



SCENES
American Book Review, Summer 2023

Turtle Point Press

An Interview with Ruth Greenstein

Could you briefly describe your press's history?

The press was founded in 1990 by Jonathan Rabinowitz, a bibliophile with superb and eccentric taste but no formal background in the book business. He built up an impressive list that was a mix of rediscovered literary gems and contemporary work. The press became home to two imprints: Helen Marx Books, which focused on translations from the French, and Books & Co., run by Jeannette Watson, who for many years ran a bookshop by the same name.

Jonathan and I met when, as a youngish editor at Harcourt, I acquired the paperback rights to the Turtle Point title *Making It New* by Henry Geldzahler. Jonathan and I became fast publishing friends. Seven years ago, while seeking Jon's advice about how to help a friend publish her poetry book, he stunned me by saying, "Why don't you take [by which he meant acquire] the press?" And I stunned myself even more by jumping at the opportunity.

I'd been working as an independent editor and publishing consultant at the time, and a handful of my clients became the first authors I signed. My plan was to continue the fine literary publishing that the press was known for, while bringing in more women authors, West Coast writers, Latin American writers, and voices from a broader international spectrum. Which is exactly what we've been doing.

Our longtime distributor is Consortium, which is part of the giant Ingram Content Group. They distribute many of the top independent presses and do a great job of advising us on marketing and sales strategies and getting our books into wholesale, retail, library, and academic channels.

How would you characterize the work you publish?

Delightful, beautiful, arresting, uncommon. Timeless rather than trendy. We seek books that will stand the test of time. Exclusive yet inclusive.

What I mean here is that since we typically publish only six or seven titles a year, we must be ultra-selective with every work we acquire. And we tend to keep our authors, so some spots on each list are often taken up by new works by our house authors. Yet we are open to a wide range of books and writers in terms of genre, length, subject, author's background, and so on. We love hybrid works, short books, books with illustrations. Plus, we publish the coolest, most hard-driving octogenarians around.

Who is your audience, and in what ways are you trying to reach them?

Students, teachers, writers, and readers with far-ranging, discerning literary tastes. I love getting to know the Turtle Point audience one by one by seeing who buys what through our direct sales efforts and by chatting with shoppers at our book festival tables.

An early step in connecting with readers is creating effective metadata that will result in the best online discoverability for each book. This may sound rote and deadly dull, but it is surprisingly challenging to determine the most important keywords for a book, the best way to categorize it (especially for unusual and hybrid genre titles), and to keep up with changes as new reviews come in, author bios need updates, and so on.

For readers who love stories about adventurous women, we have the JOAN Books series. Named after our perennially popular title *Joan of Arc: In Her Own Words*, these books showcase the voices and lives of bold women who follow their own paths.

Of course, we are active on the ubiquitous social media. Our new intern tells me that authenticity on “the Tok” is what it's all about—I'll let her lead the way. But we also do as much as we can to be sure that we and our authors get out and connect with people in real life. I can't tell you how many good things have come about because of chance meetings at live events. And I'm a firm believer in synchronicity.

What is your role in the publishing scene?

We are highly selective generalists that uphold traditional standards of literary excellence and fine book design and production.

We pack a large punch for a press with such a small list in terms of caliber of authors, review attention, longevity, and impact. We're closer to a miniature FSG or New Directions or Graywolf than to other small, quality

literary presses, most of which are narrowly focused on areas like poetry, LGBTQ writers, works in translation, and so forth.

What's in the future for your press?

We're very excited about our newly launched Helen Marx Translation Award for the publication of a work from any language by a translator and writer of color. We are looking at launching a debut poetry book award. We continue to receive surprising new work from our current roster of authors and from newcomers to the press. And most vitally, we're seeking a partnership for Turtle Point to improve our infrastructure and secure our long-term stability. This may take the form of becoming a university affiliate, merging with or becoming an imprint at another press, or bringing in a partner/co-manager/investor. Regardless of which direction this partnership may take, we are confident that the coming years will continue to see a dynamic small press publishing standout books that are important to readers and that live on shelves for a very long time.