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# Building a Literary Culture: How Indie Publishers Can Establish Stability by Operating Community Hubs

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# Building a Literary Culture: How Indie Publishers Can Establish Stability by Operating Community Hubs

Lisa Hein | May 15, 2018

*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Writing: Book Publishing.*

**Research question:** What's causing the recent rise in publisher-operated brick and mortar bookstores? Are there significant advantages that arise from concentrating on in-person connections rather than more convenient engagement methods such as digital marketing? How are some indie book publishers using high-fidelity, physical experiences to promote their brands and foster a literary culture in their communities?

When considering the production cycle of a trade book, the role of a traditional publisher is to act as an intermediary, to acquire a book from an author or an agent and then usher it along a path that leads to another entity, usually a distributor, that funnels the book to a retailer. Despite recent industry disruptions—such as digital developments and the rise of self-publishers—most publishing companies remain somewhere in the middle of the book supply chain, isolated from consumers and reliant on other intermediaries to connect their products with a reading audience. Without a strong direct-to-consumer connection, publishers lack a solid feedback loop that can help them improve how they cater to consumers.<sup>1</sup> Most function by making educated guesses based on advice from sales teams (often outsourced) and occasionally unreliable sales data, but the most valuable feedback, that of the actual consumer, is missing. Some trade publishers, however, are deviating from the traditional publishing model on their own innovative terms. But rather than concentrating efforts on cultivating direct-to-consumer sales online—a herculean endeavor when considering the effort it takes to divert consumers drawn to Amazon's convenient ordering process—an increasing number

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<sup>1</sup> Sparkes, "Publisher-run Bookstores: A New Trend?"

of independent publishers are building brand awareness and attracting customers through in-person outreach by establishing bookstores or other spaces that provide opportunities for the local literary community to gather together. That said, publishers that operate bookstores and value personal engagements with their surrounding literary community is not a new concept; City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco started its publishing arm in 1955, and New York’s Rizzoli Bookstore ventured into publishing in 1974.<sup>2</sup> But the idea of a business beginning as an independent publishing company and then establishing its own bookstore to support its publishing activities and further its mission seems to be “enjoying a bit of a renaissance lately.”<sup>3</sup> Over the last few years, “a rising number of independent presses are going into the retail book business, morphing into full-service community hubs for book browsing and expanded literary programming.”<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, this choice to invest in a physical retail space is counterintuitive. After all, isn’t commerce moving online with increasing frequency? In 2017, for example, bookstore sales experienced a 3.7 percent decrease in sales over 2016.<sup>5</sup> Armed with this knowledge, publishers would be better off concentrating on shrewd digital marketing schemes to increase discoverability and drive traffic to online purchasing platforms. This percentage decrease, however, doesn’t seem to tell the full story. According to Oren Teicher, CEO of the American Booksellers Association, “book sales—not including e-books and audiobooks—at independent bookstores increased about 2.6 percent in 2017 over the previous year.”<sup>6</sup> It appears that although large chains like Barnes and Noble are suffering major losses in revenue,<sup>7</sup> independent bookstores are managing to cleave to a spot in the retail landscape.

With these contrasting figures in mind, this paper aims to examine why an independent publisher may make the choice to open a bookstore or an event space and whether this action is

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<sup>2</sup> Sparkes, “Publisher-run Bookstores: A New Trend?”

<sup>3</sup> Sparkes, “Publisher-run Bookstores: A New Trend?”

<sup>4</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

<sup>5</sup> Duffer, “Bookstores Sales Declined in 2017.”

<sup>6</sup> Marotti, “As E-book Sales Fall and Audiobooks Rise, Print Still Dominates for Local Booksellers.”

<sup>7</sup> Helmore, “Barnes & Noble: Why It Could Soon Be the Bookshop’s Final Chapter.”

viable as part of a long-term business plan. Although there are recent instances of large publishers experimenting with physical bookstores (including Amazon),<sup>8</sup> the focus of this study is solely on traditional trade publishers that operate independently of large publishing house conglomerates, or “indie publishers.” Case studies of four publishers—all removed from the coastal, New York–centered publishing scene—that have recently established bookstores and event spaces will be examined with the intention of extracting commonalities that potentially created the right conditions for investing in this type of consumer engagement. Although each publisher’s product output will be examined, to maintain focus and scope, sales numbers will not be investigated. Rather than concentrating on sales, the goal of this paper is to examine how publishers can build their brands by establishing a community hub. But before exploring specific publishers that are currently engaging in this phenomenon, it’s necessary to lay out the reasons why an indie publisher may want to consider building a lasting physical presence in its community.

