

## Niche Presses Gained in 2021

Five indie presses played to their strengths and found growth last year

In our final roundup of how independent publishers fared in 2021, four West Coast presses and one in Maine reported that they were able to increase sales last year by honing their distinctive identities. And while they are gearing up to deal with paper shortages and other supply chain problems, they expect 2022 to be another good year.

Tom Helleberg, publisher at Seattle-based Mountaineers Books, said the press has had several good years and that he is optimistic about the one ahead. “Mountaineers Books sits right at the intersection of book publishing and the outdoor industry, so we have been the dual beneficiary of strong growth in both areas,” he explained. Sales were up 26% last year over 2020, and “backlist and frontlist blew through expectations.”

Mountaineers Books offers trail and adventure guidebooks, as well as educational books on topics including wilderness first aid and avalanche preparedness. “*Campfire Stories*, an edited collection about the parks by Ilyssa Kyu and Dave Kyu, was far and away our best seller for the year,” Helleberg said.

Some of the press’s recent success was driven by acquisitions. In 2019, Mountaineers Books acquired Green Trails Maps in a “complicated distribution partnership,” Helleberg noted, and in 2020, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy came on as a distribution partner too. “ATC opens up a lot of Southeast and East Coast accounts where we might not be on the radar,” he added. These moves plus a long-standing partnership with the Colorado Mountain Club mean Mountaineers Books has “all of the long-trail guides in-house. It’s been a little baby juggernaut”—at a time when pandemic-fatigued readers fantasize about going on epic hikes.

Throughout Covid, Helleberg saw “an explosion of online retail” sales and found that “direct-to-consumer remained high.” Because the Mountaineers organization has six program centers across western Washington, Mountaineers Books was able to arrange curbside pickup opportunities during the pandemic; third-party vendors also sold books in conjunction with events, Helleberg said.

The closest Mountaineers Books came to a publishing

disaster was with Seth Kantner’s *A Thousand Trails Home: Walking with Caribou*, which was a decade in the works. “We had it scheduled for September [2021],” Helleberg noted. “The books wound up on a ship for three and a half months, parked in [the port of] Bremerton. We could basically see the ship from our office. We got it out in October, and it landed on our bestseller list for the year.”

For 2022, Helleberg said, “we increased our baseline order quantities to push out the reprints because of the paper crunch—a bit of a gamble. We’ve been looking at our spring list, and I think we will see it going to fall because of overseas freight delays and printers declining jobs due to the paper shortage.”

Even so, Helleberg intends to participate in the Outdoor Retailer Summer Show in Denver, where he will be promoting Lynn Hill’s *Valley of Giants* and Gus DeAngelo’s forthcoming fall book *National Parks A to Z: Adventure from Acadia to Zion!* (an unusual direction for Mountaineers Books, which seldom publishes for the children’s market).

Another niche indie press, C&T Publishing in Concord, Calif., is experimenting, as well. Crafting books are C&T’s forte, and publisher Amy Barrett-Daffin said sales were up last year by more than 10% over 2020. But C&T also discovered that hobbyists would put down their piecework to read quilting-themed novels: 2021’s *The Tannenbaum Christmas Quilt*, a holiday entry in novelist Ann Hazelwood’s Door County Quilt series, resonated with readers. C&T also published Sara Trail and Teresa Duryea Wong’s *Stitching Stolen Lives*, which looks at the Social Justice Sewing Academy Remembrance Project.

“Working on this book opened our eyes to social justice, equity, and diversity,” Barrett-Daffin recalled. “We decided as an organization that we were going to take a stand on DEI and sent out an email to our entire list.”

More conventional titles continued to be solid sellers, as well, including titles for new crafters. By 2021, Barrett-Daffin continued, “all of the quilt stores were open again, so our special sales channels were really cooking, along with trade



Tom Helleberg



Amy Barrett-Daffin

at Amazon.” Though C&T’s authors are looking to travel and teach again, they are reluctant to venture far, which may mean more use of C&T’s Creative Spark Online Learning platform.



Raoul Goff

Five years ago, C&T began transitioning to U.S.-based printing and now does most printing stateside, but Barrett-Daffin is still concerned about materials and labor problems. As a hedge, C&T will explore audiobooks and electronic-only patterns as substitutes for print editions. A new venture C&T launched in April 2021 was its FanPowered Press imprint on “all things cosplay.” Barrett-Daffin said, “We have new cosplay titles coming out starting in June 2022, including one on ball gowns that I think will be our best seller. We’re really excited about that, because the cons are coming back.”

