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Write Your Own History

The Roots of Self-Publishing

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Forgetting about the exact terminology and the who-said-what-first of it all for a moment, the notion of controlling one’s words has been around for as long as words themselves—or, for that matter, notions themselves. That is to say, the concerns that guide the credo of the self-publisher are not new, or secret, or hidden. They weren’t invented in the 1970s, the 1930s, or 1517. Self-publishing and zinemaking are rooted in simple, timeless concepts. They grew from the desire of individuals to produce and distribute their own ideas without interference from others. One needn’t be a punk-rocker, broke, criminal, under the age of 24, feel desperately misunderstood by one’s peers, or live in the basement of a parent to desire to both speak and to control the conditions under which one will be heard. One must simply wish to be understood clearly, and be willing to accrue and utilize the necessary resources—which are likely available to you already: pencil, paper, scanner or photocopier, and your own personal brilliance (see Figure 27.1).

That all being said, histories of self-publishing that trace the practice back to Benjamin Franklin, Siegel and Shuster, Ray Bradbury, or Aaron Cometbus not only establish a ridiculous sanctimonious aura for zines, but give evidence to the assumption that famous White men did everything interesting that has ever happened in the world. This is not true. (Nor is it a helpful way of convincing people to self-publish their own work.) Equally legitimate histories of self-publishing can be found on early American quilts, in the lessons heard in church about reformation, written on the backs of old family photographs, crumbling in the alleyways of urban high-traffic zones, the oral histories of conspiracy theorists, or made up in your own head during a long walk in the rain. Each of these potential histories have just as much to explain about who is granted power to speak in our culture and who is not; each of these potential histories provide models for exercising voice, even if the speaker hasn’t been gifted it by privilege of skin color, economic class, gender, native tongue, sexuality, or literacy. The Underground Railroad produced coded maps in the form of bed-covers just as The Vageniuses popularized their appearance in town with wheat-pasted flyers. Both groups worked against mainstream culture to bring their unique voice to people; both use whatever available means they can muster to do so.

Such unrecognized histories are extremely important to note when discussing zines, because zines are currently one of the means by which hidden histories occasionally come to light. Zines are personal, small-scale paper ventures that tell the kinds of stories deliberately ignored, glossed over, entirely forgotten, or targeted for erasure by mainstream media. Zines in the United States
are created by prisoners, young girls, people with emotional and physical disabilities, queers, geeks, non-native speakers of English, survivors of sexual assault, radical offspring of conservative politicians, homeschoolers, members of the military, Native Americans, sexworkers, and anyone else who has ever felt that the voices speaking for them weren’t properly conveying their stories.¹

The term “zine,” however, has a specific history. It comes from the weird world of science fiction, a genre that grew as a hybrid between pure fantastical storytelling and the desire to geek out and show off to others how smart you were. When scifi first appeared in the 1920s, a group of people coalesced around it and something remarkable happened; either early science fiction was of such horrendous quality that it seemed instantly accessible to any who stumbled across it, or it was an invention so late in coming that the audience’s personal abilities to create it had surpassed the professionals’ by the time the first literary works appeared on the market. Regardless, science fiction fans started creating their own science fictions almost immediately, photocopying them, mailing them throughout the country, trading them with each other, writing each other letters, printing those letters with addresses in subsequent issues, and, presumably, dressing up like Storm Troopers on the weekends. Just kidding: This would not happen for another few decades. (But if you were not aware of it, it does happen, a lot. Even now.)

The mimeographed fictions sci-fi fans created developed a name, identity, and following of their own. The word magazine wouldn’t do to describe it. That word referred to any kind of information or resource storage, and came to apply to both military ammunitions holdings and the esteemed collection of knowledge we think of as Cat Fancy today. Yet the term “magazine” connotes an officialdom that sci-fi fans wanted to buck. In no way legitimate magazine enterprises, fan-created magazines—with names like The Comet, Time Traveler, and Alter Ego—came to be called “fanzines,” a term that remained in use until the mid-1990s.² To some degree, fanzines grew out of a passion for a genre that fans couldn’t get enough of. But they were also a legitimate testing ground for new directions in which to push that new genre, as well as a way for writers—and immediately, as comics came into the mix, artists too—to practice skills untaught in most schools.

