

STORY BY JAN DEGRASS

For the Love of Books

IN THESE DIGITAL TIMES,
BOOK PUBLISHING THRIVES
ON THE COAST

S

unshine Coast book publishers have no need of urban towers of concrete and glass. Four of the Coast's articulate and award-winning publishers live and work among us, with home offices up a winding side road or on a forested cliff.

One of the province's largest publishing houses, Harbour Publishing, runs an operation with nearly a dozen staff from a home in Madeira Park. William Gelbert of MW Books has built his self-sufficient

Renaissance-style home up a cliff near Garden Bay. Vici Johnstone of Caitlin Press runs her company from her office on a side road in Halfmoon Bay. Silas White of Nightwood Editions lives in the town of Gibsons, hardly a bustling metropolis. Nonetheless, Silas is one of the few who left his publishing mark in that mecca of bookish business, Toronto.





JAN DEGRASS PHOTOS

From left: William Gelbert of MW Books, Silas White of Nightwood Editions, and the staff of Harbour Publishing. Below: An assortment of books from all four publishing companies.

Nightwood has had an illustrious long history, beginning in Ontario as one of poet Bill Bisset's babies under the name of Blewointment. Nightwood became the poet's friend and still publishes new and exceptional work, the O Canada crossword puzzle series, and prose from such authors as local fisherman/writer Joe Denham. Many of the books win awards and further the careers of promising writers. One of the titles, Renee Sarojini Saklikar's book, *Children of Air India*, recently earned the 2014 Canadian Authors Association Poetry Award.

It was challenging to run the press by himself in Toronto but he's glad he did. "In the poetry market, readers really value the printed book," Silas says. It's about the way a book looks and feels in your hand — it's a joy that readers and publishers have in common.

The big challenge lately has been the closure of independent bookstores, a lament that was echoed by all the publishers. The remaining big box book stores don't always carry poetry.

Vici Johnstone of Caitlin Press is another fan of the beautifully

produced book. Caitlin started life many years ago as a feminist literary press in the Cariboo that morphed into a publisher for central interior stories. It still strikes a fine balance between its regional interest and work by or about B.C. women. Johnstone has returned the company to its roots and seeks works of social importance.

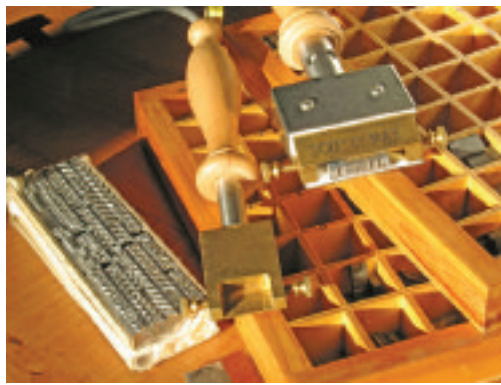
"I want books to move people, change people's ideas," she tells *Coast Life*. "That's important to me." But she acknowledges that no one is getting rich from sales. Still, Caitlin has had a "kickass year," picking up a book award and a nomination for the prestigious George Ryga Award. She is particularly proud of Andrea Routley's *Jane and the Whales* that was shortlisted for an international Lambda Literary Award since it is a validation of the lesbian literature they are publishing. Caitlin plans to release their first children's book this fall, a First Nations story about a traditional way of catching fish.

The publishing game is changing. William Gelbert, an ➤





Left: Caitlin Press publicist Andrea Routley retrieves books from the warehouse. Right: Limited edition books from MW Books and some of the tools William Gelbert has built for the gold stamping of book spines.



engineer with a love of science, carries on his consulting career from Garden Bay to subsidize his publishing habit. He first started MW Books 15 years ago to resurrect books of scientific significance, now out of print. For example, he published a 1922 text, *The Una-Flow Steam-Engine* by Professor Stumpf.

"Such a wealth of information flows through the steam engine book," he says, "— it was pivotal to transportation during the war — and it had just about disappeared."

Gelbert caresses the book's fine leather binding with its gold imprint. He used his own crafted tool for stamping the spine then had it printed on archival paper. This was the way to breathe new life into old texts — until Google. The giant search engine found out-of-print books then scanned and stored them in digital databases. Many specialized books were born again. Gelbert became aware of much other good work that had not seen the light of day, so he branched out. He published the quirky stories of Gibsons/ Vancouver author Marina Sonkina, a children's book from local author Heather Conn and a historical novel of gold adventurers from Michael Maser, among others. This fall he is publishing several children's books including a sequel to the

delightful kid's book *Scott the Starfish* by Jennifer Fraser, with illustrations by Coast artist Melanie Eastley.

The floodgates have opened in the last ten years, with more writers publishing their own work and occasionally those of others. But it's an expensive habit — there's practically no return until you sell over a thousand books, Gelbert points out.

One publisher that manages to hunt down best sellers and move them out the warehouse door is one of the province's largest, Harbour Publishing, now celebrating their 40th year in business. Howard and Mary White's line of books sat firmly on B.C.'s history, and they still publish many stories of loggers and truckers, pilots and skippers.

"We feed the interest," Howard says. "But it's changing. This generation doesn't personally remember the time when the province was a logging and fishing economy."

What's the future of print books given that so many download their books to an e-reader or tablet? Not a big concern, says Howard. E-books only account for a small portion of their sales. According to BookNet Canada, a non profit that serves the book industry, e-book sales grabbed 15 per cent in 2012 then levelled off to 17 per cent in 2013.

"The interest in print books is still there," Howard says, "and people like hard cover as much as ever."

Gelbert feels that the e-book market will grow. Before he moved to Garden Bay he had over 7,000 books in his library and had to winnow them down to his current extensive bookshelves. Even though he is a connoisseur of print books, he uses an e-reader for his own diverse personal reading.

Johnstone, who sits on the board of many publishing and literary press organizations, reports that most publishers are still waiting for a financial return on e-books. Personally she enjoys the production of a print book.

"It's such a treat to make them," she says. "It's working in the arts."

Marisa Alps, a 21-year veteran of book marketing on Harbour's staff, says that Howard has an excellent sense of what will sell, an instinctive gut feeling.

White denies that. "There's no gut feeling. It's only after you've done your homework." He almost missed a big best seller when he pooh-poohed a book about kale. Yes, that leafy green vegetable that some tout as a super food and others denounce as green cardboard. A book about that? Fortunately, he says, his staff recognized the trend, and the second in the series, *The Book of Kale and Friends*, has just been released.

Harbour's acquisition of the Douglas and McIntyre imprint increased its scope. Hot off the press is a Daniel Francis book: *Closing Time* is an illustrated colourful history about bars, prohibition and rum-runners. But will it have widespread appeal to customers across Canada?

Marisa Alps gets the last word. She's a self-described dormant writer with marketing skills who knows the difficulty of guessing what readers will buy. So why do it?

"Because I love books so much," she says. Amen. **CL**



Scan with Layar to learn more about each publishing company.