Once C&T gets fans dressed for the cons, Insight Editions will be ready with an array of pop-culture cookbooks, film-companion books, and tarot decks featuring *Labyrinth* characters and Disney villains. “Conferences are what we’re most excited about in 2022,” said Raoul Goff, Insight Editions founder and CEO. “Our deep fandom publishing means that events like Comic-Con [San Diego, Calif., July 21–24] and Star Wars Celebration [Anaheim, Calif., May 26–29] are where we really connect with our communities and customers.” He yearns for “a return to some normalcy,” and with it the opportunity for author appearances at indies, fairs, and fests.

Even with live events on hold, Insight Editions saw 25% growth in 2021 over 2020, due in large part to online sales. “Online—both our own website and online retailers—has always been the predominant channel for our high-end, high-ticket art books,” Goff said, “and with retail and events in such flux over the course of the year, we saw that trend skyrocket.” Among last year’s bestsellers, he touted movie tie-ins to *Fantastic Beasts* and *Downton Abbey* from Insight imprint Weldon Owen; *Harry Potter: Feasts and Festivities*; a *Stranger Things* pop-up from paper engineer Matthew Reinhart; and *Marvel’s Black Panther: The Official Wakanda Cookbook*.

Angela Engel, publisher and founder of The Collective Book Studio in Oakland, Calif., doubled down on exquisitely designed titles in lifestyle, parenting, food and

## The Weekly Scorecard

# Print Sales Fell 16.2% in Early March

Unit sales of print books dropped 16.2% in the week ended Mar. 5, 2022, from the comparable week last year, at outlets that report to NPD BookScan. The biggest factor in the decline was the surge in demand for Dr. Seuss titles a year ago, following the decision by Dr. Seuss Enterprises to stop publication of six older Seuss books due to the fact that they contain racist and insensitive imagery. The juvenile fiction category had the biggest decline, with sales falling 27%. A year ago, nine Seuss titles were in the top 10 bestsellers in the category, selling a total of about 460,000 copies. The #1 book was *Green Eggs and Ham*, which sold more than 105,000 copies. In the most recent week, Seuss books were again on top of the category list thanks to Penguin Random House’s annual promotion of the author’s works, but *Green Eggs* sold only 28,000 copies. Sales in the juvenile nonfiction category fell 19.6%. The Seuss surge played a small role here, as two editions of *Seuss-isms* sold a combined 24,000 copies last year. The top title in the most recent week was *Oh Say Can You Say Di-No-Saur?* by Bonnie Worth, which sold more than 8,000 copies. Sales in adult fiction declined 4.4%. Four new books were among the top 10 in the category, led by Kohei Horikoshi’s *My Hero Academia, Vol. 30*, which sold almost 29,000 copies, landing it in first place on the category list. Adult nonfiction sales declined 12.1% compared to 2021. *Atomic Habits* by James Clear was #1 in the category, selling almost 29,000 copies; *The Whole Body Reset* by Stephen Perrine was the category’s top-selling new book, selling more than 26,000 copies.

### TOTAL SALES OF PRINT BOOKS (IN THOUSANDS)

	MAR. 6, 2021	MAR. 5, 2022	CHGE WEEK	CHGE YTD
Total	16,826	14,109	-16.2%	-5.3%

### UNIT SALES OF PRINT BOOKS BY CATEGORY (IN THOUSANDS)

	MAR. 6, 2021	MAR. 5, 2022	CHGE WEEK	CHGE YTD
Adult Nonfiction	5,994	5,271	-12.1%	-9.6%
Adult Fiction	3,257	3,115	-4.4%	9.9%
Juvenile Nonfiction	1,521	1,222	-19.6%	-9.3%
Juvenile Fiction	5,103	3,724	-27.0%	-7.7%
Young Adult Fiction	582	529	-9.1%	5.9%
Young Adult Nonfiction	79	76	-3.3%	5.4%

### UNIT SALES OF PRINT BOOKS BY FORMAT (IN THOUSANDS)

	MAR. 6, 2021	MAR. 5, 2022	CHGE WEEK	CHGE YTD
Hardcover	5,808	4,012	-30.9%	-7.7%
Trade Paperback	8,530	7,995	-6.3%	-2.2%
Mass Market Paperback	817	658	-19.5%	-19.6%
Board Books	1,186	1,022	-13.8%	-7.0%



SOURCE: NPD BOOKSCAN AND PUBLISHERS WEEKLY. NPD’S U.S. CONSUMER MARKET PANEL COVERS APPROXIMATELY 80% OF THE PRINT BOOK MARKET AND CONTINUES TO GROW.

wine, and children's books. Recent highlights include Sarah Blanchard and Mishasha Suzuki Graham's *Dear White Women*, Yvonne Pearson and Regina Shklovsky's picture book *Little Loon Finds His Voice*, and Faith Kramer's *52 Shabbats*, which, because of supply chain issues, missed all of Hanukkah and ended up being released on December 13. "I was sweating here," Engel said, noting that the publisher sold out of 6,000 copies in three weeks and went back to press for another 10,000.

