



ATTICUS
BOOKS

René Cousineau
Independent Press Report
ATTICUS BOOKS
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FACT SHEET

Web site: atticusbooksonline.com

Contact Info:

Address: 13809 Oxmoor Place

Darnestown, MD 20874

Phone: (301) 525 - 8729

E-mail: Submissions - submissions@atticusbooks.net

General Questions - contact@atticusbooks.net

Distributors: BookMobile (Itasca Books)

Founded: 2010

Founder: Dan Cafaro

About Atticus Books: This D.C. metro-based publishing house was formed in order to serve authors, readers, and the “offbeat literary community.” Atticus Books strives to discover the untapped voices of distinct, and even unconventional writers whose works possess the mainstream appeal to intrigue the general reading public. Their chief goals are “to have [their] writers' work read, remembered and recognized among [their] peers and loyal customers,” and, “to produce and disseminate work that transcends literary circles and touches the wider culture... ”

What They Publish: Fiction in the form of novels, novellas and short story collections.

Average Print Run: 500 - 1,500 copies

Titles in Print: 14

Titles Per Year: 3 to 6

Submission Guidelines: “We gravitate to individuals who, if you nicked their skin, they would bleed words... We are partial to stories that resonate sweetly, bittersweetly, bitterly, tastefully, even tastelessly – as long as they provoke thought and awaken the ethereal senses.”

Reading Fee: None

Unsolicited Submissions: Yes

Simultaneous Submissions: No

Reporting Time: 3 to 6 months

Recent Publications:

2012 *Three Ways of the Saw: Stories* by Matt Mullins

2012 *Kino: A Novel* by Jürgen Fauth

2012 *The Law of Strings and Other Stories* by Steven Gillis

2012 *Apostle Islands: A Novel* by Tommy Zurhellen

2012 *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*: Nathan Leslie

WHY ATTICUS BOOKS

When it came time to choose an indie magazine or press with which to get better acquainted, I scoured my own book collection in hot pursuit of an independent press that I already loved but just didn't know it yet. The results of my search were surprisingly grim; independent publishers make up a very small portion of my personal library. Those that I did chose to investigate further seemed to have slowed activity significantly, had shoddy websites, or were no longer accepting unsolicited work. So I took to the vast and bountiful land of online book reviews, hoping to find a book from an independent publisher that seemed too intriguing to pass up.

This is how I discovered *The Law of Strings* by Steven Gillis and subsequently tracked down Atticus Books, an independent press that radiates authenticity, ambition, and an infectious passion for the written word. I was enchanted by founder Dan Cafaro's rousing publisher statement in which he writes, "I am filled with an impassioned respect and humble appreciation of words, particularly the words that fly over the transom, the words that require no human orchestration to find their rightful place on the pages of a book, the words that we publish."

Reading Cafaro's statement—as well as the equally spirited, all encompassing Atticus Books manifesto, "It's the goal of discovering an inventive mind and tapping far enough into it to reveal a treasure worth possessing." – I quickly developed a sense of trust and writerly camaraderie. After consuming Gillis' book, it's clear that the standards of innovation and "literature that transcends" are not taken lightly. These ideas are nourished and carried out to the last page.

INTERVIEW WITH ATTICUS BOOKS FOUNDER DAN CAFARO

René Cousineau: Before you started up Atticus Books, you were an independent bookstore owner. What prompted you to make the leap from selling to publishing?

Dan Cafaro: I've been a vagabond bookman for about 18 years now. I first learned the bookselling trade as a matter of survival, both creatively and professionally speaking. I left my first newspaper job (as a sportswriter with *The Record* in New Jersey) when I was 27 because my newlywed bride's job brought us to Pennsylvania. Out of sheer impulsiveness and utterly blind initiative, I decided to try my hand at entrepreneurship. As an undisciplined man of letters, I mostly wanted to follow my muse but I knew that I also needed to make a buck. Along the road to cultural enlightenment, I kept writing (freelance courthouse gigs, bad poetry, one-act plays, rambling essays) because it was all I really knew how to do.

Words, of course, are nothing but nourishment to writers, so I inevitably developed an insatiable appetite for books. Being outbid on an unprofitable used bookstore was what first prompted me to explore opening my own bookshop. A more sensible person would have taken one look at the financial books of the business for sale, crossed himself in gratitude for the appearance of a stooge with deeper pockets, and gone on to pursue gainful employment. I elected to thumb my crooked nose at reality and began acquiring used books in droves.

