

LEAPFROG PRESS

Publisher of Quality Fiction, Poetry and Non-Fiction



Gino Orlandi
Independent Press Report
December 2011

Leapfrog Press

Table of Contents

- ❖ About Leapfrog Press..... 3
- ❖ Why Leapfrog Press..... 5
- ❖ Interview with Editor, Lisa Graziano..... 6
- ❖ Review of *How to Stop Loving Someone*13

Fact Sheet

Website: www.leapfrogpress.com

Contact Information:

PO Box 2110
Teaticket, MA 02536
(774) 392-4384
leapfrog@leapfrogpress.com

Founded: Mid 90's by Marge Piercy and Ira Wood. It was purchased in 2007 by Lisa Graziano, current Editor-in-Chief.

Description of Press: Leapfrog Press was founded to seek out, publish, and aggressively market literary fiction, poetry, and nonfiction that big commercial presses would consider "midlist." These books, they say, are the heart and soul of literature. Their publishing plan includes hardcover and paperback originals as well as revised and repackaged trade paperbacks.

Focus: Leapfrog is particularly interested in work that is quirky, on the edge of avant garde, stories that fall just outside any known genre but are nevertheless literary. They want books that are illuminating and unsentimental, that uncover our complexities and take a hard look at the immensely difficult (and sometimes insanely funny) choices that we make in life, and how we deal with them. They publish mainly adult fiction, some children's fiction, and the occasional nonfiction.

Distribution: All trades, wholesale, university, and library accounts by Consortium Book Sales & Distribution. Leapfrog titles are also available through Ingram, Baker & Taylor, Koen, Brodart, Follett, and all major national and regional wholesalers.

Activity: About ten books per year.

Titles Available in Print: 48

Average print run: From 1,000-2,500 copies.

Submission: Send fiction electronically, anytime not between January 15 and May 1. Submit a query letter and a short sample in the body of an email. **No attachments unless asked to do so. These submissions will be automatically deleted.** Send to Jennifer Taylor, Acquisitions Editor, at acquisitions@leapfrogpress.com.

In addition to accepting unsolicited manuscripts, Leapfrog runs a fiction contest each year from January to May. It costs \$30.00 to enter, and first place receives a publishing contract. (Send work, a minimum of 22,000 words, to fictioncontest@leapfrogpress.com)

Upcoming Publications:

- *You're Married to Her* by Ira Wood, 2012
- *No One's Son* by Tewadros Fekaru, 2012

Why Leapfrog Press

I first came across Leapfrog Press through the Review Lab, when I read the first page of Michael Graziano's *The Divine Farce* and felt like I'd been slammed in the gut. Here was a book, a slim little thing, thinner than an artist's wallet, that in one page had me mesmerized by its imagery, cadence, conflict, and the sheer force of its prose. When I left the Lab and entered the subway, I couldn't put the book down. The thing was a riptide of good writing. A flood of good prose that's been sloshing around in my head ever since.

So when the time came to research indie presses, here I was with this little story just water-logged in my head. I took a closer look at Leapfrog Press. While reading their site, sifting through new novels such as *And Yet They Were Happy* by Helen Phillips and Connor's *How to Stop Loving Someone*, what I found was less an independent press and more a literary Justice League. "We fight for the midlist!" their battle cry rang. "The awesome and imaginative can't be overlooked!" I soon realized that the books they publish were ones that I not only love reading—a little bit quirky, but with real characters behind them—but ones I also wish I could *write*.

I asked Lisa Graziano, Managing Editor, for an interview and discovered about as sweet and passionate a person you could hope to find. The kind of editor you dream up when talking about the future books: who loves literature with every breath and blood cell, but believes it to be hard work, the most important work, which she'll fight for all she can. I imagine her wearing a cape most days, swooping around the office.

So that's why Leapfrog. It's a small press, but a fierce thing, cropping up even on the shelves of Barnes & Noble. Their editors slog through a ton of manuscripts to find the great books that they publish, and they really do publish great books. That's the biggest selling point. Often, you can find publishers who are passionate, and just as often you can find some with good taste, but it's rare to find someone who has both, plus the means to support their authors. I will definitely (hopefully) be sending my first manuscript to this press. It is certainly one to be proud of.

Interview

Lisa Graziano
Leapfrog Press editor-in-chief
(Conducted via email, December 2011)

Gino Orlandi: Could you tell me the story of how Leapfrog Press got started? What keeps it (and you) going in today's low-profit book market?

Lisa Graziano: Leapfrog was started in the mid-90s by writers Ira Wood and Marge Piercy. At that time the Internet wasn't so important, and the idea of running a literary press outside of New York City or one of a handful of other major cities was quite daring. Cape Cod was considered by the literary world to be isolated from the New York agents and hot new writers.

Leapfrog not only survived out here on the ends of the earth, but thrived on the publication of authors whose books were overlooked by the big NY presses. Some of those authors had had wide success with previous books, but were considered passé by the big commercial publishing houses, even quite early in their careers.

We bought Leapfrog in 2007, and have expanded the list, but we've maintained our niche of taking on literary titles that are not mainstream enough for bigger presses. With the Internet, publishing companies can relocate pretty much anywhere and not be isolated.

As for what keeps us going, I'd say it's a certain kind of insanity, the same insanity that led us to take over Leapfrog in the first place, at the worse possible economic time. We plug along from season to season, always excited about our upcoming titles, eagerly looking for the next season's manuscripts, supporting our backlist authors as much as we can, and trying not to think too hard about the economics of publishing.

GO: Where does the majority of your funding come from? And how do those funds get allocated—into marketing, publishing, distribution, etc.—when printing a new book?

LG: Like most small presses that aren't nonprofits, we have no real source of funding. Book sales bring in some, but not much compared to the cost of producing those books. One thing I have learned about publishing is that small-press books are heavily subsidized. Most of the retail price paid by a reader goes to the middlemen along the way, including the bookstore. Very little trickles down to the publisher, and a trivial amount ever reaches the author.

We all know that independent bookstores are suffering, so clearly the huge cut (larger than anyone else's) the bookstore gets is not enough. So you can imagine the tiny bit that reaches the publisher, which has fronted all the production costs, is not remotely enough. Our authors spend years, often decades, creating their works, and then a great deal of time, often at great expense, to promote the book once it's published. "Funding" to me covers more than cash. We are funded by the Leapfrog people who work full-time hours but take no pay from Leapfrog, and by the authors who put so much hard work and time into their writing.

As for allocation of funds, certain things are set by our distributor and certain things are dependent on the specific book and the author. A huge proportion of a book's sale price goes to distribution, through our distributor. That includes a lot of marketing as well. Some aspects of book production, such as cover design, have set costs, and other aspects depend on the page count of the book. Publishers think long and hard before taking a large book, because that book has to sell many more copies to keep us afloat. Our longer books cost 4-5 times more than our shortest books to produce. Typesetting and printing are the obvious per-page costs, but a galley review mailing of a 500-page book can cost a small fortune in postage.

GO: What is the role of the author in marketing? How much "leg work" is expected on the author's end?

LG: To be blunt, only the author can sell books. The publisher can try for reviews, which may sell some copies. Our publicist works directly with our authors and with Leapfrog on

getting reviews and scheduling book events and interviews. But the burden is almost entirely on the author. Nobody at Leapfrog can go on tour for an author. I cannot sign copies for adoring fans in a bookstore. Readers want to know about the author—they have no curiosity about the publisher of a book. Only the author can get out there and actively sell books, though with the full support of our publicist.

GO: Speaking of new books, I just had the pleasure of finishing Joan Connor's *How to Stop Loving Someone*, the recent winner of the 2010 Leapfrog Fiction Contest. What first captivated me was the rich, dynamic language, particularly in stories like "Men in Brown" and "Tide Walk", where the sentences just unwind off the page and wring you by the aorta. Could you tell me what the process was like for accepting this manuscript? What caught your attention about it, and what catches your attention in manuscripts generally?

