

BORDERS - GLOBAL INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL CURRAN, TANGERINE PRESS

Michael Curran



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On June 17th 2018, I attended an unusually small book fair with a defiant title and a mix of 7 rebel presses. It took place at the Peckham Pelican in south London a vibrant café and colourful hub for artists of all persuasions. My first visit to the Pelican was a year earlier, to listen to the Vanguard Readings founded by Faber Academy's Richard Skinner. Now, I was back to meet the Uncorrected Fair's organiser and Tangerine Press founder. Michael Curran is a friendly man and a publisher with an uncommon history and unique perspectives on his craft and trade.



Fitzcarraldo Editions

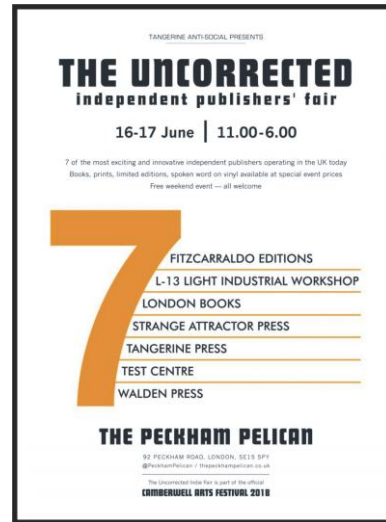
You organised the *Uncorrected Independent Publishers' Fair* and held it on June 17th - 18th 2018 at London's *Peckham Pelican*. With the exception of Fitzcarraldo Press, I was intrigued by the uniqueness, even eccentricity, of the presses you shared your platform with. One was called *Strange Attractor Press*.

What are your criteria for the selection of presses to exhibit at these Uncorrected Indie Fairs?

The Uncorrected Independent Publishers' Fair is an invite-only event focussing on the small, independent press scene. The idea each year is to try and reflect the incredible variety out there and have a little fun doing it. Our host is The Peckham Pelican, a popular eatery/drinkery/artspace in South London. This year the fair was part of the Camberwell Arts Festival and we would love that association to continue.



Olga Tokarczuk, winner of 2018 Man Booker International Prize for *Flights* published by Fitzcarraldo Editions



I wanted to avoid going down the overtly literary route; likewise I didn't want to go too artisan with the bookbinder/letterpress scene. So it's a mix of styles. To look a little closer at the publishers: Fitzcarraldo Editions, who's recent extraordinary success with *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk winning the Man Booker International Prize, has taken them to another level; London Books is run by John 'Football Factory' King and Martin Knight, where they reissue lost classics from the capital's forgotten authors. Strange Attractor Press publish everything from UFO conspiracies to zombie histories to studies on witchcraft and beyond. Test Centre seem to occupy a unique corner in publishing, involved as they are in poetry, prose, spoken word on vinyl in unusual formats and designs. Walden Press produce wonderful hand bound chapbooks and letterpress newspapers. Perhaps the curve ball of the bunch is L-13 Light Industrial Workshop. They publish limited edition books, but often as part of a larger project that is seeking the 'disruptive betterment' of art and culture. And Tangerine Press? Well, for the last twelve years we have been publishing various misfits, mavericks and misanthropes and in that time managed to find a corner worth fighting for.

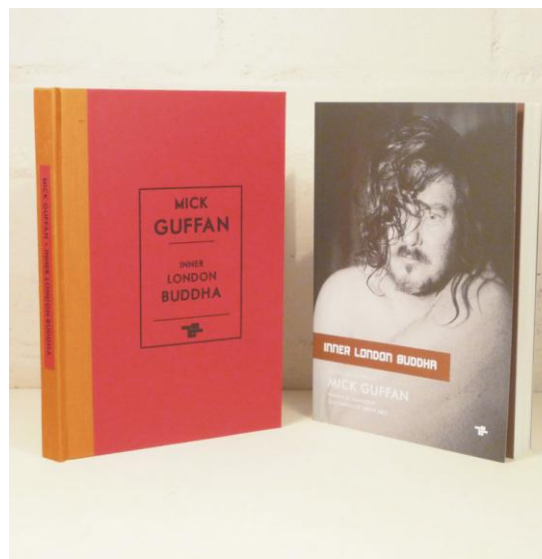
That variety is also key when it comes to those who attend. I always think the general reader is interested in all manner of subjects/genres. Much like when someone asks you: 'what's your favourite type of music?' The above average reply is 'a bit of everything.' I believe it is the same with books.

At the Tangerine Press stand, I found books that had been lovingly hand-bound. Your other publications, for example Mick Guffan's poetry pamphlet *Inner London Buddha* and Charles Bukowski's *Poem for Dante*, printed on one sheet of card with a sketch of the artist on another, were very pleasing to look at and a pleasure to touch. For me it was a revisiting of tactile literature.

Briefly share your history as a publisher and as a craftsman in book-binding.

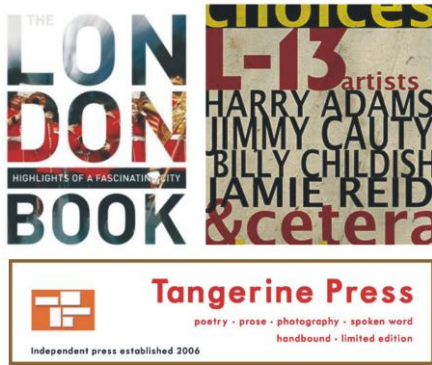
I started Tangerine Press back in 2006 whilst I was still a self-employed carpenter. I'd learnt to bookbind a few years before that and was biding my time, waiting for the

right author to inspire me to publish. The construction industry is an odd beast and wasn't giving me enough 'job satisfaction' if you will. I wanted to get away from that environment, use my time outside of work to escape that mindset. Drink and drugs had done that to an extent but were gradually replaced by bookbinding and publishing. At last all that energy was going into something positive. Tangerine puts out titles predominantly in two main formats: collectable, handbound, hardcover, signed limited editions alongside more readily available and affordable trade paperbacks. The press buzzline is '*publishing misfits, mavericks and misanthropes*' and I think that sums up well the people I deal with: William Wantling, Billy Childish, James Kelman, Iain Sinclair, many others. I went full-time with the press after a serious injury in 2013 meant I had to leave 'The Building Game'.



What kind of market is there in the UK and elsewhere for hand-bound books and the other formats for publishing literature which you produced with the kind of attention I associate with fine artists?

Obviously counter-culture publications are a pretty niche area whatever the format. But the collectors and dealers who buy Tangerine limited editions are a very curious, independently minded crowd. The writing is paramount, of course, but the attention paid to the binding and general presentation takes the reading experience to another level. Without being too ostentatious and overshadowing the author's words. Whilst there is a significant following for the press in the UK, we do have many collectors around the world, especially USA, Canada, mainland Europe and Australia/New Zealand. But we sell books anywhere and everywhere.



On your website, you describe Tangerine Press as seeking ‘*new, innovative and neglected writing*’.

What kind of writing qualifies as *new, innovative and neglected*?

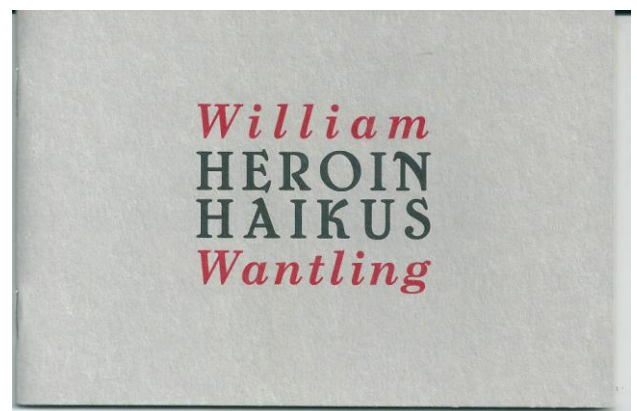
Naturally, each publisher has its own take on this. For me, it could be anything from poetry, prose through to photography and even 1970s pornography. The titles range from lost or ‘forgotten’ modern classics from the 1960s/70s/80/90s, through to work from new writers that are complete unknowns. More specifically, I am particularly interested in writers from what you could call ‘the fringes of society.’ So we are talking those who have lived an unusual life and turned it around against all the odds. In other words, I find the fact that they have almost discovered their talent by chance very compelling, compared to say a first-time author who started out as a journalist or teacher, for example. But that is not to say I do not work with people who come from a more ‘normal’ background, because I do. The bottom line is that talent is everywhere, but I am after originality, an authentic voice.

