

Paying to Play: On Solvency and Submissions Fees in Poetry Publishing

Rachel Mennies

<https://themillions.com/2018/01/paying-to-play-on-solvency-and-submissions-fees-in-poetry-publishing.html>

Data: Poet-Facing Survey

I based this survey's press categorizations on an interview conducted with publishing sage [Jane Friedman](#); in the survey itself, I asked poets to match their individual publisher with its press category.¹ Most surveyed poetry books were published by small independent presses, with the next-largest category being university presses. A small overall percentage were published by large independent presses, micropresses, or a Big Five publisher/imprint.² A decisive 87.6% of books were published only in paperback, making their retail price around \$15 (important for percentage royalties). And an important contextual note: since this survey considers published books and not publication-seeking poets, the poet-facing survey necessarily excludes the thousands of poets circulating their yet-unpublished manuscripts (and contributing to fee revenue).

Pre-Publication Data

Books in this survey were largely chosen for publication one of three ways: either by winning a contest (33.3%), through an open reading period (27.6%), or via editorial solicitation (24.8%). For a single poetry book published from 2007-2018, slightly less than a third spent \$0-50 on submissions fees. The remaining 68.6% of respondents spent between \$51 and \$3,000, a vast range.³

Advances and Royalties

In this survey, poets were more likely to receive an advance if they won a contest than via other methods of book selection.⁴ The contest prize value mode in this survey is \$1,000, and the most lucrative contest prize in this survey awarded \$10,000 to its winner, with three respondents out of

¹ This survey placed book publishers into five categories: the *small independent press*, defined as a (usually) non-profit press focusing on literary prose and poetry and who often relies on a distributor to get into bookstores, like Black Lawrence Press, Copper Canyon Books, or Alice James Press; the *university press*, like Wesleyan University Press or the Pitt Poetry Series books; the *large independent press*, like Workman Publishing or Verso Books, who differ from small independent presses by virtue of their often for-profit status and self-distribution. (Friedman notes that poetry-publishing luminary Graywolf Press lives with a foot in the small-press category (nonprofit, distributed by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux) and another in the large-press category (a 2016 [audit](#) published on their website noted \$2.8 million in net book revenue). I include this information here because most large independent publishers do not publish poetry, and it's possible that Graywolf published the books in this survey category); the *micropress*, a press with very limited print runs who produce only a few books per year, like Tiny Hardcore Press (and most poetry chapbook presses, *not* included in this survey); and commercial/Big Five publishing companies or imprints, like Ecco Press or Penguin Random House.

² 66.3% of survey books were published by a small independent press, 18.3% were published by a university press, 6.7% were published by a large independent press, 6.7% were published by a micropress, and 1.9% were published by a commercial/Big Five publishing company or imprint.

³ 31.4% spent \$0-50; 13.3% spent between \$51-100; 10.5% spent between \$101-200; 7.6% spent between \$201-300; 10.5% spent between \$301-400; 7.6% spent between \$401-500; 7.6% spent between \$501-750; 8.6% spent over \$750; a couple of respondents separately indicated specific individual amounts over \$750 (\$2,000, \$2,500, and \$3,000), bringing the total to 100%.

⁴ 78.4% of respondents received *no* cash advance via an open reading period, solicitation, or agented submission, while 41% of contest winners received up-front payment by way of prize money.

105 winning a \$10,000 prize. Therefore, prize money promises *some* possible recoup of costs for poets, but it's not guaranteed upon receiving a contract.

The responses to the royalties questions, more than any other in this survey, illustrate a key problem in American poetry publishing: the lack of consistency, or even similarity, across poetry-book publication contracts. Most, but not all, surveyed poets received royalties, but the rate varied wildly.⁵

The royalties-rate mode for both contest- and non-contest-winning respondents is 10%. However, because I received so many diverse answers for the question “If you receive royalties, what percentage royalties do you receive for your book?” beyond purely numerical ones, I will also share a few of these responses. Some survey-takers could not state with certainty whether or not they would receive *any* royalties, even after signing a contract (assuming there was one), while others cited broken contract promises or changes in the press's financial outlook as reasons for changes to their royalty expectations:

