

A Tale of Twin Cities

Jim Sitter, director of the national advocacy coalition Literary Network (LitNet), describes Minneapolis-St. Paul as “an oasis” for book lovers. “On a per capita basis, there’s more literary activity going on in the Twin Cities than anywhere else in the country—except for Manhattan, which is a special case,” he says.

BY CLAIRE KIRCH

Sitter may not be entirely unbiased; his group is based in the Twin Cities. But his claims reflect more than hometown pride. “It’s a tremendously literary city, one of the better book cities around the country,” concurs Cary Goldstein, publicity manager at Manhattan-based Farrar, Straus & Giroux. “There’s such a lively community there, any writer who can get there should.”

Sitter and Goldstein are among the industry insiders who recognize that Minneapolis-St. Paul has quietly evolved into a hub of literary activity that influences the entire country. About 50 book publishers with an estimated total of 1,000 employees, a major national book distributor, three dozen independent bookstores, 16 chain bookstores and several lit-friendly media outlets reside within a 10-mile radius of downtown Minneapolis (pop. 382,618) and St. Paul (pop. 287,151).

But don’t mistake Minneapolis-St. Paul for a miniature Big Apple on the Mississippi. This community does books its own way. This is the land of niche publishers. It’s also a place where foundations provide generous financial support to nonprofit literary presses and organizations, and the local media don’t just interview writers and review books—they actually bring authors to town.

Niche Publishers

The Twin Cities is best known for literary publishing. Three of the four largest liter-



Open Book, an auditorium and resource library, hums with constant activity as the center of the Twin Cities literary scene.

ary nonprofit presses in the United States—Milkweed Editions, Graywolf and Coffee House—are located here, as are several small literary startups—like Spout Press, which is starting to gain a national following for its experimental fiction and poetry offerings. St. Paul-based Consortium is regarded by the trade as *the* distributor for independent publishers of literary fiction and poetry, with 94 clients, including Coffee House.

The Twin Cities also is known for its children’s/educational/institutional publishers: Lerner, Free Spirit, Redleaf Press,

Meadowbrook, Book Peddlers and newcomer Tristan, founded two years ago by Waldman House veteran Brett Waldman.

Other Twin Cities niche publishers that have made their mark on the national scene include religious publishers Augsburg Fortress and Bethany House; New Age publisher Llewellyn Worldwide; automotive publisher MBI; self-help publisher Fairview Press; the University of Minnesota Press, known for its edgy cultural list; and Minnesota Historical Society Press/Borealis Books, which publishes regional titles with

The Twin Cities Top 10

These 10 leaders on the Minneapolis-St. Paul literary scene play an essential role in determining which books become regional bestsellers.



1 **Linda Myers** has been executive director for the Loft, the most prominent literary center in the nation, for the past decade. She is one of the guiding forces behind both Open Book and Talking Volumes.



2 An appearance on **Garrison Keillor's** Minnesota Public Radio programs, *Prairie Home Companion* and *Author's Almanac*, both of which air nationally on NPR, can make regional authors into national hits.



3 CEO **Donn Linn** has doubled the sales at Consortium since the former investment banker turned catfish farmer bought the company three years ago.



4 *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* book editor **Sarah T. Williams** provides local authors and publishers ample coverage both on and off the book page. Williams also is a major player in the Talking Volumes program.



5 A founder and chief organizer of the Twin Cities Book Festival, **Eric Lorberer** also edits *Rain Taxi*, a quarterly publication that reviews literary fiction and nonfiction and runs author events all over the metro area.

6

Susan Walker, executive director, Midwest Booksellers Association, is a tireless advocate for MBA members. She also is the mastermind behind the MBA trade show, held in St. Paul each fall.

7

Thanks to **Julie Arthur Sherman**, regional buyer for Barnes & Noble, local and regional publishers' offerings are well represented on B&N shelves in the area.

8

Mary Ann Grossmann, long-time book critic for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, has always given lots of ink to local authors and regional publishers.

9

An interview with WCCO radio personality **Charlie Boone** can cause a significant jump in an author's book sales in the show's broadcast area.

10

City Pages managing editor **Michael Tortorello** selects books for review in this alternative weekly. He also decides which author events get hyped on the paper's sought-after "A List."

universal themes.

There's even a small press in town that publishes books on Ojibwe language, history and literature. Birchbark Press was founded in 2002 by local author and bookseller Louise Erdrich, who is herself Native American.

Location, Location, Location

Many attribute the vitality of the Twin Cities publishing scene to the presence of a highly educated and literary-minded work force: 42% of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher. Five of the 14 local colleges and universities offer writing programs, from Macalester College's top-notch program for undergraduates to Hamline University's and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities' prestigious MFA programs.

And then there's the Loft, described by many as the heart and soul of the local literary scene. The Loft has offered writing classes and other programs for more than 30 years. More than 10,000 people attended Loft-sponsored events in the past year, with 5,300 of those taking writing classes from the likes of Rita Dove, Michael Cunningham and Maxine Hong Kingston.

Literature is also a big part of the professional scene in the area, with 19,000 people employed in publishing (excluding Internet publishing) in the greater Twin Cities metropolitan area. That's 1.1% of the total non-farm work force employed in publishing—a percentage that mirrors the 1.1% working in publishing in the New York City metropolitan area.

The Twin Cities' physical location between the coasts may also play a major role in the growth and stability of the industry as a whole. Fiona McCrae, who worked for Faber & Faber in Boston before moving to St. Paul 10 years ago to head Graywolf, considers that being in America's heartland offers just as many opportunities for local publishers as it does challenges.

"It's far enough away from

Manhattan that it's become its own center; it's not under New York's shadow. Here you can be yourself and make your own rules," McCrae says.

"It is a challenge to keep up with your contacts," she adds. "But we all travel to New York City, we all make a lot of appointments while we're there. We're part of the national conversation."

Adam Lerner, who heads one of the Twin Cities' largest houses, is more blunt, declaring, "It's a different model of doing business here, one you can't do in New York. It wouldn't be feasible."

"Look at Lerner Publishing," he continues. "We have a total of 250,000 square feet of space in four buildings—our offices, our bindery and our warehouse—in downtown Minneapolis. We could never do what we're doing here in midtown Manhattan."

Lerner Publishing, which publishes 350 children's titles per year for the trade, library and classroom markets, produces 95% of its books in Minnesota. Having so many resources in such close proximity ensures a quick and inexpensive turnaround on projects, such as *Pope John Paul II* by Alison Behnke, originally scheduled for an October pub date, which was pushed up to this month after the pope died.

Minnesota Nice

"There's definitely a spirit of helpfulness," Judy Galbraith, publisher of Free Spirit, a for-profit press, declares. "We've passed manuscripts on to Hazelden [located north of the Twin Cities metro area], or had manuscripts sent us by Lerner, because we'll see something we like and respect that might not be right for us, but might be right for a colleague. We're all very supportive of each other and would like each other to succeed."

Foundation and corporate support for the literary arts has played a crucial role in creating a culture in which publishers collaborate, not just with each other, but with the larger community. This past fiscal year, support for the literary arts on

the part of the three major local foundations—Bush, McKnight and Jerome—topped \$1 million, while the Minnesota State Arts Board allocated \$218,000 to local literary nonprofits.

Open Book Opens Doors

The Open Book community literary center in downtown Minneapolis is a physical symbol of the ongoing collaboration between the literary and philanthropic communities that has made the Twin Cities a booming hub of literary activity.

In fact, many credit the opening of Open Book five years ago as providing



Graywolf's Fiona McCrae: "We're part of the national conversation."

the spark that ignited an already flourishing literary scene that's developed over the past quarter century.

"Open Book planted a flag for the literary arts in the Twin Cities," Hilary Reeves, Milkweed's managing director, recalls. "There was now a physical space to create new collaborations, break down walls and bring different people together. It made people realize that the literary arts are a fundamental part of the Twin Cities arts scene. It empowered all of us."