After experiencing firsthand how intrinsically rewarding but insanely hard it is to make a living hand-selling books, I returned to my editorial roots with an HR trade association. When the publisher asked if anyone on staff was interested in spearheading a books program, I leaped at the chance. Once I observed how the sausage got made from a technical and due diligence standpoint, I was on my way to understanding how to run a publishing operation. It was like falling head-over-loafers in love.

RC: It states many times over on the Atticus Web site what sorts of things you're looking for in a potential publication. After reading *The Law of Strings*, as well as all of the descriptions of your books, the stories you select appear to be diverse and innovative in their own ways. I was wondering, though, if there is any common thematic thread that connects the books you choose for publication. How did *The Law of Strings* match this sensibility?

DC: There are many reasons that I quickly scooped up this collection before another press claimed rightful co-ownership. Steve Gillis is a writer's writer with a magnanimous spirit and a bloodied lip. He's a magician with words and his narratives are fluid and unconventional. His approach to storytelling is both twisted and endearing. What I like most about his writing, I think, is that when you're immersed in the literature, it truly feels like the world has been turned upside down and he — ever the bohemian alchemist — is omnisciently present at your side to help you find your footing. And then he playfully shoves you off the ledge with nary a safety net in sight.

RC: In an interview with annarbor.com, Steven Gillis is asked why he didn't publish *The Law of Strings* through his own press, Dzanc. He answers that he wanted to avoid self-publishing and that, luckily, he received many offers upon the completion of his collection. Did you solicit Gillis for a submission? Do you ever solicit writers?

DC: As a person who bends rules after he breaks them, I very rarely solicit writers for fear that they may accept. In the case of Steve's book, he sent the manuscript unsolicited with a very personable and clever query. Unlike most manuscripts with which I sit on for several months, I immediately grabbed a spade and dug into his collection. A couple of weeks later I sent Steve a book contract. The rest is left for a jury of our peers to decide.

RC: Do you pay advances?

DC: Unfortunately for starving writers worldwide, no. This indie publishing environment, compounded by a dysfunctional book distribution system in which everyone gets an increasingly smaller piece of the pie crust, makes it extremely difficult to stay afloat. It's a credit to the deep, dark allure of literature's mistress that so many presses persevere. The intermittent cash flow alone is enough to make one wince at his own, personal fiscal cliff.

RC: Can you describe the process for a book from acceptance to publication?

DC: Once a book is accepted for publication, we create a delivery timeline and begin planning for its birth. If it's a boy, we paint the room hot pink and if it's a girl, we paint it sapphire blue. Without boring you to tears, I'll say it follows mostly the same rules of any creative project parameters. At Atticus, there's a Project Editor who is accountable for hitting deadlines and making sure the book gets into production after it has gone through edits and refinements. The Project Editor works directly with a team of skilled specialists, including the author, copyeditor, graphic designer, compositor (or typesetter), proofreader, marketer, publicist, and printer. At some small presses, the publisher does all or most of the heavy lifting because there is little to no budget to assign these tasks to others. At places like Atticus Books, we rely on professionals to concentrate on their areas of expertise because our publisher is a jack of all trades but a master of none.

RC: How closely do you work with the author throughout the editing process?

Specifically with *The Law of Strings*, did you have any influence over the titles or order of the stories?

DC: The original title of *The Law of Strings* was *Falling*. I suggested the title change to Steve because as much as I like the story, "Falling," it seemed too generic as a book title. *The Law of Strings* also serendipitously (it seems) worked out to be more thematically in tune with the whole quantum physics and cosmic law themes that Steve brilliantly threads throughout the collection.

Steve took care of the order of his universe, but on past books, I have suggested rearranging stories and in a few instances, I've even asked authors to consider drafting a different ending. I am very light-handed in my line editing so the greatest influence I can have in their work is bigger picture stuff.

Title, cover design (working hand-in-hand with the ultra-gifted designer Jamie Keenan), and marketing: those are my main areas of interest and contribution. We don't sign contracts unless we're either satisfied with the book's end or have worked it out. Once the book is in edit, I don't want there to be any surprises or disappointments for the author. Many of the individuals we sign are debut authors so I would much rather their first experience be magical rather than God-awful.

