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Ágnes Cserhádi on Rufus Books

An interview with Ágnes Cserhádi on Rufus Books



ED BEDFORD

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Image courtesy of Ágnes Cserhádi

Rufus Books, founded by Ágnes Cserhádi, is an independent small press which mainly publishes work by poets from Canada, Ireland, and the UK. It has a keen focus on the physicality of what it publishes, creating books, chapbooks, and broadsides, that are unique objects. Its first publication was Whereabouts by Matthew Francis, and recent titles include Molly, Etc., which I reviewed earlier this summer.

Q: I'd often start an interview like this with something generic about why you started Rufus Books, but I think in this case a bit more specific detail would be better. So, what was it about Matthew Francis's words that made you take that punt and ask him if you could publish some of his work?

Matthew Francis's 'The God of Paths' was the first to make me laugh out loud in delight at a poem. Up to that point, poetry was serious business, something to really grapple with ontologically, let sway in imagery or metaphor, crunch in punctuation, surrender to sensuousness. And then in one moment as I was searching to be rescued from nostalgia for my year in London as a post-grad student, standing in abject misery and in the glare of a brand-new bookstore chain in Toronto, I found that and more in the sheer joy of English idiom and wit and playfulness that broke through in Matthew Francis's inimitably brilliant way. I'd been sketching out a book of black and white photographs of my travels in Great Britain (long before self-publishing was a thing) and thought 'The God of Paths' perfectly captured what I might have wanted to say in a preface, but far better than anything I could have written had it even occurred to me to try; the photographs were my voice. But the poem! It encapsulated what I loved most and experienced in my year away.

Q: So, was the focus on the physicality of what you were publishing always there from the beginning?

Very much so. The sensuousness of the tactile book matters such a great deal to me. Imagination calls up the written word in various ways, but why not have a beautiful book to look at and hold as well? I like books to be sensible to hold and good to lay on my lap as my thoughts drift from the page, so binding matters. Equally, I like texture in paper and ink to sink into the fibres—hence handmade and matte papers, and letterpress or offset printing where I can manage it. All this is indeed crucial to me. Gaspereau Press out of Nova Scotia was my model, mixed with a good dose of what I'd learned about publishing the *Hart House Review* at the University of Toronto that nearby Coach House printed, and I ended up working with both in printing Rufus Books publications. Some writers come to me because of the tactility and design sense of the books I publish. Jeremy Clarke has been a poet who has appreciated this facet from the start and is the poet who convinced me to re-emerge after an 8-year hiatus (for health reasons) so that I might publish his *Stone Hours*, which we co-designed and published in 2024. I'd first published his *Devon Hymns* in 2010, which featured cover artwork by John Berger and sketches by Yves Berger. It's the only Rufus Books title that's gone to a second printing.

Q: Linking to that, do you think there is something specific to poetry that calls for such tangibility when the words are put down on paper?

Not necessarily, but perhaps the stricture and immediacy of the form makes poetry more amenable to wanting to be expressed beautifully—or at least we can appreciate the tangibility (or tactility) when we've but a poem to focus on a single page, rather than speeding through a cliffhanging, page-turning, murder mystery (or some such), where plot matters more. This became pragmatically obvious to me when I was setting out Matthew Francis's poems in the first book I published, *Whereabouts* (2005), as the 7-line, 3-stanza structure is the same for all 35 poems in the collection. It gave me the opportunity to play with the design and page layout in a way that prose, with its typically standardised block text just doesn't allow.

Q: You mentioned elsewhere that Rufus Books tries to 'bridge the trade and fine press worlds'. Could you give a bit of detail of what you mean by those terms, and why is it you feel they need bridging?

Essentially, trade editions are more affordable—what you'll find on the shelves of any kind of bookshop (or warehouse) you can think of. Fine press is where book meets art—typically the letterpress printed books you'll only find in special or private collections and antiquarian bookshops—that might cost easily £50 to £250 for a single book.

I love the way you can get absorbed in the meticulous detail of fine press books, almost as much if not more than the words they contain. Michael Torosian's Lumiere Press (Toronto, New York) and Jason Dewinetz's Greenboathouse Press (British Columbia) books catch my breath. As do some of Deborah Barnett's Someone Editions (Toronto) books that match the fine press work of the traditional form, but she's just as adept at deconstructing it 'to create new reader experiences'. Deborah has done the letterpress printing for the covers of the last two Rufus Books chapbooks—Iain Britton's *Uncertain Densities* (2025) and Scott Elder's *Molly, Etc.* (2026)—along with an Exquisite Corpse broadside featuring a single poem, 'Dew's Quiet Light Will Be Again' (2026), written by four poets from both sides 'across the pond'—Scott Elder (US/France), Prue Chamberlayne (UK/France), Jim Johnstone (Canada), and Claire Crowther (UK)—and it'll be fun to watch Deborah unpack a poem I've written for Someone Edition's unique French Letter Society series in a much more explorative way—entirely her own.

But to answer the 'bridging' question of Rufus Books publications more directly, I tend to combine trade and fine press so that, for example, in the chapbooks I publish, I have the covers printed letterpress on handmade paper from La Papeterie Saint-Armand in Montreal, and hand-sewn (fine press), with the inside pages printed offset or digital (trade). Also, everything I publish includes a colophon and is numbered by hand, being limited editions. Combining trade and fine press makes it more affordable and opens the fine press world to booklovers who maybe hadn't really considered the tactile side of books before but might now look more readily for it. Although I can't say I've quite met

the challenge because the fine press world mainly wants fine press (why did I spoil it with offset printing, or was I lazy, or just ran out of money to complete the letterpress printing?) and not everyone is willing to fork out more money just because a trade book is nicer to look at. You might say I get stuck in the moat sometimes, but the bridge extends often enough for me to climb across, and I'll always take the optimistic view there are enough buyers who'll fish me out of the water when I fall in head-first. It's worth it to me to hold to this vision, even if I get drenched sometimes.

Q: What does being an independent publisher mean to you?

Freedom, essentially. Following my own path and having the great good fortune to walk it with likeminded people who really appreciate the same kind of freedom and attention to detail that makes me giddy. I conform to no set agenda or bottom line. I'm not in it for the money, publishing only 2-3 titles a year, and the way I do it I'm glad to break even on a project, just enough to fund the next one. If I'm lucky. It's not a realistic business model. It's a passion project.

Q: In more day-to-day terms, what does an average day of publishing look like for you?

I suppose I don't have an 'average day' when it comes to Rufus Books. With just 2-3 titles a year—and these could be a mix of chapbooks, trade books, and broadsides—I can go weeks fielding emails, researching promotional opportunities, posting on social media, updating my website, and shipping a few orders. Once I decide on a project, the design of it comes out in spurts, sometimes in intense 4-day chunks, with weeks of rest and revision between-times. Editing depends entirely on how the manuscript comes in, but design and proofreading to some extent is often a collaborative endeavour. I've no set routine and make intermittent progress on projects as the projects and my limited energy demand.

Q: Would you recommend starting an independent press to people, and, if so, what tips would you give?

I don't know how realistic it is to run an independent press full-time without outside funding, but you can always set up a micropress and see how it goes with or without grants. I opted to be completely independent because my vision was to publish writers primarily from Canada, Ireland, and the UK without restriction on how much of a percent of them from a certain nationality had to be published each year to make up some kind of quota. As I say, my model is a passion project, so my heart leads rather than my pocketbook. It's completely unrealistic and makes no real business sense the way I do it, so the only tip I can give is follow your heart. And if you can make a full-fledged business out of it, too, fantastic. (Tell me how!)

Q: You mainly publish poets from Canada, Ireland, and the UK. Why those countries as a focus, as opposed to doing anglophone poetry from across the north Atlantic—so including the US and possibly down to the Caribbean?

