
The Cons and Pros of Small Press Publishing

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In 2004, Immanion Press, a small UK publisher of dark fantasy fiction, published Taylor Ellwood's Pop Culture Magick. Soon after Nick Farrell's Gathering the Magic was published by the same company and an esoteric non-fiction line was born. It's now 2007, and Immanion Press has created an imprint for its nonfiction called Megalithica Books. We've published approximately a dozen books on edgy, experimental esoteric topics at the time of this writing with more being lined up for the rest of 2007 and 2008.

By now you might think we're writing a promotional pitch, but we're primarily establishing our credentials to give readers some context. While we've accomplished a lot for a small press outfit, we've also encountered our fair share of problems along the way and some of those problems are unique to a small press situation. That hasn't stopped us from working hard to develop Immanion Press or the products we publish.

There are advantages and disadvantages to going with a small press. We're both authors, but we also work for Immanion Press in editing and promotion, so we have a unique perspective of being on both sides of the publishing fence. In the spirit of the Pagan and Occult Author Resource Page we maintain at <http://www.thegreenwolf.com/poarp.html> we want this article to be used as a resource to help you decide what size publisher is better for you. While it's not an exhaustive list, these are some of the traits we've found particularly noteworthy.

The Cons of Small Press Publishing

We're not going to mislead you. There are specific negatives to being published by a small press.

Distribution and Printing

Distribution and printing go hand in hand for a small press. Depending on whether the publisher uses traditional printing or POD technology the options a small press has can be fairly limited. Even with traditional publishing, a big publisher has an advantage a small press can't match, namely lots more money to spend.

Traditional printing tends to be more expensive, costing upwards of ten thousand dollars to print a single run of a given book. But it's guaranteed that a traditionally printed book will get into the major chain bookstores because it's marked returnable, which means that the bookstores can return any books that don't sell to the publisher. In many cases the returned copies have their covers ripped off, which means that the books can't be resold elsewhere. Even if the books are undamaged, they either have to be stored in a warehouse or sold as remaindered copies to used bookstores at a price that is detrimental to both the writer and the publisher (Rosenthal 2004). While larger publishers may be able to afford to eat these costs, small presses usually can't and the return of books can spell the end of a small press.

POD distribution is limited to Baker & Taylor and Ingram and any other distributors that have a relationship with the POD printing company being used, though the distributors may not show the books as being in stock. Most POD publishers use Lightning Source to print their books, though others may use Lulu.com, Café Press or Xlibris. Lightning Source seems to have the best distribution setup, with automatic connections with Ingram (who owns Lightning Source) and Baker & Taylor. Any relationships with other distributors have to be formed between the publisher and distributor and will take time to execute. In our experience, lots of questions had to be asked in order to determine if going with a distributor outside of the ones already available was worth it for us financially, since distributors naturally want a larger discount than what the retailers get.

While POD has the advantage of cutting out warehouse costs, lowering distribution costs, and providing the publisher a means to correct a text without having to scrap the entire run of books (though that can still be expensive and also has disadvantages), POD publishers have trouble getting books into the chain bookstores because they use POD technology. We've even heard of cases where clerks at the chain stores refused to order books because they are POD. A big problem is that most POD books are marked non-returnable, which means bookstores can't return copies that won't sell. Unless the publisher changes the status to returnable, the bookstore chains won't even touch the books. Another problem for POD is that the quality of books often tends to be less than traditional books, because of the printers and paper that are used, and because layout may not be as clean. Additionally, it's been only recently that POD technology started including color images.

Limited distribution can be problematic, whether you want to place your books in independent stores who may want to work with only one or two distributors to keep the paperwork down, or with chain book stores that get more customers.

On the other hand, in online venues POD books tend to do really well, provided the authors and publishers work to promote the books themselves. However, the online market is only part of the entire book sales industry, and so working entirely within an online distribution framework may not be sufficient to keep a small press going. If you want to work with a small press, inquire about distribution efforts first.

Reputation

Small presses aren't generally well known. They don't have the reputation a larger publisher might have. And the books they produce won't be as well-known either, at least not for a while, partly due to that distribution issue. It takes time to build a reputation up with the target audience and no publisher big or small is immune the repercussions of negative publicity, though bigger publishers tend to have better resources for dealing with problems. (On the other hand, no publisher is complete without the phone number of a good lawyer.)

Thanks to vanity presses there is a lot of stigma associated with POD publishing. Vanity presses are the ones who will literally publish anything and may charge the author anywhere from several hundred to several thousand dollars for the "privilege". The editing may be negligible or nonexistent. On the other hand, self-publishing operations may charge for certain services but don't charge the required fees that vanity presses have, nor do they bill themselves as publishers, just printing companies. The increase in availability of self-publishing resources has led to a glut of books in all genres that aren't published under any professional heading, but rather by a single author who just wants to get hir book out there. This results in self-published titles that run the gamut from absolutely wonderful to absolutely terrible, particularly dependent on whether the author had an editor to help out or not.