I think most publishers would agree that a good rapport with your author is critical. The entire process is collaborative so if you don't get along from the onset, then it becomes like a lousy Vegas marriage. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now that the lights are on and the booze has worn off...

RC: And how were the responsibilities divided between you and Steven in the marketing of *The Law of Strings*? What form of marketing gives you the most bang for your buck?

DC: Steve sent us a clean and glowing manuscript and we did our best to do the rest. Like all published Atticus authors, Steve also was responsible for making himself available for interviews, readings, book signings, and spreading the word through his

own channels.

I'm a big believer in doing a little bit of everything to advertise your book. As a press with a growing portfolio of quirky titles, our greatest challenge is to keep our backlist vibrant and visible while rotating our frontlist titles in the spotlight. No matter how much we do to bang the drum, the clatter of the major publishing houses invariably tempers the buzz on the street of a small press title. Our goal with each book is to attract new readers who learn about our tribe and want to join in the fun. We're all about grooming fiercely loyal and passionate small press advocates.

RC: What is the average print run?

DC: Our average first-print run is 500 to 1,500 copies because we operate in a hybrid print-on-demand environment. What that means is essentially we print as many copies as we think will eventually sell without inflating runs just to satisfy author egos or old-school expectations. Even our worst-selling titles experience second and third runs. With the playing field leveled (and economies of scale is no longer driving print decisions), it affords independent publishers like us to take a chance on and produce more titles. We also have the capacity to fulfill large orders from Barnes & Noble. But what excites us more is forming long-lasting relationships with independent booksellers and readers. These folks are the lifeblood of a battle-worn industry.

RC: Speaking of battles, I was intrigued by Atticus Books in part by the number of short story collections you choose to publish. In a market that seems to condemn story collections, what gives you the confidence to continue putting your time and investments into collections like *The Law of Strings*?

DC: I am not brazen enough to think that the story collections we produce will beat the odds. They only are worth the time and investment that we dedicate because we believe

in their artful purpose. We publish story collections mostly as a hat tip toward craftsman and as a service to readers who appreciate the form. Besides that, I have an eternal weakness for them.

RC: Recently, you have also started curating an online literary journal called *Atticus Review*. What are the differences you've encountered between running a small press and a journal? How do you find time to do both?

DC: Running a small press is a business and the decisions you make each day have an impact on everything from the number of titles you'll be able to produce next year to the number of employees and contractors you can afford to pay to keep the press humming.

Running a journal is like being the president of a fraternity. It is a unique honor. My number one priority is to not embarrass my brotherhood (and sisterhood). My second job, unwritten but most definitely required, is to buy at least one round of drinks at AWP.

When you're working on a journal, you don't count the minutes, nor consider it labor. I know that may sound syrupy, but it's true. Those who participate in literary journals (be they readers, writers or editors) do it because they respect their literary forefathers and they admire the writing efforts of their peers so much that they want to recognize them. Recognition is manna for writers. I started the journal because I want to give back something of cultural relevance to society. It helps too that I have a terrific staff that does most of the work: Editor-in-Chief, Katrina Gray, Managing Editor, Libby O'Neill, Fiction Editor, Jamie Iredell, Poetry Editor, Michael Meyerhofer and Mixed Media Editor, Matt Mullins.

Atticus Books is publishing a book about literary magazines next year, *Paper Dreams: Writers and Editors on the American Literary Magazine*. I accepted the proposal by Editor Travis Kurowski not because I thought it would make a bucket load of money

for Atticus Books; I took on the challenge because I am turned on by the thought of fulfilling a vision that salutes our literary heritage and features insider conversations about where we've been and where we're going.

RC: Are your guidelines for publishing short fiction in the journal any different from those you follow for publishing a book?

DC: Journal submissions are routed to different editors through our Submittable account, while book submissions are sent via e-mail to submissions@atticusbooks.net. We tend to be more open-minded to wildly inventive works for the journal.

While we enjoy unconventional narratives, our primary interest with books these days is to find novels that fall between the crevices of literary and commercial fiction.

RC: Having worked in the past for an exclusively online journal about mindful living, I was intrigued by the section of your Web site that details your environmental objectives. Have these goals been in place since the origin of Atticus Books? If not, how has the implementation of these goals changed the day-to-day operations of your press? Have you considered going as far as offering your books solely for e-readers?

