

VANITY PRESS

According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) guidelines for fellowship for creative writers, a vanity press publication is defined as one that does any of the following: “requires individual writers to pay for part or all of the publication costs; asks writers to buy or sell copies of the publication; publishes the work of anyone who subscribes to the publication or joins the organization through membership fees; publishes the work of anyone who buys an advertisement in the publication; or publishes work without competitive selection” (U.S. Office of Management and Budget 1999, 5–6).

Of course, if the NEA were to enforce this policy strictly, there would be very few fellowship applicants. Rare is the magazine, even the most prestigious, that doesn’t encourage its contributors to subscribe and/or

purchase extra copies. Many quite prestigious journals indicate in their submission guidelines that subscribers receive preferential treatment; the *Hudson Review*, for instance, reads unsolicited poetry from nonsubscribers only for four months of the year, while subscribers may submit at any time. And “competitive selection” is clearly a term fraught with ambiguity. In short, it’s not as easy as one might believe to pinpoint just what a “vanity press” is.

The problem of defining this keyword is compounded by historical circumstances. Writers have been complaining about the equivalent of vanity press publications almost since the beginning of writing itself, with the poets of classical Greece and Rome particularly adept at satirizing those who paid to have their own work distributed. Moreover, from Gutenberg to the inception of the circulating libraries in the early nineteenth century, most books were what would now be called self-publications. If an author was wealthy enough, he—almost always it was a he—paid a printer to bring out his book, which he then passed out to friends, family members, and anyone else he thought might be interested and/or able to promote his career. Not surprisingly, with wealth rather than talent as a fundamental means of access to publication, far more bad work than good reached print.

Yet, ultimately, the current pariah status of vanity press publications is the direct result of the professionalization of creative writing. With book publication and/or extensive publications in literary journals a requirement for candidates seeking academic jobs, the need becomes pronounced to distinguish between writers who have paid someone to print their work and those whose writing has met with the approbation of an editor or editors. Because patiently putting together a record of “legitimate” publications is the equivalent of “paying one’s dues” as a blues musician, the taboo against vanity press publications helps academic hiring committees screen out writers who haven’t taken the approved route to success. Similarly, magazine editors and book publishers, who may receive many thousands of submissions a year, can do some initial screening simply by checking to see whether a writer has published a previous book with a “reputable” publisher. The effect for academic creative writers can be synergistic. Should a job candidate, for instance, be one of those rare individuals fortunate enough to have her books published by a trade publisher, she is likely to receive maximum respect from both hiring committees and literary publishers. Likewise, publication by a university press, or through one of the countless contests, will also serve as validation for her poetry or fiction.

However, one may wonder whether—given the hundreds of submissions to most book contests and the frequent accusations of logrolling against judges (see “Contests”)—the prejudice against vanity press publications is justified. No doubt there are irregularities in the creative writing business: one hand constantly washes another. Still, we can be pretty certain that for every Walt Whitman—an unknown writer with the courage to bring his boldly innovative work directly to an audience who hasn’t yet recognized his brilliance—there are a countless Whit Waltmans—unknown writers whose work is careless and self-indulgent, primarily of interest only to themselves. If the bias against those whose work has been published by vanity presses excludes the occasional good writer, the legions of authors clamoring for recognition probably make this tendency inevitable.

Finally, we ought to differentiate between publishing with a vanity press and self-publication. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, there *is* a notable difference. The self-published writer pays to have her book made by a book-making company. She shops around for the lowest price and the best-quality product and has no illusions that the publisher will promote her work. Instead, she actively markets the book herself, and if she does a good job she may eventually even see a profit. (See *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing* [Ross and Ross 2002] for details.) In contrast, publication with a vanity press is more than a simple exchange of money for product. Vanity presses often make vague promises of fame that the publisher has no ability to keep, and their profit margins are unconscionably fat: they lure writers into spending far more money than is necessary to produce the book. As an added insult, rather than delivering all copies to the writer, the press may retain a portion of the print run itself, then charge the writer even more for those copies of the book when, inevitably, it fails to sell.

Perhaps the best-known vanity press scam is the advertisement placed in newspapers and teen and homemaking magazines encouraging new and unpublished writers to submit their work to an anthology of poetry. Cash prizes are promised—and may even be paid—but the real money is made by accepting everyone who submits a poem. The publishers pay no money and no contributor’s copy (q.v.), but they do charge writers for the book in which their work appears. Using thin paper and cramming many authors onto a single page, these volumes, of a thousand pages plus, can run more than \$100; unsuspecting authors are bilked of even more money if they are seduced into purchasing elaborate bindings or multiple

copies of the book for family and friends. In such cases, the preacher does truly warn, “*Vanitas Vanitatum*,” for these vulturelike publishers feed on the author’s own overweening desire to see his name in print.