Individual reputation can be an issue as well. While it's easier to get a book into a small press, the author usually has to do more work in promoting the book. However, even with a big press, the author might only get some help with traveling costs and a publicity writer. It depends on how well a given book sells. This is something that's true no matter what publisher you go to within the pagan/occult market—chances are, you're going to have to do a lot of hoofwork yourself. Just as books don't write themselves, neither do they sell themselves. Of course, that's part of the fun in our opinion—it's a great excuse to go to more pagan festivals!

Editing and Layout

Large publishers have staff for editing and layout. Depending on the size of a small press, there could be one person doing both the editing and layout—small press people tend to wear a lot of hats. Even when there is an editor and a layout person, a lot of work is divided among a few people. In some cases, such as with us, the work is done on primarily a volunteer basis, in the hopes that down the line the publisher will grow large enough to pay us, but also because we believe in the mission of the publisher. However because a small publisher doesn't have the same resources as the larger publishers have, more problems can occur in both the editing and production stage of the book. Those problems can slip through, which results in typos and odd layout design. With a larger staff it's easier to not only catch these problems because there are more eyes on the manuscript, but also to pool available skills together to fix them.

Even with a small staff, though, the process of editing and layout can be improved with hard earned experience. Both of us have done editing and layout for Immanion Press, and we've made our fair share of mistakes and had to rectify them. But in making those mistakes we've learned how to refine our processes and improve the products we make. Over time any small press will improve its skills. It's also a reality that typos will appear in any book, no matter who publishes it. Small presses may not always be able to hire people on who have had formal training in layout, editing, and other tasks, and so there may be a lot of learning as the company grows. On the other hand, it is a great learning experience, and both of us have taken the skills learned in earning our English degrees to new levels.

The Pros of Small Press Publishing

At this point, you might wonder if there are any pros to small publishing, other than a few we've hinted at above. We've listed the cons and they may seem daunting. However there are benefits to going with a small press that a bigger publisher doesn't always offer.

Communication

One thing that small presses offer is closer communication between the author and the staff (including the owner of the company). The author has more input on the book and can get the personal attention s/he needs for hir manuscript. We've worked with authors who've had great ideas, but the writing has really needed work. Because we're small press we've been able to spend more time on individual manuscripts. We don't receive as many manuscripts as large publishers and can make that extra effort to help the writer clean up hir writing and make it shine. Another benefit is that writers get to make sure that their voice is accurately presented in the manuscript. Because authors have more input they can feel like the creative process has really been followed. This doesn't mean the author won't accept editing, but it does mean that the author gets to preserve hir voice and with it a feeling of

knowing the book accurately represents his message. This doesn't, of course, mean that big publishers don't care about the author's voice, but they have concerns that small presses may not have—more on that in a moment. Many small presses even allow authors to pick the cover art, as opposed to picking it for them. This gives authors a chance to feel like they actually have a voice in how the book appears. We both know that we like our covers to appear certain ways and that to trust someone else's judgment on what's best for our book necessarily ignores the fact that the author knows the writing better than anyone else, and the images that should go with it. Additionally, given that it's been observed by more than a few people that pagan and occult book covers have a tendency to be formulaic, a unique piece of cover art can really make a book stand out from the crowd. Problems may be resolved much quicker because there aren't as many middlemen/women to go through to get the job done. For example, at Immanion the only person between the author and the owner (Storm Constantine) is Taylor, who is the managing editor (or, for that matter, Lupa when she edits). Depending on the problem one of us may talk to Storm about it, or we may just have the author email her directly. This means the author can have more involvement in the company as a whole. For example, while Taylor started out as an author, he is now the managing/acquisitions editor for Immanion. Likewise, Lupa is an associate editor and the publicity/promotions manager. If you go with a small press you may not be automatically "volunteered" into a position, but a lot of them may very well appreciate help here and there! It's a great opportunity to get some professional experience in the publishing industry, too, which looks good on a resume. Better understanding of publishing on the part of the author, too, can contribute to a healthier author-publisher relationship. This often goes both ways, as many times people involved in a small press are authors themselves, and so have a good understanding of what it's like to be in that position in the publishing process. We've both learned to appreciate just how much work a publisher has to do because in working for a small press we see a lot of the behind the scenes details that would otherwise be missed.

