



LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 92

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The Surviving Small Press: BookExpo America

The ABA has sold its interest in the annual American Booksellers Association and Trade Exhibit to Association Expositions & Services, a division of Reed Exhibition Companies. The event will continue as a base for the ABA convention, and the ABA will be a sponsor, but without financial risk.

Reed already was a 49% partner in the event, with the ABA owning the other 51%. Reed also puts on the London and Tokyo book fairs. In all they organize 355 trade shows in 25 countries covering 55 categories of industry.

The ABA convention used to be the most important book fair in the US. Big name publishers would spend millions of dollars trying to outdo each other to have the largest and most spectacular booth.

Over the past decade, however, the fair has attracted more and more non-publishing exhibitors. Bookstores seldom sell just books anymore, having found that high profit gift items or running a coffee bar could not only bring in more money, but also more customers.

As the emphasis on books at the ABA was diluted, the big publishers found it hard to justify the money

they were spending on exhibits. Over the past few years many of them have pulled out of the fair entirely, leaving the ABA without the revenue or drawing power that made the fair profitable. The "world's leading English language book fair" (according to Reed's website at <http://www.reedexpo.com>) looked more like an oversized craft show and was losing money to boot.

In its new incarnation as BookExpo America, the fair takes a further step in its evolution. With attendance no longer limited to bookseller members of the ABA, retailers of any kind that carry books are invited. This makes some sense since book departments are found in all kinds of stores.

"Attendees come from virtually every retail environment – mass and discount merchandisers, specialty stores, museum and college stores," says Reed.

On the other side of the coin, BookExpo is inviting exhibitors to display anything that a bookstore could possibly want to carry. That leaves the field wide open. The ABA fair was already getting to be a free-for-all. Without attendance being restricted to booksellers, the cross-merchandising could become chaos.

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Catch-Up

As you all know by now, Laughing Bear has moved to Dallas, Texas. The reason for the move was to get married to Laura Thomas next Spring. I wasn't going to move until January, but a job came through as a technical writer here and I had to move immediately.

For Laughing Bear, the move was traumatic. You'd think I'd be better at this having done it twice before, but as usual everything was crammed in a U-Haul as quickly as possible and it took a couple weeks just to dig out the most important stuff. In this case, however, I kept the condominium in Denver and left a lot of the Laughing Bear inventory there. Meaning something I'll desperately need in the next few months got left behind.

In Denver, doing the newsletter, I had the luxury of being able to print it out where I worked on a laser printer. I also had access to a Pentium PC with 16 mb of RAM. When I arrived here I had a dot matrix on its very last leg and a 486 with 8 mb. Doing an issue with any graphics was sure to crash it.

The 486 has now been upgraded with Windows 95 and 32 mb RAM. Issue masters will be printed on a

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BookExpo America

(continued)

At first this sounded like more bad news for publishers. The ABA each year was publishers' only opportunity to build one on one relationships with a national sampling of booksellers and to show off their wares to the rest of the industry. It was American publishing's trade show, a place to pick up new ideas, compare notes, and keep up with trends in the business.

Still, there could be a silver lining for small press. We've always had a hard time finding shelf space in bookstores. Small press, however, has always done pretty well with small stores that sell books as a sideline, a niche that BookExpo is trying to target.

We can offer books the store's customers can't find at Barnes & Noble or WaldenBooks, plus our terms can be flexible and we can offer personal service.

At the traditional ABA book fair small presses were competing with the big publishers and their unlimited budgets for attention. At a fair like BookExpo America we're on more even ground, competing with a variety of products that can co-exist in a store, instead of with a similar product to ours that can outdo us in marketing, advertising, and distribution.

The question is whether an event as diverse as BookExpo America can succeed. There are some advantages to retailers being exposed to such a wide range of products, but that also means they won't have as much to choose from of any one category.

As it was, the ABA book fair had grown until it could only be held in the largest convention halls in America. There is no way BookExpo America can expand, in floor space alone, to include a wider range of exhibitors without reducing the number of publishers who can participate.

Also, retailers can only afford to go to so many shows a year. Will they want to go to one like this that may include a lot of elements of no interest to them, or will they opt for one tailored to their specific field? And what draw does the fair have if the big publishers with their superstar author signings and publicity and advertising dollars refuse to play?

As of early October, only 400 booths had been sold for the May 1997 event (last year's ABA had 2,500 exhibitors, according to Reed, most of which were booked a year in advance). The promoters of BookExpo America were requiring full payment by the end of the month, which suggests they were hurting for operating funds.

BookExpo America may offer small presses better access to retailers (not just booksellers) than the ABA fair, but the areas small presses have found profitable in the past, like foreign rights sales and making distribution deals, may be tougher to find. Reed insists the opportunities will be there, but I'd think they'd be few and far between.

If you want to participate in book fairs (and they are your best chance to meet and sell to booksellers and readers), I'd suggest doing so on a local level. Join your regional

Booksellers Association as an associate member to keep up with bookselling trends and have input to the system.

