

Stillhouse Press

written by Entropy | September 2, 2021



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Interview with Rebecca Burke, Acquisitions Editor

How did Stillhouse Press start?

Stillhouse was founded in 2014 by a group of George Mason University MFA program students, alums, and faculty as an independent, non-profit “teaching press” designed to widen the professional development opportunities available to GMU students and to help student writers better understand the “back end” of the publishing business before embarking on their own writing careers. Our first book, *Helen on 86th Street and Other Stories*, was written by Wendi Kaufman, a friend and former classmate of some of our founders. Wendi was an incredible writer—her work had been featured in the *New Yorker*—who had terminal cancer, and her friends wanted to help publish her book before she passed. After the success of Wendi’s book, we have since published 11 more books, with many more forthcoming.

In a way, it feels like Stillhouse is still “starting”—each year, we’re growing into new and exciting opportunities. Last year, Stillhouse came under the umbrella of Watershed Lit: Center for Literary Engagement and Publishing Practice at George Mason. While Stillhouse still operates independently, this expands our teaching press ethos and our commitment to providing students with opportunities to learn publishing in a hands-on environment. With the founding of Watershed Lit came the formation of our first imprint, Watershed Lit Books. Where Stillhouse is managed completely by students from the moment a manuscript is submitted by an author for consideration through publication,

Watershed Lit Books is an opportunity to publish books that are of particular interest to the many entities now housed under Watershed Lit.

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

Eclectic is a good word for our aesthetic, I think. Our MFA students, undergraduates, and, increasingly, alumni are involved in the publishing process at every step, from reading and reviewing manuscripts to making decisions about what we should publish to working on the editorial teams preparing accepted manuscripts for publication. Because our students graduate, and new students come in to take over these roles, our taste in books varies a little bit every year. We try to adhere to one central aesthetic: We like books that tread off the beaten path of traditional publishing, books that big publishing wouldn't embrace with the same enthusiasm. We want something that pushes the envelope, that doesn't make a reader feel like they've picked up another book that fits into some formula that's supposedly guaranteed to sell copies.

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?

Right now, we're excited about two recently released books and six books forthcoming in our catalog. Here's a little bit about each of them:

Before the Fevered Snow (April 2020): This collection of poems was released right in the middle of COVID chaos. Megan Merchant grapples with motherhood and the challenges of stepping into a mothering role when her own mother begins to suffer from dementia.

You Will Never Be Normal (May 2021): In a first-of-its-kind memoir, Catherine Klatzker walks readers through her experiences with Dissociative Identity Disorder, providing an important look at trauma and its lasting effects on children, as well as the challenges of confronting DID as an adult.

Our Last Blue Moon (October 2021) The first title from our imprint, Watershed Lit Books, Kris O'Shee's memoir juxtaposes her final days with late husband Alan Cheuse alongside their initial meeting and the bliss of their marriage. The result is a compelling memoir that explores the grief of loss by writing one's way through the whole story.

Shapeshifting (November 2021): This collection of short stories forthcoming from Michelle Ross was the winner of our 2020 short story contest. It's right up our alley. Subtly speculative and unnerving, Ross explores the sides of motherhood unfit for Instagram-perfect posts.

Baltimore Sons (November 2021): A frank and unsparing look at Baltimore in the past and present. In these poems, Dean Bartoli Smith writes from the voice of a young man grappling with the changes in the city he loves dearly.

How to Bury a Boy at Sea (April 2022): Poet Phil Goldstein offers an unflinching look into the sexual abuse he suffered as a child and the multifaceted implications of that trauma on his life as he matured into adulthood.

On the docket: we have three more poetry collections in the works, and I'm in the process of editing an as-yet untitled anthology featuring pieces of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by writers with disabilities. We also have two novels in the early stages of development and a variety of intriguing other long-term possibilities in our Submittable queue.

Looking forward, I'd love for us to keep exploring new, less traditional forms. I'd really like to publish a stand-alone novella (or a couple!). I'd also love to publish another collection of flash, either fiction or nonfiction. I want to continue expanding our horizons with themed anthologies and I'm sure there are plenty of other concepts in the heads of our amazing staff. And of course, we're still carefully combing through our Submittable submissions for other gems. We love finding things in our queue that we never could have anticipated, that grab ahold of us and can't let us go.

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.

I think for me, and for Stillhouse, the answers to both these questions are innately intertwined. What's exciting for us is how flexible small press publishing can be, how quickly we can pivot our goals and work to better ourselves. We had a hard conversation with our editorial board last fall about the whiteness of our backlist and how we can do better in the future to make our press a safer place for marginalized writers to submit their work to. We immediately began implementing the changes we created, and our forthcoming books, both those we've announced and those that are still in the early stages of development, reflect this. This isn't an unusual anecdote—many small presses and literary magazines had these same conversations in recent months. But this is something I think needs to be the norm going forward—small presses exist in space where they can constantly ask themselves "Are we doing everything within our power to be accessible to the people we want to publish work from? And if not, what are ways we can address this and do better?" Their intrinsic connection to the communities who support them encourages this reevaluation—we can always do more to be accessible.

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 Stillhouse Press?

Though we're affiliated with George Mason University, we're a 100% self-funded nonprofit. This means all of our money for operations and production comes from donations, reading fees we charge on Submittable, and book sales.

I personally would love to be in a position where we don't have to charge reading fees, because I firmly believe they're prohibitive. But we use Submittable to manage our submissions. It's an easy-to-use interface, and easy for our student readers to learn. It's widely used, which means our submissions opportunities reach more people. It also means our students are learning how to use an industry-standard tool that they can take with them after graduation, if they go on to read or edit literary magazines or small presses. But it's expensive and gets more expensive every year. We've had discussions about moving away from it as it becomes more costly than we can reasonably afford, and we refuse to raise submissions fees above what we currently charge. But we have to consider what's available and what makes the most sense for us to use in conjunction with our students. What else is out there right now that is going to give them a great foundational education that they can use as they continue to work in the literary community? That's something that's always in the back of our minds, and as new alternatives to Submittable emerge, we're evaluating the options and trying to make decisions that make sense for us, our readers, and our submitters.

At Stillhouse, we believe the author shouldn't have to pay for any part of publishing their book beyond the reading fee. We try to be transparent about where the reading fee goes: primarily, to pay for Submittable. Secondly, to pay to print copies of books, including ARCs for media review, and final copies. Our budget is small—though larger than some small presses, I'm sure—and entirely dedicated to producing and marketing high quality books. We use print-on-demand, which cuts some of the production costs—instead of ordering hundreds of copies that may or may not sell, we order small batches to hand sell, and order more when we need them. Our authors are never asked to nor expected to contribute to the expenses of printing or marketing their work. In short, we make things work for us within our model and always prioritize our authors and the quality of their experience working with us and their product over all else.

Recent releases from Stillhouse Press:

