

Tolsun Books

written by Entropy | March 16, 2021



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Interview with David Pischke, Chief Operating Officer

How did Tolsun Books start?

Two of our founders, Heather Lang-Cassera and David Pischke, had met in an MFA program, and were discussing what they saw lacking in the small press community: books treated like beautiful objects that people cherish and display. We decided, with the help of Brandi Pischke's keen eye for aesthetic and great ear for narrative, to start a press that focused on not just the words of authors, but also on high-quality, daring design. Risa Pappas, our Editor-in-Chief, came aboard within a couple months bringing a meticulous approach to the process of publishing books and a bold energy. We named the press after the neighborhood where Brandi and David were living: Tolsun Farms, which is a great community of diverse people, something we treasured and sought to create within our own small press family.

Tell us a bit about Tolsun Books. What are your influences, your aesthetic, your mission?

Our main goal is publishing exciting literary works made from parts. We really leave what exactly this means up to authors. We've often told people, "Send us your weird stuff." We now have a catalog full of dynamic works from badass authors wrapped in covers with electric artwork from intriguing artists. Once we landed on a jackalope as our mascot, we really ran with that

aesthetic. Jackalopes are wild, magical, and not easily put into a category. We love supporting creativity: We'd much rather have a book that messily pushes boundaries than a book that would be considered "classic." We want to build a community for underserved, strange voices, and based on how much our authors support one another, we've succeeded.

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 two most recent chapbooks are dynamos: *There is a Man*, stories by Pete Hsu, and *Women's work*, which is a hybrid of needlepoint, text cut from old sewing magazines, and poetry (it's gorgeous!) by Madeleine Barnes. Our first full-lengths of 2021 will be *Be the thing of memory*, a linguistically-beautiful, complex history of women through prose poems, by Carrie Oliva Adams, *Infinity Closet*, an examination of the nature of the queer experience through poetry, by Robert Campbell, and *Off Boulder Highway*, a revolutionary hybrid work of memoir, fiction, and poetry about addiction, trauma, redemption, and motherhood, by Jennifer Battisti who also wrote our very first book, *Echo Bay*. We just started working on a new project: Our assistant editors are co-editing incomplete manuscripts with our editors who have been around awhile. The goal is to develop full-length manuscripts while giving our new staff members editing and operational experience. We really want them to soar in the literary world, so we're trying to give them all the tools they need to do that. We're calling that series: Jack-to-Jack. (Our whole staff spent a day coming up with ideas for the name and then, on secret text-in ballots, we all voted on our favorite.) Look for those works in 2022!

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.

We're excited by the diversity of voices being published by small presses, especially by small presses run by underserved members of the literary community. We love reading books by folks with unique backgrounds. We're tired of the same old stories. We would love to see the small press world find a way to band together to really make a loud, unavoidable presence in book stores and on the bestsellers lists so that these voices reach even more people. We want our authors to have the most success possible, and right now, it's tough to push into the larger public arena.

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 Tolsun Books?

We survive by living within our meager means. We don't have a proper office, our entire staff are volunteers (and the best people ever!), and we use pre-orders to determine our print runs so we don't end up with a ton of excess

stock. We don't distribute our chapbooks to keep their cover prices low. We break even. We actually doubled our income from 2019 through 2020, even within the midst of a pandemic, so we're growing. Readers are responding to the amazing work of our staff—Bridgette Brados, Margarita Cruz, Ngozi Iloka, Percy Lind, Kalani Pickhart, Brandi Pischke, David Pischke, Risa Pappas, and Heather Lang-Cassera—who are all just so damn talented and passionate.

Recent releases from Tolsun Books:

