

Lives of the poets

How (some) authors and publishers get by in the low-profile, low-paying world of Canadian poetry

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Quill & Quire

By Cheri Hanson

It takes commitment to keep playing when the stakes are low and tumbling lower all the time. In Canadian literature, that game is poetry. It has few readers, sluggish sales, and only the rare star who grabs substantial media coverage or public notice. The financial realities of publishing and writing poetry have inspired more than a few literary punchlines, as well as some sleepless nights for parents of aspiring scribblers.

Ailsa Craig, a Toronto-based PhD candidate at New York University, says we can learn from poets' dedication to an art form with almost no financial rewards. Her dissertation explores how 20 poets in both Toronto and New York City define identity, community, and subculture. Craig developed the term "symbiotic employment" to describe how poets blend paying work with writing. For example, some choose to work in publishing to stay connected with literature, while others do construction work and mull over lines during the physical labour. She found that Canadian poets are more likely to rely on "symbiotic employment," while Americans often gravitate to the numerous MFA writing programs. "Not only is there a place where you can train to be a poet," explains Craig. "There's also a job [in teaching] for you to train toward."

Poetry is one of the lowest-paying jobs there is, so many writers find other ways to keep the heat flowing and the phone connected. Here are a few closeups of just some of the people who are stoking the fires of poetry across Canada today.

Mark Callanan is a 26-year-old writer who lives in Rocky Harbour, Newfoundland. His first poetry collection, *Scarecrow*, was published with Killick Press in 2003, and his work has appeared in *The Fiddlehead*, *Newfoundland Quarterly*, *Books in Canada*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *Grain*. Callanan has had successful readings and generated some buzz in the Newfoundland literary community.

After completing a BA at Memorial University in St. John's, Callanan moved to Leeds in northern England five years ago. He stocked magazines in a bookstore, filling up on trashy U.K. tabloids and writing

reams of poetry. “I kept sending my stuff out and then crying in despair when the rejection letters came back.” Callanan often returned from 12-hour shifts to write into the morning hours. “It sounds romantic,” he remembers, “but it really wears on you after a while, not getting any sunlight.”

He returned to Newfoundland in 2003 and worked as a marketing intern for Rattling Books before relocating to Rocky Harbour. He now writes a biweekly book column called “On the Shelf” for The Sunday Independent in St. John’s and pens freelance reviews. His girlfriend works for Gros Morne National Park, and together they stretch their cash so Callanan can keep writing. He has received two Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council project grants worth about \$2,500 each and is currently waiting for the results of a federal grant application.

Callanan began writing poetry as a child and has reached the point where quitting is simply not an option. “It becomes more vital to you, so you feel like you can’t go without it,” he explains. Poetry now leads him through life almost like a scavenger. “After a while, it’s just second nature. It’s what you see. You see poetry.”

He also lives for the high that arrives 30 seconds after finishing a poem – that window of confidence before self-doubt sets in. Callanan doesn’t have grand visions for his future as a poet, but feels content to keep juggling his life to accommodate the work. “I just hope that whatever I’m doing, I can keep writing and publishing.”

For Shawna Lemay, a 39-year-old poet who lives in Edmonton with her partner, Robert, and daughter Chloe, writing poetry means living a pared-down life, driving a “beater” car, and sacrificing luxuries that others might see as necessities. In 1999, she published her first book, *All the God-Sized Fruit*, with McGill-Queen’s University Press, winning both the Gerald Lampert Memorial and Stephen G. Stephansson Awards. Lemay then self-published a collection called *Still* and released another book, *Against Paradise*, with McClelland & Stewart. *Blue Feast* is her most recent book, published in September 2005 by NeWest Press.

Lemay works part-time at the Edmonton Public Library, and the family tries to make Robert’s income from his work as a visual artist stretch as far as it can. When it comes to money, “everything is a bonus that you get from poetry,” says Lemay, who has also received provincial and federal writing grants. “But it’s well worth it. I always knew [the money] was zero, so poetry is all about love, which is one of the things that attracts me to it. I like the smallness of it.”

Dionne Brand is one of Canada's most celebrated poets, but even she can't live by her words alone. The 53-year-old writer has eight poetry collections on the shelf, a Governor General's Award nomination for 1990's *No Language Is Neutral*, and a win for 1997's *Land to Light On*, which also earned the Trillium Book Award. Her 2002 collection, *thirsty*, was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize and secured the Pat Lowther Memorial Award. Her latest book, *Inventory*, was published by M&S in March. Brand also writes fiction; her latest novel, *What We All Long For*, was published in 2005 by Knopf Canada.

Brand teaches one creative writing course each semester at the University of Guelph, but if teaching begins to encroach on her writing, she finds a way to focus exclusively on her work. "I've never thought about giving up writing. I've only thought about giving up the other things."

Teaching is the only "other thing" Brand does to survive, and her teaching day is the only day she doesn't write. Otherwise, she grabs her coffee and concentrates for eight hours or more. "I do it like one goes to work," she explains. "I think you have to pay that kind of attention."