### Convenience Versus Fidelity

To establish itself as a viable business entity, every book publishing company must decide how it will meet consumer needs. Kevin Maney, author of *The Fidelity Swap*, outlines a continuum that determines how businesses will compete in the marketplace. On one end is *convenience*; a business provides a good or service that is widely available and charges consumers the cheapest price possible. The other option is to pursue *fidelity* by producing a high-quality experience that a customer will value for its uniqueness. Most successful products and services tend to fall firmly into the realms of high convenience or high fidelity. Maney further distinguishes fidelity and convenience in the following manner:

One key to the model is the definition of fidelity and convenience. Fidelity isn’t just tangible quality, but includes the perceived quality or aura of a product or service. Convenience is not

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<sup>8</sup> Sparkes, “Publisher-run Bookstores: A New Trend?”

just simplicity or availability, but also includes price—because if something is cheaper, it’s easier for most people to get.<sup>9</sup>

In *Every Book Is a Startup*, Todd Sattersten applies this idea to bookselling. He argues that Amazon, with its low costs, easy ordering process, and quick delivery services, firmly falls on the convenience side of the industry. The other end of the scale would be a place like Powell’s City of Books in downtown Portland, which stocks more one million new and used books and has become, as Sattersten states, “a Disneyland-like destination” in its draw as a must-see destination for booklovers.<sup>10</sup> Powell’s may be a standout merchant, but across the United States, other booksellers understand that they can’t compete with Amazon in terms of convenience and are also investing in high-fidelity experiences. Some ways independent bookstore operators are playing into the fidelity side of the continuum are by carrying highly curated collections,<sup>11</sup> taking a hyperlocal marketing approach,<sup>12</sup> and tuning into the needs of their communities by creating a desired space for local literary enthusiasts to gather.<sup>13</sup> Ryan Raffaelli, professor at Harvard Business School and author of a forthcoming study on the independent bookstore business, describes it as a “bifurcation of the industry where the indies [independent bookstores] represent this high experience, a chance for the consumer to engage on a set of very personal dimensions, versus Amazon, which is really about, can I just get something quickly at the cheapest price?”<sup>14</sup>

Independent bookstore owners are taking a fidelity approach that is almost entirely based on strengthening ties to the surrounding community, but with very few trade publishers making money on direct to consumer sales<sup>15</sup> coupled with the tight margins that accompany owning a brick and mortar bookstore, why should publishers care about cultivating this type of fidelity? Certainly,

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<sup>9</sup> Maney, “The Fidelity Swap.”

<sup>10</sup> Sattersten, *Every Book Is a Startup*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Raffaelli, “Reframing Collective Identity in Response to Multiple Technological Discontinuities,” 5.

<sup>12</sup> Natarajan, “5 Ways to Make Your Marketing Strategy Hyperlocal.”

<sup>13</sup> Sattersten, *Every Book Is a Startup*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, “Why the Number of Independent Bookstores Increased During the ‘Retail Apocalypse.’”

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, “Why Bookselling Is Now a Relationships Game.”

publishers can create high-fidelity experiences in other ways, such as by improving the quality of their book products. It's becoming increasingly common for publishers to create versions of their titles that stand out from their competition by producing beautifully designed books with aspects such as embossed hardcovers and full-color interiors. But for some publishers, particularly those of the small to medium size, veering too far toward the fidelity side of the continuum by creating books that are expensive to produce limits their ability to scale up and reach more readers. If a publishing company's mission is to remain an independent entity and weave themselves into the fabric of their community's literary culture, then it will need to keep production costs affordable—or find another way to supplement its income. One way that publishers may do this is by working to establish a presence that local consumers will value.

