

# Perugia Press

written by Entropy | April 5, 2016



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## *Interview with Susan Kan, Editor and Director*

*How did Perugia Press start?*

Perugia Press is a nonprofit poetry press publishing one collection of poetry each year, by a woman at the beginning of her publishing career. Our mission is to produce beautiful books that interest long-time readers of poetry and welcome those new to poetry. We also aim to celebrate and promote poetry whenever we can.

I began Perugia Press when I saw that many of the poets I knew had fantastic poetry manuscripts that they couldn't get published. Around the same time, a good friend of mine self-published a book about the UMass basketball team. His book looked like a "real" book, and he encouraged me to make books. It's funny that a sportswriter inspired this poetry press!

When I made our first book—Gail Thomas' *Finding the Bear*—I wasn't really thinking I was starting a press. However, I loved the process so much that I published a second book and formally launched the press. This was in 1997 after I finished an MFA in creative writing at Warren Wilson.

It took a few years to arrive at our current mission—publishing first and second books of poetry by women—and to create the national manuscript contest, apply for and receive nonprofit status, and establish ourselves as a literary organization with clout.

*Tell us a bit about Perugia. What are your influences, your aesthetic, your mission?*

The 2016 Perugia Press Prize winner—*Guide to the Exhibit* by Lisa Allen Ortiz—is the 20th book we're publishing, marking our 20th anniversary! Excellence comes best this way: one book at a time. I can spend a whole year with undivided attention on the project. And the one-book-at-a-time strategy has created a buzz: people want to know who will win the Perugia Press Prize

each year. We have resisted the pressure to expand, and that has paid off. Our books keep winning national contests, including Amanda Auchter's *The Wishing Tomb* which won the PEN Center USA Award, and Jennifer Sweeney's *How to Live on Bread and Music*, which won the James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets.

Part of our mission is to publish books that are welcoming to new readers of poetry and interesting to longtime readers. So that's one thing we look for when screening manuscripts. We look for really good poetry—obviously! I'd say that of the 500+ manuscripts we receive each year, 15% of them are outstanding, and what distinguishes the winners usually has to do with confidence of voice, unity of the manuscript, a discernable project of discovery, levity, and originality. Poems with self-esteem stand apart.

*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?*

Inspired by displays at a small natural history museum, the poems in Lisa Allen Ortiz's collection, *Guide to the Exhibit*, are about what we set aside to examine and remember. The quirky, scientific lens—grimy, focused, funny, always illuminating—animates the odd and overlooked. With humility and curiosity, Ortiz is moved to learn how to see more clearly both as lover and as griever. Speaking the names of things—animals, skeletons, teeth, feathers—is a way of connecting with the complications of being alive. How does the stillness of an exhibit encourage us to be deliberate about the suppleness of love and joy? Does knowing more increase the pleasure of felt experience? This poet is paying close attention to love while death and sorrow lurk nearby. "Survival is the mutest joy," Ortiz writes. *Guide to the Exhibit* looks outward and reflects, examines, links, and contradicts.

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

Independent presses are independent. That means we can do what we want, as long as we can afford it. I love that freedom. Sometimes I can get stuck looking around at what other presses are doing and feel competitive, which is ridiculous and antithetical to poetry. So I strive to run the press in a way that works for me and all the people who help out with the press—the board of directors, screeners, judges, the poets themselves.

*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 Perugia Press?*

Perugia Press is a small and sturdy press. Actually, we're tiny. However, we get more than 500 submissions for each year's Perugia Press Prize. We charge \$26 for the submission. That rate is based on the going rate, which makes sense. In the last 20 years, so much in printing has become electronic and streamlined, so the costs have gone down. I'm not complaining. Sure, paper might be more expensive, say, but so many other time-related costs are down.

*I appreciate your transparency with regard to the numbers. Is there any way that you could answer a follow-up question: Where does that \$13,000+ go?*

Submission fees are our greatest source of income, complemented by income from book sales and donations. Where does the money go? This amount is so small, and yet people want to know that their fees are necessary. It goes toward designing and printing the winning book. It pays the winner her honorarium. It goes toward promoting the book. It pays my salary (we have one paid part-time employee, me), and it pays for things like our office, utilities, website, and bookkeeping. By the time our next roux of submissions starts, our bank account is depleted. If we had more donors, even say, ten people willing to promise us \$1000 per year, we could consider reducing our submission fees significantly.

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*Recent releases from Perugia Press:*

