

**FFC, the Fantastic Fiction Collective, wants to take on the publishing biggies:**

Introduction to a possible revolution in quality LF publishing

A DIALOG ON FFC [or SFAC] BETWEEN Michael RIEVES & Dan PEARLMAN

I've posted this email interchange that took place during two recent weeks [5/4-5/20] because, especially near its conclusion, it gets very sticky as Mike and I try to iron out major issues of FFC's goals and policy objectives. I hope this correspondence will have value to those of you interested in a real revolution in the way writers can get decently published and decently paid for decent work. [Mike's messages are posted here with his permission. SFAC = Science Fiction Authors Collective and is the tentative organizational name with which this whole idea began. FFC is my own naming preference.] ==Dan Pearlman

Michael Rieves, a long-time fan of LF [literature of the fantastic], recently entered into a conspiratorial talk with writers Jack Chalker and John Betancourt about new ways to beat the terrible old odds in getting LF out there to those who want to read it. Here is Mike's preliminary draft of a statement of purpose, including a list of objectives. It forms the basis for what we chew over in the email dialogue/debate that follows.

For those of you just tuning in, if you like this emerging idea and want to be a part of its development, join the ongoing SFAC-List dialogue at **SFAC@onelist.com**.

**SFAC'S PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES:**

by Michael Rieves

Statement of purpose:

To form a collective of writers for the purpose of publishing, printing, distributing and selling works written by members of the collective.

List of Objectives (note: this list is not in chronological order):

1. Set up a web site similar in purpose to Amazon.com, for the purpose of advertising and selling works by Members. Set up a small site for the purpose of posting progress reports, and use as a Members' discussion forum.
2. Use the services of an on demand printer to print copies of works as they are ordered, thus eliminating the need for a large inventory. As an alternative, lease an on demand print system and have the Collective do the printing.
3. In addition to the Collective's web site, use existing distributors to the minimum amount necessary to establish the Collective as a viable business, as their commissions substantially increase costs. Work towards establishing alternate, less costly methods of distribution for the purpose of eliminating the costs incurred by the use of existing distributors, and greatly increasing profits.
4. Explore the possibility of organizing small press ventures into a network working with the Collective, for the purpose of pooling resources for advertising, etc. and using the collective bargaining power of such a group to lower costs of printing, distribution, etc. This network also might possibly form the basis for one alternate method of distribution.

5. Ask each Member to send a list of works available for publishing, and set up a tentative catalogue of available works. Use the discussion forum to find a suitable period of time Members would agree to contract with the Collective as publisher. Contracts would be for a specific period of time and renewable by mutual agreement. Have suitable contracts drawn up. Open a line of discussion concerning suitable methods of evaluating new works submitted for publication and properly promoting works.

6. Use Members' web sites and fan sites as free advertising. When everything is set up and ready to go, enlist the services of a good PR person to start a media campaign for free publicity. eg. "Large Group of Sf, F & H Writers Takes On the Publishing Establishment" It's news with a human interest angle, and the public loves to root for the underdog. Properly handled it should get air time on the network news, and some of the Collective's more well known Members guest appearances on network and syndicated talk shows. With a catchy name for the Collective's site, it would be nationally recognized in a very short time.

7. Explore the possibility of printing and selling signed and numbered limited collector's editions of a few of the best (and most salable) works by well known Members, for the purpose of raising start up funds. These funds would be used to cover the cost of setting up the web site, set up costs for printing, and initial advertising.

8. Find out exact costs of printing, web site, etc., and day to day operation, so that members will have some idea of the royalty rates they can expect. Royalty rates on direct sales will be much higher than sales through distributors, because of costs, so there will be a dual rate. Establish a percentage of sales revenue to set aside for advertising, payment of staff, and reinvestment in the Collective.

9. Explore the possibility of incorporating the Collective and selling stock to raise funds.

10. Recruit a project coordinator with knowledge of the workings of the publishing industry, a business background, and experience in setting up similar ventures. Offer a percentage of profits as compensation.

#### THE RIEVES-PEARLMAN DIALOGUE:

At 02:11 AM 5/4/99 -0500, you wrote:

[M. RIEVES]: I have been discussing with SF authors Jack L. Chalker and John Betancourt, the present state of the publishing industry. I brought up the possibility of authors getting together and forming their own publishing and distribution network.

Jack Chalker, John Betancourt and I have been kicking this thing around for about a week now, so let me fill you in on some of the ideas we've come up with so far:

Advertising: There are many thousands of web sites out there owned by SF, fantasy and horror fans, virtually all of whom would be happy to donate a little space for advertising. There are also quite a few syndicated radio and TV talk shows, Art Bell and Larry King are two that come to mind, that well known authors could get interviews on and plug our venture. We can also work with existing marketing and distribution systems.

Printing: Print on demand is here, and prices are reasonable, the only problem being the three hundred to five hundred dollar set up fee. If a group of well known authors with proven track records went to one of these companies as a group, I'm sure something could be worked out. As an alternative, these print on demand systems are now being leased at a very reasonable price. This gives us

the capability of doing backlists and out of print works at very reasonable cost, even for just a few copies.

Distribution: A web site offering our works at slightly less than the major publishers' prices, and offering the customer the option of paying a membership fee or getting a free membership with the purchase of three or more books on one order, and giving members a much greater discount. The member would then have to purchase a certain minimum number of books per year to maintain his member status. This would greatly increase our initial sales, and with print on demand, the books could be printed as they were ordered, thus eliminating the need to maintain inventory. With several well known authors on our side, we could also market through the major chain bookstores.

Another idea we have for raising initial capital is offering limited edition leather-bound, signed hardcover works. These can be printed cheaply enough to allow us a healthy profit margin. We could offer them to a major chain such as Barnes and Noble, and they'd do the advertising for us.

This is what the three of us have come up with in one week. Sf, fantasy and horror authors are among the brightest, most imaginative (and most underpaid) people in the field. With a few more of you working with us, there's no telling what we can do! Of the responses I've received so far, 60% are enthusiastically in favor, 25% are interested but withholding judgment until we can come up with something more concrete, and 15% satisfied with the status quo.

On demand book printing now makes it possible to print as few, or as many copies of a book as you need. Once you have the manuscript in a suitable digital format, even one copy can be printed economically. This is what makes an enterprise like this possible. We will simply print to order with zero inventory. Initial costs will be quite reasonable, plus we have some ideas for making the start up money, and some potential financing. Fifty authors is the minimum we must have on our side before we can start. This idea is technologically feasible at reasonable cost, and no one else is doing it yet, so now is the time to get it started. Here are the advantages:

1. Every author will be able to list every single work not currently licensed to another publisher as available in our catalogue. (Each manuscript must be in a suitable digital format, more details on this will be forthcoming..) There will be no more "out of print", books will be printed to order.
  2. Because this is a consortium of writers, royalties will be considerably higher than those paid by mainstream publishers.
  3. No one is being asked to contribute money, we are going to try everything possible to make this thing pay for itself. All we want right now are your comments and bright ideas. We're going to try to get this thing going on a sweat equity basis.
- Feel free to email me with any questions you may have, as well as comments and ideas.  
Michael Rieves

REPLY BY DAN PEARLMAN: 5/4/99

[DP]: Michael,

I like many things about the concept you outline below, and if there are ways in which CLF can be supportive, we will be so.

Are you familiar with my own call-to-arms, my little manifest on the Whimsy site (and in CLF News #5) on a possible FFC, or "Fantastic Fiction Collective"? It is intended as an indie publishers collective rather than an authors' collective a la the Fiction Collective. See

<http://www.uri.edu/artsci/english/clf/ffc.html>

My immediate concern regarding your own idea of an authors' collective using the X-Libris type of publishing system is that the better-known authors will find this system useful for selling more copies of their out-of-print titles (and only secondarily use it to publish a new title, which they'd rather see printed by a standard, refereed publisher), whereas new or little-known offbeat authors whom Tor, etc., won't touch will be "publishing" no more than an announcement, since hardly anyone will order a title issued under a vanity-press type of arrangement--and that's what the X-Libris system essentially boils down to.

If, however, in a truly collective spirit of mutual aid, well-known writers would commit to a certain number of reviews per year of their colleagues' new books--even and especially of lesser-known writers' works--and vice versa, in such a way that we do not sound like a mutual admiration society (i.e., no one would praise a book they really didn't like), then all the good writers in the group would get well-deserved promotion and we would not fall into two groups, the made-its and the wannabes sharing nothing except an empty rubric. Despite the faults of the original Fiction Collective, a new author had to be approved to be published, a process which legitimized all their titles. I don't see how the idea you outline would promote anyone who does not already have a decent readership.

