

See Sharp Press

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Interview with Chaz Bufe, Founding Editor

How did See Sharp Press start?

See Sharp Press started as a self-publishing project in 1984 after I escaped from graduate school (in music theory/composition) and asked myself, "What can I do out in the real world with all of this education?" The answer was "write and publish a good book on music theory for pop, rock, and jazz musicians." There was nothing on the market that fit that description; the very few theory books aimed at nonacademic musicians were confusing and unnecessarily convoluted. In short, I found a need and I filled it. *An Understandable Guide to Music Theory* is still in print and over the years has sold in excess of 10,000 copies.

Five years later I compiled and edited a second book, *The Heretic's Handbook of Quotations*, which again is still in print and has sold in the low five figures. Two years after that, in 1991, I wrote and published *Alcoholics Anonymous: Cult or Cure?*, which is still the only critical history and analysis of AA. It also sold well, is still in print, and over the years outsold the two previous books.

In 1992, See Sharp began publishing books by other authors, and shortly after that signed a deal with a now-defunct small press book distributor. We're currently distributed by IPG.

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

There aren't any influences that I can think of. Similarly, no esthetic other than producing attractive, readable books. As for a mission:

See Sharp Press is a cause-driven small press. Our mission is to make available radical books and e-books in the standard commercial outlets, especially books/e-books in the areas of anarchism and atheism. We want to live in a free, sane (that is, in part, religion-free) world, and feel that this is the best contribution we can make toward that goal.

We publish books, pamphlets, and e-books in other areas for three reasons: 1) We have some expertise in those areas; 2) we feel that the materials we publish in them are inherently worthwhile; 3) they help to support publication of anarchist and other political books that often do not pay their own way.

Our primary book publishing niches are music instructional/reference, anarchism, atheism, science fiction, psychology, and modern (non-12-step) alcohol/drug abuse self-help. In recent years we've been focusing almost exclusively on music, anarchist, atheist, and science fiction titles.

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?

We have four books scheduled over the current and coming publishing seasons:

1) *Culture Wars: The Threat to Your Family and Your Freedom* (revised and expanded), by Marie Alena Castle. This timely book focuses on the religious right, its intrusion into our daily lives, and practical ways to resist it.

2) *Venezuelan Anarchism: The History of a Movement*, by Rafael Montes de Oca. Translated from the original Spanish-language title, this is the first history of the anarchist political movement in Venezuela.

3) *Corrupted Science: Fraud, Ideology, and Politics in Science* (revised and expanded), by John Grant. Hugo and World Fantasy Award winner (both for nonfiction) John Grant examines political misuse and distortion of science in this timely and greatly expanded update of his 2008 title.

4) *The Wake of Leviathan*, by T.C. Weber. The second book in Weber's "Sleep State" trilogy. The first volume, "Sleep State Interrupt," was a nominee for the 2017 Compton Crook Award for best debut science fiction novel.

We plan to continue publishing books in the niches mentioned in our mission statement.

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.

Nothing excites me about the current small/independent press publishing situation other than that it's much less financially risky than it used to be, thanks to POD and e-books, to publish new books. This encourages publishers to take a chance on books they'd otherwise turn down. There's little else to be excited about.

The number of books published annually has skyrocketed. The number of review publications, and the number of reviews in surviving publications, has plummeted. Market concentration, starting with the rise of the chains, their subsequent downfall, and the current dominance of Amazon, has had a devastating effect on sales.

The gate-keeping function formerly provided by the indies, and to a lesser extent the chains, is almost totally gone. As a result, huge numbers of terribly written, terribly (if at all) edited, and terribly produced books—which would never appear on the shelves of indies or chains—have flooded Amazon, making it extremely difficult for high quality books produced by small publishers to rise above the noise.

Similarly, word-of-mouth sales are all but dead. Decades ago, the indies would keep books on shelves for months, sometimes a year or more, and as a result readers would see them, sometimes buy them, and then recommend them to others. As a result, even books that received few or no reviews still had a chance to sell as a result of word of mouth. No more.

A further result of all this is that publisher are dependent on an extremely small number of retailers for their sales, and the actions of those retailers can have dramatic effects on sales. Market concentration has all but killed our three best-selling titles. Here's how:

In 1999, I noticed that H.L. Mencken's translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's final, and arguably best, book, *The Anti-Christ*, had been out of print for decades. The book was in the public domain, so See Sharp published a cheaply priced trade edition expecting to sell a few thousand copies. For once, we were pessimistic about sales: between 1999 and 2011, we sold over 30,000 copies.

Then everything changed. Sales had gradually been tailing off, but in mid-2011 we were still selling just over 100 copies per month and were close to being out of stock, so I ordered another printing of 3,000 copies. Borders had been selling roughly 90% of the copies of that book, and two months after the new printing arrived, they went under. As an unsecured creditor, we were stiffed for the hundreds of copies which they had taken, left with nearly the full 3,000 copies of the new printing sitting on our distributor's shelves, and left with monthly sales of roughly 10 copies per month. We ended up pulping half of the books, and the remaining copies are still selling at about 10 per month.