For the comic book was invented at around this same time and, many would say, by the same people—although comics themselves had been appearing in newspapers since the turn of the century, and crudely drawn packets of sex jokes called Tijuana Bibles had been passed around the pub circuit for about as long. Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel first encouraged the union of words and pictures for popular consumption with their brightly colored, non-professionally produced tales of a physically overdeveloped Superman in the late 1930s. This took hold more staunchly by the mid-1960s, when Biljo White founded Batmania, a fanzine exclusively devoted to the doings of a single illustrated superhero. Soon after, everyone and their mothers were drawing and writing stories about other subcultural obsessions: sex, drugs, and stickin’ it to The Man.

If, however, comics and science fiction were taught in schools, it is unlikely they would have proceeded to develop as democratic institutions. Some histories, for example, indicate that early science fiction fandom was fairly gender equitable, and when fanzines were created, girls may have participated in even greater numbers than boys because they felt shut out from the traditionally masculine institution of professional publishing. (It is true that female science fiction writers adopted masculine-sounding names when called upon to publish their craft in wider venues.) Interestingly, girls often purchased early comic books in greater numbers than boys—yet rarely were even the most talented then granted admission into the studios of the growing numbers of publishers who later became DC, Marvel, and Harvey Comics. As recently as 1973, Frederic Wertham—anti-comics activist, psychiatrist, and author of Seduction of the Innocent and The World of Fanzines—argues that “the male-female proportion in fanzines is somewhat
similar.” He then goes on to acknowledge “outstanding female fanzine editors and co-editors” including Joanne Burger (Pegasus), Linda Bushyager (Granfalloon), Juanita Coulson (Yandro), Ethel Lindsay (Haverings), Pat Lupoff (Xero; a best-of book came out in recent years), Lesleigh Luttrell (Starling), Karen Rockow (Unicorn), and Lisa Tuttle (Mathom).3

Clearly, the unprofessional natures of comics and science fiction fanzine publishing allowed for a great deal of flexibility in interpreting approaches to authorship, craft-honing, and audience: the high rate of participation by women, when compared to professional participation in comics and legitimate science fiction publishing, was only one indication. The democratic nature of fanzines was likely advanced by their status as outsider modes of communication—perhaps most exemplified by Valerie Solanas’ \textit{SCUM Manifesto}, which began to appear around New York in 1968, shortly before the author shot Andy Warhol.

Surely, the lines between various outsider, geek, and niche cultures have always been thin and malleable, so when punk emerged as a music genre in the 1970s, fanzines were adopted immediately by punk-rock music fans—who were then, and remain now, overwhelmingly male. Widely considered to be the first punk fanzine in England, \textit{Sniffing’ Glue} was edited by Mark Perry. Perry, however, had this to say about the distinction of his publication: “… All that stuff about \textit{Sniffing’ Glue} being the first fanzine is crap. Brian Hogg’s \textit{Bam Balam}, which was all about 1960s music, was in its fourth issue by then: it showed you could do a magazine and you didn’t have to be glossy.” Other early punk fanzines included \textit{Search and Destroy}, \textit{Flipside}, and \textit{Profane Existence}.

As fanzines proliferated, the term describing them was shortened. First to ‘zines, and then, simply, to zines. Zines and punk made a perfect match, for as Heath Row notes in his article “From Fandom to Feminism: An Analysis of the Zine Press,” “The punk press demonstrates that not only clothes and music can be produced cheaply and immediately from limited resources and experience.” The DIY ethic of punk culture, the bucking of mainstream acceptance, and the newly minted pejorative “selling out” all gave credence to zines as the official voice of punk culture—or at least as official as it was going to get. Originally, too, this combination meant that the zine press developed a heavy reliance on music reviews, interviews with musicians, and incessant chatter about “shows,” “gigs,” and “sets.”