And show at regional fairs. You'll be with publishers more your size and the price for booth space will be less than at BookExpo America. Also, booksellers will be more open to a local publisher's books, giving you that home town advantage.

Encourage publishers' organizations and community groups you belong to to sponsor book fairs. Publishers groups have gone long enough offering little more than a discount on *Publishers Weekly* ads and a co-op booth at the ABA and ALA.

That's a start, but they charge extra for those services. Demand more creativity and effort on their part to earn your dues dollars.

If you want to participate in national or international fairs use an exhibit service, either your organization's or an independent. You can still go yourself, but you'll be free to roam the hall making deals and meeting people instead of being tied to your booth. And it will cost less.

The selling out of the ABA book fair should be a reminder that publishing is an ever changing business. Booksellers who stay in business have to be flexible, learn to read the public's moods, and decide which represent genuine growth and which are just trends. So do we. One marketplace has closed and we have to decide whether to support the upstart.

BookExpo America sounds like it's trying to be everything to everyone, which seldom accomplishes anything for anyone.

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Catch-Up *(continued)*

Canon BJC-210 bubble jet printer (which actually is a nice little printer for \$129) for the time being. Windows 95 is nice, but runs slower with 32 mb RAM than Windows 3.11 did with 8 mb. The main advantage is it very seldom crashes even with lots of tricky formatting and graphics.

The Laughing Bear web site address has changed to <http://members.aol.com/laughingbr/lbp.htm>. When America Online announced unlimited access, GNN (a little sister of AOL) was folded and all accounts transferred to AOL. I haven't had a chance to spend time with the web site since the middle of September, but will be revamping it entirely soon.

You'll find Laughing Bear's new phone number and address in the masthead of this issue. For those of you in this area, the metro free number is 817-858-9515 (that means toll free within the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex).

I don't have a fax number yet, but if you let me know a fax is coming I can receive it through the computer at the regular phone number. If you need to send something by UPS or Federal Express, the address is 1418 El Camino Real, Euless, TX 76040.

To my friends in Denver, I apologize for not saying goodbye and not being able to do the small press panel at the Rocky Mountain Book Festival. Once things got rolling I was spending all my time either flying to meetings or packing; then Laura and I drove 21 hours straight to get to Dallas. But we will be coming back to visit.

Announcements

• International Titles

(Loris Essary & Harry Smith; 931 E. 56th St., Austin, TX 78751-1724; 512-451-2221; e-mail: leint@eden.com) will have a large marketing display at the 1997 Prague International Book Fair in the Czech Republic, May 8-11, 1997. Contact Loris for details on how to participate in this exhibit. Over the years International Titles has had impressive results selling foreign rights.

• **Baby Teeth** (Jeff Dowling, ed.; P.O. Box 120-859, Boston, MA 02112; send SASE for sample) is a new 4 page zine of short stories, poetry, commentary, and art. Welcomes submissions.

• **Teague Publishing** (Bob Teague, ed.; P.O. Box 13689, Dayton, OH 45413-0689) has published a special report, "The List Report", on how to rent and use mailing lists. \$5 ppd.

• **Fragments** (P.O. Box 5370-362, Santa Ana, CA 92704; \$3/issue) is a new, large format zine of political and cultural ideas.

• Mid-America Publishers Association

(MAPA, P.O. Box 376, Ada, MI 49301; 888-308-MAPA) has a new mailing address and interim Executive Administrator, Doug Bandos.

• **House Organ** (Kenneth Warren, ed.; 1250 Belle Ave., Lakewood, OH 44107) is a tall, narrow, and very good literary magazine that uses poetry and fiction.

• **RAW NerVZ** (Dorothy Howard, ed.; 67 Court St., Aylmer, QC, Canada J9H 4M1; \$20/4 issues) is a quarterly of haiku and related material. Uses visual poetry and artwork as well. Always fascinating.

• **The Colorado Center for the Book** has a new address and phone numbers: 2123 Downing St., Denver, CO 80205; 303-839-8320; fax 303-839-8319.

• **Poetry Alive!** (Allan Wolf; P.O. Box 9643, Asheville, NC 28815; 800-476-8172) announces that the 1996 Asheville Poetry Festival recorded over 500 people in attendance. The 1997 festival will be held July 11-13 and feature Yusef Komunyakaa, Philip Levine, and Jack Prelutsky. The festival is sponsored by Poetry Alive! and the UNC-A Creative Writing Program. Poetry Alive! also sponsors Asheville Poetry Slam every Friday night at 8:00 at the green door on Carolina Lane, Asheville.

• **The Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry** (P.O. Box 10169, Santa Fe, NM 87504; 505-988-3251; fax 505-986-8222) is interested in promoting poetry as an integral part of a balanced society. To that end, they provide grants to non-profit, tax-exempt organizations. Individual poets can apply if they can get such an organization to sponsor them.

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