DC: The environmental commitment has been in place since day one. It's not that hard to achieve, really, given all the options that printers offer, and just because you're publishing on recycled paper doesn't mean you've tossed profit margins to the wind.

I'm not of the mindset to offer our books solely for e-readers. I believe in the power of multiple methods of delivery and I'm too much of a glass half-full dinosaur to think that print is dead. It is alive and well, as is the state of literature. We are living in remarkable times. We're in the midst of a second Renaissance and we don't even know it.

REVIEW

The Law of Strings

by Steven Gillis

Review by René Cousineau

Steven Gillis' sometimes whimsical, often surreal, and always gorgeous collection of short stories opens with a quickie called, "What We Wonder When Not Sure," the story of a veteran something and a rookie something sharing a beer and discussing the undisclosed task at hand. Upon my first read of this odd, cryptic story I was left feeling not so sure, and so I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into. So I read it again, before moving on to the rest. And then I read it again. The story opens like this: "They gathered us all together, those of us who'd been here a while and those new to the game, and told us to have a look. 'See what you find,' they said, and sent us out." I decided not to beat myself up over my perceived inability to get what the abstract tale was throwing out, and pressed on, with some reservation, to see what I might find.

What I found in *The Law of Strings* was a cast of thoughtful, complex, and often desperate and lonesome characters living in a world eerily similar to our own. In Gillis' reality, however, the rules of physics lend themselves not just to the organic workings of the universe, but also to the aches and triumphs of the human heart. In Gillis' world, the rules are at one moment embraced, at another defied, and anything seems possible. The absurd reigns supreme – a weightless man courts a woman whose bone density is "several hundred times the mass of lead," a community becomes obsessed with a mysterious door that leads to nowhere, and one fateful night at a bar, a man meets himself.

The standout piece is "The Things We Cling to When Holding On," about a man who wakes one day to find himself weightless, floating about his bedroom and only able to ground himself by fashioning special, weighted shoes. At the same time, a young woman finds that her slight, delicate form has become so heavy that she can only

be moved by a hydraulic lift. Ardee, the Floating Man believes that love is what makes him float and that is what will cure Deena, the Immovable Girl. When the two come together Ardee questions whether his floating is just a “metaphysical accident,” or if it's faith. To this, Deena responds that “Faith is what we cling to when we don't know for sure.”

Weaved amongst the eccentricities of some of these stories, are a handful of more subdued, domestic narratives. Many of them deal with love – mostly from a man's perspective – the loss of it, the inability to find it, the surprise of it, and how to hold on to it. In the second story of the collection, “Falling,” a tightrope walker is caught more off-guard by the burgeoning feelings he has for his lover than by his inexplicable nerve for performing dangerous, long-distance jumps. In the title story, a woman demands her lover – Lange, the apprehensive narrator – to restrain her with string and rope as “a way to hold on.” She talks of how fleeting relationships have become when no one is willing to apply restraint, “If I'm to stay... it shouldn't be easy for me to go.” However, even the pieces in Gillis' collection that take place in more down-to-earth settings, with seemingly realistic characters and simple plots are rooted in the unconventional.

All of the stories, be they fanciful or practical, are true to life in some way and hinged on the themes of certainty versus uncertainty, the authenticity and value of love. The titles of each piece are plain and sometimes vague, a way of keeping the reader from making assumptions, from jumping to conclusions. Many of the stories seem to suggest that there simply are no conclusions, while maintaining that the journey is still invaluable in spite of that fact. In the title story, “The Law of Strings,” the main character, Lange, states that “Feelings are *chaotic inflation*, there's both a randomness and a reason for their existence.” This quote could easily be applied to the collection as a whole.

After hungrily consuming the entirety of *The Law of Strings*, I felt all at once gratified, but still slightly misled by the first story that seemed to stump me in a way that the others hadn't. While each piece has elements that enchant on the surface and

elude in a way that makes you want to read them over and over until you glean your own meaning from them, the opening tale remained a mystery to me. I couldn't crack it, and the frustration brought me back and back again. Then I considered the things I'd learned from the book as a whole, the ideas I'd been entreated to meditate upon – uncertainty, impermanence, the illusion of inherent meaning. I read “What We Wonder When Not Sure” one more time, and on my last attempt, paid special attention to each and every line, until I came across this one: "There are ways to get to the bottom,' I tell them, then reread the line and cross it out." Finally, I was satisfied.