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Fast-Growing Independent Publishers, 2023

By Jim Milliot | Mar 17, 2023

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TokyoPop was founded in Los Angeles in 1997 by Stu Levy and was responsible for introducing manga into the U.S. market. The publisher had a near-death experience in 2011, largely shutting down its U.S. business (it also has a division in Germany). It revived its U.S. operation in 2016 and, after a slow start, began hitting its stride in 2021 and 2022.

Sales in 2022 doubled over 2021, and were up 580% from 2020. "TokyoPop's revived '2.0 version' is growing quickly, and I'm proud of our close-knit, passionate team," Levy says. Sales in 2022 were the highest since the relaunch, and Levy is "looking forward to further expansion."



TokyoPop's revival has been due in part to the overall surge in demand for manga. The boom has led longtime TokyoPop accounts like bookstores, libraries, and comic shops to increase their manga footprint, while allowing the publisher to add some new retailers such as Walmart and Hot Topic, according to Marc Visnick, who was promoted to COO and publisher in January in recognition of his work leading TokyoPop's rebound.

Also, on the sales side, TokyoPop has expanded its global retail reach through digital initiatives and has struck up more subscription partnerships. In addition, in January 2021, it moved its trade distribution from Diamond to Independent Publishers Group.

All those new channels have had more, and better, content to sell over the past couple of years. The publisher's new title count, which includes books as well as single-issue comics, rose from 45 in 2020 to 61 last year, as TokyoPop's acquisition team focused on signing, and releasing, titles based on high fan engagement. A big success last year were TokyoPop's Disney manga titles, led by *Marcy's Journal: A Guide to Amphibia* and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

Jonathan Merkh, whose publishing background includes executive roles with Thomas Nelson and Simon & Schuster, started the hybrid publisher **Forefront Books** in Nashville in 2018. The company began to pick up traction in 2020 and saw solid gains in both 2021 and 2022, leading to a sales increase of 216% in the three-year period.

Merkh sees the steady sales progress as success breeding success, noting that as Forefront's sales grow it has attracted more successful authors, a number of whom had previously been published by larger traditional publishers. Glenn Beck and



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Joan Lunden are two examples of established personalities and authors who have been published by Forefront. Beck had one of Forefront's biggest hits with *The Great Reset*, selling more than 250,000 copies since its publication in January 2022, according to the publisher, while Lunden's *Why Did I Come into This Room* hit a number of bestseller lists.

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"We are seeing more and more interest from successful authors with platforms who are tired of playing games with the big publishers," Merkh says. "Our model provides them more flexibility and control, and a better payout on the back end."

Partnering with key brands has helped Forefront quickly build a backlist. An agreement with Worth Media has resulted in signed deals for nearly 20 titles under the Worth Media imprint. Merkh has also created imprints with leadership guru John Maxwell and launched a Jewish Leadership imprint with entrepreneur Michael Levin. In addition, Forefront started Frederick Douglass Books with the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives Foundation to, Merkh says, "give a voice to Black and brown voices around social justice and human trafficking."

Merkh turned to one of his former employers, S&S, for distribution. "Without them we wouldn't be anywhere near the size we are," he says. "Their sales force has been amazing."

Forefront's success, and changes in the industry, have resulted in the publisher getting more submissions from agents. "When I announced Forefront to agents they wished me luck, but didn't think this would work for their clients because of the advances they were looking for," Merkh explains. "Now, more and more are either finding it difficult to sell midlist authors or just don't like what publishing houses are offering, and they're finding our alternative to be a solution for their authors."



After finishing atop *PW*'s fast-growing independent publisher list last year, Portland, Ore.-based **Microcosm Publishing** had a 22% sales increase in 2022 over 2021, giving it a three-year gain of 152%. Founder Joe Biel is well-known for his pro-indie, anti-Amazon beliefs—*How to Resist Amazon & Why* has been a steady seller for the publisher for several years—and independent retailers continued to be a key to Microcosm's growth in 2022. Microcosm added 2,576 independent retailers last year, bringing the total number of retailers that feature its books to more than 12,000. "This strategy proved once again that the underground is bigger than the 'mainstream,'" Biel

says.

Another successful strategy that Biel continues to follow is to sign a subset of books that most other publishers shy away from: debut nonfiction written by unknown authors with no platform. "We focus on value proposition and title development above all else," he explains. With that operating philosophy, it is no surprise that Microcosm has built a successful backlist, with many of 2022's bestsellers repeats from 2021, led by Faith G. Harper's *Unfuck Your Brain*, which once again topped the publisher's bestseller list, selling about three times more copies than the next nine bestselling titles combined. In second place was Friday Gladheart's *The Practical Witch's Almanac*.

Underpinning all of Microcosm's operations is its WorkingLit software, which automates virtually every function, making it easier for the publisher to make data-based decisions, Biel explains. He notes that it played a crucial role in helping the company navigate the pandemic successfully. Microcosm began making WorkingLit available to other publishers last year, and Biel says several presses are now using it, with interest growing.

