

Publishers with SPUNC

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Independent presses and journals are an exciting alternative to commercial publishing and play a vital role in promoting diversity in the industry. Laurie Steed finds out what it's like to be an independent press in Australia.

Something strange is going on in a bookstore near you.

If you wander past the latest Carey and Flanagan, sidestep the Lonely Planet rack and the Kylie Kwong cookbooks immaculately stacked on the front table, you will come across a motley collection of journals, magazines and books under one collective banner.

They are various sizes and shapes. Some are literary novels, some are cookbooks and some are hybrids of prose and poetry, art and anarchy.

These stylistic renegades have changed an industry known for its safe bets, its one-size-fits-all chick-lit and insert-a-wizard Young Adult fiction. They have redefined notions of acceptable style and format to engage the reader. And, if recent reviews are anything to go by, they may just be the future of Australian publishing.

SPUNC

The Small Press Underground Networking Community (SPUNC) was formed in 2006, primarily to promote independent publishing and unify the various independent presses in Australia. Since then, more than 50 independent publishers have signed up, with their output defying traditional expectations of 'small' presses. Thirty books are due for release between February and April 2009, ranging from traditional literary journals to daily meditations for writers and the first novels from Sleepers Publishing.

In September 2008 SPUNC received CAL funding to appoint two full-time positions. Since that time, general manager Zoe Dattner has steered the organisation towards greater public visibility with an eye for increased merchandising of the SPUNC brand.

Broadly speaking, SPUNC's goals are as follows:

- To network and support the efforts of Australia's small and independent publishers.
- To improve the sector's engagement with the public and general book trade.
- To identify the issues which affect the sector and to develop strategies to address these.
- To initiate and facilitate programs which contribute to the development of the sector.
- To actively represent members' interests to government and other organisations.

At the time of writing, SPUNC's various members have released a cornucopia of titles, ranging from the much applauded to the unfairly overlooked. This divide is more about the relevant interests

and passions of each publisher than anything else; with such broad representation, the number of niches covered range from accessible to esoteric and all things in between.

SPUNC's members vary in subject and form: literary journals such as Melbourne's *Meanjin* and the left-wing *Overland* rub shoulders with South Australia's *Wet Ink* and Queensland-founded *The Lifted Brow* and Queensland poetry/chapbook publishers Small Change Press. Transit Lounge's travel narratives sit alongside Affirm Press' *Slow Guides* to Melbourne and Sydney.

For most of its members, SPUNC is about raising the profile of independent presses, whatever their content, and ensuring a collective voice for independent publishers amongst the traditionally dominant mainstream publishing houses.

Vignettes and Vegan Indulgence

Two of SPUNC's earliest members are also two of its more daring. In a national landscape dotted with literary presses and academic journals, Vignette and Aduki Independent Press have always done things a little differently.

Vignette Press was started by Lisa Dempster after taking over Wannabee Press in 2007. Wannabee catered to a much older market, whereas Vignette always intended to reach the younger, more culturally literate reader.

'My niche market is young, creatively inclined people,' explains Lisa. 'Anyone under 35. They may not be artists or writers themselves, but they appreciate the arts.'

Vignette's publications reflect such leanings, with their most recent release being *The Death Mook*, a book/magazine hybrid series that began with *The Sex Mook* in late 2007.

From conception to execution, Vignette Press works as a team. Each Mook is a joint effort from any number of writers, illustrators, editors and designers, not to mention publicity staff, most of whom are working free of charge.

'Collective intelligence is everything to Vignette Press,' says Lisa. 'I delegate most stuff to other people, while still working closely with them when it is needed.'

Their content has challenged pre-existing notions of what is worthy of debate. In both *The Death Mook* and *The Sex Mook*, there is a free-spirited, if at times confrontational embracing of the safe and unsafe, the tried and the taboo.

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'There is a definite tendency for us to publish the off-beat and quirky,' says Lisa. 'This may seem strange to most,' she adds, 'but it's working for us!'

Alongside Vignette Press is Aduki, run by Emily Clark. Aduki began as a street press dedicated to exploring vegan and vegetarian issues in May 2006. It was the only Melbourne-based publication of its kind at the time and soon found a loyal following.

'Aduki came about when I realised there was a serious lack of locally-produced material for vegetarians and vegans,' says Emily. 'So I created a publication that I would want to read.'

Aduki's environmental ethos led the magazine to go online in 2007, a shift that made the magazine more accessible to both national and international audiences. The first of SPUNC's current crop to adopt a completely online model, such innovation has resulted in newsletter subscribers from around the world and blog coverage from Canada and the United States of America.

At the time of Aduki's move online, Emily also began Aduki Independent Press, for exploring subjects both in and outside the tight guidelines of *Aduki Online*. Since 2007, Aduki has published a number of Vegan cookbooks and two collections of essays, *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* and *Stick This in your Memory Hole*.

Like Vignette Press, Aduki has a blueprint for niche subjects and different ways of presenting them. The Veg*n Shopper is a literally tiny guide to all things ethical and Aduki is willing to explore both veganism and vegetarianism, as well as the politics that sometimes surface alongside such issues.

Both Lisa and Emily had seen little exposure to the world of publishing prior to beginning Vignette and Aduki. Emily is particularly aware of the financial dangers of starting up a small press, particularly in the first 12 months.

'I was a complete novice when I started,' says Emily. 'I had to work it out as I went along. I was lucky. I made conservative decisions and managed not to get into financial difficulty in the first year. You have to manage your finances carefully and not stretch yourself too much.'

SPUNC and the Literary Collective

While Vignette Press and Aduki may well have flourished independently, SPUNC has enabled both to be a part of the collective voice for small publishing in Australia.

Graham Nunn, co-founder of Small Change Press, believes that small presses will always play a key role in the development of literature.

'They are often responsible for launching careers and taking risks on authors, [who may be] overlooked by corporate publishing houses. They provide the freedom and flexibility to publish a work in the form that best suits its distribution and in the area of poetry, one could argue that small presses have single-handedly kept the art alive (in its printed form). SPUNC has already provided some exciting promotional/distribution opportunities for us in larger book chains interstate [and] distribution is an area where small presses are at a distinct disadvantage, so these opportunities are invaluable.'

'It is still in its infancy,' says Lisa. 'But in the future I hope to see SPUNC help small presses network and help grow the industry in a positive and powerful way.'

SPUNC general manager Zoe Dattner has valued Vignette and Aduki's involvement from day one. With SPUNC now picking up CAL funding, she sees increasing potential for a united front:

'In SPUNC's early days, we struggled to get small publishers involved who could regularly attend meetings and contribute to paving the way forward,' says Zoe. 'Aduki and Vignette were two of only a handful of publishers that got on board at that stage. Now that we're established with funding from CAL and the Australia Council, Emily and Lisa can afford to sit back and let their initial involvement in SPUNC work for them.'

Although the full potential of SPUNC has yet to be realised, its presence is already changing the face of Australian publishing. Locally produced vegan cookbooks now sit proudly alongside celebrity-endorsed culinary journeys from mainstream publishers; macabre masterpieces like *The Death Mook* hold their own against the latest mass-market releases. Although such books do not yet make the bestseller lists, their very presence is the sign of an Australian publishing industry intent on exploring outside the box, away from the mainstream and further into the future of independent publishing. ■

Further information

www.spunc.com.au

www.vignettepress.com.au

www.aduki.net.au

www.smallchangepress.com.au

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