These are just preliminary thoughts by way of opening a dialogue on a matter to which I, and CLF, have paid much attention over the years. If there continues to be a rift of selfishness and snobbery between the established "commercial" f/sf writer and the "literary" newbie or wannabe f/sf writer, then a "collective" which doesn't bridge that gap is just a fake.

==Dan Pearlman

Coordinator, CLF [Council for the Literature of the Fantastic]

At 12:38 AM 5/5/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Thanks for your comments and suggestions, we have briefly touched on some of the issues you've mentioned, but primarily we've been working with the mechanics of getting this thing off the ground. We will certainly be appreciative of any help you are willing to offer. I am amazed and appalled by the fact that, of the responses I've received so far, less than five percent of authors have expressed satisfaction with their present publisher. The time is ripe for a venture of this sort, and with recent technological advances, it is now feasible. In fact, considering the attitude of the mainstream publishing industry, I believe that we could have fifty percent or

more of the SF and fantasy market by the end of our first year, if we can get authors to act in concert. I'm just a lowly SF fan who does not want to see the demise of quality SF works, and I'm trying to do my share to insure that it doesn't happen. We will most certainly see a revolution in the publishing industry quite early in the twenty first century, and I would love to see the SF, fantasy and horror genres at the forefront of that revolution.

All the things you mentioned are valid and important issues, and we will have to address them before we actually start publishing. We will be in contact with you soon to discuss them further, and we can certainly use any support you can send our way.

Please feel free to contribute any further insight or ideas you may have. You may contact me, Jack L Chalker at <jchalker@miragepress.com>, or John Betancourt at <wildside@sff.net>.

Thank you again for your interest and support. I will keep you informed of our progress.

Mike Rieves

5/5/99:

[DP] Thanks for your thoughtful reply, Michael.

You could indeed get at least 50% of SF \*writers\*, but NOT of the SF \*market\*. Remember, the market is dominated by a handful of schlock-vomiting pros who hog the shelves. The rest of us, especially if we're small-press authors, never reach the shelves. If you want to reach a great many of the sunlight-deprived SF/F writers and not just the pros with out-of-print books to sell, you'll have to come forth with a promotional strategy that makes it clear you are not interested in another form of vanity press publishing. For example, I have an SF novel that I had a great agent for, but he couldn't sell it because it crossed into mainstream territory, and I haven't been able to sell it on my own, but the most suicidal thing I could do would be to "publish" it via an X-Libris type of channel.

I maintain that a bunch of established pros with a bent for \*quality\* in the field, pros who would be willing to sacrifice a bit of time to blurb some good but ignored newbies and therefore serve to elevate the whole field, would be a necessary start-up cadre for a plan like yours to work. The pros might in turn receive a big discount on the cost of making their out-of-print or unmarketably obscene (cf. Delaney) book available via your program, whereas the rest of us would pay whatever is the normal rate to publish in this manner (thus subsidizing the pros for cheerleading the rest of us).

Anyway, expose these thoughts of mine, if you will, to Jack and John and let me know how they--as pros--react to them. (I won't contact them directly because you might have to "introduce" me by copying them my previous email to you.)

More good luck.

Dan Pearlman

At 06:49 AM 5/6/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Judging by the response I've received so far, we could get over 80% of the Sf writers, and I think you underestimate Sf readers. The reason they're buying the schlock is because that's mostly what's on the shelves. Presented with a choice (which they don't have because of major publishers and their arrangements with the major book retail chains), they'd buy the quality stuff. With alternative distribution methods, we intend to present them with that choice. Admittedly, we've still got a ways to go, but I believe that we're headed in the right direction, and I also believe that if we hit on the right combination, 50% of the market (or more) is easily attainable.

I agree wholeheartedly with your remarks about giving all writers equal opportunity to sell works, and I've already forwarded those suggestions to Jack and John. After all, the old pros were newbies once, and if someone hadn't given them a chance, we'd still be reading stories of the first trip to the moon written by a bunch of dead guys. Don't get me wrong, I've been an Sf fan for over forty years. I still like a lot of the old stuff, and reread it occasionally. But I'd be bored to tears if there was nothing new available, as a matter of fact that why I started this crusade.