After trimming its title count in 2018 and 2019, New York City's **Media Lab Books** carefully expanded the number of new titles it was publishing annually between 2020 and 2022, in order to "maintain a very high bar for what we choose to publish," says publisher Phil Sexton. MLB has

been able to follow that go-slow approach because it has developed a successful backlist built around some key series, including books related to Harry Potter, John Wayne, and tabletop role-playing games, Sexton says. Titles that performed particularly well in 2022 include *The Game Master's Book of Traps, Puzzles and Dungeons*, *The Unofficial Harry Potter Hogwarts Handbook*, and *Tastes Like Schitt: The Unofficial Schitt's Creek Cookbook*.



10 Essential Works of Northern Irish Literature

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Colleen Hoover, Author, Tarryn Fisher, Author
- 5 I Will Find You**
Harlan Coben, Author

With a firm foundation in place, MLB is focusing on some new growth areas. Custom sales, translation rights, and special sales all rose over 2021 and combined to account for about 15% of total sales last year, Sexton says, noting that in 2022 MLB increased its number of translation rights deals by 27% over 2021. The consistent frontlist and backlist performance has also enabled MLB to expand its list to 25 titles in 2023, and it plans to publish 36 titles in 2024. In the current year, MLB is expanding its list in new areas, with titles including *Queer Here*, *Queer There*, *We're Not Going Anywhere*, created in partnership with *LGBTQ Nation*, and *Self-Love Rainbow Workbook* by social media influencer Dominee Calderon.



New York City–based **Seven Stories Press** had a prosperous year in 2020, as a number of its titles addressed issues brought to the surface by the police murder of George Floyd. Sales fell in 2021, but several events came together in 2022 to boost sales by 65% over 2021, giving the publisher a sales increase of 32% since 2020.

The popularity of French author Annie Ernaux grew in 2022, says publisher Dan Simon, after she was named winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature last fall. The announcement came two days after Seven Stories released her *Getting Lost*, and the award enabled Seven Stories “to reintroduce American readers to all 12 of the books by her that were currently in print,” Simon says. Ernaux’s

success “added a tidal surge to what was already going to be a very strong year.”

A major news event in the early summer had already sparked sales for another Seven Stories title. When the Supreme Court decision overruling *Roe v. Wade* was handed down in June, the second edition of Robin Marty’s *Handbook for a Post-Roe America* “suddenly became the book of the hour,” Simon says. A new book by nonbinary sex educator Cory Silverberg, *You Know, Sex*, which Seven Stories released last spring, also sold well, helped by a *New York Times Magazine* profile of Silverberg. The publicity also stimulated sales for two previous Silverberg titles for younger kids: *What Makes a Baby* and *Sex Is a Funny Word*.

Over the past two years, Seven Stories was able to strengthen its ranks by bringing in Bill Rusin as national sales director and Clare Kelley (who is now marketing director for all channels) as academic marketing director, and adding James Webster to its social media team, giving the company two employees devoted to improving its web presence. “These were crucial steps, because they allowed us to present our books more deeply through all the different sales channels, including to libraries and to bookstores,” Simon explains. “We’re obviously an editorially driven house, but as publishers we also recognize that in this electronic age there are many new ways to put books in front of people, and it’s our job to do that work.”

Kogan Page Inc. has enjoyed three years of solid sales since it was established in 2019 in New York City by Kogan Page, the U.K. independent business book publisher, to reach the U.S. and Canadian markets. While the vast majority of its list comes from its parent company, in 2022 it had several bestsellers by American authors, says marketing manager Vanessa Rueda. These include *From Start-up to Grown-up* by executive coach Alisa Cohn, *The Success Factor* by mentoring and leadership development consultant Ruth Gotia, and *Words That Work* by global leadership and innovation expert Val Wright. Revisions of key backlist titles, including the third edition of *Digital Marketing Strategy* and the fourth edition of *Warehouse Management*, also sold well.



The Kogan Page Inc. team was strengthened in the year, Rueda says, by the implementation of a hybrid work model, which allowed for more training of its recently hired acquisitions and marketing personnel. The U.S. business also benefitted from investments made in new technologies by its parent company, which allowed it to place greater emphasis on title metadata to support data-driven booksellers and to use data to help the publisher “take an evidence-based approach to marketing and sales and new product development,” Rueda says.



After an 18% sales increase in 2021 over 2020, **Barefoot Books** in Concord, Mass., was able to hang onto most of its gains in 2022, even as online sales declined. The children’s book publisher has long employed a

multichannel sales approach, and that paid dividends again last year: sales through book and gift indie retailers rose 15% over 2021.

The main driver, says Barefoot marketing and sales associate Lauren Joyner, was the success the company had using the Faire platform, which matches local retailers with brands and products that fit their stores. The retail push is continuing this year, and Barefoot appointed new sales reps across the U.S., signed new sales agreements in Canada, and added Compass as its new trade reps in the U.K. and Europe.