### Localism and Brand Strengthening

In the mid-2000s, independent bookstore owners fought to regain space in the marketplace lost by the rise of national chains such as Barnes and Noble and the subsequent domination of Amazon. Many booksellers began to lean heavily into the idea of “localism,” which means they worked to establish “a network of small business owners, investors, policymakers and citizens focused on creating and sustaining local economies.”<sup>16</sup> Localism attaches a set of community-based values to a merchant's economic interests and gives local businesses an incentive to collaborate with each other. Emphasizing a personal connection to a region gave booksellers “a unique set of practices that distinguished them from other actors in the industry.” In other words, businesses that engage in localism can brand themselves as a reliable resource for the surrounding community, a place where like-minded people could gather.<sup>17</sup> Thus, publishers that take a note from the localism movement and participate in the activities centered around engaging with their communities can achieve, at least on a small scale, something that is notoriously difficult for a book publisher to establish—a

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<sup>16</sup> Raffaelli, “Reframing Collective Identity in Response to Multiple Technological Discontinuities,” 5.

<sup>17</sup> Sattersten, *Every Book Is a Startup*, 30.

recognizable brand.

It's commonly been held that, outside of some select genres, most readers don't buy a book because it comes from a certain publishing house; "it's the author's name that counts."<sup>18</sup> When consumers lack a relationship with a publisher as a brand, they "have little incentive to purchase (and purchase again) from publishers. Instead, they will seek out the cheapest and easiest purchasing option available,"<sup>19</sup> which, as discussed previously, is an option that indie publishers are unable to provide when compared the resources of Amazon, a monolith of convenience. According to William Kingsland and Rakesh Satyal in their article "Why Book Publishers Need to Think Like Amazon":

Publishers face many challenges when it comes to establishing themselves as viable brands with customers. Traditionally, they have little to no brand recognition with book buyers because it's been the author's "brand," not the publisher's, that's typically been marketed to consumers. Furthermore, bookstores have acted as the main point of contact between publishers and readers, and regardless of whether they are bricks-and-mortar or online, very rarely have they focused on the personality of a publisher instead of the books themselves. Until recently, it's been largely unnecessary, given the traditional sales model.

A key phrase to take from Kingsland and Satyal's statement is "until recently," as chain bookstores, once a vital component of the publishing sales cycle, are now in trouble.<sup>20</sup> Publishers are also increasingly unable to rely on Amazon for income. More than a year ago, Amazon opened up the opportunity for third-party sellers to "win" the buy buttons on its book product listings.<sup>21</sup> Using factors such as price, availability, and delivery time, orders placed using some buy buttons can now be sourced from third parties, which cuts authors and publishers out of the sale. "Frontlist trade titles are less likely to have buy buttons from third-party sellers, but for deep backlist titles whose

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<sup>18</sup> Esposito, "Why Publishers' Brands Matter."

<sup>19</sup> Harvey, "Why Bookselling Is Now a Relationships Game."

<sup>20</sup> Helmore, "Barnes & Noble: Why It Could Soon Be the Bookshop's Final Chapter."

<sup>21</sup> Milliot, "Publishers Are Urged to Monitor Amazon Buy Buttons."

inventory may be thin, third-party sellers have a relatively high portion of the buy buttons.”<sup>22</sup> This is a troubling development for publishers that depend on Amazon for much of their revenue, and, according to Fran Toolan, CEO of Firebrand Technologies, it appears that the change to the buy button’s functionality is “here to stay.” With less large bookstores able to act as intermediaries and the potential of being cut out of a sale from Amazon, it’s up to publishers to find ways to develop their brands so that they can reach consumers on their own.

Successful branding occurs when people can distinguish a company from its competitors, and one way that publishers can develop their branding is to provide spaces where they can engage in personal interactions with their customers. Establishing a bookstore or community outreach center can serve the purpose of a “brand extension exercise” for indie publishers. It gives them an opportunity to display “a face that people can make the association between the publisher’s name, and what they create and what they make.”<sup>23</sup> This type of hyperlocal brand-building exercise allows publishers to build a community of followers within the society they cater to. If they can do it well, their business can entwine itself into part of a “customer’s life story.”<sup>24</sup>

## Case Studies

With the reasons a publisher may elect to invest in a physical, community space outlined, it makes sense to examine a selection of indie publishers that are actively operating such locations. The following indie publishers were chosen as representatives of publishers that also operate as booksellers and community advocates because of their commitment to community engagement and a specific publishing mission.

