

Portrait of a Press: Write Bloody Fights to Bring the Stage to the Page

Isla McKetta spends a long weekend with Write Bloody, exploring one of the most eccentric presses in poetry today.

By [Isla McKetta](#)

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IT'S NOT EVEN nine o'clock in the morning and the Write Bloody Publishing crew is looking a little weary. We're all a little weary after two full days and nights of panels and parties at the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Seattle. With a few minutes to go before their presentation starts, Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz is joking around with Derrick C. Brown, founder of Write Bloody, about how many retweets she got on a topless picture she posted of him. Performance poets Taylor Mali, Jonathan Sands, and Mindy Nettifee are slowly gathering behind the tables at the front of the room while Brown rearranges the furniture. In a black T-shirt and jeans, he looks out of place against the beige carpet and faux-marble chandeliers of the Sheraton's Willow Room.

A former paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne, Brown describes being a publisher and author as "A war against the working self and the creative self. A war for more knowledge that demands speed, so you don't go broke, and a push to be a better businessperson." In the 10 years since Write Bloody was "born out of rejection and other failed presses," he has continued to wage that war, and he's learned a lot along the way.

Aptowicz interrupts Brown's furniture shuffle to ask, "Who do you think you are, Sherman Alexie?" in reference to the way he's taking over the room. Even before the panel starts, it's clear how much they all like one another.

Brown and his fellow panelists may still be recovering from their show earlier in the week at Seattle's Rebar, an event that included performances by more than 20 slam poets, but when the clock strikes nine, they switch to performance mode. The Write Bloody 10th Anniversary Reading and Honky Tonk Badonkadonk is now ready to rock this sleepy crowd. Brown cues up "Tainted Love" on his phone and holds it up to the mic. The music is jarringly loud, but makes this hotel conference room a little less generic, which is a good thing for the 40 or so 20- or 30-somethings in the room. It's the hippest crowd I've seen so far at the conference, and the least likely to be at an event this early. Brown then announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, I will be changing the song to something a little more suited to the 9 a.m. hour" before switching the music over to "Whoomp! (There It Is)." They are pumped and they want us to be pumped too.

Write Bloody isn't your average poetry press. Brown is a self-proclaimed "spoken word poet" who writes work that is meant to be heard rather than seen. The work he publishes at Write Bloody is mostly writing by other spoken word poets, many of whom come from the slam poetry scene. If you've never been to a poetry slam, it's an experience you won't soon forget. First conceived by Marc Smith at Chicago's Get Me High Lounge in 1984, the competition moved to the Green Mill in 1986, where luminaries like Patti Smith, John Rives, and Rebecca Bridge dominated the mic. During these wild events, random audience members judge the poets and their performances. It all starts with a "sacrificial poet" who is used both as a warm-up act and to create a baseline for scoring. Spectators cheer, boo, snap their fingers (unlike at the Beat readings of yore, a snap is a signal that the audience dislikes what they're hearing), and stomp their feet as poets leave their hearts onstage. It's not unusual for the noise to be as deafening as a rock concert.

At the Sheraton, Brown steps up to the mic again and says, “Ladies and gentlemen, I realize I chose the wrong song again. I will be changing it again.” Instead he summons his best pro-wrestling announcer voice to introduce Aptowicz, who gives the crowd a quick rundown of Write Bloody’s accolades. The press now partners with over 50 writers who have toured everywhere from Bangladesh to Germany and performed with everyone from the Flaming Lips to Cold War Kids and David Cross. One of their poets, Sarah Kay, has given two TED talks. Another, Taylor Mali, has YouTube videos with more than five million views.

The Origin of the Press

Brown shouts a falsely modest and playful, “What?” in answer to all the praise. He steps up to the podium to explain the Write Bloody origin story, which consists of three elements: bankruptcy, awful book covers, and a lie.

He doesn’t elaborate on the bankruptcy, but the awful book covers may have been a contributing factor. A record label published Brown’s book, *If Lovin’ You Is Wrong then I Don’t Want To Be Wrong* with the bar code for an album by The Get Up Kids on the back. The label folded, but Brown was undeterred. He says,

I was about to tour Europe and no one wanted to re-launch a book that was already released years ago. All my friends also had stapled chapbooks and the price point wasn’t right. We were paying three bucks to staple and print and selling for five or six bucks. Everyone was beyond broke after every tour.

When Brown realized that publishers got discounts on printing, he created a website and voilà, instant small press. “I printed up all my chapbooks into one and made it look pro.” He tells the crowd that the press expanded when he announced, “Hey friends, you want some books? I have 10 barcodes.”

Brown describes some lessons learned by saying that there was “not a lot of proofreading in the early years. Sorry about that. If you’ve been to our backlist and been like, ‘This looks like a drunk person did this’... Yeeees.”

If only it was all that easy. Write Bloody has bounced around the country over the past 10 years. At one point, Brown moved to Long Beach, California, after a break-up and ran Write Bloody out of a storage unit. In 2012, the press moved to Austin, Texas, where Write Bloody had a storefront for a brief time.

The bookstore was first going to be an operational office and a small display area for book samples. It turned much bigger and we met all kinds of wonderful local presses during the bookstore period. I hunted, and I think we were the only poetry store that just sold our own books. We had pens and journals, but I learned a lot about why that wasn’t profitable. We didn’t go red but I couldn’t hire anyone.

You almost get the sense that the press is chasing Brown, knocking on his door at midnight saying, “I can’t quit you.” Luckily for readers of poetry, Brown can’t quit Write Bloody either.

Reinventing Poetry and Performance

The next speaker on the panel is Taylor Mali, a poet and teacher. In a button-down shirt, he explains his start with Write Bloody by saying, “I had been touring a lot when Derrick called me up and said, ‘Do you want to use one of my barcodes?’” Mali shares how a friend asked him to present at a school, which led to an invitation to speak at an international school conference in Nice. There was no pay. The other panelists heckle him lightly at this point as if to say cheekily, “A poet, working for no pay?” He goes on to describe how much he enjoys connecting children with poetry. He shares how a 16-year-old Sarah Kay said to him, “I can never tell when you’re reciting a poem and when you’re just talking,” and how, now that she’s an internationally famous poet, a student recently emailed her the same thing.

Mali then reads from “Plagiarism in the Service of Art,” an ars poetica that is so good and so well performed, it leaves the audience in a peculiar state of charged hush.

At this point in the Honky Tonk Badonkadonk, Brown begins walking through the audience passing around the traditional glass dish of wrapped candies you might find at any conference center in America. Aptowicz calls out, “We also lace candy with drugs. So you can enjoy the rest of AWP. Sherman Alexie’s face is melting...”

Even among the slam poetry crowd, Write Bloody has a reputation for non-traditional approaches to shows. They’ve tapped into an underserved niche in poetry — something evidenced by the fact that student groups are more likely to invite the poets on this press to speak than teachers. In an interview, Brown recalled his favorite “reading series”: a poetry cruise where he loaded up the boat on which he was living with wine and snacks and then added performance poetry and acoustic music. He described one night when “Buddy Wakefield swam from shore with a light on his head and freaked everyone out, screaming his poem from the sea to us. The poor exhausted dude. It was worth it.” Not to mention the double-decker party bus poetry tours which Brown called “drunken spectacles” where the bus “stopped at lifeguard towers to read to everyone below in the moonlight.” It’s all a little closer to Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters than Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast. The Write Bloody Poetry Potluck I attended last year at Longbranch Inn in artsy East Austin was a raucous display of southern hospitality as poets performed poems related to the snacks they had brought for the audience. It was also a chance for Write Bloody to help out Timber Mouse Press, another slam poetry press just emerging in Austin, by sharing the stage with some of its authors.

At the Sheraton, Brown says it’s “war to get people to come to your shows.” A poet has to “convince people to come to this thing that’s going to crush you.” He advises that a successful event ought to have “great poetry, a DJ, candy laced with acid,” and that the poets have to “fun it up; then hit them like a hammer with grief and the sugars of sorrow.”

