boundaries and as a way to experiment with form and spread ideas. Among them, concrete poets in Brazil and French *Lettrists* arising from Dada produced "books" that worked to undermine the concept of the book and the text. Isidore Isou's *Le Grand Désordre* (1960), for instance, challenged readers to reassemble the contents of an envelope back into the semblance of a narrative.

But the introduction of new copying and printing technology in the early 1960s established the chapbook as we know it today. With access to the mimeograph machine, letterpress, inexpensive offset, the Xerox machine, and eventually desktop publishing, dozens and then hundreds of small-press publishers sprang up across America, with the greatest concentration on the coasts. At first they provided venues for the work of an underground economy centered on Beat poets and the students and faculty of the influential North Carolina arts college, Black Mountain. In the spirit of DIY, they wrote, designed, printed, and distributed a mass of

countercultural experimental literature reflecting the political upheaval around them. “A paradoxical fusion of fine printing and samizdat diffusion,” was how poet and writer Guy Davenport described the mid-century chapbook explosion.

At City Lights Bookstore, Lawrence Ferlinghetti launched the City Lights Pocket Poets series of chapbooks in 1955. Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), a small, square black-and-white volume, was #4 in the series. “From the beginning,” Ferlinghetti wrote, “the aim was to publish across the board, avoiding the provincial and the academic. I had in mind rather an international, dissident, insurgent ferment.” Gregory Corso’s *Gasoline* (1958) was #8, and Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters* (1971) was #27 of 60 volumes. The series endured until 2011.

In New York, LeRoi Jones, before he became Amiri Baraka in 1968, founded Totem Press in 1958 and promoted the poetry of Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Frank O’Hara, and Charles Olson. These small presses engaged in work with little commercial appeal, but huge ambition in literary culture. Though these were predominantly male enterprises, Diane di Prima’s Poets Press, Margaret Randall’s El Corno Emplumado, and Lyn Hejinian’s Berkeley-based Tuumba Press gave female poets a place and a voice. Presses like Burning Deck, founded by Rosemarie and Keith Waldrop and based in Providence, Rhode Island, helped to usher in the significant new poetry of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Movements like L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetics involving genre-disrupting poets like Jackson MacLowe, Bob Perelman, and Carla Harryman got their first airing in chapbooks. This trend has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A dizzying array of these chapbooks is on display in the Chapbook Special Collection at Poets House in lower Manhattan. It’s the largest such collection in the country, estimated by librarian Amanda Glassman at over 10,000. Shelves of small books packed in cardboard containers range from floor to ceiling and defy categorization. Most are standard-sized six-by-nine-inch booklets, saddle-stitched with a long-armed stapler. There

are mini-chaps, hand-sized and smaller, and even more intimate formats, that give off a whiff of the “zine” publications from the 1980s and ’90s. In fact, some chapbook presses began as Xeroxed zines, such as Brooklyn’s redoubtable Ugly Duckling Presse. From its street-lit origins, the Ugly Duckling transformed in 2000 into an editorial collective that today publishes chapbooks, books, artist’s books, broadsides, translations, and periodicals. Feminist Dancing Girl Press, based in Chicago, morphed in 2004 from an online literary zine, *wicked alice*, to chapbook publishing.

Many chapbooks in the Poets House collection are handmade marvels, their pages interleaved with block-printed artwork, published in limited edition. The books are artfully sewn along their spines with running stitch, Coptic or Japanese binding, using exotic papers, marbled or fabric-woven rice papers, wallpaper, ribbons, even cloth in covers elaborated with French flaps. Inside, the book printer’s arts are fully deployed, with poems gorgeously letter pressed into fine paper; data about typeface, paper type, and print runs are listed at the back. These books are meant to endure in collections, serving as historical artifacts.

In these hand-made objects, a reader senses the collaboration between poet and book designer in a joint mission with the publisher. Such meticulous attention is present, for instance, in *Grief/Rue des Écouffes*, by Marilyn Hacker (2001). A thin book of 12 pages, consisting of two poems, it was published by Bradypress in collaboration with the University of Nebraska and *Prairie Schooner* to commemorate the journal’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The run consists of “one hundred numbered copies printed in three colors from Perpetua type on Arches text and cover papers with endsheets of Oruga lace and a French Marble wrap,” an insert explains. Each book also contains an original engraving by the artist and printmaker Marie-Genève Havel. The poetry chapbook series from Manhattan’s Center for Book Arts publishes the winners of their annual chapbook competition in exquisite (and pricey) editions of 100, from authors like Kimiko Hahn, C.K. Williams, Sandra Beasley, and Albert Goldbarth. Each book suits its content. The Center produced Kim Addonizio’s prize-winning volume, *Another Day on Earth* (2009), as a scroll wrapped in a vellum wrapper, each signed and numbered.

While the occasional one-off printing is possible with a chapbook, many publishers issue series and boxed sets of small books united by a common theme. For three years Akashic Books has published *New-Generation African Poets*, boxed sets edited by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani consisting of eight or more chapbooks plus one introducing them. The Wick Poetry Chapbook Series from Kent State University Press features the work of Ohio poets in an elegant uniform design. The Song Cave's beautifully designed chapbook series is sold by subscription, and quickly sells out. Larger poetry publishers like Tupelo, Sarabande Books, Kattywompus Press, New Directions, Black Lawrence, Bull City Press, Carnegie Mellon Press, and the Poetry Foundation have developed offshoot chapbook series.

The short form offers unique aesthetic possibilities for poetry publishers. "A chapbook often has a quiet intensity that I find difficult to sustain over the course of a full-length collection," says editor Ross White of Bull City Press, which launched its chapbook series in 2006. "While almost every collection that interests me features some sort of transformation, I find that a chapbook is better able to focus the scope of the transformation in ways that are productive for the project at hand and mysterious or sublime enough to hint at the work outside the project's concern."

Other series are published in conjunction with events, a reading series, or poetry festival, such as Belladonna Press with the annual NYC/CUNY Chapbook Festival in Manhattan. Or like Button Poetry, a Minneapolis press, whose chapbooks serve as companion volumes to a subscription series of performance poetry videos on YouTube.

Twenty-first century advances in digital publishing technology have widened the options for chapbooks, offering new business models to small presses in the multi-platform mode. As Kristy Bowen, editor at Dancing Girl Press, said in an interview, "I think things like the internet and social media have opened things up so much more to people looking

to either start their own presses/litmags or publish with small operations.... You can take a chance on that completely unknown author or that very strange book. Maybe it sells, maybe it doesn't, but there is a lot more risk-taking when the bottom line is not so foreboding."

Web-based e-chaps take several forms. Sundress Publications, New Jersey's Bloof Books, and ELJ Publications all publish e-chaps as books unto themselves, to be downloaded for a few dollars and read on computer, or printed out. Vallum Press in Ontario offers PDF versions of their hardcopy books, often by subscription, as alternatives to the more expensive hardcopy. Sale of The Song Cave's signed limited edition allows the press to offer the digital version of their books for free. Wordrunner eChapbooks publishes poetry and prose chapbooks in PDF form, as well as editions in Smashword or Kindle for hand-held devices.

Artists Proof Editions is an example of a press that exploits the multi-platform chapbook model to its limits. An evolution from *Archipelago.org*, an early digital literary and arts journal based in Charlottesville, Virginia, the press publishes books in multiple media. "We make interactive digital books, artist's books, and letterpress books. We make broadsides. We make video poems. We make animations," says publisher Katherine McNamara. "We begin with the text." As an example, readers (and auditors) can download to an iPad an Apple iBook of a collection of poems by Russian poet Inna Kabysh, enhanced by music and animated images. Then click to listen to the voice of the poet in Russian; click again to hear translator Katherine Young speak in English—all while reading the poem in either language.

E-chaps are ephemeral in a different way from their 16<sup>th</sup>-century forebears. On one hand, an e-book is instantly accessible to tablets and desktop computers, making distribution and sales even more seamless. And it has no pages or binding that might crumble and disintegrate the way some slapped-together booklets have. For this very reason, archives such as the one at Poet's House are scanning and digitizing their "older treasures" to preserve them in some form and make them accessible to even more readers, according to Amanda Glassman.

But here the questions of book *ownership* arise. As Molly Schwartzburg, curator of the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collection at the University of Virginia, and publisher Katherine McNamara elaborated at a recent panel at the Virginia Festival of the Book, publishers and archivists are grappling with buying and selling digital books, which essentially are leased to the reader. While the content belongs to the author, digital booksellers like Apple and Amazon own the format the book appears in. The book is essentially on lease. “It’s as if they [the digital booksellers] own the paper and binding,” says McNamara. And what or who is the final author? McNamara, who herself combines the audio, animation, and text into the iBooks she publishes, describes herself as a book “producer” (or even an “author”) rather than an editor of the book. “The book becomes an object—but also not one” in digital form, she says.

For archivists, tasked to preserve variorum editions of an author’s work, what would have been an edition in the “codex” is a “version” in the digital book. Downloading an update of a book obliterates the original work, or previous edition. Further, evolving storage media technology, from floppy disk to hard drive, is a moving target in terms of finding the most enduring. A change in software or hardware can make the book obsolete, putting it out of print regardless of its value.

Whatever their future, chapbooks are labors of love—and labor-intensive. Their editors or designers (or producers!) are at this moment more likely to be hunched in front of a screen than leaning across a type-setting table. But thanks to them, small publishing enterprises in communities of like-minded literati now have even greater power to reach their readers.