### *Hub City Press*

The Hub City Bookshop opened in 2010, relatively ahead of the curve in this recent rise of

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<sup>22</sup> Milliot, “Publishers Are Urged to Monitor Amazon Buy Buttons.”

<sup>23</sup> Sparkes, “Publisher-run Bookstores: A New Trend?”

<sup>24</sup> Natarajan, “5 Ways to Make Your Marketing Strategy Hyperlocal.”



publisher-run retail spaces. Based out of Spartanburg, South Carolina, this independent bookstore is an offshoot of the nonprofit Hub City Press and Hub City Writers Project, originally modeled after the Depression-era Federal Writers Project.<sup>25</sup> The founders of Hub City aimed to “preserve a sense of place in their rapidly changing Southern city” by providing the surrounding community with a “literary identity.”<sup>26</sup>

Hub City has been operating as a publishing entity for more than twenty-three years and has published more than eighty titles and sold roughly 180,000 Hub City Press books. The press publishes “high-caliber literary works, including novels, short stories, poetry, memoir, and books emphasizing the region’s culture and history.”<sup>27</sup> The press is particularly interested publishing books with a distinct sense of place and that highlight “lesser-heard Southern voices.” Before opening the bookshop, Hub City was already engaging with its literary community by running writing residencies, conferences, and contests. Unlike the other case studies outlined in this paper, Hub City is not located in a large city with an extensive arts scene. In fact, the decision to open a bookstore developed out of necessity when, in 2008, the only independent bookstore in Spartanburg went out of business. “It was a survival thing for us,” Betsy Teter, the founder and executive director of Hub City said. “Without a place for people in Spartanburg to buy our books, we were going to have trouble.”<sup>28</sup>

Hub City books is now an established literary center for the Spartanburg community. In addition to stocking Hub City Press books in the front of the store, it also stocks thousands of other titles, making it perhaps the largest publisher-run bookstore discussed in this paper.<sup>29</sup> With eight years of retail experience under its belt, Hub City has found that the risk of opening a bookstore in an unstable retail environment has paid off. “We have more than doubled the number of people

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<sup>25</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

<sup>26</sup> “History,” Hub City Writers Project.

<sup>27</sup> “History,” Hub City Writers Project.

<sup>28</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

<sup>29</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

making charitable contributions to our organization since opening the bookshop,” Teter said. She also added that “sales at the bookstore help bring in revenue for Hub City’s press and programming.”<sup>30</sup> This success story is good news for the following case studies, which have all operated storefronts for less than two years.

### *Milkweed Editions*

Founded in 1980, this established nonprofit publisher is a Minneapolis institution. Milkweed Editions, much like Hub City Press, functions as a nonprofit entity so that it can pursue its goals of bringing new voices to the literary landscape and enable engagement between authors and readers “without overbearing financial pressure.”<sup>31</sup> The press has published more than 350 titles with roughly four million copies now in circulation.<sup>32</sup> In the late nineties, Milkweed moved its offices to the third floor of Open Book, the largest literary arts center in the United States and the “physical hub of the Twin Cities vibrant literary scene.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to Milkweed Editions, Open Book houses tenants like the Loft Literary Center and Minnesota Center for Book Arts and contains public areas such as meeting rooms, performance spaces, and a coffee shop. Then, after about fifteen years in the space, a group of donors laid the groundwork for renovations that led to the 2016 opening of Milkweed Books on the first floor of the Open Book building. Daniel Slager, Milkweed’s publisher and CEO, said that the purpose of the bookstore is to “bring together readers and writers” in a way that puts more people in contact with books.

The store is set up like a gallery, with “rotating exhibits related to the publishing process, such as cover designs and manuscript pages to offer insight into what they do as a publisher, as well as a space for literary events.”<sup>34</sup> Milkweed Books also carries more titles than ones published by Milkweed Editions. Slager compared his store’s approach to that of a local craft brewery. “We want

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<sup>30</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

<sup>31</sup> “Our Story,” Milkweed Editions.

<sup>32</sup> “Our Story,” Milkweed Editions.

<sup>33</sup> Kirch, “Milkweed Editions to Open Indie Bookstore.”