When I read the American poet, William Wantling’s *Heroin Haikus*, my mind went to the conversation we had at the Fair about ‘*redemption*’ as the vision of who and what you publish at the press.

Talk to us about that redemptive vision, particularly in the context of William Wantling.

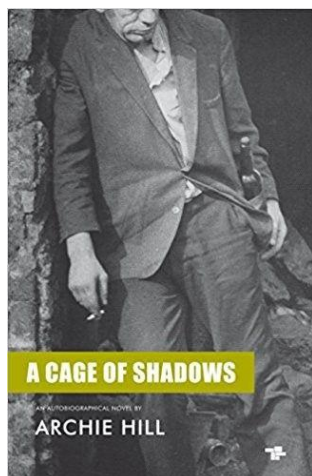


William Wantling



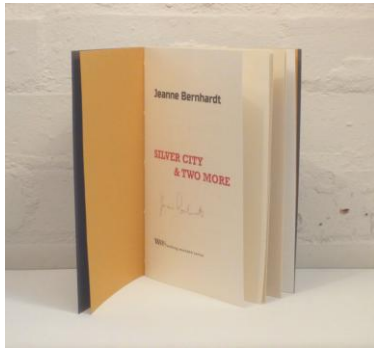
It is appropriate that you should mention William Wantling (1933-74) as he was the reason I started Tangerine Press in 2006. When I found out all his books were out of print, it became my mission to right that wrong and introduce his work to a new generation of readers. His writing is still powerful, still relevant. This ‘state of mind’ extends to all the writers I am lucky enough to publish, be they neglected/lost from the recent past, or unknown contemporaries. With Wantling, the idea of redemption

through literature is very clear. He started writing poetry whilst incarcerated at San Quentin Prison (1958-63) as a way of coming to terms with his situation. Wantling was an ex-junkie and ex-marine who saw action in Korea. He was injured whilst there and treated with morphine. He never totally shook off those addictive tendencies, leading to his arrest for possession and forgery. *Heroin Haikus* is based on his prison experiences, heroin addiction, arrest and sentencing. But Wantling did turn his life around on his release and entered higher education and was a lecturer when he died aged just 40 years.



But I think we all seek redemption, some understanding of our place in the world, certainly as a writer, but also as a publisher and reader. It is just that those who's lives have taken an extreme turn have an original way of looking at things and can nourish *our* lives emotionally and philosophically.

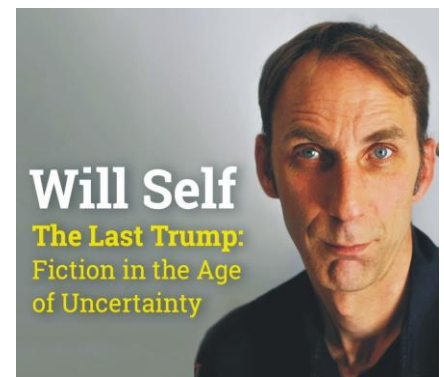
Another wonderful example I can give you is the re-issue of Archie Hill's *A Cage of Shadows*. This autobiography was originally published to great acclaim in 1973 and Mr Hill even secured a short BBC TV series off the back of it. It tells of his brutal Black Country upbringing, frequent beatings, an alcoholic father, run-ins with the law. On leaving home, he encountered further degradation in prisons, asylums and on London's skid row. But a chance meeting whilst incarcerated during the 1950s changed his life completely. Mr Hill became friendly with Klaus 'Doc' Fuchs, atomic spy for Russia, who instilled in him a passion for literature and encouraged him to write. Libel action in 1975 meant copies of *A Cage of Shadows* were pulped, with an edited version being published two years later. This new edition reinstates the original text of a genuine, lost classic comparable to John Healy's *The Grass Arena* in both its content and the troubled history of its publication.



I am fascinated: how do you meet the people (they seem to be exclusively men) whom you describe as misfits, mavericks and misanthropes – in short, those on the fringe of society whose literary works Tangerine seeks to publish?