That sense of community and generosity is how Write Bloody really became a press. Brown says, “When I toured in the late 1990s, I’d hit the Green Mill and see someone who blew my mind and thought, that person needs a book. Everything changes or can change with a legit book.” Aptowicz describes this as “horizontal loyalty.” Write Bloody has published a wide variety of spoken poets including Anis Mojgani, David Perez, Karen Finneyfrock, and Franny Choi as well as prose writers like Idris Goodwin and Rebecca Bridge. Touring is still an important part of the life (and income) of Write Bloody authors; new recruits are required to set up 20 dates in their first year under contract. Most years, getting signed by Write Bloody involves a highly-competitive submission process that requires the author to undergo several rounds of jury review.

Performance Poetry on Paper

You might wonder how spoken word poetry translates to the page. According to Brown, “The live show is everything. Books can easily be free now that even the simplest program like Scrivener or Pages for Mac has an ePub function. You can scan anything and load it up.” The book becomes a memento much like the program from a play. The audience member can’t recapture the magic of the stage, but the experience can be recalled by leafing through the book. Write Bloody doesn’t produce or sell many ebooks, because, according to Brown, “Ebooks don’t work for every kind of title. Bibles and books of poetry want to be held. How to Play Tennis is a great ebook.” When it comes to poetry, especially spoken word poetry writ on paper, the connection with the audience and the performance itself are essential.

Poetry in Unexpected Places

Jon Sands is next up on the panel. Now Director of Poetry Education at the Positive Health Project (a syringe exchange center located in Midtown Manhattan), he got his big break when playing ultimate Frisbee with a friend. He’d only been a slam poet for months when a friend asked him to teach. Wearing a blazer, the youthful Sands describes the “moment as an artist when someone presents an opportunity you don’t officially have credentials for. I said yes.” This approach has served him well. Sands became a Write Bloody poet through one of their submission contests. “Write Bloody pushes you to put yourself in the path of the opportunity to grow or to deliver.”

Building an Effective Squadron of Authors

Brown met the next panelist, Mindy Nettifee, when she was 15 and he was home on leave from the Airborne. Nettifee jokes with the audience, “Pre-internet, you actually went out to coffee shops.” She says, “Derrick is the biggest believer in the power of poetry. He believes in it so badly it’s like osmosis.” That osmosis has served her well. Although Nettifee looks impossibly young, she also serves as director of the Write Now Poetry Society, which she co-founded with actress Amber Tamblyn. She says, “Every single opportunity you have to get people to take poetry seriously, you have to grab it [...] You have to do the work to get the people to the poetry.” She tells the audience about one event where she invited Marilyn Manson to come and read William Blake.

Authors can be (and in the case of Write Bloody sometimes are) a press’ best friend. This is especially true when a huge part of the press’ business model involves authors hand-selling books at performances. According to Brown:

The bigger sellers love the people. They have long lines to get books signed after an event, and they sign something unique in each one. The book becomes a souvenir of the reading. Our bigger sellers were champions of the road. They didn’t over-saturate their hometowns. They did a great huge book release party at home and then hit the libraries, theaters, house shows, and slams of the United States. The big sellers, before we signed them, had a website, press kit, press photo, mailing list, and merch. They had merch beyond just their book. Cool hand towels with sayings on them, book bags, posters, koozies. It all made the road a place to make money, instead of just a promotional money dump by the press.

He insists that not being able to pay for author tours made the authors work harder to put on a better show:

If they didn’t put on a good live reading, they wouldn’t sell books, and thus wouldn’t be able to afford the hotel room or good meal, and then would be tired for the next reading. Every reading, all of the sudden, really matters. The audience begins to feel like the author gives a shit about being there and they are often rewarded financially and with a lasting fan base.

Authors can be a liability, too. This is particularly true when it comes to cover art where, as Brown puts it, “Tinkering will grind down your budget fast.” He advises presses to “work with authors and ask them their current favorite covers, but don’t let them grind you down when they might not even be sure of what they want. There will always be tiny changes that do not help the movement, mood, or sale of the book.” As a result, Brown is careful about whom he works with and how much control he lets authors have over the process.

