

CHAPBOOKS

Not quite a book. But almost. Collected. Circulated. Contests for. Used in classrooms. Fine press and electronic. Well and poorly produced. Counts for much and counts for little. Published by others. Self-published. Concrete object. Conceptual art space.

The creative writing chapbook is a chameleon form. We borrow the name from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and make it our own. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the chapbook is “a modern name applied by book-collectors and others to specimens of the popular literature which was formerly circulated by itinerant dealers or chapmen, consisting chiefly of small pamphlets of popular tales, ballads, tracts, etc.” A quick trip to the Web locates library collections like the one at the University of Pittsburgh, where the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room “houses approximately 250 chapbooks printed in both England and America between the years 1650 to 1850” (www.pitt.edu/~enroom/chapbooks). The genres of these older chapbooks are varied and include books on religion, ethics and morals, fables, tales, legends, prose, nursery rhymes, natural history, jests, riddles and satire, curiosities and wonders, history, travel, and so on. “In general, chapbooks were inexpensive publications designed for the poorer literate classes. They were typically printed on a single sheet of low-quality paper, folded to make eight, sixteen, or twenty-four pages, though some examples were longer still. Closely related to the chapbook were two other forms also hawked in the streets during the same period. Broad-sides were texts printed on one side of an entire sheet of paper. Smaller slip-poems were printed on longer strips of paper cut from a larger sheet” (www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/britlit/cbooks/cbook1.html).

Due to the small market for full-length collections of poetry—one assertion we’ve heard is that a first book of poems by a university press in

the United States sells approximately three hundred copies—the contemporary poet often looks to the chapbook contests for first publication. If a poet wins a contest in a field of from three hundred to eight hundred entrants, his first-place chapbook is published, often with copies given out to other contestants, all having paid a fee to have their manuscript read. In this version of chapbook making, the chapbook manuscript is regularly described as “a 20–30 page collection of poems,” though some contests specify shorter or longer manuscripts. Shorter manuscripts are usually required for handpress, limited, numbered, and signed editions, yet electronic chapbooks are now a regular feature of online journals, in which length is less of an issue. While most chapbook contests specify poetry, there are a few that focus on the short story and the novella, genres that typically require greater page lengths. Chapbooks are also not considered books due to their smaller press run, usually under five hundred copies. Not quite a book, or is it?

It makes sense that a book of two hundred or more published pages requires a greater investment from both writer and publisher. Paper and postage and printing costs are high, which is why many look to online publishing as the future hope and future home of creative writing. Therefore, the contemporary chapbook represents a smaller investment and in this sense remains closer to its historical predecessors and a more democratic form, since the chapbook allows a publisher, potentially, to publish more authors. A small press can more readily explore the fine arts book market by beginning a chapbook series or by devoting one issue of a multiissue journal each year to the chapbook. Unlike the case with early chapbooks, though, the contemporary chapbook publisher is not hawking wares to a mass market. Since the market is limited, publishers must charge fees to create a support base and a readership. Often the fee represents the price of subscription to a journal, or, as mentioned above, provides an immediate market for the winning chapbook if contestants are also given a copy.

However, the chapbook idea has often been more than just a pragmatic move by publishers to sample and circulate the work of a number of writers rather than investing all their publishing hopes on the single work of a single author. The chapbook has launched careers and journals. Elizabethan authors circulated their poems in court informally, the precursor to the chapbooks of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mentioned above. Twentieth-century authors often published their own work and tried to sell it or were first published by patrons. A particularly famous example is that of Sylvia Beach, who ran Shakespeare and Company in Paris and brought

James Joyce to world notice. Among the works Beach published was “*Poems Penyeach* . . . a small twenty-page pamphlet in gray wrappers” (www.libweb.princeton.edu:2003/libraries/firestone/rbsc/aids/beach.html).