Barefoot's titles are written to both educate and entertain children, making the education market an important channel. Sales to that market were up 55% due to a variety of initiatives. Barefoot worked with Books4School to distribute nearly one million bilingual editions of its early learning and multicultural titles, which were translated into more than 20 languages. A partnership with Books for Africa resulted in a major distribution deal in Madagascar. A new marketing initiative last year was the launch of the Learning Hub section on its website, which offers free resources, activities, and lesson plans that support its books.

Having published about 1,000 titles in its 31-year history, Barefoot is a backlist-driven press, and backlist represented 90% of its sales in 2022, up from 85% in 2021. Bestsellers include its animated sing-along titles, which help build listening and gross motor skills. According to Barefoot, its sing-along videos on YouTube have garnered nearly half a billion views.

Similar to Barefoot, **Ulysses Press** was able to keep sales above 2020 last year despite a dip from 2021, giving the publisher, with offices in Berkeley, Calif., and Brooklyn, a 9% increase in revenue in 2022 over 2020. A company spokesperson said Ulysses was pleased with its performance last year, in light of the turbulence in the industry.



Though backlist continued to generate the majority of Ulysses's revenue—70% in 2022—the press was helped by good responses to several new books in its core categories. Sales were solid for *The Unofficial Studio Ghibli Cookbook* in the pop-culture cooking niche, the officially licensed *Hunt a Killer: The Detective's Puzzle Book* in true crime, and, in self-help, *Taking Stock: A Hospice Doctor's Advice on Financial Independence, Building Wealth, and Living a Regret-Free Life* by Jordan Grumet, host of the *Earn & Invest* podcast.



In 2020, sales at Minneapolis, Minn.-based **Milkweed Editions** jumped 183% over 2019, and while 2022 sales increased only 2% over 2020, the press takes pride in maintaining the "new sales normal," says marketing director Joanna Demkiewicz. The key contributor to that achievement has been the performance of Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which was published in paperback in 2015 and landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list on Feb. 9, 2020.

Some three years later, the book is still on the list.

Demkiewicz attributes *Braiding Sweetgrass's* long bestseller run to its overarching message: a call "to embrace mutual flourishing and to practice reciprocity" at a time when readers are navigating a range of challenges, including political tumult and environmental collapse. *Braiding Sweetgrass* has sold more than 1.5 million copies in multiple formats to date, according to the publisher.

Milkweed followed the sales jump in 2020 with another solid gain in 2021 thanks largely to the selection of Aimee Nezhukumatathil's illustrated nature book *World of Wonders* as a Barnes & Noble Book of the Year. The press has augmented the *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *World of Wonder* hits by building a strong backlist, which routinely drives its monthly sales. Among those standouts are U.S. poet laureate Ada Limón's poetry collections *The Hurting Kind*, *The Carrying*, and *Bright Dead Things*; *The Seed Keeper* by Indigenous author Diane Wilson; Margaret Renkl's *Late Migrations* and *Graceland, at Last*; and Drew Lanham's *The Home Place*.

"All of these titles are examples of what Milkweed has been doing for decades and what we do best: publishing literary books that explore human relationships to the natural world," Demkiewicz says. "This market is expanding, and Milkweed is leading its growth."

Spiegel & Grau Gets Rolling

Cindy Spiegel and Julie Grau formed the independent press Spiegel & Grau in 2020 after Penguin Random House closed their imprint of the same name in 2019. The company didn't publish its first title until 2021, making it ineligible for the fast-growing list, but Spiegel and Grau have made important strides



in building their business since 2020. S&G's first title, and its only in 2021, was the critically acclaimed *Fox and I* by Catherine Raven, which has sold more than 60,000 copies across all formats, according to the publisher. The company upped its output to seven print books plus two audiobook originals in 2022, resulting in a 116% jump in sales over 2021. Last year also saw the release of Melody Beattie's *Codependent No More*, the first book in the Melody Beattie library, which S&G sees as an important step in building a backlist. With a staff that now numbers 13, S&G will publish 10 new books this year. Its lead titles are *Go as a River*, the recently published debut novel by Shelley Read; Alice Carrière's debut memoir, *Everything/Nothing/Someone*, set for August; and Margaret Renkl's *The Comfort of Crows: A Backyard Year*, due in October.

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PUBLISHER	SALES GROWTH 2022 v. 2020	EMPLOYEES		NEW TITLES	
		2020	2022	2020	2022
TokyoPop Los Angeles	580%	5	9	45	61
Forefront Books Nashville	216%	3	7	21	39
Microcosm Publishing Portland, Ore.	152%	18	32	23	41
Media Lab Books New York City	52%	12	20	19	20
Seven Stories New York City	32%	7	9	41	48
Kogan Page New York City	18%	3	5	90	115
Barefoot Books Concord, Mass.	17%	21	31	24	17
Ulysses Press Berkeley, Calif./New York City	9%	13	13	65	69
Milkweed Editions Minneapolis, Minn.	2%	10	14	20	24

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