Engel runs The Collective Book Studio on a selective partnership-publishing model, with authors paying for such services as editorial, design, and marketing. And she sometimes helps with fund-raising. For the A-Z children's cookbook *B Is for Bagel*, she and author Rachel Teichman ran a Kickstarter campaign that enabled them to hire developmental editor Amy Treadwell, as well as a photog-



Angela Engel

rapher. "Rachel owns the photography, gets to sell shirts, bags, earrings, whatever," Engel said. The Collective Book Studio's distribution is through IPG, and Engel said trade sales approached \$500,000 last year for the three-year-old publisher. To help it expand, Engel is working to grow its backlist, and to that end will be going to the Bologna Children's Book Fair this month and will exhibit at the ALA conference in June. She'll also have a booth at May's Bay Area Book Festival.

Engel is counting on her high-quality production values and established staff to attract readers. She sees "cool sponsorship" potential for former media exec Fran Hauser's *Embrace Your Work, Love Your Career*; regional events for Nashville author Rebeka Iliff's *Champagne for One: A Celebration of Solitude*; and Bay Area bookshop events for Cheryl Yau Chepusova's alphabet book *Noodles, Please!*

Back East, John Whalen, founder of Kennebunkport, Maine's Cider Mill Press, said sales jumped 47% in 2021 over what was a record 2020. "What we have been most pleased with is the sell-through performance of our list, as well as the growing demand in our backlist," Whalen said. Cider Mill's cookbook and cocktail and spirits publishing categories have been growing steadily over the last several years, and they did well again in the pandemic while readers stayed home.

**WHALEN  
STUDIO  
EDITIONS**

The press develops its publishing program in-house, which Whalen said has allowed it to target its title output based on new trends, as well as to create custom titles for its different distribution channels. He added that both the online and physical retail channels had "fantastic performances in 2021," noting that in physical retail, bookstores, warehouse clubs, mass merchandisers, and gift stores all had higher sales. School book fairs was the only significant Cider Mill channel that underperformed during the past two years, and with schools reopening, Whalen expects to see a resurgence there in the next 12–24 months.

In addition to its adult titles, Cider Mill has done well with its children's books, led by its Charles Santore Illustrated Classic series. Since Cider Mill published its original edition of *The Night Before Christmas* in 2011, that one title has sold nearly three million copies.

Whalen remains confident enough in the market to launch a new imprint this year. Whalen Studio Editions will release its inaugural list this fall, featuring books from photographers, including one from Hollywood photographer Greg Williams; a new book by *National Geographic* and former *Magnum* photographer William Albert Allard titled *Paris*; and a three-book series by Leica ambassador Craig Semtko, including the titles *Unposed*, *Unposed India*, and *Unposed USA*.

—Nathalie op de Beek and Jim Milliot



**A Poem for Snow Days**

The American Booksellers Association hosted a virtual conference for booksellers last week. *Snow Days* featured speakers, educational panels, networking opportunities, and rep picks. The conference spotlighted poets every day, including nine who performed solo in five-minute poetry interludes. Last Tuesday morning, National Book Award recipient Elizabeth Acevedo recited an excerpt from *Inheritance: A Visual Poem*.

# Triangle Square at 10

If publishing imprints were people, 10-year-old Triangle Square Books for Young Readers would be Seven Stories' Mini-Me. The concept for an activist children's line parallels the adult division, with books for "skeptical young readers." The resulting titles have sold so well, particularly during the pandemic, that TSBYR is about to double its list and introduce two new series.

"The children's division is thematically and philosophically an offshoot of Seven Stories," said Seven Stories publicity director and newly appointed TSBYR publisher Ruth Weiner.

"We believe at Seven Stories, and I do, first and foremost, that books can change the world," added Seven Stories founder Dan Simon. "It can seem a little bit earnest in the adult world, but it works in the kids' world."