Yet more importantly for a music non-fan such as myself, this infusion of print media into a culture focused on live performance opened up previously unexplored distribution options. Suddenly, going to see music often meant picking up three or four zines handed out for free, traded for mix tapes, dropped into bathrooms, or sold very cheaply at tables set up in the backs of venues. Punk zinesters emulated sci-fi and comics fanzine creators directly: if you loved a certain musician, or a certain sci-fi writer, or a certain comic-book character, you wrote about them and networked with other people who would write about them for your zine. Thus, zine culture grew into a close-knit community—whose members often overlapped with other close-knit communities.

Obviously, recent zine culture developed beyond its musical, sci-fi, and comics origins. In fact, the hidden fourth antecedent of zines—porn—was just as influential. As a fast, sure way to shock the mainstream, graphic depictions of sex have never been bested: Tijuana Bibles displayed popular figures, like Popeye, having sex with, say, the latest young movie starlet. Dirty, disjunctive imagery, in combination with the early photo-based pornographic magazines, pin-up collections, and erotic fiction that brought in enough cashflow to allow comic-book publishers to create \textit{that} industry—these are all still prevalent in zine-making. Naked ladies, non-standard spelling, pop-culture commentary, street language, personal narratives: these mark the common language of American self-publishing.

As the practice caught on among youth cultures in the age of media consolidation, it moved away from music, and zine topics began to focus on underground obsessions such as crappy jobs
Then, in the 1990s, a deliberately anti-mega-media outgrowth of the post-punk music scene emerged in the Pacific Northwest called Riot Grrrl. While most histories of zine culture fold Riot Grrrl into punk, three distinct matters cause me to keep these discussions separate: (a) the media blackout called for by the Riot Grrrl movement was a unique and thrilling invention that forced zine-making and personal experience with the culture to tell the entirety of the history; (b) the consolidation of media was quickening during this time, and few other responses to the ever-incorporating environment of storytelling were as graphic; and (c) my personal involvement with Riot Grrrl zines profoundly influenced my education in the field of publishing.

“Riot Grrrl zines attempt to expand the boundaries of feminist conversation through discussion of editor’s sexual exploits, the ins and outs of menstruation and feminine hygiene, and the danger of silverfish,” Heath Row explains. “Like punk zines, Riot Grrrl zines exhibit the rough-edged, hand-written text, doodles in the margins, and third-generational photocopied photographs.” Through collage, text, and comics, publishers like Nomy Lamm established a radical alternative to mainstream beauty images by sexualizing physical disabilities, fatness, queer desire, and masculine women. In 1992, mainstream press coverage began to distort the Riot Grrrl message—turning it, mainly, into the latest fashion statement—and a media blackout was enacted. Riot Grrrls no longer talked to the press, so if you wrote for anyone other than yourself, you had to turn to zines like Girl Germs, Satan Wears a Bra, Girly Mag, and Quit Whining for information about the hot new feminist scene.

Bitch and Bust grew directly from the third-wave feminist/Riot Grrrl self-publishing ethos around this same time and are widely available on newsstands and in bookstores today. The expansion of the relevance of punk beyond its early scrawny white boy constituency that was one result of Riot Grrrl also influenced the growth of two different influential zines, widely available until recently: Maximum Rock’n’Roll (first published in 1982) and Punk Planet (first published in 1994; ceased publication in 2007). Self-published comic books, called minicomics, have been launching pads for such contemporary artists as Tom Hart, Megan Kelso, Jesse Reklaw, and Lilli Carré. Small, self-published comics are actively traded through the mail, sold at comic-book conventions, given away during social gatherings, and purchased through specialized distributors such as Global Hobo, USS Catastrophe, and Cold Cut Comics Distribution.

Yet even with this rich, profound, and slightly hidden but well-documented history, the word zine is not going to be found in most dictionaries. This is as important to note as the secret religious, quilt-related, and flyer-influenced histories of zinemaking, because it proves something extremely important about our culture: not everything that happens is granted space in our most widely available reference materials.