<sup>34</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

to be a taproom for all these great indie press publishers,” he said.<sup>35</sup> This curated approach to a retail space evokes a high-fidelity experience that helps establish Milkweed as an authoritative literary figure in the surrounding community and beyond. Milkweed is also cognizant of the slim margins that often accompany running an independent bookstore and, to keep Milkweed’s revenues from being tied up in keeping the bookstore stocked, books are “bought by the bookstore’s buyers in the conventional way, as well as on consignment.”<sup>36</sup> Now in its second year of operation, the bookstore is open seven days a week and hosts events such as author readings and book launches. By running a bookstore in a building that is designed for community engagement, Milkweed is able to interact with the local community in a “more explicit way.” It also takes notes from the challenges involved in operating a bookstore to “make it a better publisher, especially in terms of marketing and sales.”<sup>37</sup> “We’re trying to reinvent what it means to be a publisher,” Slager said.

### *Curbside Splendor*

Although it’s the youngest press discussed in this paper, Curbside Splendor was the quickest to expand into the retail scene. Established in 2009 from the ashes of a now-defunct punk rock band, Curbside publishes fiction, non-fiction, and poetry and seeks “work that explores hybrid forms and examines contemporary culture.”<sup>38</sup> Curbside opened its physical location, Curbside Books and Records, in the heart of Chicago’s South Loop as an “opportunity to expand its readership and engage with the broader demographics of downtown foot traffic.”<sup>39</sup> Staunchly independent, Curbside jumped at the chance to further its goal of promoting indie publishing in such a heavily trafficked area of Chicago—one generally full of chain stores and high-end retailers. As former editor-in-chief Naomi Huffman said in an interview with Jon Sealy of *Literary Hub*, “indie publishing is about discovery.” The bookstore’s objective is to deliver “literature to people who don’t know

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<sup>35</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

<sup>36</sup> Kirch, “Milkweed Editions to Open Indie Bookstore.”

<sup>37</sup> Kirch, “Milkweed Editions to Open Indie Bookstore.”

<sup>38</sup> “About.” Curbside Splendor.

<sup>39</sup> Hawbaker, “Curbside Splendor’s first storefront comes to Revival Food Hall.”

what they're looking for, and maybe don't even know it exists."<sup>40</sup> According to Huffman:

What we've been discovering over the past few years is that publishing is no longer just about publishing books. It's about delivering literature to people. The best way to do that is not just selling a book—which a bookstore will do—but creating a community that people want to be involved in.

In keeping with the theme of community creation, Curbside publisher Victor David Giron likened the Curbside bookstore to that of the Milkweed Books. “The idea,” he said, “is that it's going to fit into a larger communal space; it's going to be part of this community center.” The community center he referred to is Revival Food Hall, a showcase location for local chefs from fifteen Chicago restaurants (and now Curbside Books and Records).<sup>41</sup> Though a food hall may feel like an exercise in convenience, the participants come from some of Chicago's most highly acclaimed local restaurants—making the location an experience in fidelity. Locals and tourists alike travel to Revival Food Hall to enjoy this “all-local concept.” In terms of brand building, the bookstore promotes Curbside Splendor's brand as a community-oriented publisher by “hosting discussions, readings, and pop-up events.”<sup>42</sup> Curbside isn't a nonprofit entity like Hub City or Milkweed, but it does adhere to a strict mission to promote independent books and music. Like Milkweed Books, the store's selection is highly curated. The store, which also carries records, only stocks materials from indie publishing houses and record companies.

When first examining Curbside, it's hard to believe that a small publisher could scale up so quickly—especially in a competitive publishing landscape like Chicago—and establish a physical presence in such a well-trafficked area of the city. This answer to how Curbside established itself in this manner without becoming a nonprofit entity becomes clear, though, when you look at the background of Curbside's publisher. Giron is the CFO of 16” On Center Chicago, the Chicago

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<sup>40</sup> Sealy, “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”

<sup>41</sup> Kirch, “Indie Publisher to Open Chicago Bookstore.”

<sup>42</sup> “About,” Curbside Books and Records

restaurant and entertainment group behind the creation of Revival Food Hall. Because publishing and bookselling both have high risks and thin margins that accompany them, it helps immensely for an owner of a publishing company that aims to stay independent and maintain a storefront to have connections in other industries.

