



An Independent Press Report
by Fallon Gallagher
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Adding Helium: More on Black Balloon Publishing

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Founded: Leigh Newman and Elizabeth Koch kick started Black Balloon Publishing with their first publication, *The Recipe Project*, in 2011.

What They Publish: Black Balloon Publishing dedicates their time to publishing literary fiction that transcends the everyday story; they are looking for stories readers haven't heard of. They strive to put out "unclassifiable" fiction, moving memoirs, challenging prose, and books that make readers believe in something. *The Airship* is an online component to the press, offering articles written by staff members and other writers.

About Black Balloon: Black Balloon Publishing's works have been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *All Things Considered* and more. They consider themselves artists, and are in search for writers who "kick conventions curbside." Pushing forward in today's changing industry, BBP offers both print and digital editions of each book they put out. They only take what they love, but ensure their writer's dedication to the editorial process, and a marketing plan.

Publications Per Annum: Two (spring, fall).

Submissions: Unsolicited manuscripts are submitted via BBP's Web site along with a forty-page sample of the writing. Please include a cover letter giving a summary of the novel, short story collection, or work of nonfiction.

Current Publications: *And Every Day Was Overcast*, by Paul Kwiatkowski,

Our Man In Iraq, by Robert Perisic (2013)

Future Publications: *Nine Rabbits*, by Virginia Zaharieva (2014)

Fat Man and Little Boy, by Mike Meginnis (2014)

Tying the String: Why the Black Balloon?

I like books that stand out or have something to say, even in their tiny little blurbs on their Web site. Black Balloon Publishing stood out to me at first because they offer a variety of genres. *The Recipe Project* has a soundtrack index for you to jam out to while cooking. They publish translated titles from parts of the world most people in the U.S. have no idea exist. There is an entire coming of age novel full of beautiful, raw photographs taken by the author himself. In the ever-changing world of publishing today, Black Balloon and its authors are innovative, spunky, and are unapologetic.

Reading more into their personal statement as a publisher, and after talking to their Managing Director Buzz Poole, I learned about their loyal dedication to their authors—they put out insanely, well thought out Web sites for each book—*Our Man In Iraq* has a page full of submitted articles and narratives from soldiers, teachers, and citizens who have been affected by current turmoil in the Middle East. I felt like I found a publishing house that I'd like to work for some day, or one similar to it.



Street Vendor's Perspective: Interview with Buzz Poole

Fallon Gallagher: How did you get introduced to Black Balloon?

Buzz Poole: I had been the managing editor for something called Mark Batty Publisher for years. I was laid off from that about two years ago, right before Thanksgiving. Later that year I was out at an event and I ran into a friend of mine. She asked me what was happening in my life, and I told her. Not too long there after, she asked me, knowing I needed help—in the occupational sense—and here I am today.

FG: As managing director, what are your daily duties?

BP: Well, I kind of manage things [laughs]. I go through the actual book production; reading manuscripts from agents and the slush pile, negotiating contracts, editing manuscripts, writing sales and marketing copy, working with the book designers, the digital team. So, a little of every thing. But mostly the title, and it's printed form.

FG: You do it all, so to speak.

BP: I wouldn't say that. I'm not a designer, I'm not a programmer. I have nothing to do with "The Airship," which is the digital daily arm of Black Balloon, so I definitely don't do it all. Together we do it all; we're a team. I'm the one who brings in the projects. But I couldn't even begin to tell you how many submissions come in every day, and we had hundreds coming in for our Horatio Nelson Fiction Prize, and that was over a month long period. I have relationships with agents who reach out directly to me, and then Leigh and Elizabeth [the founders] take a

turn. We have other readers, as well. There are multiple manuscripts coming in every day through our submissions page.

FG: Black Balloon publishes a large scope of material. From a recipe book accompanied with musical directions, translated work, to a gorgeous coming of age novel interspersed with raw photography. What type of manuscripts would *you* like to see come in, based off of the house's manifesto?

BP: The books we've published are the best example of what I'd like to see come in. [Laughs] *Our Man in Iraq* tells a story that's not common to English language readers. We're doing another translation in the spring from a Bulgarian writer, with a marriage of food. It has a hazy space between fiction and memoir, which is also very similar to the juxtaposition with *And Every Day Was Overcast* by Paul Kwiatkowski, which is a very photography driven novel.

FG: So, you'd say you're looking for submissions that decidedly take some form of art to inform the prose?

BP: We're starting to look for more books like that, yeah. *And Every Day Was Overcast* is a great example. Really, we're looking for these marriages of visual content with the textual, where you need one with the other. It's a great interest to us. I think all publishers have their own editorial voice, and ours is about stories that exist on and off the page. We really do try to not only produce traditional books, but these enhanced e-books, more than the verbatim nook editions. *And Every Day Was Overcast* is a prime example of that. Even *Our Man in Iraq*, it doesn't have that visual component, but it has a pretty interesting website.

FG: You mentioned earlier that you have a heavy hand in the process of releasing a book. How do you go about that? How do you all work together?

BP: When we get an unsolicited manuscript sample, we [myself, Leigh, and Elizabeth] all read it and then talk about it. At that point, the entire novel is read, and if we get to the end of it and dig it, we'll talk about the project as a whole. Once we agree on a manuscript, we'll reach out to that writer and see what we can do. It's more or less is the same for something that comes in through an agent. If an agent sends it to me, I'll read the entire manuscript. I know what I'm looking for, and I can easily find it [in the writing], and find what I'm not interested in. Then we'll talk about it.

FG: What are you currently working on?

BP: I'm working on a passage of a manuscript which won our first Horatio Nelson Fiction Prize, called *Fat Man and Little Boy*. It'll come out next October. It's an astounding novel by Mike Meginnis.* He has personified the two atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I've never read anything like it.