- “Unsure/was told I would at some point but not a lot of faith I actually would”
- “50% e-book, something else for paperback”
- “Cover price was \$13.95. \$1.50 per copy purchased directly from the press, \$1.00 per copy sold through distributors. So, call it 10%”
- “I should have, but publisher changed rules. I feel I was taken advantage of. I was told I would get royalties but last minute it changed to more free copies.”
- “10%, paid in the form of additional copies of the book”
- “lol”

As sunk submission-fee costs vary tremendously from submitter to submitter, as seen above, recovering significantly larger costs—especially if offered a contract without royalties or prize money—may prove impossible.

Data: Press-Facing Survey

Using the same press-category definitions as above, most presses in this survey identify as small independent presses, and most are nonprofit.⁶ While the total number of respondents is smaller than in the poet-side survey, the similar distribution of press type speaks to poetry publishing's broader narrative: most American poetry books are published by small presses, university presses, and micropresses. I sought responses from presses that publish at least one full-length poetry book per year, but the presses need not exclusively publish poetry. Most presses in this survey published between 1-10 poetry books per year, and (inclusive of poetry) 1-14 overall books.⁷

⁵ Overall, 58.2% of contest-winning respondents receive royalties for their books, but 12.9% of these must wait until they've sold over their prize amount in order to receive them (advance against royalties). 65% of non-contest-winning respondents receive royalties for their books.

⁶ 73.3% of press respondents identify as a small independent press, 13.3% identify as a university press, 6.7% identify as a micropress, 6.7% identify as hovering between a small independent press and a micropress, and 0 respondents identify as either a large independent press or a Big Five publisher. 80% identified as nonprofit, and 20% as for-profit.

⁷ 40% of respondents publish 1-3 poetry books per year, 13.3% publish 4-6, 26.7% publish 7-10, 13.3% publish 11-14, 6.7% publish 15+. 26.7% publish 1-3 books (inclusive of poetry), 20% publish 4-6, 6.7% publish 7-10, 13.3% publish 11-14, 20% publish 15-24, 13.3% publish 25+.

Contests and Open Reading Periods

How did these presses acquire the manuscripts they published? Just over half of survey respondents, 53.3% (eight total), ran a contest to publish at least one poetry book in 2016. Of these eight contest-running presses, only one ran a fee-free contest. Five presses charged between \$21-30 to submit to their contest, one charged between \$11-20, and one charged between \$1-10.

60% of respondents, or nine presses, ran an open reading period to publish at least one poetry book in 2016. And they charged slightly less for poets to submit than for contests: six presses charged \$0 to submit through their open reading period, one charged between \$1-10, and two charged between \$11-20. Overhead costs for surveyed presses' open reading periods were also generally lower than for contests.

Submissions Fees and Overall Funding

To what degree do these presses depend on submissions fee revenue to function? I asked respondents first to check *any* of the funding sources they received from a list supplied in the survey.⁸ All fifteen presses responded. The mode response was book sales (14 presses)—a robust sign for our poetry publishers. The next most common response was submissions fees (9), followed by private donors (8) and state-level government organizations (8). Five survey presses receive NEA funding; one receives NEH funding. Four receive funding drawn from editors' personal finances, a concerning statistic that's magnified in the journal survey data below.

I next asked presses to rank their top three sources of funding from this list. Only thirteen presses responded to this question, and a couple only ranked one or two sources, so the list here doesn't match up exactly with the above numbers. By far, presses' most common source of funding comes from book sales, though several presses listed submissions fees in their top three (and one press ranked it as their primary source of funding). The NEA appears three times in these rankings, which signals both its importance and its overall lesser funding share compared to either book sales and submissions fees. Private donors/patrons and funding drawn from editors' personal finances both figure in the rankings to a lesser share.⁹

⁸ State-level government organizations, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, university funding/support, book sales, private donors or patrons (not including book customers), submissions fee revenue, funding drawn from editors' personal finances, one-time fundraisers (e.g. Kickstarter), and/or any other sources of funding.