### *Two Dollar Radio*

Two Dollar Radio, based out of Columbus, Ohio, is a “family-run outfit founded in 2005 with the mission to reaffirm the cultural and artistic spirit of the publishing industry.”<sup>43</sup> Headed by married team Eric Obenauf and Eliza Wood-Obenauf and their financial partner Brett Gregory, the company publishes literary fiction and also includes Moving Pictures, a film production operation. It took the team twelve years of operating primarily out of a living room before they were able to open a headquarters that included a community-oriented space. This is a realistic timeline for an independent publishing company, as Two Dollar Radio doesn’t function as a nonprofit, and the leadership team concentrated their professional endeavors on building the company’s reputation as a publisher and community hub. The strength of the connections Two Dollar Radio forged with its surrounding community are undeniable; the publisher now not only owns and operates a physical space but also produces a three-day arts festival called The Flyover Fest. The annual festival, which took place for second time in May 2018, featured “nearly thirty independent book publishers, booksellers, record labels, and comics writers and artists from throughout the United States.”<sup>44</sup>

Establishing a storefront allows Two Dollar Radio to affirm itself as an institution invested in localism and establishes a direct feedback loop with its customers. “The storefront will provide a physical gathering space for us to engage directly with readers, writers, and thinkers, which is something we typically only get to do at fairs or events,” Obenauf said.<sup>45</sup> Two Dollar Radio Headquarters opened in fall of 2017 and contains a bookstore, an event and performance space, a

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<sup>43</sup> “About Us,” Two Dollar Radio.

<sup>44</sup> Seman, “Flyover Fest Could Soar to New Heights in Second Year.”

<sup>45</sup> Sega, “Local Publisher Two Dollar Radio Will Open Bookstore, Café and Bar on Parsons.”

full-service coffee and alcohol bar (featuring locally roasted coffee and beer from a local brewery), and vegan food offerings.<sup>46</sup>

Two Dollar Radio is unique in that it controls every aspect of its space, even down to the food. This juggling act is likely possible for at least two reasons: Obenauf has a service industry background, and the leadership team has a strong network of friends lending a hand to help make the enterprise operational.<sup>47</sup> Like Milkweed and Curbside, Two Dollar Radio emphasizes curation when stocking its store. The bookstore stocks most of Two Dollar Radio's titles, but also features a collection of books produced almost entirely by other indie publishers. According to Obenauf, "independent publishers can foster an unconventional book shopping experience, unlike mainstream publishing companies, because the books they publish are often more curated."

## Analysis

Although the four publishing companies investigated above may vary in factors such as age, size, scope, and location, there is, however, a commonality among them all: an adherence to a mission and a commitment to fostering a literary culture in their communities. With Hub City, the publishing team provides a service for its community—an independent bookstore and gathering space for literary enthusiasts—that would not exist without their help. Milkweed is able to pursue its goal of building an engaged community around literature by providing a high-quality space that both attracts the public and solidifies Milkweed's brand as a respected producer of transformative literature. Both nonprofit publishers have philanthropic objectives to pursue, and they are able to generate greater support for their efforts by using their storefronts to connect with the public on a more personal level. The two for-profit publishers, Curbside and Two Dollar Radio, have managed to overcome the high costs of opening a storefront by establishing partnerships with or making forays into other industries. Curbside achieves similar aims as Milkweed in terms of its retail style, but it also takes its

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<sup>46</sup> Real, "Two Dollar Radio Opens New Bookstore, Bar, Event Space."

<sup>47</sup> Kirch, "Indie Pub Two Dollar Radio to Open Bookstore."

focus on localism a step further by connecting with local food culture and the indie music scene. Two Dollar Radio, with perhaps the most ambitious goals in terms of community presence, seems positioned to become a model of a publisher's potential to reaffirm connections between book production and the larger artistic community.

In all four cases, it's evident that high-fidelity consumer experiences made possible by establishing publisher-owned storefronts are fueling consumer engagement on a local level, which provides recognition and credibility to their publishing brands. With these physical spaces, the publishers are also cultivating a type of stability that may be able to withstand imminent changes to the publishing ecosystem. For a visual breakdown of how these four presses compare to each other in their approaches to their community spaces, see Appendix A.