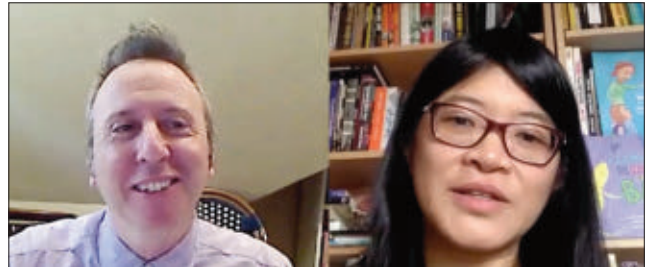
Kids' books were introduced to the Seven Stories list back in 2007, with Howard Zinn and Rebecca Stefoff's *A Young People's History of the United States*. And even though TSBYR is a separate division now, it shares personnel with the adult line—there is no dedicated children's staff. Simon pointed out, though, that it's not always obvious whether a given title should publish with Seven Stories or TSBYR.

Last year, Seven Stories released Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk's *The Lost Soul*, illustrated by Joanna Concejo and translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, to acclaim as an adult picture book, even though it was released in other countries for kids. On the other hand, a picture book by Swedish writer Sara Stridsberg, whose adult novel *Valerie* was longlisted for the 2019 Man Booker International Prize, is on the TSBYR list. Slated for June publication, *The Summer of Diving*, illustrated by Sara Lundberg and translated by B.J. Woodstein, describes the summer during which Stridsberg's father was hospitalized for depression.

Though the children's program started small, initially releasing titles only once a year, in 2022 it will begin ramping up—from six–10 per year in 2021 to 16–20 by 2023. The success of TSBYR's 66-title backlist encouraged it to do more. Top sellers include Innosanto Nagaro's *A Is for Activist* and *Counting on Community*, which together have sold nearly 400,000 copies; *A Young People's History*,



Ruth Weiner (l.) and Dan Simon

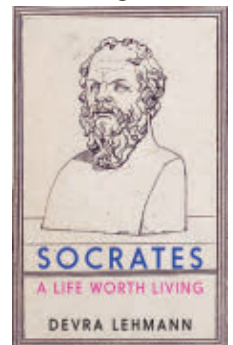


Author Cory Silverberg (l.) and his editor, Veronica Liu, founder of Word Up in New York City.

which has sold 300,000 copies and is due out in a new edition, with contributions from Latinx scholar Ed Morales in honor of the centennial of Zinn's birth; and Stefoff's adaptation of Ronald K. Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, which has sold 90,000 copies. The first two books in Cory Silverberg and Fiona Smyth's frequently challenged trilogy (*What Makes a Baby* and *Sex Is a Funny Word*) have combined sales of 143,000 copies; the third book, *You Know, Sex*, is due out next month.

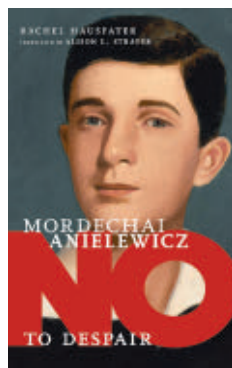
"The mark of a good company is that the books become more important over time," Simon observed. He points to the growth of Seven Stories' backlist, which has gone from 40% of sales to 70% in recent years, in large part thanks to TSBYR. During its first eight years, children's books contributed 52% of overall backlist sales. In 2020 and 2021, its share rose to 57%.

This spring TSBYR will introduce two new series. "It's a little coincidental," Weiner said, "and it's also the way we came into publishing children's



books. When it's good and we like it, we do it." In the case of the Philosophy for Young People series, for ages 12–17, Weiner and Simon wanted to do a series on philosophy for several years but couldn't find the right books, until they read Devra Lehmann's *Socrates: A Life Worth Living*, which is due out in May in hardcover. When TSBYR reissues her earlier work, *Spinoza: The Outcast Thinker*—which received a National Jewish Book Award for Young People's Literature—in paperback in April 2023 along with the paperback of *Socrates*, the books will be given a unified look. Lehmann is writing at least two more, on St. Augustine and Hannah Arendt.

The second series, *They Said No*, offers short historical



fiction about real people who stood up to injustice and is aimed at slightly younger readers, in some cases 10–14. The first books, due out in May, are translated from the French series from Actes Sud Jeunesse. *Anna Politkovskaja: No to Fear* by Dominique Conil, translated by Alison L. Strayer, is about the slain journalist, known for her reporting on the Second Chechen War.