While self-publishing is a complicated issue, often viewed as self-aggrandizing by those in the field of creative writing today, there is certainly room for exceptions to the rule when we consider the fine arts book (see “Vanity Press”). Whether the fine arts book is a collaboration between artist and writer or completed solely by the writer, it reverses the original definition of chapbook: it is not democratic, for it is often quite expensive (unlike the “gray wrappers” of Joyce’s *Poems Penyeach*). Instead, the artist and writer complete a limited edition press run, sometimes using rare and expensive papers and inks, original art, and unusual formatting. Sizes vary. Fine arts books may actually be boxes, filled with individually printed leaves, and so on. While attending the Santa Cruz Writers’ Conference many years ago, we writers were given a tour of the special collections room at the campus library and shown a hand-printed collection of Robinson Jeffers poems, bound in the granite similar to that which Jeffers and his wife used to construct Tor House on the Monterrey peninsula where he wrote most of the poems we were being shown. Certainly a book like the one we admired that day seems to push the boundary of our definition of chapbook; it also suggests that there is room in this form for more thought and innovation.

Currently, most chapbook (and book!) contests refuse to consider collaborative writing (see “Collaboration”). One author is supposed to write a work that one editor wants to acquire and publish and circulate to a general reading public. Therefore, collaborative efforts, large scale to small scale, are rarely published. Yet due to its special positioning, the chapbook space seems promising for collaborative investigations.

Equally, many writing teachers have found the chapbook format to be an excellent teaching tool. Mirroring the movement in composition to ask students to collect and refine essays across the term and to present them for final evaluation in a course writing portfolio, creative writing teachers often ask their students to work toward a small chapbook as the final product of their writing workshop. Doing so asks students to write toward a theme, to revise and arrange material, and to consider how several poems or stories can work in concert. The chapbook is also a useful class text, allowing a teacher to assign and discuss works by several writers in the course of a semester without asking students to invest too heavily in the work of any single author.

Finally, the chapbook in the academy is equally a chameleon. In this arena a chapbook is often considered less than a book. Generally, university presses holding full-length first-book manuscript contests specifically label as a “first-book” author any writer who has not published a collection of more than thirty to sixty pages in an edition of more than five hundred copies. A first-book author is eligible to enter contests for first-book publication but ineligible for contests inviting second-book manuscripts. The writer who has published six chapbooks may have an advantage here over the writer who has published few or none, for she is still considered a first-book author. At the same time, the writer who has published six chapbooks may still find these chapbooks—though equal in page count or exceeding the page count of a regular-sized published book—do not translate as a “real book” in the academy. That is: six chapbooks by small-press publishers do not generally equal one book by a university or trade publisher according to academic scales. It is here that the chapbook’s democratic roots—small books published by small-press editors who believe in the work—are poorly served. In the academic meritocracy, chapbooks do not make great headway with tenure and promotion committees.

Despite the vagaries of counting—how many chapbooks equal one book and under what circumstances and for what group of individuals?—writers for many good reasons continue to invest in and value the chapbook space. Visit a national creative writing conference like that held annually by the Associated Writing Programs and you’ll find yourself in a book exhibit room full of tables where committed editors display their wares. In fact, they *are* hawking these wares like their more itinerant chapman predecessors. And the wares are lovely, lovingly produced, full of fine and exciting writing. Not the mass market many of us seek to avoid in our daily life but tables arranged on the communal village commons where good writing can flourish and be shared. Chapbooks exist because writers, editors, and readers want them to exist. And our guess is they will continue to evolve and flourish, in hard copy and on the Web, for the foreseeable future.

SOURCES FOR CHAPBOOK CONTESTS AND CHAPBOOK PUBLISHERS

Bentley, Chantelle. *Poet’s Market*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer’s Digest Books, annual.

Fulton, Len, ed. *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*. Paradise, CA: Dustbooks, annual.

Poets and Writers Magazine, published six times a year, 72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012, www.pw.org.

Writer's Chronicle, published six times a year by Associated Writing Programs, Tallwood House, Mail Stop 1E3, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, 22030, awpwriter.org.