Publishing as a Financial Battlefield

The financial realities of a small press are not always pretty. Brown says, “I am getting better about trying to not lose money. I sadly have to let some books go when authors lose a passion for sharing the book. It’s all to keep the family alive.” One might imagine that the cash saved by this streamlining would result in larger advances for authors, but most poetry presses don’t even use the word “advance.” From layout to printing, running a press is just plain expensive. Brown has to juggle logistical and ethical issues like, “Do we order 1,000 copies and pay two bucks a book in China, or order 250 for \$3.90 a book and print locally? It was important for us to print in the USA. We had to pay more, but we also get to hold our head up higher.”

Sometimes it’s hard for him to know where the landmines are before he steps on them. “As I was mentoring a local young press here in Austin,” Brown says,

I realized I have spent many years dumbfounded and naïve in terms of making money at publishing. You aren’t sure how long it will take to move 1,000 copies. One misstep, where you hire three new authors and all the books tank and take too long to make back the money, can fold and shut down a press.

He has opted for slower growth and smaller quantities to avoid renting another storage unit or taking out a loan.

Brown also made some mistakes early on with royalties. At first, he paid his authors quarterly. He says,

Books have returns. I was paying out money that didn’t exist — meaning that I should’ve waited to see how the year played out. I would pay an author for their sales of 200 books and that money was gone. Five months later 120 of those copies would come back as destroyable returns, but I had already paid out the money on 200.

Then Brown found out that Amazon takes 50 percent and a distributor takes 27 percent. (This is if you get an awesome distributor that sends out a sales force every season to pitch your new titles.) Collecting money myself from fifty bookstores was a nightmare. The manager wasn’t in, some books might have been stolen, the check was delayed, etc.

It’s easy to see how the money from the 22,000 copies *Write Bloody* sold last year could get eaten up by man-hours alone.

Still, Brown’s committed to putting out a product he’s proud of and, starting in 2006, he says, “We cut into our profits a little more by using Eco-Libris to plant trees for the first run of books. It was a good way to drum up press for our publishing house and the authors thought it was badass. It never made us get more sales, but it felt good.”

So how does Brown make it work? He advises,

Make talented friends. I found Lily Lin, the cover designer, in Berlin on tour. She is a Canadian who didn't speak a lick of German and just packed up and gave it a go. Jennifer Heuer is an award-winning designer I found online randomly. Matt Maust [a graphic designer] is the bassist for The Cold War Kids. Nik Ewing, who did my cover, is the bassist for Local Natives and we met through Maust. [Designer] Brandon Lyon and I worked on a kids show together for four years when I was a graphic design director and writer. Matt Wignall is a Volcom photographer and shoots all kinds of bands. Bill Jonas [cover artist] is a set designer. Ashley Siebels [book designer] is an improv comic and designer in Austin who worked with us as an intern first. There are many freelancers who show up and make it all happen with very tight deadlines and low pay. Someday I will give them pedicures for their faces.

Friends like Amber Tamblyn and Taylor Mali also helped Brown out in 2010 when he put together a Kickstarter campaign to gather \$20,000 to fulfill warehouse stock demands. Because of the sheer amount of time submission contests have involved in the past, these days Brown has returned to the model of asking friends and trusted authors to recommend new authors for Write Bloody to check out.

For many people, starting a press is a decision to focus on the business side of publishing, but Brown continues to fight for both the business and his art. In his words, "The press suffers from my needing to tour. But I need to tour." He says, "If you want to start a press yourself, you can. Maybe you should put out poetry and porn, to offset the losses." All kidding aside, Brown shares the financial reality of a small press: "Even if we sell 25,000 books in a year, that doesn't lead to much profit. I look forward to giving more talks to help others learn and not make my mistakes."

Knowing Brown, this podium in this bland hotel room is the last he'll stand behind any time in the near future. Unless, of course, it's part of a performance piece. And that is part of the energy that keeps Write Bloody so vital 10 years — and over 100 titles — later. When Brown wraps up the panel with a poem about the cities he's visited on tour, we are all glued to our seats, knowing there will be more.

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