What would you think about having an arrangement with a small network of experienced Sf fans who would read new works for us and pass along their opinion to us. We could ask for volunteers, find out what type of Sf they like and send them copies accordingly. We could possibly work out some system of grading the new works, and pass the better ones along to major authors for review. This would let us review a large group of works without bogging down our major authors in book reviews. We could give our amateur reviewers the review copies and offer them extra discounts on our other books. I really don't know if this is practical, but it is an idea to consider. I like the idea of an incentive to the old pros for passing judgment on the newbies, I think it's a workable notion.

I keep hearing the terms "vanity press" and "X-Libris publishing", if it has the potential capability of taking over half the market, does it really matter what you call it? I'd call it a successful marketing strategy! The real secret to the success of this thing is getting a large enough group of authors working with us, and since the major publishers seem to be bent on tossing them in our laps, I think this will be no problem. Feel free to contact me, Jack <jchalk@marigepress.com>, or John <wildsidepress@sff.net>. As I said, I've already forwarded your name and suggestions (I believe in giving credit where credit is due), and I think you could be a major help to our cause. Mike Rieves

[DP] Michael,

Your idea of developing a cadre of respected SF/F fans to do the initial filtering is a great idea. I myself have enlisted my grad students to review books, zines, etc., for CLF, and the process has been very successful. Most importantly, such a review process is free of direct market pressures and biases. If the reader sees publishable quality, he does not fear losing his job if he is voted down, and he just sends it up the line for a pro review.

Perhaps a system could be worked out whereby any submitted ms. gets an initial two reviews. If both are positive, the ms. gets sent to a pro for review with possible blurb. If the initial two reviewers have opposite opinions, a third fan-reviewer is brought in to settle the matter, and

if the ms. does not as a result receive two yes votes, it is turned down. I would suggest also that, when mss. are sent to a pro, they not be accompanied by the earlier fan reviews to avoid bias. Fan-reviewers should, of course, include people of widely different tastes--from slipstream and experimental to Tor-type mainstream readers. You might think also of a Fantastic Collective Website offering the reviews and initial chapters of books chosen for publication, a Website paid for by advertising from Amazon, etc., which might bring in enough revenue to cover some of the publishing costs of our FC authors.

I think it especially important to make fan-reviewers aware of the fact that they, the experienced readers, are going to control a lot of what develops as SF/F in the future. Right now, superstores with their conservative tastes are the tail that wags the dog. We could reverse that--at first, for SF and F, but we would serve as a model for literature as a whole in this country, which suffers from the same deadly market forces.

To develop this whole program will take lots of your time--if it is to be done right. It could become an administrative nightmare, and if you don't like dealing with detail, don't get into it. Or find trustworthy people who do like dealing with administrivia--shunting mss. to reviewers, keeping records, making nice, etc. In general, however, this is a worthy project of a sort I've been promoting through CLF for five years. It's about time a marketing means was developed to insure that quality literary work reaches the audience that wants it--and the elimination of the whole usual marketing route (in addition to the sheer waste of time that entails!) would be nothing short of revolutionary. Expect a lot of jeering (like from Paul Levinson, who laughed at my suggestions made through CLF) out of the sense some pros have that the Holy Marketplace is the true judge of values. After all, if a guy has made a few bucks from Holy Market, he tends to kiss Holy Market's ass.

==Dan Pearlman

At 11:04 PM 5/6/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] I've forwarded your suggestions to Jack and John, along with my endorsement of them. I suggested that they contact you personally, as I think you have much to offer in getting our venture off the ground. Thanks again, it's the bright, caring and imaginative people like you that are going to make this venture succeed!

Mike Rieves

5/7/99

[DP] Mike,

I do think the basic idea is workable and I'd like to see it

all happen--soon. I think the SF/F publishing industry is so oriented toward mass-market stuff that quality doesn't get to see the light, except through a few small-press ventures, few of which last very long, or have promotional resources worth a damn, or can afford to back more than a few authors. (I was fortunate to have my first book of fiction, a collection of SF stories, published by Permeable Press [1995] but, like many other small-press publishers, Brian Clark found he couldn't substitute love for money and had to sell out--to Andy Watson of Cambrian, and he's even more cautious than Clark.)

