

Indie Spirit

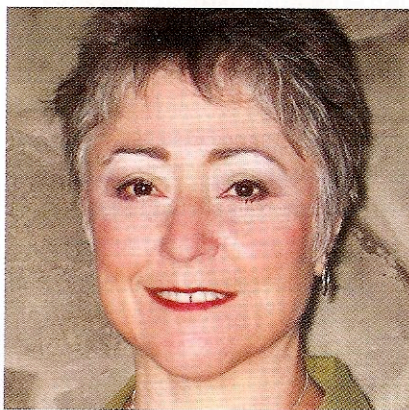
Rising up in the face of conventional wisdom, a fiction publishing house hits the stage.

CHARLOTTE COOK, president of the new independent publishing house Komenar Publishing, is intimately acquainted with her chosen profession—she was raised by a father who was an independent bookseller. She holds an MFA and is married to Richard Cook, owner of Sunrise Bookshop in Berkeley, Calif. Komenar, a fiction-only publishing house for debut authors, is her first foray into publishing.

What's behind the name Komenar? Komenar was my partner's grandfather's occupational name, a Polish word that roughly translates to Chimney-ist [hence the chimney sweep logo]. I loved it right away because both his grandparents and mine come from Poland. One of my friends in the book industry said, 'But it doesn't relate to books.' And I said, 'Yeah like Simon & Schuster or Viking does!'

What made you want to open your own publishing house? It was out of idealism, not naiveté. We felt that unknown first-time authors with really good writing were being ignored or mistreated by the industry. We wanted to use a combination of old publishing traditions and wiser business practices.

I've worked in high-tech and retail, and as a result I came into this with a different business approach. It's a tough industry because it's fractionalized into a large group of gatekeepers and passionate artists. The two clash an awful lot. But we also went into this business because we're massive readers.



Fiction is often a tough sell, yet Komenar is a fiction-only publishing house. What gives you confidence that your fiction titles will succeed? A lot of people below the radar are buying fiction. I know tons of people of all ages who are buying fiction. They're reachable, just not very vocal.

We're growing in ways that are unpredicted. We were told we would fail and we haven't. We [bring] passion and perseverance to publishing.

How does the attention you give your authors differ from what they could expect if a big N.Y. house published them? We differ greatly. In a big house, fiction authors are given a three-month window to succeed. We give them 18 months to two years—or longer if the trade paperback is showing promise. We have a bigger budget per book because we publish so few. We assume that authors don't know how to market and don't understand the industry, and we work hard to educate them and provide them with professional support. We don't really want our authors to be marketers; we want them to be authors. That's the best marketing they can do. We've been un-training them in some of the things they learned at writers' conferences and workshops. We focus more on the author.

What criteria will make you fall in love with a book? We have a statement: compelling story, engaging characters, evocative setting. I look at a book and if something takes me by surprise in a wonderful way and I can't put it down, then we're going to talk to that author. [WD]

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