It all boils down to constant research on my part. I am always checking out new writers and investigating lost modern classics to see what gives me the buzz. But I should say that 97% of the writers I end up working with are initially approached by myself. Hardly anything is taken on through unsolicited submissions. Another thing I do to keep tabs on the current literary scene in particular is put out a ‘chapbook journal’ of new writing every year, with an open submissions policy. The majority of writers are men, you are correct, but if you look through the complete catalogue of Tangerine authors you will find many women: Jeanne Bernhardt, Meena Kandasamy, Joan Jobe Smith, Ntozake Shange, Salena Godden, Akiko Yosano, Adelle Stripe, Lyn Lifshin, many others; plus an unusual project with Jenni Fagan will be announced next year.

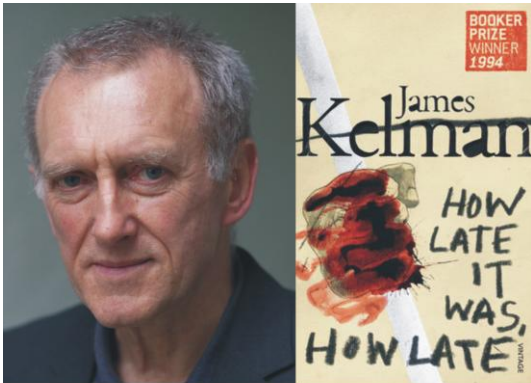
There are two stand-out names on your authors list: the Scottish author, James Kelman, and Will Self. Self is a mainstream, widely published author and regularly sought after for his experience and wise judgment by mainstream prizes and main stream media.



How do Will Self, the man and Self's work, reflect the Tangerine Press vision?

To clarify, I only ever published Will Self once, in a ‘book periodical’ of poetry, prose and graphics called *Dwang*, back in 2011. I had just helped out on a fundraiser project for RAPt (Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust) and came into contact with him then. He had some work that was turned down by a more mainstream publisher as it was too controversial for them, so that is where I stepped in. But again, he does fit in with the ‘redemption/misfit’ vision of Tangerine as an ex-heroin addict, as well as a political and social commentator who does not necessarily ‘toe the line’ as they say.

James Kelman won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1989 for his novel *A Disaffection* and the Man Booker prize in 1994 for *How Late It Was, How Late*. He is reputed to have said that the Booker Prize was his downfall as an author. That isn't what one would expect to hear from a Booker prize winning author!



James Kelman

Why was the Booker such a controversial win for James Kelman and how did it represent - in his view- his downfall?

I do know Jim Kelman fairly well and we have the occasional email exchange about the current literary scene. Again, he is very forthright, his 'own man' to coin a phrase. I feel very fortunate to have that connection with him.

To get the definitive answer to your question you would need to ask him direct. On winning the prize he did get much abuse, was called 'illiterate' by one of the judges if I recall. I remember the controversy at the time and was shocked even then at his treatment by the establishment. There is an incredible snobbery in England in particular, even with all these sudden attempts at change that the larger publishers keep banging on about. I think Kelman's win and the surrounding 'trouble' put publishers off him. They didn't know how to handle him. "I think it's a wonderful irony – and something I am very proud of – that one of the best and most influential writers in modern times has Tangerine as his sole English publisher. I truly believe that his Booker triumph helped pave the way for writers such as Marlon James as even being considered for the prize. You just have to look at the reception of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* compared to *How late it was, how late*."

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Talk to us about the challenges his way of writing poses for publishers in the UK.

Personally I see no 'challenges' with publishing his work. I have always admired his writing and was fully aware that he does not fit in with a more mainstream publisher's idea of what a writer should be or how they should 'behave.' Those are the kind of writers I want to hear from.

Your status as, Kelman's sole English publisher. How did that come about?

My connection with Kelman was pure luck and again says a lot about the man. When I started Tangerine Press I had no connection to the literary world. One of the first publications I put together was a ‘book periodical’ of new writing and graphics called *Dwang*. For the second issue in 2010, I was keen to have something by Kelman in there. So I wrote to him ‘care of’ Hamish Hamilton, not expecting a reply. But lo and behold, a letter came back two weeks later. His response was positive, respectful and it turned he was a fan of the poet William Wantling too.

After that, we began talking about putting together a book of his short stories. We to-ed and fro-ed on that for a year or so and the outcome was *A Lean Third*.

Does his writing pose a marketing challenge for Tangerine Press?

Marketing is a secondary concern for me as a publisher. I will get hooked on the writing, then try and work out how to let people know about it!