That was small potatoes compared to what Amazon has done to us. (I do not ascribe any ill intent on Amazon's part. Rather, their actions were the equivalent of an elephant inadvertently stepping on a flea.)

In 2003, we published *The Jungle: The Uncensored Original Edition*, by Upton Sinclair. This was the virtually unknown version that had been serialized in 1905, was the version that Sinclair tried desperately to get in print, and which he subsequently gutted in order to make it acceptable to commercial publishers. That gutting resulted in the much shorter version published by Doubleday in 1906, and that's still the version familiar to the vast majority of readers.

Our "Uncensored Original Edition" was 30% longer than the standard commercial version, contained the gut-wrenching and politically cutting material Sinclair had excised, and also contained lengthy introductory material: a scholarly introduction and foreword explaining what Sinclair had removed and

why, and *The Jungle's* checkered publishing history.

The Jungle: The Uncensored Original Edition received rave reviews across the board (including a starred review from "Library Journal"), and over the next eight years sold over 50,000 copies.

During that time Amazon's dominance of the bookselling trade skyrocketed. Current estimates are that Amazon sells over 50% of physical books—with some estimates being as high as 70%—and roughly 70% of e-books.

In 2011, someone (not a book publisher, but someone simply using Amazon's CreateSpace label) published a knockoff edition of *The Jungle: The Uncensored Original Edition*, using the same subtitle, but without the explanatory introduction and foreword, and without the explanatory footnotes with which we had peppered the book; they added no explanatory material whatsoever to their edition.

They apparently grabbed our text, reformatted it, and put the book out with smaller type and with a much smaller page count (216 pages versus the 352 pages of the See Sharp edition), with a cheap black and white cover and a lower cover price. They also falsely claimed copyright of the book. In short, they published, in my view, a poorly produced book, bearing a dishonest copyright claim, that would almost certainly never have been carried by the indies nor the chains because of its appearance.

Amazon's reaction? They put the CreateSpace edition at the top of the page, assigned both the industry publication reviews (Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, and School Library Journal) and the in excess of 1,500 overwhelmingly favorable reader reviews to it.

Our sales tumbled immediately and drastically. They tumbled even further when Amazon took our edition off the first page, and made it accessible only via the tiny other-editions link on the CreateSpace listing. Things reached their nadir earlier this year when readers couldn't find our edition via the other-editions link, and could only find our edition on Amazon by typing in the ISBN.

Amazon has mostly but not entirely rectified the listings (they still assign the reader reviews of our edition to the CreateSpace edition), and our edition now comes up first on the page. However, the damage has been done. During the book's first eight years, we sold over 50,000 physical copies and were selling a steady 500 to 600 copies per month prior to 2011. Over the last six years, we've sold 5,000 copies.

More recently, Amazon, through its listings policy, badly damaged one of our other best-selling titles, *The Drummer's Bible: How to Play Every Drum Style from Afro-Cuban to Zydeco*, a book/2-CD set, which we published in 2004. The book received very favorable reviews in drum and percussion periodicals, and sold very well for a music book: 19,000 copies during its first eight years; monthly sales (a large majority via Amazon) were increasing at the end of that period.

In 2012, we let the original edition go out of print and issued an updated, considerably expanded second edition at very nearly the same price as the original edition. Sales immediately plummeted.

Why? Amazon transferred neither the magazine reviews nor the dozens of favorable reader reviews of the original edition to the updated second edition. As well, they placed the out-of-print edition—which has a very similar cover to the second edition—at the top of the page, where readers would see the out-of-print designation, and likely go no further. To make matters even worse, some of the older Kindles wouldn't play the embedded audio tracks in the e-book version of the *Bible*, and we received a number of one-star reviews of the new edition from readers who mistakenly concluded that the problem was with the e-book rather than with their Kindle devices.

The end result was that sales immediately dropped from 200 to 250 copies per month (of the original edition) to 40 to 50 copies per month of the second edition, where they're still sitting.

Amazon has finally, for the most part, fixed the listings situation, but the damage has been done. It's worth noting that our distributor made repeated requests to Amazon to rectify the problems with the listings for both books, and that for years Amazon simply ignored those requests.

As for "what needs to change?", we need a much greater diversity of bookselling outlets, both bricks and mortar and online. I don't see that happening any time soon, if ever, but it is what's needed. Until that changes, small publishers will be in an extremely vulnerable position, where a single bookseller can all but destroy a book's sales.

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 See Sharp Press?

We keep costs to a minimum by doing almost everything in house and, unless advance sales justify an offset run, doing titles via POD. E-book sales are a help—after your initial small investment for conversion, there are no additional costs other than paying royalties—but they've leveled off at about 20% of sales.

We continue using the standard contract model—paying advances and paying royalties—and wouldn't consider any other type of publishing structure. The publisher should pay all costs. The author should never pay a dime. Period.

My advice to authors would be to run the other way if an agent or publisher charges a reading fee.

Rising book costs aren't a concern. Most people consider books a luxury item, and the two dollars or so that you have to bump the cover price for a POD title have little effect on sales.

Recent releases from See Sharp Press:

