

Tough Poets Press

written by Entropy | October 17, 2017



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Submission Guidelines: "Since Tough Poets Press is dedicated to publishing lost and forgotten works of literature, there are no submission guidelines."

Interview with Rick Schober, Editor

How did Tough Poets Press start?

I decided to start an independent press in 2010, out of frustration really. I'd been working as a visual designer in some capacity for years but was never able to break into the book publishing industry. Eventually, in my mid-fifties, I realized that the only person who was going to hire an old man like me to design covers and page layouts was me. My first project was a collection of out-of-print and never-before-published interviews with the Beat poet Gregory Corso, whose work I've enjoyed since I first came across it as an English major in college. I called the book *The Whole Shot*, an expression he used a lot in his speech and writing. Similar collections of interviews with the other members of the founding "inner circle" of Beat writers—Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs—had already been published, so I figured it was just a matter of time before somebody got around to Corso. I found several interviews in obscure literary magazines, old newspapers, and university library archives; secured all the permissions to reprint; and even got Dick Brukenfeld, who knew Corso when he was a "stowaway" on the Harvard campus and became his first publisher in 1955, to write the book's foreword. I abandoned the project after a failed Kickstarter fundraising effort in 2011, but picked it up again in 2015 and finally released the book later that year. With the blessing of Corso's estate, I followed this up in 2016 with the first ever publication of his first play, *Sarpedon*, a very funny little piece written in 1954 in the style of the ancient Greek playwrights.

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

Tough Poets Press is a one-person publisher of "rediscovered" literary fiction and non-fiction. What I choose to publish are mostly forgotten, out-of-print or previously unpublished works which I've read and enjoyed and

think other readers of postmodern, experimental, and otherwise offbeat literature would also enjoy. For influences, I would have to include publishers James Laughlin (New Directions), Barney Rosset (Grove Press and *Evergreen Review*), and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (City Lights); and designers Roy Kuhlman, Paul Rand, and Alvin Lustig. My mission is simple: to keep on publishing quality literature without losing money.

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?

In addition to the two Corso-related volumes, Tough Poets has recently reissued two works by essayist, novelist, and humorist Marvin Cohen: a 50th-anniversary edition of his first volume of fiction, *The Self-Devoted Friend*, originally published in the U.S. by New Directions; and a 40th-anniversary edition of his dark comedy novel *Others, Including Morstive Sternbump*. Cohen was an accidental find; I came across his work in a 1964 New Directions anthology while researching the plays of Gregory Corso. As it turned out, Cohen was (and is) still alive and well and very eager to see his work back in print. Upcoming releases from Tough Poets will include Cohen's collection of baseball essays, *Baseball as Metaphysics* (originally published in 1974 as *Baseball the Beautiful*) with an introduction by *Ball Four* author Jim Bouton, and a selection of his longer unpublished fictions. Work is also under way for a 2018 collection of short stories and poems by the woefully neglected experimental writer Gil Orlovitz, to coincide with the 100th anniversary of his birth.

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.

The technology is what's making small/independent publishing viable for many today. Print-on-demand has virtually eliminated the financial barriers to becoming a book publisher, social media has helped create communities of readers for authors that wouldn't exist otherwise, and crowdfunding has allowed me to finance the publication of four books so far without risking a penny of my own money. The big drawback to this is that the market has become flooded with new books by new authors and presses. The supply far exceeds the demand and the average reader just doesn't have the time nor energy to search out the really good stuff. I think that the only way for small publishers to thrive in this environment and compete with the more established presses is to combine forces. Pool their resources with like-minded small publishers, put out fewer and better quality books, and market to a wider audience. It's either that or realize that, without some incredible stroke of luck, independent publishing is only going to be a marginally profitable hobby at best.

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 Tough Poets Press?

I cope by not deluding myself into thinking that I could support myself solely by publishing. I'm doing it because I like books and book design and if I can make a few dollars along the way, that's great. But if it wasn't for crowdfunding (i.e., other peoples' money), none of this would be possible for me. Even though I do all the work myself (with the exception of the writing, of course), there are still significant upfront costs associated with putting out a book: printer setup fees, content licensing, ISBNs and bar codes, review copies, and so on. In the end, breaking even on a book is a success, and selling 200 or 300 copies is, to me, phenomenal.

Recent releases from Tough Poets Press:

