

Thinking Inside the Box: DIY Book Making and Selling

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Chicagoan

Rob Christopher is the author of a book that's not really a book. Call it more of a literary object. His first collection of writings, 100 Spinning Plates, doesn't even fit on a shelf. In fact, it isn't even bound. Also check out his new video on youtube...
Do it yourself - self-publishing with 100 Spinning Plates

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Christopher explains the germination of this unorthodox format. "I researched box manufacturers and small-run presses to see what size/shapes would be affordable and that's how it ended up as a box of tall skinny cards. I'm really pleased with it; the stories are kind of newspaper column-sized."

You can read the cards in any order; creating a new story of varying length each time you rearrange them. "What has been gratifying is that when someone picks up the book and plays with it, they get it. Once you see it in front of you, it doesn't require explanation," the 30-year-old "non-profit officetron" reassures.

Christopher began writing at a young age and initially wanted to put his skills to use with a film degree, but some roadblocks of that industry seemed daunting. "I was increasingly frustrated by how expensive and collaboration-intensive it was just to make a film." Still wanting very much to write, Christopher says he preferred the quick and inexpensive results of his own creative writing. "I really liked going off on my own, writing something on a piece of paper and then sharing it." Christopher's first foray into publishing these autonomous scribbles was in poetry journals. "I got a ton of rejections but also ended up having a few pieces published."

Christopher soon began writing more prose and completed his final draft of 100 Spinning Plates in 2003. He briefly considered bumping down the road of traditional publishing. "What I heard from other writers and people in publishing was that I ought to be prepared for at least two years of waiting, for the manuscript to make the rounds and for the machine to make up its so-called mind. And I had like zero connections in the publishing world. I mean, there wasn't anyone who could grease the wheels for me." Christopher went from zero to 35 by networking between foam frothings as a barista at the well-known Chi-town coffee house Intelligentsia. Determining that self-publishing was the way to go, Christopher befriended David David Katzman who self published Death By Zamboni. "He was a mentor and a big help, because the DIY publishing world was brand new to me."

With boxed book in hand, Christopher was catapulted into unknown territory. "I really didn't have any experience with the DIY publishing community. Doing 100 Spinning Plates really put me smack dab in the middle of all that, and I've met some great folks because of it." Katzman came into the picture again, setting up a reading for Christopher at the famed indie Chicago bookstore, Quimby's, "Then Billy at Loop Distribution came across it and wanted to carry it, and because of him Powell's Books in Portland started stocking it. And I've sold something like 75 copies alone at Powell's!" Being a part of the community has helped Christopher become more extroverted, "mostly out of necessity".

Having readings is good but having a big party is better and that's just what Christopher did. "Once everything was back from the printers, and I had the labels and a big bottle of glue, I threw a release party at a local theater and invited everyone I knew, even remotely. That got the momentum going."

Cut to now, 2 1/2 years after that party. Christopher has picked up a whole lot of tricks, such as participating in craft shows and sending out promo copies to the press, web sites and magazines. "I would do a lot more from the get-go next time," he says. "I've learned that the Internet is definitely your friend. You spread something around online and the odds are, if you've got something good, it'll start going like gangbusters." Christopher found Dan Poynter's *The Self Publishing Manual* to be "a huge help; it's an excellent flowchart for a DIY project". Turns out if you wish to become a DIY writer you've got to gear up to; well, do it yourself, "I don't exactly have a PR staff at my disposal. For that matter, I don't even have an agent," he quips. "Perseverance is the most important thing. But there's also a fine line between being enthusiastic and being pushy," he warns. "It's good to stay humble even though you're energetic."

Christopher does take advantage of the web. Both by creating a site surrounding *Spinning Plates*, "I mean, let's be frank: it's advertising. It's a way to tease people into buying the book, or at least to convince them you're a cool guy. It's been helpful for sure." And he also blogs on livejournal, which, he says, "has been a fantastic way to connect to people."

The future holds a new book for Christopher titled *Tiny Apocalypse*. "It takes place mostly in Chicago, circa 1999, when Y2K anxiety was swirling around. But at the same time there was this optimism in the air about the future. Sounds kind of quaint from our current perspective, doesn't it? Anyhow the main characters, Lem and Grant, are dating each other and it's very dysfunctional. But neither has the momentum to break out. And then the year 2000 comes and, umm, things change." Though he's learned a lot and gained many friendships from the DIY experience, Christopher resolves, "This time out I want to hand it over to someone else." He'll be out there shopping his new book around and, of course, hopes it leads to something big. "It's equal parts work and chance."

Be sure to check out Rob's new video that's up on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJbQmNYiGs0&search=Rob%20christopher>

Also, be sure to visit Rob's site: www.randomcha.net, and Jeremy Wells' web site. Jeremy created the video for Rob. He's quite talented - www.thejeremyshow.com
Rob Christopher

Rob Christopher has lived in Chicago since 1993. Before narrowing things down to writing, he worked on films; *Kosher Messiah*, a documentary he co-wrote and edited, screened at various festivals. His work has appeared in *The Church-Wellesley Review*, *A Great Read*, *Plug*, and *The Chicago Reader* among others. His self-published "exploded novel" of *Random Literature, 100 Spinning Plates*, is available online at www.randomcha.net as well as at fine bookstores like Powell's in Portland and Quimby's. In his spare time he watches far too many movies, mixes up retro cocktails (the Mai Tai being his specialty), and writes more stuff. He's currently finishing *Tiny Apocalypse*, a novel which examines the hysteria and optimism of Y2K Chicago circa 1999.