

# On starting your own small press



Writer Stephanie LaCava on what led her to start a press, how holding day jobs helped her hone her voice, and the importance of openness and curiosity.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 2788 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Independence](#), [Day jobs](#).

**When did you get the idea to start your own independent publisher, Small Press, and how long did it take to come together?**

It's always been the dream. I've always been fascinated by the stories of tiny publishers like The Hours Press or Olympia Press. [Barney Rossat](#) was a real hero of mine. I had a lot of interest in what he was doing. It seemed very unreal and impossible, the whole idea of starting it and making it happen, and everything in between.

I decided that I was going to try it. If I didn't try it, I would never know what the process was like. I really wanted to make something. I also started reading books about publishing as an artistic practice, and doing a lot of interviews. I'm not a critic or an expert or an art historian, but as a writer, I was really interested in talking to predominantly visual artists about what they write, what they read, ways of playing, codes, and questioning things that exist. It also became this thing where I was really interested in understanding how things reach people, what reaches people, what is reality, what is not reality, and how that can also be shaped by businesses that have been set up to sell things or present things.

**In looking towards the past as a publisher, at lost classics and old titles, what do you wish to recapture?**

A lot of it for me with these books that have gone out of print, which had always been a collecting fascination of mine, was, "How does that happen? Why does that happen?" Because we know that it's not always the quality that determines what stays in print. I wanted to resurrect things, but also play with how they're dispersed throughout the world and what form they take and what new things can happen with them.

In terms of what I want when I'm looking for an old book, it's the same thing I would look for in something that's new. I like books that were not successful in the way people needed them to be successful in order to reprint them, maybe. I like things that are too experimental to make sense. I like things that someone took a chance on, even though it wasn't the wisest investment. It's probably my own lack of common sense.

**As a publisher of translated texts, and a journalist who often does her own translating, how would you describe vetting a translation?**

I am not a trained translator, so the best that I can do is sort of come up with what feels right and what seems right to me, which is obviously not always what would make sense to somebody else. Neither is wrong. That says a lot about translation, and what I love about it. I think translators are really under-celebrated and under-recognized for the work that they do, especially when dealing with anagrams, alliteration, any kind of constrained writing techniques, or rhythm. I just have a deep respect for it.

But the reason I was interested in translations as a form of publishing wasn't so much because of that respect—although I hope that we choose people who make interesting choices. It was because such a small percentage of books in the English language, and specifically the American market, are translated works, which I think says a lot about the norms that we're experiencing with our storytelling. And even less in the children's market. That to me is enough of a reason to try to get more things circulating.

**You're publishing a children's storybook called *The Mysterious Tale of Gentle Jack and Lord Bumblebee*, a reimagining of the original published by George Sand in 1851, with new artwork by Stephen Ostrowski. How did you decide on collaborators for this project?**

Part of the thing that interests me with publishing is it's never a solitary practice. Because the writer writes a book and then has to deal with a publisher, and the people who do all the other parts. It's more like filmmaking in this way. I also had an interest in the packaging of the project, the aesthetics of the thing, and how it lives and appears and feels.

In terms of collaborators, I work with [Eric Wrenn](#) for the design, which has been amazing and is essential. He's been really wonderful and has a great sense of everything. I'm kind of an obsessive and I've always loved typography and layouts. I think of Eros magazine, for example. I really wanted there to be a strong visual identity or some kind of cohesion among everything. I needed someone also to show me, to guide me. I didn't know the technical aspect of any of that. And I'm trying to learn.

[Stephen](#) [Ostrowski] and I first bonded because we both grew up as third-culture children, which is a hugely important thing in the shaping of one's identity. We realized it's what made us see things or problem-solve in a certain way, having grown up with a lack of constants and, in my case, long-term social attachments. Stephen grew up in southeast Asia, and so we talked about that. And this story is important because—and it was Stephen who made this direct connection—the character Jack is sort of told by everyone to go against what feels intuitive to him. He said, as a queer person, he felt that that was also an important piece of the story. Stephen's art also caught my eye in that it has a very particular color palette. It just feels like the right thing in this particular case. I really like him as a human. So, we tried it out.

