

Baseline Press

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baselinepress

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Interview with Karen Schindler, Publisher

How did Baseline Press start?

I began publishing Baseline chapbooks in 2011. We launched three poetry titles that first year, all by first-time authors: Andy McGuire and Christine Walde from London, ON (where the press is located), and Danielle Devereaux from St. John's, NL. I'd been involved in various forms of arts administration and support for several years at that point—London, for a mid-sized city, has an incredibly vibrant literary community—and it felt like a natural next step. I've always loved poetry and I've always loved books, especially those that focus not only on gorgeous words but gorgeous design as well. The name Baseline Press was chosen because I was living on Baseline Road at the time and I liked the idea of a name that was grounded in a place. I also liked how Baseline suggested a taking off point—for me and perhaps also for the writers the press was going to work with. By the fall of 2020, Baseline will have published titles by over fifty authors. We're proud to say that three of those have been short-listed for Canada's bpNichol Chapbook Award, with a co-win for Gil McElroy's *Ordinary Time* in 2013 and a win for Chuqiao Yang's *Reunions in the Year of the Sheep* in 2018.

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

When Baseline was in its early stages, I drew a lot of inspiration from other Canadian chapbook presses—Apt. 9 in Ottawa, Cactus Press in Toronto (now Anstruther Press), Frog Hollow in Victoria, JackPine Press in Saskatoon—all expertly run operations, publishing the very best of Canadian poetry in beautifully designed chapbooks. The support of these peers made it feel easy to slide onto the chapbook scene and I continue to be motivated by their (and others') good work.

In terms of aesthetics, Baseline aims to produce chapbooks that readers want to hold. We pay a lot of attention to materials. The coverstock is from the St. Armand Papeterie in Montreal. They make exceptionally lovely paper with the most beautiful textures. And I also spend a lot of time with the poets choosing endpapers to play off the book's theme or accent the cover design.

These endpapers are often silkscreened or hand-made, most of it found at The Paper Place on Toronto's Queen Street West. All of the paper involved is hand-cut and trimmed, and the books are bound with hand-waxed linen thread. It can feel like a labour-intensive process, but I've found that there's huge appreciation, from both the poets and the readers, when effort is made to give the words a beautiful home.

In addition to the bookmaking, I really enjoy working with each poet on poem selection and editing. I feel honoured to be allowed into each manuscript. There was an interview aired this month on CBC Radio One: Eleanor Wachtel was speaking with the late Franco-American critic George Steiner. Steiner said that he didn't believe himself to be one of the great writers, then went on to explain his passion for writing *about* the masterpieces:

"I always felt... the next best thing, and an immense joy and privilege, was to help that work break through, get recognized, get read, get loved."

When I heard this, I thought: I feel exactly the same way about publishing. I see it as an immense joy and privilege—an act of love and delight—to help new poetry find its way into the world and be recognized. Steiner also presents a wonderful metaphor for the critic (again, think publisher): that tiny bird who perches on the rhino's back and makes the rhino's presence known to other animals. "The really good critic," he continues, "chirps away and says, rhino is coming!" I feel just like that tiny bird, shouting out to the world, "look at what's coming!" I can't think of any work I'd rather do.

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?

Baseline's focus varies from year to year. Last year we published six poets who were all working towards their first full-length collections. This year the list includes three newer writers—Olive Andrews (Montreal), Natalie Hanna (Ottawa), and David Janzen (London). Plus two mid-career poets who are already recognized as two of Canada's finest—Amanda Jernigan (Halifax) and Anita Lahey (Ottawa). It's a pleasure to help emerging poets get a foot in the door, and it's also a huge honour to work with established poets whom I've admired over the years. I expect Baseline will continue on in this vein, though there's always a wish list of special side-ventures. A local anthology, a poetry calendar, and a translation project are a few things that are currently floating around at the top of that list.

We used to ask, "What about small/independent press publishing is particularly exciting to you right now?" We're still interested in the answer to that, but we're even more interested to know what you think needs to change.

In terms of what's exciting—it's that this level of publishing continues to

thrive, even as our lives become more dictated by screens and sound bites. The bookfairs I go to attract bigger crowds every year, book sales consistently grow, and new publishers are constantly entering the scene. (And it's nice to now be the one who's occasionally called on for advice—a pay-it-forward after receiving guidance from so many, myself.) I'm also excited to see the overlap between the Canadian and American communities—and I appreciate how Entropy is supporting that! Last year, at Toronto's "Meet the Presses" Indie Literary Market, I sat beside MC Hyland from DoubleCross Press, based out of Brooklyn. It was a great opportunity to share info on methods and paper sources, and to walk away with a new list of authors to look up.

In terms of necessary change—every small press I know of is looking for ways to diversify its operation. And there's an understanding that the best way to do this is at the most basic level, ie: not only more diversity of authors on the rosters, but also within the publishing houses themselves. I see some small presses going the route of collectives—an editing collective, or a collective for soliciting manuscripts. I think that's a brilliant way to get input from a wide range of voices and it's something I'm currently looking at.

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 Baseline Press?

Baseline is more fortunate than many, as we receive a grant from the London Arts Council every year. This allows us to maintain a certain level of quality in our production, to operate without charging fees of any kind to our authors, and to cover launch night expenses (helping with travel as best we can). The launches are so important—a necessary recognition of all the work that's been done. We host two events every fall—one in London at TAP Centre for Creativity, and another in Toronto at knife|fork|book bookstore. Each of the year's authors are invited to both events, bringing everyone together for two back-to-back group celebrations with two distinct audiences. We also aim to keep chapbook prices as low as possible in order to keep the work accessible. But if we didn't receive help from our local arts council, it would be much harder to do all this.

I'm pretty sure that everyone who goes into small-press publishing does so with the understanding that it's a break-even venture, at best. I wish that weren't the case. I wish there were more funding opportunities available. In the meantime, we work hard with what we've got.

Recent releases from Baseline Press:

