

Awst Press

written by Entropy | August 30, 2016



AWST
P R E S S

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Interview with Wendy M. Walker, Publisher

How did Awst Press start?

We organized in 2014. After being with a journal for a year and a half, we wanted to work more closely with authors on longer projects. Journals are wonderful at featuring authors briefly, but each author rarely gets the same amount of attention, especially if the journal is long. We wanted to slow down the process and focus on supporting the individual more.

Our goal has always been to publish books but being new to publishing meant that we didn't have a reputation to vouch for our first few authors. We started with chapbooks because they taught us how to make a book on a smaller scale—layout, cover design, interviews, and publicity. The first challenge was finding authors. We didn't want to publish only authors we knew; we also weren't equipped to handle the onslaught of submissions. That brought us to the guest-curated chapbook series, which we published exclusively before we started publishing full-length books.

Tell us a bit about Awst Press. What are your influences, your aesthetic, your mission?

Awst (Google Translate says *oust*, but originating from Austin, Texas, we are also agreeable to something like *awe-st*) is Welsh for august, which is both the month we started, and means respected and impressive. That seemed like a good reputation to strive for.

There were several things coming into focus for us as we organized—Ferguson, VIDA counts, representation of minorities in publishing, submission fees, compensation, etc. The question was how we'd do things differently than other presses? If we couldn't do something better, why even start it?

Our mission is to reduce racism, sexism, phobia, inequality, and ignorance by publishing impressive work from a diverse group of people, hopefully in an entertaining way but without shying away from topics that may be uncomfortable. We also want to improve the business of publishing. This mission seems even more important today.

Guest curators are chosen to represent different genres, regions, involvements. Each curator is instructed to make their group diverse within different variables. It automatically means that we are going to offer works from different angles, sometimes from opposite sides—religious vs. not religious, MFA/Ph.D. vs. not, writers of color, LGBTQIA, etc. We want diversity to be familiar.

In the beginning, authors shared their publishing experiences—long waits for submission responses, no pay, work posted online for a while but then either removed or hidden by a pay wall—and it gave us goals to achieve. We aren't open for submissions, but we strive to handle things efficiently. We pay for work. We also set up author pages on our website to accumulate previously published work, an interview, a bio, a photo, social media links, and new work. We regularly post updates for them via social media. This extra level of support is meant to help our authors become published more since we may not publish more than 2-4 books a year. We've teed up their information to make it easy for publishers, agents, and readers to get a better sense of them and their work.

Can you give us a preview of what's current and/or forthcoming from your catalog, as well as what you're hoping to publish in the future?

Our current book is David Olimpio's *This Is Not a Confession*, a collection of essays focusing on divorce, grief, alcoholism, childhood sexual abuse, and polyamory. It was just listed as a bestseller at SPD. In September, we will be publishing Donald Quist's *Harbors*, a collection of essays about growing up black in America and moving to Thailand. Our third book, *Bronzeville After Dark: 1949* by Vida Cross, is due January 2017. It's a collection of poems referencing her ancestry as a third generation Chicagoan, a Bronzeville resident, the artwork of Archibald J. Motley Jr., and the poetic research of Langston Hughes. After that we are hoping to do a couple of hybrids, a novel, maybe a book of comics, or maybe something interactive.

In addition to these books, we will have our next chapbook series landing around October 2016, our annual essay series in August, and possibly a broadside series in there somewhere.

What about small/independent press publishing is particularly exciting to you right now?

Freedom. We do whatever we want as long as we're satisfied with the outcome.

How do you cope? There's been a lot of conversation lately about charging reading fees, printing costs, rising book costs, who should pay for what, etc. Do you have any opinions on this, and would you be willing to share any insights about the numbers at Awst Press?

We've been lucky as things have unfolded for the press. We gave ourselves a year to figure out our processes. There were plenty of expensive mistakes at the printers initially. This second year has been much more efficient and each subsequent year will get better especially now that we operate as partners on full-length projects. We work with somebody who finds the best print situation for us, balancing costs and quality.

We strongly believe that writers get paid for their work and pay minimally to get it published. Consumers pay \$5+ for coffee that costs little. Why can't they pay \$5 for a chapbook that an author took maybe weeks to write? They don't consider it because they aren't expected to. We want to shift the paradigm.

Our chapbooks pay \$.10/word (minimum of \$50, maximum of \$200). This seems to be the current minimum professional rate, but isn't a living wage. For books, we don't offer a signing bonus, but royalties are 50%. We handle editing, copyediting, design, ISBN, 40 review copies, and marketing and then split profits (sales minus printing costs) evenly with the authors starting with the first book sold. We require authors to pay for any permissions. Because we are not open for submissions, they don't pay reading fees. We feel like we've set up the ideal partnership with each author.

Recent releases from Awst Press:

