



## **Small Press Values**

**Interview with  
Kent Watson, Executive Director, Small Press Distribution**

**For podcast release  
Monday, February 26, 2024**

KENNEALLY: Founded in 1969 in the San Francisco Bay Area, Small Press Distribution is the nation's only exclusively literary nonprofit book distributor serving small, independent literary publishers. In 2023, SPD presses and their authors were honored with the PEN Award for poetry in translation and the National Jewish Book Award in poetry. In 2022, John Keene's *Punks*, from indie poetry publisher The Song Cave, won the 2022 National Book Award in poetry.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Small Press Distribution connects underrepresented literary communities to the marketplace of the commons. Its business model allows SPD to take risks on books by new or marginalized writers, enabling work to develop an audience and to gain recognition.

SPD executive director Kent Watson joins me now from outside Portland, Oregon, to explain why you should read a book from SPD. Welcome to Velocity of Content, Kent.

WATSON: Hi, Chris. Thanks for having me on the show.

KENNEALLY: Delighted to have a chance to talk with you and to learn more about Small Press Distribution. We want to offer congratulations. You've had success recently with a fundraising campaign for your reorganization. How much money was raised, and what will this investment allow SPD to do?

WATSON: So we raised over \$111,000, and the campaign was started to get us on new footing, to put us into a 21<sup>st</sup>-century platform. When I entered the company, as I jokingly say, it was about 1992 with internet. We hadn't gotten into print on demand. We hadn't gotten into ebooks and audiobooks. We had a very dark, dank warehouse in Berkeley, California, with a little less than 300,000 books.

So we started this campaign, raised the money, and I'm happy to say two weeks ago, we have completely moved out of the Berkeley warehouse. We moved 300,000 books. We



moved half of those books to an Ingram facility in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. The other half of the books went to Publishers Storage and Shipping outside of Ypsilanti, Michigan. This new way of our operating gets us out of these fixed-cost expenses and the difficulties of having a remote West Coast distribution center. Both environmentally and economically, we were paying large sums for rent and utilities. With this new way of doing business, we move from a fixed cost to a flexible cost, where we do our pick each day and we tell Ingram what to pick, pack, and ship, and we tell Publishers Storage and Shipping what to pick, pack, and ship. That's where we really used that \$111,000.

This was a difficult, difficult process – an antiquated warehouse, leaky roof, no loading dock. Our team had to take 120 pallets of books down a 200-foot driveway into small trucks and get them loaded up and taken away from there. So it was a difficult process.

We're starting a new campaign that'll actually launch soon, and the new campaign will help us utilize those funds to get started on ebooks, audiobooks, and finally, really put a push towards print on demand. In this new campaign, we're hoping to raise \$75,000.

**KENNEALLY:** Kent Watson, describe the small press values that drive your mission at Small Press Distribution.

**WATSON:** What we do is unlike any other distributor. We don't have our presses come into the system by having to prove that they have such and such sales or such and such titles. A lot of large distributors require a certain outlay of not only the amount of titles that they have, but the amount of money that they generate each year to even get into distribution, which seems kind of crazy. You have to get distribution to get distribution. It seems a little nuts.

What we do – we operate as a nonprofit 501(c)(3), so we are mission-based. We do a lot of literary fiction, literary nonfiction. Most of our books are based around poetry. We do some art criticism and that sort of thing. We also – inside of who we work with, with our publishers and their authors, 60% of our bestselling titles come from people of color. 35% of our bestselling titles come from LGBTQ+ authors. And 75% of our bestselling titles come from women-identified authors. So we're really here to help the marketplace equalize and allow everyone to have a voice in the community.

**KENNEALLY:** What services does SPD offer to independent publishers?

**WATSON:** We offer quite a few things. In part of distribution, we move metadata out into the entire marketplace. I actually signed a deal six months or so ago with OCLC, and we're now moving our metadata out to 30,000 libraries across the world. Metadata fuels the marketplace where people can find the books to order, that sort of thing. So we do that.



We also get EDI information. We service Barnes & Noble, Baker & Taylor, Ingram – the entire marketplace from all of our feeds from there. So we provide those services.

We also give our presses a place to house their books inside of a website. People can order directly from us through that website. We also do things like we host many events. The Bay Area Book Festival we're part of. Litquake we're part of. We go to various regional bookseller shows throughout the country. We try to participate and showcase our authors – our presses' authors inside of things. We just all returned from AWP two weeks ago.

KENNEALLY: Who are SPD's customers in the bookselling community, Kent Watson?

WATSON: In the bookselling community, it's everyone that's in the marketplace. So it's individuals that come to us and want to order books. It is the larger chains. It is our strong, healthy independent bookstores. It's the academic bookstores that are looking for adoptions. So really anyone that's looking for a book from one of our presses can find it through us.

KENNEALLY: And you've given us an idea already, Kent Watson, of the really diverse literary world that SPD publishers and authors represent. Why do you think these books are so important for booksellers and for the culture at large?

WATSON: Listen, what we do is we really bring diversity to a bookstore. We bring diversity to the marketplace. That's really our strength. Again, we don't create any of these thresholds that people have to jump over to get distribution. And with our new model and what we can do especially with print on demand, we can create an even lower threshold of financial dollars to get in the business.

Say, for instance, a small press wants to start up, and they have the funds to do the editorial work and the design work and the marketing and publicity, but they don't want to do a big outlay of cash for the printing. They can come, they can work with us, we can do print on demand, and in a very short time, we can get those books out and get them out in the marketplace. As that book or those books grow, we can facilitate that. We can print in 16 different countries. We can move books worldwide. We can eliminate the hassle of worrying about inventory.

KENNEALLY: You've worked in independent publishing for many years, Kent Watson. Is it the best of times, is it the worst of times, or maybe a bit of both?

WATSON: You know, I always think independent publishing's strong and thriving, and I always will. Independent publishers mean so much to this world. They bring so much diversity. They bring so much strength. For instance, you mentioned that our publishers



that we work with have had translation awards from PEN Awards. They have Lambda Awards, two National Book Awards. These are presses that are strong, and they're healthy, and they're growing, and bring so much interesting, lovely reading to the world.

KENNEALLY: There's so many challenges, though, to get people to read these days. That's harder than ever. That's probably the biggest hurdle that these independent publishers have to get over.

WATSON: Yeah. I mean, what we do inside of SPD is we help with our marketing and our publicity, but we also rely on our presses to really do their own marketing and publicity. Our presses are always striving to get more reviews, to get into any kind of award system they can, to get the word out as much as they can. That's always going to be a constant struggle. But that's a constant struggle not only for independent presses, but for the bigger presses at the same time – the readership, finding those readers. But what we want to do is feed that marketplace. If someone wants that book, if they're interested in that, they find that information, we want to get those books to them.

KENNEALLY: Kent Watson, executive director of Small Press Distribution, thanks so much for joining me today.

WATSON: Thanks so much, Chris, for having me. Appreciate it.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me.

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