

The Poetry Chapbook

Organizing Your First Book Of
Poetry

Local Gems Press

The Poetry Chapbook

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What is a Chapbook?

Chapbooks have become exceedingly popular on the poetry scene. While in recent years they have become common place amongst experienced poets and poetry fans, many newcomers to the poetry scene have never heard the term before and this generates curiosity.

The dictionary definition of a chapbook is:

“a small book or pamphlet containing poems, stories, ballads or religious tracts.”

But in the poetry world a chapbook is simply known as a tiny book of poetry—not

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quite the length of a full-poetry collection, but enough for a reader to get an understanding of a poet's work. They come in various shapes and sizes (though never quite as big as a full length collection) and are usually the first piece of merchandise a poet has to offer for sale in the early stages of their career.

Why a Chapbook?

Many poets have found that a chapbook is a great solution for getting their work to a wider audience. Once poets have read consistently at open-mics or gotten a few poems published in local publications people start to inquire about where they can get a hold of more of their work—and a chapbook is easy and inexpensive to produce.

Some poets put a chapbook together just for the sake of distributing them as gifts to their family and friends—some poets have even started handing out chapbooks of their own poetry as wedding favors for their

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guests—others distribute them around the holidays. While other poets trying to tour from reading to reading find the income from selling their chapbook to help fund their activities.

Chapbooks tend to require a lot less effort than putting together a full-length collection of poetry—but at the same time, a chapbook has many of the same benefits of a full-length collection such as earning money, distributing poetry, and even making the statement that this poet is serious.

More than that, chapbooks can be produced in a variety of ways; while many traditional poetry publishers offer chapbook contests or hold open submissions for them, to be professionally produced, some authors

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find alternative methods of producing their chapbooks, even making them at home!

A typical chapbook sells anywhere from \$5, \$10 or even \$12 a copy depending on length and professional quality.

Organizing Your Chapbook

Poetry chapbooks, like poetry collections are typically arranged in a similar fashion with many of the same components:

The introduction:

Many times written by the author themselves, though occasionally written by another poet of note. This normally addresses the readership, giving some kind of extra information about what they are about to read. Either the journey behind the poems, or something factual about the collection at hand. Some authors even turn

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this section into a group of thank yous to various people who have helped them along the way, though that is something that normally goes in a dedication if it is short enough.

The poems:

A full length poetry manuscript is anywhere from 70-130 pages of poetry. A chapbook can be anywhere from 20 or 30 pages up to 60 or 70 pages. But the average length of a chapbook falls somewhere between 40 and 60 page and usually contains 30 poems or less. (Depending on the length of the poems.)

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The order of the poems is entirely up to the poet—many find they like to string the poems together in a way that has significance. Which brings up a personal point when it comes to creating a chapbook:

To theme or not to theme?

Poetry has always been a tricky art form in terms of its appeal to the general public. One thing that is widely suggested by all of the successful publishers is gathering all your poems together by a theme. Cooking, sports, martial arts, school, a particular hobby or interest.

A lot of poets tend to reject this idea on impulse—many claim “I don’t write to a specific theme, I tend to write about more

diverse topics than that,” quite so—many of the most famous poets in history wrote a great deal more than we have seen in our books in the classroom, or the collections on our nightstand. But of course we haven’t seen them all—and likely all of ours probably won’t be seen.

Anthologies these days tend to take submissions based on particular topics which they find easier to market and poets are seeing similar results by turning out collections and chapbooks of poetry about particular and sometimes popular things. It might be true that poets in general write about many different topics. But if one separates themselves from their writing for a little while and returned to it they might find several or more poems about a

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particular topic that happened to be on their mind. Some poets tend to come back to certain topics over and over from different angles. And some poets would be surprised to find common threads running between vastly different poems they have written.

Some publishers would argue that using a theme for poetry books also helps the reader decide if this book is for them—marketing, as it is very rare that readers will seek out a book by a beginning poet who has no reputation for themselves yet based on their name alone.

We seek out poets like Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert Frost or Walt Whitman in the bookstore because those poets have long standing reputations. But who runs to a book launch or a store to seek out “The

Collected Works of George NewPoet?" Not very many.

However, chapbooks do earn a bit more leniency in this department because in some cases chapbooks are used simply to introduce a budding fanbase or even an already existing but small (family) fanbase to a poet's work. So the choice about them is a personal one that each poet will ultimately have to weight the pros and cons with and decide for themselves what works best for them.

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Bio:

Since the chapbook is all about introducing someone to your work, no chapbook is complete without the biography at the back of the book. Written in the 3rd person, the bio here can be larger than the bios you are asked for in journals and anthologies which typically are limited to only 3-4 lines. Here you have a page to tell the readers about you and about your poetry. If you have other hobbies feel free to mention it, but try to keep the

information to your poetry which is what the readers are interested in here.

Blurbs? Description?

One of the bigger dilemmas a lot of chapbook authors face is what goes on the back cover of the book! The front cover is usually far easier to figure out—a photo, a piece of art, something custom made, or something the author painted, drew, or a picture they took themselves. But on the back, there are a lot of different theories.

For full length poetry collections it is custom for there to be blurbs on the back,

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written by fellow poets or poetry professors endorsing the collection and talking about the poet's writing. While some people go through this effort for their chapbooks it is not always necessary. Some are content with simply a description of the book itself, others just include another piece of art, some leave it blank. (I personally would avoid this last one.)

If blurbs are easy to come by and you are already part of a thriving poetry community they can be a good way to sell a chapbook—especially if a popular host or two who may have featured you will write a quick little statement about your poetry (it doesn't even have to be specifically about the poems in the book, although that helps, but they can just offer a general

commentary on you as a poet—from their memories of your feature.) It all depends on how much time and effort you want to spend on the chapbook and where are intending it to go. There is no one right way to do it.

Previously published poems?

Have any of the poems in the chapbook appeared in journals or anthologies or are they all original work? If they have appeared in print previously, it is customary to acknowledge the publications in which they appeared first (in some cases this is even legally obligated in the contracts you may have received for publishing your

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poetry.) Some authors do this on a separate page in the beginning or the back of the books sometimes referred to as an acknowledgment page—others tend to make a little footnote at the bottom of the poem on the page in which the poems appear—this again is a personal choice. However, the recognition of previous places the poems have appeared is customary and considered extremely rude (if not also a breach of legal contract) to overlook.

Distributing Your Chapbook

Although poetry has never been the best-selling medium of any publisher, there are still many exciting and creative ways to market or distribute your chapbook. But as with everything, it depends on what the individual author is intending to do. Some poets want to use their chapbooks to make money, others want to distribute it to as many people as possible, others want both. Below are a few ways to get your chapbook out there and (hopefully) make a few bucks doing it.

1: Readings

This one goes without saying. If you are active in a local poetry scene and attend open-mic nights and have the occasional reading as the featured poet, these are your golden opportunities to spread your work around. After hearing you read, some of the attendees will often inquire if you have a book or a chapbook (if this hadn't been made clear already) and assuming a reading is well attended, if you are a featured reader you can almost always count on at least a couple of people approaching you about your book. Make sure you always have at least a few on you for these occasions.

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2: Family and Friends

Some authors of chapbooks find that their supply tends to run out almost immediately before they even get to book launches or live readings. Some authors tend to get too few copies of their chapbook made and find that they have very few or none left by the time their family gets through! Your mother will tell your aunt who will tell your second-cousin who will tell your grandparents, so on and so forth. While poetry books might be popular on the poetry scene—in regular life for most people knowing someone who produced a book, even a small book is a big deal! People often underestimate how many

friends and family will want to get a hold of your book.

3: Book Launch

This is a great way not only to move a lot of your books but to make you feel like a star for a day. Figuring out a good location can be tricky—a VFW hall, a community room at a church or library (though many libraries do not allow the selling of books,) getting your alma matter to help you host an event is a possibility—but there are usually restaurants with private rooms available if you are willing to sink a few dollars into this—other times places like yoga centers or art galleries are willing to host events such as this (for a few

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dollar cover charge to the guests perhaps) or maybe just fold the book launch into a regular reading you already attend. But book launches are rare and special events that normally will get your friends, family and poetry fans out to the same place to hear you read, pick up their copies and get you to sign their books. There is nothing quite like a book launching event.

4: Special Events

What is your poetry book about? This is where the theme benefit comes in. If you wrote a poetry book about something specific, say, breast cancer, or autism—are there any events near you focusing on these topics? If so, reach out to them! I have

known many authors who have managed to work their way into fundraisers/benefits or awareness events for various topics using their chapbooks. Others who elected to write about their home towns or specific areas dear to them became something close to a town hero for a little while at their town's cultural days. It's all about finding where your work fits best and then making that fit happen!

5: Tables

Many art and music festivals seek out vendors, many swap meets, church fairs and fireman's bazaars are always putting out calls for tables—and they are usually pretty cheap. Some authors, especially if

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they are local to a specific area like to give these tables a try, and many have been surprised by the results. Poetry is a very in-person business—and people walking by a table with an author sitting there, ready to sign—could find it hard to refuse!

6: Local Bookstores

One could write a textbook about the difficulty of poetry books getting into the big book retailers like Barnes and Nobles without some kind of established university connection—but local books stores are usually willing to work with local (or even non-local) authors! Some of these places are a little more friendly than others, and some might take the lion's share of your

profit, but in many cases something can be worked out.

7: Giveaways

Most people like getting things for free. Giveaways are a great way to generate excitement for a new book. One can be hosted on social media, from an author blog, or website, or even just with word of mouth. Say a poet were to give away 3 copies of their book, but 100 people entered the give away—odds are, some of the people who didn't win will want the book anyway and buy it!

Final Thoughts

At the end of the day putting together a poetry chapbook is a different experience for every poet. While there are some general commonalities, none of them (other than length) should be taken as hard and fast rules but rather as helpful guidelines. Poetry is an art form and as such, exceedingly personal and unique from poet to poet. The experience should be fun, enlightening and exciting. But the most important thing is to be true to yourself.

Are you in it for making a few bucks? Are you in it just to share your work with those you care about? Is a career as a touring poet something you think might

legitimately be in the cards for you? Or is this just a fulfilling hobby you want to take as far as you can in your off-hours? Only you know the answer.

But while live readings are amazing, energy-filled and empowering, a book is something special. A book is the physical manifestation and culmination of your work—holding the physical, printed, bound copy of the poems you yourself have creates is a feeling like no other—a feeling that nothing can take away from you. And it is a feeling that all poets, or anyone who is a creator, deserves.

About the Author

Local Gems Press is a Long Island based small press focusing in local poetry publications, anthologies, collections and yes, chapbooks. They have been in business since 2010 and published over 1000 poets' work in their numerous publications.

Local Gems Press has seen up close the positive effect that poetry can have on a community and works hard to see poetry publications and readings find their way to as many places as possible.

www.localgemspetrypress.com



Local Gems Poetry Press is a small Long Island based poetry press dedicated to spreading poetry through performance and the written word. Local Gems believes that poetry is the voice of the people, and as the sister organization of the Bards Initiative, believes that poetry can be used to make a difference.

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