*Mordechai Anielewicz: No to Despair* by Rachel Hausfater, translated by Alison L. Strayer, traces the life of the leader of a Jewish insurrection against the Nazis in Poland in WWII. TSBYR will begin with 12 books translated from the French. It also plans to commission its own titles directly.

—Judith Rosen

## Bookselling Spotlight: Mitzi's Books

“When you walk in the door, it feels like you are walking into your home,” said Mitzi's Books retail manager Mary Ackland, speaking of the independent bookstore in Rapid City, S.Dak., where she has worked for more than a decade. “I honestly still look at it and say to myself, ‘I can't believe I work here.’ I know I am biased, but it really is a beautiful little bookstore.”

While Mitzi's may be similar to indies across the country in terms of ambiance, it must contend with certain challenges due to being separated by hundreds of miles from any major metropolitan area. Though Rapid City has about 80,000 residents, it is far off the beaten path for author tours, which means that there are few in-store events, and those it hosts feature local writers.

One exception occurred in 2017, when John Green made an unscheduled



**Mitzi's Books**  
**Rapid City, S.Dak.**  
**Date founded: 2011**  
**Employees: Four**  
**Size: 2,100 sq. ft.**  
**Titles in stock: 66,000**

Booksellers Association's annual fall conference held in the Mile High City, nor does it go to MPIBA's spring forums. Publishers' field reps do not visit the store, either, resulting in Mitzi's two buyers relying

stop at Mitzi's and signed books while on tour for *Turtles All the Way Down*. Ackland laughs at the memory, saying, “It was pretty awesome,” but booksellers could not publicize his appearance because “we would have been inundated” and “we don't have a lot of room for events.”

The store's location, approximately 400 miles from Denver, also prevents Mitzi's booksellers from attending the Mountains & Plains Independent

heavily on phone reps for information and to instill a sense of community with the rest of the industry.

“We have really good reps,” said Ackland, who serves as the children's book buyer. “Penguin Random House, Simon, HarperCollins, all of the major publishers—any information we need, we go to them. Most of them I have regular calls with, so I feel as if I get to know them.”

Filling a two-story building in the

historic heart of downtown Rapid City, Mitzi's opened around Thanksgiving weekend in 2011 as part of a small development of shops and restaurants surrounding a plaza that previously had been a parking lot. The development was intended to rejuvenate the downtown area, which had lost foot traffic to shopping malls on the city's periphery.

The development, Main Street Square, originally was not going to include a bookstore, but when Borders Group announced in summer 2011 that it was shutting down its Rapid City outlet that fall, developer Ray Hillenbrand added a 2,100-square-foot bookstore



to the mix. Four Borders employees who were being laid off—including Ackland—were hired to staff it, and those four booksellers still work at Mitzi's.

The bookstore was named for Hillenbrand's sister, Mitzi Lally, who had urged Hillenbrand to open the store so that the city would continue to have a full-service, general bookstore—though Books-a-Million moved into the former Borders space inside a shopping mall in late fall 2011, at approximately the same time Mitzi's opened its doors.

Hillenbrand died in 2019; his daughter, Margaret Hillenbrand, a rancher who, Ackland said, "is pretty hands-off," now owns Mitzi's.

Eleven years after the rejuvenation effort began, Ackland reports that Main Street Square is a success, as there has "definitely been a revival," with the development attracting both locals and the tourists visiting Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills. The pandemic further boosted store revenues, with sales up

40% in 2021 over 2019. "It's amazing," Ackland said. "We've had such great support from the community, it's actually been the best couple of years we've ever had. We've always had really good local loyalty, and that's continued throughout this. I thought sales were going to drop off from last year, but we had

a really strong January. What really bumped us is our website; there's more online ordering," as tourists who discovered Mitzi's during their travels continue to order books online. While the store's bestsellers reflect national trends, regional titles like *In God's Country* by Johnny Sundby, *Black Hills Yesterday and Today* by Paul Horsted, *Corn Exchange Cookbook* by MJ Adams, *More Than Presidents* by Nancy Todd Engler, and *The Question Is 'Why': Stanford M. Adelstein, a Jewish Life in South Dakota* by Eric Zimmer have also been among the store's top sellers.

Brenda Beal, Mitzi's general manager, said, "More and more locals are finding us. It took a while, because people are used to driving out to the mall—but with Covid hitting, people really did seek out smaller venues for safety's sake. It just helped build up our base. People want to get out of the house, and they want to handle books. Covid sucks and all that, but it did not hurt us."

—Claire Kirch

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