This is a more difficult question to answer. In short, there's a distinction to the 'mosaic' of Canada and the 'melting pot' of the US that makes the Canadian experience far more complex and compelling to me. There's a very great imprint of English, Irish, and Scottish in Canada—along with French—as far as our colonial past comes into it—and every other immigrant group from anywhere in the world can be captured in the Canadian experience. (I'm first-generation Hungarian, myself.) This is not forgetting the Indigenous experience that we're finally getting our eyes properly opened to. And to some, this is a shared history with the US, but the 'melting pot' confounds me and I'm much happier with the distinction we make North of the border. That's not to say I don't like or read US writers. I absolutely do. But it's a huge market that makes no real sense for a publisher as small as Rufus Books to dip its toes into in earnest as a publisher of US writers. Simply put, I hold a very dear affinity elsewhere. Having said that, Scott Elder is from the US but lives in France and is most widely published in the UK and Ireland, which is how I came to know his work. So exceptions are possible.

Q: Linked to that, what do you think about keeping links ‘across the pond’ as you say (so keeping readers connected to poets in different countries)?

I suppose it’s about building community, isn’t it? I happen to love the UK and Ireland, and as I say, Canada breaks the world wide open. I have grand plans to publish a trilingual chapbook of the Hungarian poet János Arany’s poem ‘A walesi bárdok’ written in 1857. ‘The Bards of Wales’ project is something I hope will bring together writers from Canada, England, Wales, and Hungary you might never have imagined gathered in a single book. I’ve already secured the rights of Peter Zollman’s translation into English and Twm Morys’s translation into Welsh. Other poets have also committed to the project who will be writing original works and/or translating, so it’s underway. It’s a big undertaking and will take a few more years to publish; I’m aiming for the 175th anniversary of the original poem’s writing.

Q: With that sense of linking, do you think tech, e.g. video calls, might alter things, such as facilitating remote readings?

There are opportunities, certainly. But nothing replaces the in-person event. Online complements (and can sometimes complicate if the tech isn’t working), but I’ve my work cut out for me if I want to move in that direction. Given the emphasis on the tactile nature of Rufus Books publications (I will never do e-books, for example), online events aren’t an immediate priority, though I’d like to crack that nut at some point.

Q: As someone who works across different countries, do you think anglophone poetry now can be thought of as one body, so with one pulse, or as a slightly more fragmented ecosystem of related bodies, with different pulses of varying vitalities?

I like this question, but I would frame it more capaciously in extending your query by answering that to be individual isn’t to be fragmented, and to be writing in English is one way to bring together ‘different pulses of varying vitalities.’ I do love the English language, but I also find the process of literary translation fascinating and intend to publish more translated texts. A project of which I’m most proud is the bilingual edition of Fernando Pessoa’s complete Alberto Caeiro poems, collected, edited and translated by Michael Lee Rattigan, published in 2007. The mere act of setting out the text in Portuguese flush with the English on the facing page, and proofreading a language not my own was pure, unexpected, joy. There’s a broadside I’ll be publishing next spring that incorporates Irish, and there’s the Hungarian-Welsh-English ‘The Bards of Wales’ project I’ve already mentioned. That Canadian ‘mosaic’ (rather than US ‘melting pot’) is coming to the fore in good measure, I think.

Q: Slightly linked to that—what do you think makes good poetry?

Bewilderment. Transformation. So many have said this in the past, some of whom more recently include Seamus Heaney, John McGahern, Pádraig Ó Tuama, Alice Oswald, Ishion Hutchinson, Jan Zwicky, Don McKay, Jorie Graham, Kaveh Akbar. The list goes on, as it should. And for my own inclination: subtly, ambiguity, ontology. Say more between the lines than in them. Tell me about becoming. Claire Keegan and Colm Tóibín are masters of this. There’s nothing I like more than reading to a point I’m compelled to lay the book down on my lap and drift off less in thought than in the stillness the words have imprinted in the air—or laughter, as Matthew Francis’s ‘The God of Paths’ will remind us.