Toronto's House of Anansi Press is one of the biggest players in Canadian poetry. Founded in 1967 by Dennis Lee and David Godfrey, Anansi was purchased in June 2002 by Scott Griffin, founder of the Griffin Poetry Prize. Anansi began as a small press and quickly gained a reputation for publishing poetry by then-unknown authors such as Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood. That reputation for literary quality informs publishing and acquisition decisions to this day. "People look for poetry from Anansi," says publisher Lynn Henry. It helps that "quite wonderful" manuscripts land on Anansi's doorstep, but Henry says the press has also learned valuable business lessons. Anansi is conservative with print runs (averaging 1,000 to 1,500 copies) and related costs.

Anansi worked diligently to break even with its poetry, says Henry, but the titles now fund themselves, with a very modest surplus. Poets receive advances of around \$1,500, plus standard royalties, and they are toured nationally. Anansi also has a large web presence, strong promotions, and throws a well-attended annual poetry bash in Toronto. The press enjoys "robust sales" for its annual Griffin Poetry Prize anthology, says Henry; the book features the work of both Canadian and international nominees.

Turning down strong manuscripts for economic reasons is the only frustration, says Anansi poetry editor Ken Babstock. Out of a few hundred

annual submissions, he says, 10 to 15 manuscripts should be published, yet only a few go to print. Babstock looks for poets who are well versed in global literature while maintaining their distinctively Canadian voice. “There’s a fierceness out there among poets to stay on top of what’s going on stylistically and aesthetically,” he says.

If Anansi represents one of the largest publishers of Canadian poetry, Brick Books is a small press with an exclusive commitment to the genre. Its authors include Margaret Avison, P.K. Page, Jan Zwicky, Patrick Friesen, and James Reaney. The press currently operates from the London, Ontario, home of general manager Kitty Lewis, who is the only full-time employee on the payroll. Production manager Maureen Harris works part-time, and editors are paid by honorarium.

Stan Dragland and Don McKay founded Brick in 1975, while Dragland was running a new publishing house called Nairn. The first offering (published under the Nairn imprint) was *Ten Letters*, a chapbook by Colleen Thibaudeau. Eventually, McKay and Dragland changed the name to Brick Books and began publishing longer titles to gain Canada Council funding.

Brick seems to have found and, most importantly, understood its niche. Its print runs average 750 copies, with some titles running up to 1,000. Poets do not get advances and receive a 10% royalty in published copies. Last year, the company sold 27% of its books to chain stores, 33% to independents, 20% to universities and colleges, 12% to libraries and wholesalers, and 8% to the U.S.

Brick has experimented with its approach to marketing. Its website has logged over 30,000 unique visitors since May 2000, and Lewis has had considerable success with a five-year-old program that offers four or five free titles to poets, university professors, high school teachers, and curious readers. To date, Lewis has given away over 10,000 books and says it’s a great way to build a loyal audience.

The press also attracts talented writers; Avison’s *Concrete and Wild Carrot* won the 2003 Griffin. Submissions are now increasing, and Brick can print only about half the books that editors would like to support – regardless of trends in style and form. (The house publishes about seven titles per year.) “We are trying to be open to whatever poetry succeeds on its own terms, even if adjusting to the terms requires a stretch,” says Dragland. “Stretch is good.”

Marnie Parsons, an editor for Brick Books, also operates Running the Goat Books & Broadsides, a St. John's micropress that is one of those small outfits that has emerged to serve the niche market of Canadian poets and poetry readers. It produces chapbooks, "poemphlets," and limited edition, letterpress-printed poetry and prose.

It all began when Parsons' friend Tara Bryan invited her to try out a Vandercook SP15 printing press, and in July 2000, Parsons printed 30 copies of the poem "The Tilts, Point Lance" by Agnes Walsh. Her first chapbook was a 16-page volume called Ghost Poems by Carmelita McGrath. Parsons had officially caught the printing bug. She renovated the basement and bought a press of her own.

Parsons hails from Ontario but is committed to publishing Newfoundland writers. It's her way of giving back to a province and community that she says has been generous and welcoming. In return, the writers receive 10% to 15% of either the print run (in physical copies) or the gross sales.

Print runs usually include a limited edition of 100 copies and a "plain edition" of anywhere from 300 to 400 copies. Parsons sells books from the website, in St. John's bookstores and craft stores, and, most recently, to Toronto fine press and antiquarian bookseller Matthew Handscombe. It takes time, but the books are slowly finding their place. "There is an incredibly supportive arts community here in Newfoundland," says Parsons. "I sell a lot at book launches, and people make an effort to support the writers and publishers in the community."

A micropress is clearly a labour of love. Parsons and Bryan received a Newfoundland apprenticeship grant in 2002/2003, but the goal is purely to cover costs. Parsons also writes book reviews and works part-time at a children's bookstore. The rest of the world may be moving faster and embracing digital technologies, but Parsons loves the work of hand-setting, -sewing, and -producing beautiful books. "I think I'm not at all alone in that desire to have things take time. It's not a bad thing. An awful lot of things are worth taking the time to do, and this is just one of them."