Agents & editors: Michael Wiegers, the Editor in Chief of Copper Canyon Press, talks about how he decides which books to publish (from the two thousand manuscripts the press receives each year) and what it’s like to edit the likes of Pablo Neruda, W. S. Merwin, and C. D. Wright

Citation metadata

Author: Michael Szczerban
Date: November-December 2015
From: Poets & Writers Magazine(Vol. 43, Issue 6)
Publisher: Poets & Writers, Inc.
Document Type: Article
Length: 4,868 words

Main content

ONE might not expect to find the center of American poetry here, hanging off the northwest corner of the country, in a white building set on the grounds of a decommissioned military base. But this is where Copper Canyon Press operates: Fort Worden, in Port Townsend, Washington. From just a few rooms in what was once a cannon foundry, Copper Canyon has achieved outsize national and international acclaim.

Founded on a shoestring in 1972 by Sam Hamill and Tree Swenson, with Bill O'Daly and Jim Gautney, Copper Canyon Press started as a letterpress printer of poetry. Four decades later it has published more than four hundred titles, including winners of the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes and the National Book Award, and inspired countless other independent minded editors to start their own presses.

At the center of the publishing operation today is editor in chief Michael Wiegers, who started working there in 1993 (two years after Swenson left the press, following her separation from Hamill). After working for years in the poetry section of bookstores in Boston and the Twin Cities, followed by a stint at Coffee House Press, where he learned about editing and publishing under the late Allan Kornblum, Wiegers joined Copper Canyon as its managing editor, and over time his responsibilities accrued. After Hamill left in 2004, Wiegers was named executive editor. Now with a small team, and still an independent nonprofit, Copper Canyon publishes twenty books a year.

The authors Wiegers has published include W. S. Merwin, Ruth Stone, C. D. Wright, Ocean Vuong, Arthur Sze, Dean Young, Alberto Ríos, Matthew Zapruder, Brenda Shaughnessy, Frank Stafford, Ted Kooser, Roger Reeves, and Michael Dickman. He has also published major works in translation, including Taha Muhammad Ali, Ho Xuan Huong, and Pablo Neruda--whose collection of previously lost poems, Then Come Back, will be published by Copper Canyon in 2016.

Back in 1993, how many books did Copper Canyon publish a year?

The first year I was here, we published four books. When Sam left in 2004 we were doing about fourteen, and now we’re up to about twenty.

Are you still looking to increase the number of books you publish?

I always want to publish more books. At heart I want to say no less and yes more often. Over many years you want to continue to commit to the people you’ve published in the past, but you also have to bring in new voices. But without publishing more books, people have to start dying or they have to stop writing. I hope neither of those things happen, because many of our poets are dear friends and close confidants. My impulse has been to support their work as best, and as reliably, as I can. So that has necessitated adding more books. When I sign on a new author, I’m looking at that book first and foremost. But I’m also looking at the author and the longer tail.

You’re imagining the arc of a person’s future career?

Right. Maybe...

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Source Citation

Szczerban, Michael. "Agents & editors: Michael Wiegers, the Editor in Chief of Copper Canyon Press, talks about how he decides which books to publish (from the two thousand manuscripts the press receives each year) and what it’s like to edit the likes of Pablo..."
Michael Wiegers, the editor in chief of Copper Canyon Press, talks about how he decides which books to publish (from the two thousand manuscripts the press receives each year) and what it’s like to edit the likes of Pablo Neruda, W. S. Merwin, and C. D. Wright. At the center of the publishing operation today is editor in chief Michael Wiegers, who started working there in 1993 (two years after Swenson left the press, following her separation from Hamill). After working for years in the poetry section of bookstores in Boston and the Twin Cities, followed by a stint at Coffee House Press, where he learned about editing and publishing under the late Allan Kornblum, Wiegers joined Copper Canyon as its managing editor, and over time his responsibilities accrued. The editor in chief responsibilities include editing and approving the written articles by the authors before they are actually published. They are also responsible for guiding the authors on various writing issues and ensuring that all the rules of print media are followed. The editor in chief is a person who oversees the editorial process for the publication or the news gathering organizations. It is one of the most stressful and responsible jobs and requires high level of intellect, experience, and dedication. The editor in chief responsibilities consist of various duties such as editing the articles before they are actually printed and published, guiding the staff, supervising the employees, etc. Agents & Editors Recommend. Every week a new publishing professional shares advice, anecdotes, insights, and new ways of thinking about writing and the business of books. More. G&A: The Contest Blog. Find information about how Poets & Writers provides support to hundreds of writers participating in literary readings and conducting writing workshops. About Us. Subscribe Now. —Michael Wiegers, executive editor and editor in chief, Copper Canyon Press. Subscribe. Gift Subscription.