FG: Say you received a manuscript that you felt wasn't quite there yet, would you still reach out to that author, and assist them with more editorial work? Or would you pass it on and look for something in your slush pile that's a little more polished?

BP: It really depends on how much we think it's worth it, because that can be a lot of work. It also depends on how willing we are to really dig in, and get in the trenches like that. For example, *Fat Man and Little Boy* is a very polished book. Again, some things need to be added, some deleted, and changes need to be made but it's not an overhaul. *Our Man In Iraq* is an

* A contributing writer for *HTML Giant*

interesting example. It had previously been released in the UK, and we used the translation, but that never really got a proper edit.

FG: Since you were handed a not-so perfect translation, what was the process like going through and remedying the mistakes?

BP: When I got the UK edition, I recognized what I thought of as the book's strength: the humor, the insight, the ability to really evoke Croatia in 2003, but also how that spoke to the world at large here in 2013. That was all there in the translation, but we, Robert Perisic and I, moved around some pieces, took out a lot, strengthened the sentences.

FG: What was it like working with Robert at that point? How close were you both in making the final cuts?

BP: It was fantastic. We did a lot of late night discussions; he was on a fellowship in Vienna, so I'd get on Skype at six or seven in the evening here in New York and he'd be at whatever time there—Robert's a night owl. And we'd just power through it. We'd go through it hours at a time. You know, page by page, every word. I was up pretty late most days.

FG: Final thoughts: how would you describe what Black Balloon is trying to capture in its publications?

BP: We're about books that celebrate place, that's the thread throughout the list of our published books. Especially throughout the past couple of years. In *Our Man In Iraq*, it's Croatia. In *And Every Day Was Overcast* it's southern Florida in the nineties. Bulgaria, for the book in the

spring. Japan, France and the US in *Fat Man and Little Boy* next fall. It's been about the acknowledgement of the importance of place here, and what we can do to shape that.



Book Review

Our Man In Iraq
 By Robert Perisic
 Trans. Will Firth
 [Black Balloon Publishing, 2013.
 202 pages. \$14.00 paperback.]

A Coke Bender that isn't to Blame for Your Dry Bank Account

Few people can point to a map of the world and pick out Croatia. The small, once socialist, eastern European country is the core of Robert Perisic's novel *Our Man In Iraq*. Originally published in 2008 in Perisic's native tongue, the novel juxtaposes Croatia's transition into capitalism circa 2003 with the budding war in Iraq. Our protagonist, Toni, a hotheaded journalist hailing from the capital, Zagreb, sends his oaf of a cousin Boris into the throws of the Middle East. While bouncing around American Forward Operation Bases and kicking it with Iraqi citizens, Boris sends Toni his dispatches, written in manic, PTSD induced prose. Deciding these are far from professionally written journalism, Toni edits them, publishing fabricated information in his newspaper. Moves similar to this drive Toni into a downward spiral, fighting for power in the social classes, deciphering a sticky bankruptcy situation, and snorting up some of the finest white powder on Monday nights.

Quick paced, Perisic introduces the world of Zagreb ten years after the Croatian War of Independence. Spanning over the course of five days, and then beyond, the world of Zagreb is given in very telling, straightforward prose. “The city perspired in the midday sun. Trying to be European, it wore the most modern rags and expensive labels. Sunglasses and street cafes sought to invoke the flair of Milan and Vienna.” Toni’s observations on changing Zagreb, as well as it’s people, drive the narrative forward. Through Toni’s first person point of view, Perisic sets a nice foundation on where Croatia was when it was still a part of Yugoslavia. Witty dialogue is splashed between Toni’s musings, bringing life to Zagreb and the world at large.

Boris’ emails create a completely different tone than Toni’s narrative. Although they only appear a few times in the novel, they carry on in a manic way. They’re fly-by, gut-wrenching details of what people are experiencing first hand in Iraq. Boris depicts Iraqi citizens, American soldiers, anyone he comes into contact with. The satire is there: dry and poignant. “He [Jason] said that since they’d [the American soldiers] been out in the field they hadn’t had any information, so he asked me, What is the News? The war’s begun, man, I said, you are the news.” This perspective shines a new light on what’s currently happening in 2013, a fresh outlook on the actions and suffering taken by every day people. “Saddam is a young villager from the outskirts of Basra, named after the president. What can he do?... his village, said Saddam, is in a bad place. So he stuck all his goats in a pickup truck and took to the road like Kerouac, except there’s no literature here, and no shade.”

Back in Zagreb, Toni and his friends play out in a capitalist society. His actress girlfriend Sanja, friend Markatovic, and many other characters gossip about the dried up Rijek Bank. Toni, though heavily involved in Zagreb’s “in” crowd, ridicules how each person is so engulfed in their own life, so self-centered. “That’s why socialism failed. It didn’t offer people enough

options, enough masks...we're all actors now. We wear our costumes and perform in the wide world." Purposeful and deliberate, this commentary illustrates the extreme rift between padded social life and what's unraveling in Iraq, not far from how millions of us view wars we aren't directly involved with. As Boris' emails become more and more infrequent, the farther away Toni becomes from his situation. "And our man in Iraq?" Toni's boss frequently queries, "How is he?"

Hilarious and poignant, *Our Man In Iraq* calls to the artist's, and citizen's attention: what is your responsibility in being informed on your surroundings? Critical as it is moving, Perisic's novel takes heart in the route of human folly. The best use of prose is to get the reader to ask questions, which Perisic does, bringing forth a decade old situation in a country few pay attention to, and encapsulating it's meaning into a relevant issue people are concerned with today.