I think it important, in connection with my comments on the small press, for a venture like the one you propose not to appear--or actually be--in \*competition\* with the barely surviving quality small press. It is important to actually pick up what the small press simply cannot handle resource-wise and to find ways to \*support\* whatever is left of the small press, and to announce this intention with your initial public announcements--or else you might cause a backlash among authors who are loyal to small-press publishers who've taken a chance on them when the biggies wouldn't even piss on them/me/us. Perhaps your organization-to-be can promote individual quality imprints as part of its general strategy to get the quality stuff published AND sold. Getting small-press publishers behind you (and why not also the editors of the major SF/F zines?) will be very important to the success of your venture!

Anyway, thanks for thinking I'm being helpful. Please keep me informed on your next steps.

==Dan

At 02:24 AM 5/7/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] It seems that many of us connected with Sf in some way are night owls! I work at this all night, so I can leave my phone line open during the day, a necessity dictated by my wife. After corresponding with several authors, and small press publishers, I think that perhaps the best thing would be to form a network of independent writers, and small press ventures, using our collective bargaining power to get better deals from printers and distributors, and pooling our resources on advertising, where it would have the greatest effect. Each small press would continue publishing under it's own name, simply adding something like "Participating member of Writers Sf, F & H collective" (or whatever we finally choose to call it) Each member would, of course, have full access to all marketing, distribution, etc. avenues of the collective. That way we would strengthen, not weaken the established small press ventures, and together we would be a force to reckon with.

Mike Rieves

==Dan

5/7/99

[DP] Michael,

Do you have a background in business that enables you to coordinate a project like this?

At 11:36 AM 5/7/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Well, I was once the assistant manager of a Hardee's Restaurant for about three months, does that make me qualified? Seriously... No! What I do have is 43 years experience as a die hard Sf reader ... and a ton of common sense, none of which qualifies me to coordinate a project of this magnitude. I'm hoping that one of you over educated (for the purpose of writing Sf & F), underpaid writers will step up and grab the ball. I do, however, make a pretty damn good recruiter, question answerer, explainer, general PR man, and coffee getter when the real experts show up and start brainstorming.  
Mike Rieves

5/7/99

Well, Michael, you sound like the perfect guy for the job.  
==Dan

At 03:48 AM 5/8/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Nope, not me! I'm willing to recruit, explain, and answer questions relating to this venture, but we need someone who knows his or her way around the publishing industry, and has a solid business background. Any suggestions? Any volunteers?  
Mike

[DP] Mike,

I suggest that a fully articulated statement of the proposal be written up and submitted to the SFWA FORUM by either Chalker or Betancourt (it has to be a SFWA member) and that it contain a request for precisely the kind of volunteers you're after. Such a statement should indicate that it was formed after considering input solicited from the whole membership, so that we'll all feel we had a chance to respond.

I think, however, that grad students in some Master's degree program in Marketing could work this out as a for-credit project, even as a thesis project, and that you might want to email a list of Marketing programs in grad Bus. dep'ts around the country (or start with some major bus. schools). Some students could work on developing the strategy, others could implement it.

It's a source of cheap and effective labor. Think about it.

==Dan

At 04:44 AM 5/9/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] We have many brilliant minds among the authors who are interested in this project, and several of them would be qualified for the position. My thought was to attempt to get one of them to volunteer to do the job for a percentage of future profits. That way we would have to spend nothing right now to get the position filled. Both of your suggestions have equal merit, and going before the SFWA would also serve to let all the writers that I haven't found contacts for know about our plan.

Mike

5/9/99

[DP] Mike,

My one concern about getting \*authors\* to volunteer is that dedication to administering such a project must eat enormously into their writing time, so that they will bow out relatively soon, no matter their initial enthusiasm.

==Dan

5/9/99

At 07:18 AM 5/9/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Our intent is to use the internet as an advertising, marketing and distribution tool., in addition to more conventional methods. We intend to be at the forefront of the coming revolution in publishing, but to do that we'll need a firm foothold in conventional publishing, and capitol to finance our efforts. That's what we're working on right now.