**So many creative projects can come about just by living in New York City. How important is being based here to what you do for work?**

I never thought about it like that. But I guess it's true—Stephen and I were originally introduced through a friend at another friend's home.

I guess I thought I missed out a little bit because there was a time when there was a lot of stuff happening in nightlife and I wasn't a part of it, just based on the hours I was keeping with my day job. I've always been a really early riser, because I'm much better early in the morning than late at night. But I think a lot of interesting things happen in the after-hours.

I recently interviewed an older French writer, Jean-Jacques Schuhl, who talked about how important it was for him to be present as an observer at night, which I agree with. There's something to being less concerned with having meetings or sending out emails, and instead to actually being present in what is happening in a city. That's an important thing, and a vital thing, and a vibrant thing. I actually didn't really do that enough, especially during the years you're supposed to. But I do believe in that.

And I think you have to be careful, too. I'm sort of open and naïve, and I tend to think I can just start up a conversation with anybody and be super friendly. Some people take that the wrong way. People misunderstand it. Maybe that's because early on, I didn't learn a more guarded way of doing that, but so far it's been okay. That kind of self-selects. If someone is willing to see past my awkwardness or at least understand it, then you get the ability to connect in another kind of meaningful way.

**What types of children's books did you grow up with, and how are they a persistent influence?**

I was really a misanthropic little kid and I liked to hide under the table and read. I would rather read than socialize. My parents would take me to dinner parties at people's houses and my mom would have to sit me down and be like, "You can't go in their cabinets and read their books." And I was like, "Why not? On their tables, they put magazines out, I don't understand, what's the problem? I'm not going to pretend, this is much more interesting to me."

I read anything and everything. My idea for doing children's books isn't the conventional children's books, because I read everything at inappropriate ages. My mom was a nursery school teacher for her second career in life. She didn't go to school for that, but it's something she loved and really did such a good job with. As I grew older, there were always children's

books of all kinds around my house.

My father and I always talked about writing children's books together. He wanted to write a story about pancakes. He was the reason we moved around a lot, and he was always presenting similarities between places and making people comfortable. There are pancakes in the cuisines of many different places, so, he wanted to present a story about the dosa, the latke—pancakes in different cultures. Which is kind of sweet.

#### Which books are you reading lately?

I'm really interested in hybridity. Even if it's not clear right at the beginning, books that sort of straddle genres and are doing new things.

I've recently read Virginie Despentes, *Vernon Subutex*, *I*, *Pretty Things*, and *Apocalypse Baby*. The last two have been translated by Emma Ramadan in these great English editions by Feminist Press. I've read some in French, some in English. It's super entertaining. Some people think it's pulpy.

If you look at the idea of the Modernist writer being the author who takes a turn from the idea that she is giving information to the reader, like, "You, lowly reader, are learning from me, and this is what humanity is about." I think what I loved—and felt was super modern about Despentes—is there's such a humility and awareness of the hypocrisy of all kinds of characters and ways of thinking and the conflicts that happen in the way we see ourselves and we see other. Each one of her characters presents things about themselves that are unlikeable, while at the same time, they may belong to something that we think in another sense gives them moral superiority.

What's really cool about that is it's basically presenting a complete distrust of everyone, even oneself. I think at one point you would look to a book when you were younger to be like, "Oh, this is how a person should be," to borrow from the Sheila Heti title, who I think is great as well.

I guess what I'm saying is I'm interested in reading forms of criticism that aren't straightforward or conventional. I'm interested in reading things that make me think about something completely differently than how I was thinking about it before. We watch movies, we read books, and think, "What would I do if I was in that situation?" I like to look at this idea as, "What would I not do?" And also to consider refusal.

