

Thoughts on Getting Your First Book of Poems Published the (Mostly) Traditional Route by Gus Peterson

Note: what follows is my own perception, my own thoughts. It in no way reflects on the larger purpose or mission of the Maine Poets Society, which supports and encourages all practitioners of poetry. That includes those who simply enjoy reading and listening to poetry and poets who never have any intention to publish, as well as those who have every intention. As one of the latter, what follows is garnered from my experience of following through on that end. But that in no way diminishes those of our membership who write just as diligently and passionately with no other goal than love of poetry. In that respect, I hope the way I exist within the Art resonates with you all.

Know that your voice is appreciated and carries as much weight in the Maine Poets Society as all others.

It's true - there's no money in poetry outside of a few very big established names. A print run of 300 sold copies is a remarkable success for any publisher. You will submit time and time again only to be disappointed. You must understand: like the rush of words that arrange themselves on the page, this is part of the process. Think back - did you stop writing when a poem rejected you? Did you throw away your pen, your paper, every last word? I'm betting you didn't. I'm betting you salvaged a line or phrase that worked. I'm betting you filed it away in some recess of your mind or a desk. That, eventually, the itch came back and you had to scratch a few things out in a hesitant hand. That, slowly, something arranged itself again and you kept going. And before you know it, you have another poem, another brick in the foundation of your manuscript in progress. I'm assuming if you've read past the title you're interested in publishing not only poems, but maybe a chapbook or a book. Know that already you're about to embark on something that few people ever come close to doing. However it happens, publishing a book still means someone has read your most intimate thoughts and experiences and believed enough in it to invest themselves into making sure it gets out into the world. What follows is a few thoughts on improving your chances, depending on your goals.

Look through any calls for submissions group, at the back of any magazine, and most of the calls for manuscripts are for "X poetry prize" judged by guest judge X. There's a reading fee (usually \$15-30, depending on who is running the contest) and a small cash prize along with contributor copies. Let's be honest: submitting to contests is expensive. The chances of winning a prize are astronomically small. The advantage of the contest model is you will have virtually no responsibility outside of approving certain parts of the creative process. The publisher will edit, design, and promote your book. They may arrange readings. You will have a first-rate credential in your bio. You will basically be along for the whirlwind, the ride. My chapbook, *When the Poetry's Gone*, was a result of this pathway. It didn't win the contest run by Encircle Publications, but as a finalist was offered publication. Factor this when you send entries - if the publisher offers top finishers an opportunity to publish, you can triple your chances of getting a book deal. It won't come with prize money, but all the other advantages will still be in play. This is a more effective use of your dollar.

For my second collection, *Male Pattern*, which is my first full length manuscript, I didn't go the contest route for both financial and impatience reasons. I just wanted to get a book out into the world. I went with what is called a hybrid publisher, in this case Finishing Line Press (FLP). A hybrid publisher is advantageous because, if accepted, they will edit your book. This can include cover design, artwork, etc. They will promote it and handle orders, including print runs and listing it with

major distributors. You will have better odds than a contest, but don't think of it as automatic. In a recent exchange online, the editor of (FLP), Leah Maines, said that at last check they had an acceptance rate of about 8%. This is better than close to zero, but not guaranteed. You will have to take a more active role in marketing and promoting your book, because it doesn't come with the prestige of winning a contest. You won't get author copies for free. Luckily, most hybrid publishers will mockup promotional materials and have information on how to maximize sales during your preorder period. You will, in essence, have to put more sweat in on the back end. In my view, with the advent of social media and email, this is much easier to do nowadays. In my opinion, because FLP promotes their authors constantly this way, hybrid is the best model for those of us with limited cash to burn and a desire to get a book more quickly into the world who don't have the technical skills to truly self-publish.

If you just want to get it done, you can also explore self-publishing. There are a couple of pathways here - cooperative self-publishing, where you pay a press to take on the work of editing/designing/promoting the book, and the true self-published route, traditionally done through a big platform like Amazon. Cooperative self-publishing is expensive and still subject to the publisher accepting your manuscript, whereas true self-publishing puts all editing/design/promoting on you. There is no gatekeeper, though, and some authors who self-publish do very well. It is time intensive and technically demanding, but not as hard nowadays as the tools get more user friendly. Ultimately, the biggest savings are financial.

In short, there are more routes available now to publishing your manuscript than ever. I encourage you to explore opportunities online by signing up for platforms like Submittable. Most publishers today only take electronic submissions. It's just where the market is at and is the only way to truly maximize your chances. The rules to finding a publisher, however, are the same as ever: read their guidelines thoroughly. Do not submit your formal sonnets to a call for free verse sci-fi speculative poetry. Go to the publisher's website or find their journal in a bookstore. Read back issues of their magazine or sample poems online if they provide them. You can get a good sense if your voice is the same pitch as the voices they publish frequently. If you think you have a match, go for it.

The same just-before-you-submit rules still apply: make sure there are no technical things that will automatically get a rejection before you're even read. Make sure you have your table of contents and acknowledgements of publication page, if they ask for it. Check for typos, spelling and page count. If they ask for one, make your cover letter personal - know the editors (find on the website) and address them by name. Stand out just a bit. Don't flatter to the point of obsequiousness but make sure they won't forget you. These are all things you can control. Then, when all that is said and done, click that button. And maybe, just maybe at the end of a long day months from then, when you have forgotten all the stress and strain of the process, you'll sit down at your desk, open your email and find a message in your inbox: *Congratulations! We're pleased to inform you that your manuscript has been accepted.* Imagine that feeling when it feels hopeless, when all the world feels like a rejection. How, like a poem filling a page, it will happen.