Charles Bukowski’s *Poem for Dante* sounds to me like the groaning of a broken man longing for spiritual redemption and escape from the kind of hell Dante Alighieri evokes in his *Inferno*.

Do many or any of your authors struggling with demons such as alcoholism, drug addiction, find the spiritual path toward redemption or do they seek the promised land solely through their personal experience of writing?

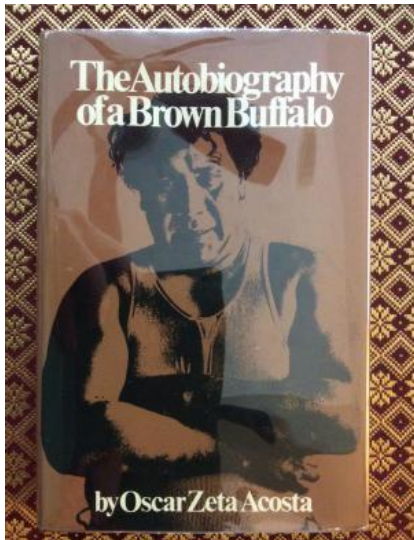
I was at an event a few months ago and was introduced to a fellow publisher. He had heard of Tangerine and said: “*So you’re the one who only publishes ex-junkies and convicts.*” Which is kind of true, but it was said in a derogatory, dismissive way; so my retort was: “*And you’re the one who only publishes lecturers and journalists. Who’s right?*”

There are a few writers I have published who have had addiction problems, most obviously William Wantling and Chris Wilson. I think all writers have demons of one kind or another, regardless of background. And so do we as publishers and finally readers.

As regards the writers’ motivation and what they hope to gain from their work – I really cannot say. But I do think, on the whole, that part of the process in any creative act is to seek redemption of one kind or another, the promised land if you will. You will not find it, but there is no harm in looking.

Finally, tell us about the interesting projects in the pipeline for Tangerine Press.

In the immediate pipeline:



Late September will see the launch of the first seven chapbooks in the new *Walking Wounded Series*. This includes work from Benjamin Myers, Jeanne Bernhardt, John Dorsey, Ford Dagenham, Jim Gibson, Meena Kandasamy, Lyn Lifshin. These are limited edition, signed, handsewn and embossed in gold on a dark grey Mohawk card cover. Endpaper sheets are beautiful 'golden rod' Glastonbury paper, made by a long forgotten mill and recently unearthed in some dark corner of the warehouse where the Tangerine workshop is based.

In November we have what is arguably the reissue of the year: Oscar "Zeta" Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*. It will be available as a limited edition and paperback. Hunter S. Thompson's lawyer tells his own story. Acosta is often dismissed as a 'sidekick' to the creator of Gonzo journalism. With this reissue I wanted to rectify that, place him as a legitimate counter-culture figure in his own right, civil rights lawyer, etc. To this end, Acosta scholar Ilan Stavans has written an introduction. And Marco Acosta (Oscar's son) is working on an afterword. Somehow I got permission from Annie Liebovitz to use one of her iconic images of Acosta for the paperback front cover. And the book itself is a roller-coaster ride. Acosta took on many roles in his short life: converted Baptist missionary in Panama, bar hopper, psychiatric patient, struggling writer, heartbroken lover, great imposter, connoisseur of excess, Chicano activist, Brown Buffalo – he did it all, then disappeared like a puff of smoke off the coast of Mazatlán, Mexico in the spring of 1974. It has taken three years of negotiation to get to this stage and it has all been worth it.

Just before the official release of the Acosta book, we have an unusual event scheduled for November called *Collecting the Future: Tangerine Press vs The L-13 Light Industrial Workshop in the Seething Underbelly of Independent Publishing*, at Shapero Rare Books in Mayfair, London. More details to come on this.

December's release will be a limited edition photobook by the legendary Kevin Cummins. I cannot say too much about this at the moment, but it is related to Ian Curtis and will be worth the wait.

Also planned is a Christmas edition of *The Uncorrected Independent Publishers' Fair*. Five invited publishers – instead of seven as per the Summer event – will bed down for two days at the Peckham Pelican in south London. It will be the usual eclectic mix of indie press pioneers with special event prices and a few surprises.



Host, Olatoun Gabi-Williams