Two Major Indies Fold

As strong as the book culture is in the Twin Cities, it hasn't been enough to sustain two of the area's best-loved independent bookstores. St. Paul-based The

Ruminator, one of the nation's legendary bookstores, shut its doors on July 25, 2004, after 34 years in business. Now another St. Paul bookstore, Bound to Be Read Books, is scheduled to close on July 27.

The closings raised concerns that the Twin Cities, despite its strong economy and highly educated populace, might not be able to sustain a large independent bookstore. One publicist at a large New York house says that she is now reluctant to send literary authors to the Twin Cities unless they are selected for Minnesota Public Radio's influential Talking Volumes book club.

Nevertheless, author events are still going strong in the Twin Cities. Many of the most successful programs are taking place at independent bookstores that have developed a loyal customer base by filling a niche. The Red Balloon, a children's bookstore, attracted more than 700 patrons to its two-day 20th anniversary celebration last November, while Uncle Hugo's Science Fiction Bookstore drew more than 200 patrons to a reading by Laurell K. Hamilton this spring. Once Upon a Crime hosted 300 fans for an afternoon of readings by 32 mystery writers in March and 150 came to a reading by U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser at a Minneapolis church in April drew 1,000 people.

National Public Radio personality—and Minnesotan—Garrison Keillor is doing his part by bringing two authors together each month to converse and read from their work in front of a live audience at St. Paul's 1,000-seat Fitzgerald Theatre. The Literary Friendships series kicked off its first season in January with authors Robert Bly and Donald Hall.

The *Rake*, a monthly cultural arts magazine, is collaborating with the Loft and the University of Minnesota Bookstore in bringing touring authors, books and local audiences together with its monthly Happy Hour Book Club in a Minneapolis bar.

Not only does the largest newspaper in the state, the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, provide two full pages of book reviews in its Sunday edition and a half-page of reviews on Wednesdays, it is an active partner in the most ambitious book club in the country: for the past five years, the newspaper has collaborated with MPR and the Loft in bringing top national authors to the Twin Cities. Recent Talking Volumes authors include Amy Tan, Russell Banks, Edward P. Jones and Joyce Carol Oates.

Everybody Is Talking Volumes

Hands down, the biggest Twin Cities attraction, for readers and publishers, is the Talking Volumes regional book club, which features a month-long blitz of publicity for an author and his or her book. The *Star-Tribune* publishes a Sunday pro-

file, a book review, a week of book excerpts and a list of more than 50 participating independent bookstores all over the Upper Midwest that carry the book. The author is interviewed twice on MPR, with both interviews broadcast live throughout the Upper Midwest. Not only does the Loft feature each author and book in its nationally distributed literary publication, *Speakeasy*, but it also hosts community discussions at Open Book.

Linda Myers of The Loft estimates that more than 5,000 people attend Talking Volumes events each year, and that the program has reached a total of 600,000 people all over the region and beyond in the past five years.

Local booksellers and publishers around the country say Talking Volumes does a lot to boost the profiles of unknown writers. For instance, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *Purple Hibiscus* (Algonquin), participated

in Talking Volumes in October 2003, the same month her debut novel was released. Michael Taeckens, Algonquin's publicity director, recalls, "Talking Volumes really opened a lot of doors for Adichie. It got the ball rolling right away, not just with sales, but in giving her some clout.

"She was taken seriously as a writer, and she received a lot of attention she might not have received otherwise," he continues. "She was reviewed everywhere, from the *New York Times* on down, and was even shortlisted for the Orange Prize. And it all started with Talking Volumes."

"For a literary author promoting their book, the combination of a major newspaper, MPR and a literary organization is golden. Talking Volumes takes all the elements you need to have a successful outing and they put it all together at once," says Jane Beirn, director of publicity at HarperCollins. "It's a good reason to send authors to the Twin Cities." ■

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