⁹ The mode *primary* source of funding for respondents is book sales (8 presses), followed by private donors or patrons (2), submissions fees (1), university funding (1), and NEA funding (1). The mode *secondary* source of funding is book sales (4 presses), followed by submissions fees (2 presses), funding drawn from editors' personal finances (2), NEA funding (1), private donors (1), state funding (1), university funding (1), and one-time fundraisers (1). The mode *tertiary* source of funding is private donors or patrons (4 presses), followed by submissions fees (2), funding drawn from editors' personal finances (2), state funding (2), and NEA funding (1).

Data: Journal-Facing Survey

My first question to the twenty-seven respondents considered publication format, important not just for context but because it also presents a key difference in product: in general, print journals have physical objects to sell and online journals gain visibility via clicks. In this survey, almost half of the journals publish content exclusively online, with the rest publishing either print-only journals or a hybrid of print and online content.¹⁰ Most are nonprofit or lack formal status.¹¹

Submissions Managers and Journal Fees

I asked whether journals charged a fee to submit work, and 59.3% of journals responded “no.” 3.7% of journals responded a flat “yes.” The remaining 39%’s responses should also largely be characterized as “yes,” but their answers revealed some compellingly diverse approaches to the submissions fee:

- “For online submissions, we charge. People can snail mail for free;”
- “No, but a Tip Jar or donation request is offered;”
- “Yes, but waived for subscribers;”
- “No but submitters can get a quick response by buying a chapbook;”
- and “We’re open for free year-round, but four times a year, we offer expedited submissions for a fee.”

Providing a service with a submissions fee, flexible pricing, and incentivizing subscriptions all present interesting ways to make fees beneficial for submitters, if a poet must pay them.

Submissions Fees and Overall Funding

As with the press survey, I asked respondents first to check *any* of the following sources of funding they received from a list supplied in the survey.¹² All twenty-seven journals responded. In a significant departure from the press data, the mode response was funding drawn from editors' personal finances (17 journals). This was followed by purchases of individual/back issues (15), private donors or patrons (14), submissions fees (12), subscription revenue (10), university funding/support (8), NEA funding (4), state funding (1), and a couple other write-ins (1 chapbook sales revenue, 1 [Project MUSE](#) revenue, 1 one-time reading/event revenue). Editors' personal finances and submissions fees appearing frequently alongside one another in this survey could indicate that poets submit more to journals than they (and/or non-poets) subscribe; this may also be a result of journals' increased shift to online-only publication, where fewer physical products are available for sale.

¹⁰ 44.4% of journals publish content online only; 25.9% publish primarily in print with separate online content; 14.8% publish print content only; and the remaining 14.8% publish a mix of print and online content in various configurations (print with online archives, primarily online with a print option, etc.).

¹¹ 59.3% identified as nonprofit and 18.5% as for-profit. The remaining 22.2% noted a lack of formal status.

¹² State-level government organizations, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, university funding/support, subscription revenue, purchases of individual/back issues, private donors or patrons (not including book customers), submissions fee revenue (contest and/or slush), funding drawn from editors' personal finances, one-time fundraisers (e.g. Kickstarter), and/or any other sources of funding.

I next asked journals to rank their top three sources of funding from this list. As with the press data, some journals did not respond to this question or rank all three sources. Here as well, editors' wallets claimed the top source of funding, with submissions fees, private donors, and university support close behind. Subscription revenue and back-issue purchases appear lower in the rankings, which may indicate a larger presence of online journals in the survey, and/or that fewer people pay for literary magazines than they do poetry books.¹³ (I didn't ask about advertising revenue for online journals, which I regret.)

¹³ The mode *primary* source of funding is funding drawn from editors' personal finances (8 journals), followed by submissions fees (5), university funding (5), private donors (2), purchases of individual/back issues (1), events (1), and chapbook sales (1). The mode *secondary* source of funding is purchases of individual/back issues (5 journals), followed by subscription revenue (3), private donors (3), submissions fees (2), funding drawn from editors' personal finances (1), NEA funding (1), university funding (1), and Project MUSE revenue (1). The mode *tertiary* source of funding is private donors (7 journals), followed by funding drawn from editors' personal finances (3), subscription revenue (3), submissions fees (1), and university funding (1).