In fact, most reference materials, anathema as they are to self-publishing and staunchly professional, frequently get it wrong when it comes to contemporary zines and comics. In 2004, The Grand Rapids Press described zines hilariously and nonsensically as “shaped from a blank piece of standard paper and folded into a pint-sized booklet … Some liken early books of the Bible to zine style.” In fact, zines can look like anything and be bound in any which way—some aren’t at all. Comparisons to the Bible, the most popular book in the world, are at this time few and far between.

Further trouble with relying on mainstream and professional press accounts of the history of zines—and the importance of seeking out alternative primary sources—is pointed out by the fact that Wertham’s Southern Illinois University Press-published book is considered one of the most important documents in zine history. While, granted, an excellent albeit professional resource, few historians have ever staunchly aligned with conservativism as Wertham was when Seduction was released in 1954, an act that lead to the creation of the Comics
Figure 27.1 How to Make This Very Zine, by Anne Elizabeth Moore.
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Code Authority, widespread comics censorship, and the loss of entire comic-book lines as well as several publishers. Even Stephen Duncombe’s more recent Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture only tells a very small part of the story about the politics of alternative culture, focusing as he does on the largest and most widely available zines—in other words, those that most closely emulate major media.

Which brings us to the important aspect of self-publishing: that “major” is not what they are about at all. In fact, they are about the minor, the local, the accessible. If any products of our culture deserved to have a bottom-up (as opposed to top-down) history committed to paper, it is zines. They themselves outline the very reasons for such a messy, nonlinear, and unprofessional approach. Because messy, nonlinear, and unprofessional describe not only the way they are constructed, but point to the need for some aspects of society to remain unclean, to refuse to conform, and to be created outside of formal training institutions or profit-focused businesses.

The experiences of women involved in Riot Grrrl show us how history wants to package and proselytize, and their media blackout approach gives us one way to avoid contributing to the creation of those neat boxes into which we will later be placed. Consider for a moment that perhaps a media blackout has been enacted on fully accurate zine histories, which tell (sometimes in roundabout ways) the real stories of real people in their own words. Might it not be more informative to go straight to the source? Hundreds of zine archives now exist for such purposes, in Portland, Chicago, New York, Madison, Seattle, Providence, Austin. Possibly, someone you know will have an extensive collection on hand. Read it, thoroughly, and then write your own history.

Perhaps most importantly, be aware when reading a history of zines that for every single sentence you read committed to paper by a devotee of some subject or another, a different sentence was uttered somewhere and never written down. It was more accurate than whatever you just read, and more beautiful, and spoke more directly to you and your experiences. You can think of it as lost, gone, and unavailable to history—or you can assume it is still there, somewhere. You either haven’t come across it yet, or you haven’t yet written it down.

Notes

1. Of course, self-publishing is in no way limited to the United States. Zines have been made around the world, in literate cultures and sometimes elsewhere—including by the 32 young Cambodian women college students I lived with in Phnom Penh, who, over the course of two months in 2007 and 2008, created, published, distributed, and established a readership for over 50 zines (in English and Khmer) and one large-scale group book called New Girl Law, more about which can be read at http://camblogdia.blogspot.com.

2. My first fanzine in 1994 was named AnneZine and was intended to support and popularize people who shared my same name, although this joke stopped making sense by 2000.

3. Wertham, Frederic. The World of Fanzines. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973 (p. 121). Unfortunately, more recent histories, and the resultant spates of books published to bolster them, have failed to take this same interest in the works of female self-publishers, and a few of these titles have since been lost.


7. In a way, there was a de-facto big media blackout in place among the zine community for several years. Many fellow zinesters and I refused to talk to the authors of books or go on TV talk shows to discuss our projects during the zine craze of the mid-1990s. That is, until I was invited to appear on the amazing Jim Jay and Tammy Faye show, which was sadly canceled before I was able to record the zine segment.