Acceptance of Edgier Writing Another benefit is that more specific topics can find a home with a smaller press. There are numerous small press books that have been deemed "too niche" or "won't sell enough copies" by bigger publishers. Because of the enormous investment in traditional publishing, bigger publishers have to be sure that a manuscript they accept will sell enough for them to at least break even, taking remaindering and returns into account. But a smaller press may be less invested in selling books for the largest potential audience and can afford to produce books that might appeal to a specific niche. This means that, at least at Immanion, we have the benefit of producing books that will appeal to more people as time goes on and word gets out, because they aren't on the same subject that everyone else is publishing. Our books aren't written for the lowest common denominator, but with the understanding that eventually more people will buy them as they find those works to be significant.

The other benefit of accepting edgier writing is that it gives that writing a venue to express itself. If there's no venue for experimental writing, then there's little or no opportunity to change a particular market or offer a different perspective. Small presses provide the opportunity for different perspectives from the mainstream of larger publishers. We're sure most of you readers have probably heard (or even uttered) complaints about not being able to find anything different on the shelves. The books are out there, so do some research on smaller presses—you might just find exactly what you were looking for!

On a side note, small presses generally don't require the author to have an agent. Most of the bigger esoteric-specific publishers don't, either, but once you get into mainstream publishers that happen to have a metaphysical line, you're in agent territory. While agents definitely have their benefits (such as knowing their way around the publishing industry much better than your average first-time author does) they do present an additional hurdle—they won't accept just any manuscript. This means that they have to decide that a potential book will be a good enough seller before taking it on. Again, small presses may have no problem with a good book that an agent may have decided wasn't really worth his investment of time.

Greater Chance of Publication

Because small presses generally don't receive as many manuscripts as larger ones, the acquisitions process is more favorable to the author. It takes a lot less time for an editor to look at a manuscript if s/he doesn't have a dozen piled up for that day. This means that the notice of acceptance or rejection will show up a lot quicker (unless the small press has some serious delays!). It may take weeks or even months for some larger publishers to even get back to the author; rarely does it take a small press that long.

There's also the advantage of less competition. Say you have a great book on ecological magic. You submit it to a large publisher, who we'll say has three other manuscripts on similar ideas sitting on the table. If only one will get accepted, you have a 25% chance of getting your book published if all manuscripts are of comparable quality. With a small press, on the other hand, if you have a good book and there aren't any pending manuscripts on the topic, there's a much greater chance of getting that "Yes" in the mail. This is even more likely if they don't even have a book on your topic in their line. (This is, of course, assuming that your work is good—small presses have standards, too!)

You do want to take note of the focus of the publisher's line. For example, Immanion is primarily concerned with magical, rather than religious, texts, covering topics that haven't really been dealt with much before, or new twists on old favorites. We also tend to mainly publish intermediate and advanced texts. Chances are we're going to

turn down a Wicca 101 rehash, a book on crystal healing (unless the author has a really unique, practical take on it) or yet another spell book. Other publishers (small and large) have their own agendas with what they publish; for some it's a specific area of esoteric, while others may be after what will sell the most copies at the chain stores. Promotion Finally, smaller presses may devote more long-term promotion efforts to your book. With a large publisher that has a lot of titles (particularly mainstream publishers that have a metaphysical line), there's a window of about four weeks to three months in which a new release has to catch the public eye and sell well. In many cases if it doesn't have good sales numbers at the end of the initial promotional period it's taken out of print or relegated to the dust of a backlist. However, since small presses generally have fewer titles to concentrate on, they can afford to spend more time promoting each one. Because the distribution may not be as quick, too, it may take a title more time to really hit its pace. This means that there's a better chance that the book will stay in print longer with a small press. In our case, we continue to promote every title we have as long as it's in print, and we've routinely sent out review copies of books that were released several years before, as well as our new releases.

Conclusion

Hopefully we've presented a balanced view of small presses. We want to encourage our readers to do their research carefully and determine whether or not a small press is for them. Ultimately, once you've chosen a press, you have to live with the product that's produced by that press. So research the quality of their other work, decide where your priorities lay, and whether or not your books fit the publisher you want to go with. Whatever choice you make, remember as well that you have opportunities with whoever you go with. It's just a question of educating yourself about what those opportunities are.

BIOs:

Taylor Ellwood and Lupa live in the Pacific Northwest with a cat, tons of books, and too many art supplies. Taylor is the author of *Pop Culture Magick*, *Space/Time Magic* and *Inner Alchemy*, and is the editor of the *Magick on the Edge* anthology. Lupa is the author of *Fang and Fur*, *Blood and Bone: A Primal Guide to Animal Magic* and *A Field Guide to Otherkin*. They are cowriting *Kink Magic: Sex Magic Beyond Vanilla* and may be found online at <http://www.thegreenwolf.com> and <http://www.kinkmagic.com>.