

The Boston Globe

August 17, 2000

A LEAP OF FAITH: SMALL CAPE PUBLISHING HOUSE BEATING THE ODDS

By Francie Latour, Globe Staff

WELLFLEET - To find the pulse of what's hot in the book publishing world, turn left at the peeling rowboat and look for the seafood shack up ahead.

This is Commercial Street, not Times Square. The parking lot that leads to Leapfrog Press - if you can find it - pops with seashells and ends in a marsh. In a one-room office inside, the company's entire publishing arsenal consists of a computer, a Web site, a fax machine, and cartons of . . . plastic frogs.

"He'll do anything to sell a book," said Marge Piercy, watching her husband and fellow author, Ira Wood, tear through a box of the souvenirs.

This fishing village has always been a writer's enclave, drawing the likes of Annie Dillard, Stanley Kunitz, and Maya Angelou to its rugged harbor and local eccentrics.

Now, four years after one of the town's most celebrated literary couples launched the Cape's only small press with national distribution, Leapfrog is bursting onto the scene with rare success. Amid the national explosion of independent presses trying to fill the gaps between New York's giant conglomerates, the company has quickly distinguished itself. In the process, it has brought a new dimension to this town's literary legacy.

With writers' instincts and impossible good luck, Wood and Piercy have drawn a potent, eclectic mix of authors and genres to their coastal offices. With 10 books published so far, their titles have captured the attention of leading industry reviews, including the New York Times Book Review, Kirkus Reviews, The Los Angeles Times, and The American Book Review.

Their authors, almost all with New England ties, are popping up on National Public Radio. Several have won awards or nominations for national prizes in fiction and poetry.

The works include a book of early poetry by Piercy, a 30-year Wellfleet resident and author of 14 novels, including the 1976 science fiction classic "Woman on the Edge of Time."

But they also include "Rookie Cop," a former New York City police detective's memoir of his years infiltrating a terrorist group. The author, now Wellfleet Police Chief Richard Rosenthal,

had published other books through a major New York house, but he abandoned that publisher for Leapfrog's intimacy and literary edge.

"There wasn't anything quite like what they are doing, and they sensed an opportunity to bring the energy of the publishing industry to the Cape," said Charles Coe of Cambridge, an African-American poet who was unpublished until he put together a collection, "Picnic on the Moon," under Leapfrog.

"At the same time," Coe said, "[Ira and Marge] love Wellfleet, and they made a decision to integrate their work into their life. A lot of people who were going to do this would say, 'We have to be in New York.'"

With a national distributor to push their books to the major chains, and printing contracts with companies in the Midwest, Wood and Piercy seem to have the art of small press publishing down to a science, using cyberspace for everything from text editing to book jacket design.

From the start, Wood said, his aim was simple: to create an outlet for writers whose books have all but died amid the multimillion-dollar deals of New York's major publishing houses in the last 15 years.

"We saw friends of ours who had already published three or four books and couldn't get published," Wood said, "terrific writers whose books would get rejected over and over."

But slowly, as Wood and Piercy take on different projects, the stories of how some manuscripts have found their way to Leapfrog's door have taken on a magic as strange and compelling as the books themselves.

Consider "leo@fergusrules.com." A first novel by Arne Tangherlini, it is a book that, by all accounts, never should have seen the light of day.

A Harvard graduate who taught high school students in the United States and the Philippines, Tangherlini sent the first 50 pages of his book to a few New York houses. They rejected the work, saying the cyber-science-fiction, coming-of-age story couldn't be marketed. Then, Tangherlini sent the excerpt to Leapfrog, picking it at random from a long list of smaller presses.

For days, it sat in a pile with dozens of others the couple receives each week. But as soon as Piercy read it, she said, she knew it deserved to be published.

Described by one reviewer as a computer-age "Catcher in the Rye," the novel follows an Asian-Italian-American teenager caught between her lost ancestors and the virtual reality behind her computer screen.

Wood and Piercy rushed an e-mail message to the author, asking for the rest of the manuscript. A few months after receiving it, the couple sent a second e-mail to accept the book. They didn't hear back from him.

A few days later, Tangherlini's wife returned the message. "She said Arne would have loved knowing that someone wanted to publish his book," Wood said. "And I said, 'Wait a minute. What do you mean, would have?'"

Three weeks before Wood's last e-mail, Tangherlini killed himself. Now, the couple faced another dilemma - whether or not to invest resources in an unknown author and publish the book posthumously.

In Piercy's mind, there was no question. The book came out last year. And after a USA Today book reviewer stumbled on the novel at a bookstore, the exposure catapulted the novel to worldwide acclaim, winning a best-book prize from the New York Public Library and finding a place on the reading lists of international schools. It sold 5,000 copies in trade paperback - a rare feat for a young, small press - and is poised for a second printing. "You really have to think about how impossible it is," Wood said. "A guy from USA Today walks into a bookstore with miles and miles of books, he sees five-eighths of an inch of the spine of my book by an unknown writer, and then he buys it. He actually buys it, and he decides to review it, and the whole thing just takes off. "That's the kind of thing - when you're sitting here doing nothing, feeling like you're in the middle of nowhere and your books are collecting dust - that makes you just shoot to the ceiling. That's what pulls you along in this business."

Copyright © The Boston Globe, 2000

This article appeared on Page One of the Metro Section, August 17, 2000.