There is the flip side, like Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*, which is a book about not embracing that thing. I'm not looking for someone to tell me how to be. I'm looking to really feel and begin to understand that there's a continuum, there's a spectrum, there's an acceptance that there are things you can't control.

I think it takes a real lack of smugness on the part of a creator, and I think that's really important: to have an ideal, to capture an experience, but not to say, "This is how you should see things. This is the best, I am the best at making things be seen this way." This is something I think about a lot.

#### Growing up, who encouraged your creativity?

My mother and father. My father would make these papier-mâché animals when he had time. Or we would paint the ceiling of some room in our house. I do have to say that my parents were never supportive of being an artist as a practical job. Which I think was a good thing for me. I was told it was something you would just do, but you wouldn't do it as your work; it would be a supplement, and it was something you were lucky to be able to do. If that's what you enjoyed, that's what you did in the time you did things you enjoyed. Work would be something more practical in their eyes, whatever that meant. I broke away from that, but it took me years to be able to feel comfortable with it.

#### After college, where you studied international relations, you began working for American Vogue. How did your time at the magazine impact your writing habits?

I'm really thankful for my time there. It's a rigorous experience and you get to work with the best people: talent who adhere to strict ideas of how things are done in respective fields. You do the best you can at each thing. And I learned so much. I didn't start off in writing there. I was super young, so I also made a lot of mistakes and had to learn the hard way a lot of the time. I was super cavalier and a little bit of a punk at the time.

My parents weren't really down with me majoring in English literature, let alone getting an MFA. So following in certain footsteps, I studied international relations and international economics and French with the possibility and the thought that I might go to school to join The Foreign Service.

All the while, I wrote for the school newspaper in college and I did all these internships every summer. I actually opened the local coffee shop at 5AM my entire sophomore and junior year, because I wanted to be on a schedule. I didn't want to have the possibility of allowing myself to stay out until all hours of the night. I wanted to get up, do that, and go write.

I graduated a year early and I took a job right away that I was lucky to have had the chance to get, at Vogue. I was there nearly six years doing assistant work. I think it was to my parents' credit that I didn't feel entitled to be able to become a writer right off the bat.

#### What do you find particularly stylish lately?

I think the ability to be aware that you don't know. I think that can be an aesthetic as well. The possibility that you're figuring it out, and that it's imperfect. I think that's super attractive, and warm. A little bit of tenderness.

#### You recently chaired a talk at the Tate Modern in London called "Art Writing Now," with the writer Lynne Tillman and Ben Eastham, writer and founding editor of The White Review. In what ways is preparation for an event such as a museum talk distinct from your other practices?

It's about the discussion of ways in which we talk about and present the visual arts, and how that comes into conversation, the media, and new models. And about what it means to do that through fiction, as Lynne does. I mean, Lynne is just a remarkable talent, an incredible writer, and also a really good friend. I didn't know Ben so well, but was excited to get to talk to him more.

I don't know how it happened. I don't have a precedent for it. I'm not a critic. I'm not an art historian. I'm a writer. I am curious. I'm really interested in subversive things that aren't exactly what they seem, and in people who are willing to play and experiment and defy what's expected. Perhaps with consequence.

#### Stephanie LaCava recommends:

Using Life by Ahmed Naji, illustrated by Ayman Al Zorkany, translated by Benjamin Koerber  
The House of Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories by Yasunari Kawabata translated by Edward Seidensticker  
Agua Viva by Clarice Lispector translated by Stefan Tobler  
A Little Lumpen Novellita by Roberto Bolaño translated by Natasha Wimmer  
Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words, Edited by Janet Kraynak  
Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility and the Duty of Repair by Sarah Schulman  
Vsszhzz by Jeanne Graff  
The Mother and the Whore (1973)  
Sweet Movie (1974)  
N. Took the Dice (1971)  
La Reine Margot (1994)  
Inside Man (2006)  
Chilly Gonzales  
Old Nova or Mondo magazines  
newmodels.io

Name

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Vocation

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