## Takeaways

Publishing is an ever-evolving industry, and constantly meeting the rapidly changing market on its terms is a tall order for most publishers. But many indie publishers are rising to the challenge and innovating in ways that not only allow them to survive—but to grow. The four publishing companies examined in the paper represent only a segment of indie publishers that are tapping into the localism movement and renewed interest in independent bookstores. For a few additional examples: Only weeks ago, KiCam Projects, an independent publisher based in Georgetown, Ohio, opened a bookstore to serve suburban and rural readers outside of Cincinnati. Jennifer Scroggins, executive vice president of the company, envisions the store, which will be the only dedicated bookstore in the surrounding area, as a “hub” for a community that is “rapidly changing and growing.”<sup>48</sup> Red Hen, a nonprofit Los Angeles–based publisher, moved into a new space in November 2017 with the goal of establishing an on-site events space. With the new space, Red Hen hopes to experiment with book launches, master classes, and writing workshops that will keep the

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<sup>48</sup> Milliot, “KiCam Projects Opens Bookstore.”

company in touch with the needs of their community.<sup>49</sup> Dallas’s Deep Vellum Publishing, another nonprofit publisher, has been operating a bookstore since summer of 2015. And, “as the bookstore expands, it will continue to be united with Deep Vellum Publishing through their shared mission: ‘To provide accessible books and culture to the communities and neighborhoods they serve.’”<sup>50</sup> While not entirely in the scope of this study, it’s likely no coincidence that nonprofit publishers make up a substantial part of the movement toward publisher-owned bookstores and event spaces.

If large chains such as Barnes and Noble do fold, and if Amazon’s adherence to third-party sellers becomes even more persistent, indie publishers that establish storefronts or other spaces suited for community engagement will have the advantage of a home base and an engaged community to help them regroup and adjust to changes in this ever-evolving industry. After all, “publishing has a secret weapon that most other industries don’t: passionate readers who promote books for no reason other than to spread the joy of a good story.”<sup>51</sup> Such readers will seek out recommendations from—or provide their own to—others in their literary community. If said community is fostered through in-person engagement, then it is likely to become an effective feedback loop and support vehicle for the publisher. Jon Sealy posits that this may be a “new reality for publishing. As New York publishers and tech companies continue to vie for market share and boost quarterly returns, local literary communities are taking matters into their own hands, building unique book cultures across the United States and continuing the old-fashioned task of bringing together writers and readers.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, if the conditions are right to do so, indie book publishers that can establish a community hub will find they are better positioned to build a home base, garner local support, and scale up their operations to expand their reach or diversify their offerings. It’s an exciting prospect for any publishing professionals that hope to break out of a detached position on the book production cycle to engage directly with the people they truly wish to serve: the readers.

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<sup>49</sup> Ulin, “Cooking the Books: Los Angeles Has Never Been Known as a Bastion of Publishing . . .”

<sup>50</sup> Rosen, “Making Book: How Booksellers Are Becoming Publishers.”

<sup>51</sup> Ellis, “What Is Your Book Community?”

<sup>52</sup> Sealy, Jon. “Why Milkweed, Other Indie Presses Are Opening Bookstores.”



## Appendix A: Case Study Comparison

	Hub City Press	Milkweed Editions	Curbside Splendor	Two Dollar Radio
Date press established	1995	1980	2009	2005
Date bookstore established	2010	2016	2016	2017
Location and city population	Spartanburg, SC 37,876	Minneapolis, MN 413,651	Chicago, IL 2.705 million	Columbus, OH 860,090
Books published (approximate)	50	350	68	80
Mission statement (abbreviated)	To nourish writers and cultivate readers in Spartanburg and across the Southeast.	To identify, nurture, and publish transformative literature, and build an engaged community around it.	To rewrite the tradition of Midwestern publishing.	To reaffirm the cultural and artistic spirit of the publishing industry.
Nonprofit?	Yes	Yes	No	No
Food and drink?	No; shares building w/coffee shop	No; shares building w/coffee shop	Wine; located next to café and bar	Yes; bar and café
Event programming?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Programming other than literary?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Easy access to separate event space?	No	Yes	No	Yes
Philanthropic outreach?	Yes	Yes	No	No
Highly curated collection?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Diverse product line at retail space?	Mainly books	Mainly books	Books and records	Mainly books
Membership program?	No	No	Yes	Yes

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