LG: This was an unusual one. We are most often grabbed by truly creative art when we go through our contest manuscripts. We receive 400-600 manuscripts during our annual fiction contest. Some just pop out. "How to Stop Loving Someone" grabbed me with the first sentence of the first story: "This is how bad it's gotten: I dream about the U.P.S. man."

Oddly enough, humor is a rare thing to find in manuscripts. I was almost rolling on the floor reading that first story, "Men in Brown." But it didn't strike me as "literary" right away. I'd never read anything of such quality in the use of language that was also so ordinary and down-to-earth and so darn funny. I didn't know what to think of it. I even sent that story on to another Leapfrog judge with the question "Is this really as good as I think it is, or am I just taken in by the humor?"

As I read more stories in the collection, I saw how varied Joan's abilities were, and the brilliance of her use of language, from story to story. Joan has such skill with humor. She uses many forms of humor, from situational comedy to some very clever wordplay. That opening story was such a breeze to read, so light and delightful, that only the most skilled language artist could have pulled it off. At the same time, the somber stories have a quite different effect. Your phrase "wring you by the aorta" is wonderful. Several of those stories do just that.

It is easy to weed out manuscripts that are overwritten; that are centered on a theme that we see over and over, and do not present it in a new way; that are simply poorly written; or that use a common technique employed by inexperienced writers, which is try to shock the reader with a horribly brutal and/or sexual opening scene. Far from shocking, such openings elicit the too-familiar “ho hum, we’ve seen a hundred of these this month,” reaction. We really look for writing that is different, which means writers who know what’s out there and what’s been done too many times already, writers who are starting at the far edge of the art and trying to advance it.

GO: *How to Stop Loving Someone* received a stellar review from Kirkus. How do you go about getting a book reviewed?

LG: There is no guarantee that any book will be reviewed by a trade journal such as Kirkus, or by any newspaper or magazine. We send out typically 70-150 galleys about 6 months out from the publication date. Galleys are somewhat rough versions of the book; they may still have typos, the spine and back cover is not yet designed, and they are printed digitally on thin paper stock. Six weeks to two months out from pub date, we send another round of review copies, called ARCs, to the shorter-lead media: papers, magazines, radio shows, online review media, etc.

There’s no set percentage of review copies out of total copies printed. We send the same range of review copies out for a book that has a 1000-copy print run and a book that has a 2500-copy print run.

GO: Assuming that, say, an author's manuscript is simultaneously accepted by both Leapfrog Press and Random House, what would an author gain by choosing Leapfrog over a big commercial press?

LG: Now that is a tough one. I’m not sure what I would do if that happened to me. What a small press offers that Random House doesn’t is small-company dedication to the book’s production and marketing, at every stage in the process; and a dedication to keeping the

book in print, whatever the sales numbers. We will not pull a book and remainder it after 3 months or 6 months because it isn't a blockbuster. Titles from Leapfrog's first year are still in print, and still selling here and there.

The big presses have enormous budgets, yes, and that is something for an author to consider. But that budget is unlikely to be directed at a new or obscure writer. And regardless of the size of the press, the author is expected to be the one to sell his or her book. That does not change when an author is picked up by Random House.

GO: What is the editorial process like for a new manuscript? Are authors involved in the entire process, from revising to marketing to distribution, or are they kept on the outside?

LG: It is very important that authors are active in the entire process. I have not worked with an author yet who is not excited to be involved in the cover design, who does not want a say in the inside design (the typesetting), who does not want to be part of the editing team. This is their baby, and they need to be involved.

Indeed, the authors work very hard throughout the process, especially during the many proofreading stages. Authors are also key in the publicity and marketing of a book. Our authors fill out a questionnaire before we offer a contract for the book. We do not turn down a manuscript if an author doesn't have friends in high places, but we do need to know what the author has in mind for getting the book out into the world. Every author has ideas on who would be most interested in reviewing this book, or interested in doing an interview, or hosting an event. We incorporate those ideas, and the author's availability for travel, into our marketing plan. All this is done 10 or more months before publication date. We are working on that right now, in fact, for our four fall 2012 titles.

GO: How has the prevalence of e-books affected Leapfrog in terms of its readership, financial budgets, etc.?

LG: Very little, with that little being positive. Certain kinds of books, we find, sell very well as e-books. These tend to be the more mainstream titles, those approaching a genre. The

esoteric literary titles, the true literary art, do not sell much at all as e-books. Once a book is produced for printing, it's inexpensive to also convert to e-book forms. This is done through our distributor, and we now automatically put out all our books in every available e-book format. Right now, about five percent of our total book sales are e-book sales.

GO: What are some of the worst mistakes that you see in unsolicited manuscripts? What will immediately turn you off?

LG: The two biggest mistakes a beginning writer tends to make are 1) not reading enough and 2) not writing enough. When someone submits a "first novel" that is expertly written and grabs our attention, we know this person has been writing for years and years, possibly for decades, writing novel upon novel, stories, essays, and shoving all those manuscripts into the proverbial drawer, and starting over on the next one. One author has 20 novels stashed away that will never be seen. It took him 20 years of hard work to perfect both his craft and his talent and produce the little novel that Leapfrog published—as brilliant and imaginative a piece of writing as anything you could find.

We can usually tell when a submission is a true "first work," and we can tell when a writer is not a reader. One of our recent newsletters had a short article called "Spare the Reproductive Anatomy—and Read the Slush Pile." Openings intended as shockers to grab the editor's attention will invariably have the opposite effect. A writer who wants the best education in novel-writing would do well to intern as an acquisitions editor at a small press. I can't begin to describe how much I have learned from reading submissions and contest entries. Themes that may seem terribly interesting and creative are often revealed as the most humdrum of all.

One other mistake that some people make is to equate being published with being a writer. A writer's goal is to write. Getting published cannot be the reason behind it all. It's a wonderful goal, but it can't take the place of writing for the sake of writing.

I have worked, outside of Leapfrog, with a number of beginning writers. I am often impressed by the quality of their writing and their dedication to the stories they are telling.

At the same time, many beginners think that once they've got the story on paper, it's time to send it to a publisher. Again, the quality of writing that most small presses look for won't be found in anyone's first attempt or even 10th attempt.

GO: Do you have any closing advice for emerging writers?

LG: Read. Read, read, read, read. All the time. Read the classics. Read translations. Read the biggest variety possible. Read a hundred books a year for 20 years. And write as if you can't live unless you do. Write novels, stories, memoirs, essays, opinion pieces, anything; put each one aside and write another, and another. You'll hone your craft pretty quickly if you work hard enough. Talent takes more time. I like to say that talent is learned, not taught. A good writing class will teach you a great deal of craft. It will not teach you any talent. Talent is gained over years of practice—reading and writing.

Before I became a publisher, I spent a lot of time at sea. We sailors have a saying for students: your 2nd thousand star fixes (celestial navigation) will be better than your first thousand.

How to Stop Loving Someone

Joan Connor

Leapfrog Press

ISBN: 978-1-935248-20-0

205 pages

\$15.95 paperback

If there's anyone out there who believes that language has gone stale, that it can't do new things, that it no longer possesses the vibrancy or verve to swoon and surprise, well, then, Joan Connor is ready to prove you wrong. In her newest short story collection, *How to Stop Loving Someone* (winner of the 2010 Leapfrog Fiction Contest), Connor unleashes language like defibrillator shockwaves, arousing and vibrating the heart. Befitting, given her subject matter: stories all about love's losses and disappointments, its loneliness and false expectations, in which her characters cling desperately to the idea that love, despite its many oddities, is always worth the struggle. Whether sharp-witted and punchy as in "Men in Brown" and "The Landmark Hotel", or slow-painted whorls as in "Tide Walk" and "Halfbaby," Connor's writing manages to be as richly dynamic as her central theme. "What does love feel like?" the book seems to ask, over and over. And with each cutting verb and pulsating image, Connor confidently answers, "Like this."

In *How to Stop Loving Someone*, characters find, seek, lose, and rediscover love. Sometimes, it's disappointing. In "What It Is," for example, two characters plan an affair for months, fantasizing and building it up, only to have their expectations squashed when the moment actually happens. At other times, these stories are funny and sweet. In "Men in Brown," the narrator, Kristina—a self-diagnosed "agoraphobic claustrophobe"—falls in love with her U.P.S. guy, and orders random objects every week just to see him: "extendible fan blade dusters (I do not have a fan), silver serving spoons (I do not have dinner parties)," etc. Still other stories hit darker, more melancholic notes. "Aground" is a brooding storm of violence and lust, in which a young man crashes his boat onto a hidden sandbar and takes shelter in a house where a woman—rhythmically chopping a cleaver—gives insight into her dark past, in which she murdered her husband for sexually abusing their daughter. The young man sees the daughter, and feels the same prurient desire.

Full of idiosyncrasy, complexity, and punny one-liners, Connor's collection is colored by the young and old, the male and female, the poignant and funny and cynically-acerbic.

What strings them all together—from lavish imagery to snappy prose, from secluded islands to plain-brown suburbs—is their centralized theme of love. It defines our lives, rolls beneath the surface like a driving current, washing us away in many directions. And Conner’s book maps them all. Whether it’s a writer drinking himself depressed because of the wife that left him, or a girl finding affection in an unexpected stranger, these stories paint characters overwhelmed by the waves of love. Caught in its turbulence, they have no choice but to be swept away. Yet somehow they endure, bringing truth to the title story’s closing line that captures the heart of this book—“The cure for love is lobotomy or this:” to fall in love again.

In order to capture the array of emotions, Conner employs language and metaphor as dynamic and multifarious as her topic. At times, her stories reach poetic heights. For instance, in “Men in Brown, here’s how she describes the haunting thought of a woman at night: “In the hypnagogic dusk, the oneiric purple evenings of late fall, she glimmered over the silage, like summer’s last firefly, a fleeting thought.” Or in “Tide Walk,” she describes a woman’s love for her son as “rising forever like a blue and rimless bowl to contain the sky.” Her work is full of these little flourishes, vivid yet delicate. Then just as quickly, Conner will catapult out of it with something light and punchy: “Night didn’t fall; it fucking plummeted.” As a result, the book keeps you on your toes, stays active and engaging. Just like love.

Conner’s pacing in this collection is similarly diverse. Sometimes, they will be slow and meditative as in “Tide Walk” and “Halfbaby.” At other times, they will have a galloping momentum, a whip in their giddy-up. “Men in Brown,” for instance, is full of snappy, fast-paced dialogue, as in the moment when Kristina’s boyfriend Walter breaks up with her:

It went along fine until he dumped me.
 “I can’t see you any more.”
 “Can you see me any less?”
 “I’m serious.”
 “About whom?”
 “I’ve met someone.”
 “Where?”
 “She’s a model. A model and a psychiatrist.”
 This was unlikely. “Where did you say you met?”
 “I didn’t.”

“You didn’t meet.”

“I didn’t say.”

This went on for a while.

As you can see, Connor doesn’t often waste beats in her prose. Rather, her scenes ripcord themselves ahead, catch wind and fly at full-speed. These are not fluffy stories. They are wild rides—funny and sad, poetic and visceral—and often from one sentence to next.

Though fresh, lively, and slightly quirky on occasion, these stories are also best in small doses. Like sweet crème brûlée or rich moscato wine, too much in one sitting overpowers your palate. The beauty of her language is best kept fresh, a digestif after a heavier meal. Otherwise, it can lose its punch. But even so, *How to Stop Loving Someone* is a reminder that literature can still impress, that language really has no limits. It is a book that will be hard to stop loving any time soon.