The Web will be a play large roll in the coming revolution. E-books in downloadable digital format will become a viable and profitable alternative to hard copy books, but not until several things happen First, there are issues of copyright and authors rights yet to be resolved. Second, the technology for this is not yet available at a reasonable enough price. I doubt that the Palm Pilot, etc. will even survive the revolution, and I don't think whatever replaces it will be backwards compatible. I think the primary weapon in the revolution will be the computer display. The new large panel LCD displays are coming close, but they've a ways to go yet toward allowing the user to read comfortably for hours at a time. We're another two generations away from that, maybe one to three years. Allow another year or two until they're cheap enough to be included with the average system. A typical novel would require somewhere around 500kB to one MB of storage space on a hard drive, and advances in compression techniques could cut it to a fraction of that, as the MP3 format has done with audio (20:1 in that case). Since the average system hard drive is around 8 GB now, and any serious fan would be willing to use a GB or so for book storage (1000 to 2000 books, uncompressed) we're already there in terms of storage.

A 56k modem will download one MB in less than ten minutes, so that's not a problem.

There will have to be an advance in encryption and copy protection techniques before downloading a work in digital format is really safe and practical, but if it looks to be profitable (and it will!) that part will be ready when everything else is in place. This will also go a long way toward solving the issues of copyright and author's rights also.

Third, since no one will be happy with a plain text format, there is also the issue of a standard digital format. There will be some argument there, as no software manufacturer will want someone else's format to win out. We will either see the development of software capable of displaying multiple formats, or the PDF format, which is pretty much industry standard now, will win out.

What all this boils down to is display technology is the bottleneck. Everything else will fall into place as soon as suitable displays are available at reasonable cost. I put it at an absolute minimum of two years, most likely time frame of three and a half to four years, and a maximum of five years, unless we run into a problem serious enough to force us to go with another type of display technology, which would put us at six to ten years away.

That is highly unlikely, as there are already suitable prototype LCD displays in existence. My background is electronics and computers, so these should be accurate guesstimates. The Revolution starts in two to five years. We will all need to cooperate if we're to be ready for it.

Mike Rieves

5/9/99

[DP] Mike,

Your riff on e-books may be jumping ahead too far for now. I think the immediate focus should be this: What \*quality\* writers with already established readerships are sufficiently pissed off with the games the big publishers play with them to induce said writers to publish their next book under your Writers Collective aegis (using the technology exemplified by X-libris, for example)--whether it's a new book or the reprint of one out of print. A group of such writers demonstrating allegiance to such a Collective is the necessary start. The next thing to set up is the method of selection of books by lesser-known authors, and the method of promotion--matters I've discussed with you more or less already. The format of publication is a tertiary matter (whether it be in hardcopy or electronic form) if a large enough readership is psyched up enough to WANT the Collective's titles, to BELIEVE in the quality of what the Collective has to offer.

Fortunately, a terrific publicity campaign can be managed cheaply and effectively online. The Websites of many an established author gone Collective make excellent billboards, among other sites.

==Dan P

At 11:23 PM 5/9/99 -0500, you wrote:

I agree that e-books are not something we should be working on right now. The point I was trying to make is that the digital revolution in publishing is almost upon us, and a sound base in conventional publishing and some funding will be necessary if authors as a group are to make the transition successfully and use it to their advantage. This means that we must get this venture started as soon as possible, and we must use what time we have to our advantage.

Other than continuing to do what I've been doing, that is contacting people ,explaining what we're trying to do, answering their questions, and making note of their ideas and suggestions, I'm not sure what my part in this venture will be, if any. My suggestion on what to do next would be to set up some sort of online forum where everyone could meet in a chatroom sort of environment to discuss where this thing needs to go next, and who is willing to do what to get it there. Surely, there is a website somewhere with the necessary resources that would be willing to donate a few evenings of time to a worthy cause.

You guys would know more about that than I would. It wouldn't be a bad idea to set up a site where everyone could post questions, comments, suggestions, ideas etc. and where we could post progress reports. Maybe one of our authors would be willing to donate space on their site. This would be a way to accomplish the first couple of objectives you listed.

What I need to do now is make some sort of organized list of suggestions, ideas, objections etc. submitted so far, and I will be working on that.

Mike Rieves

5/10/99

Mike,

I've seen several analogous plans--i.e., to do something to promote quality publishing--talked to death when presented in too inchoate a form to a wide audience for their input.

I think that by now you probably have enough suggestions to create a solid PLAN of coherent objectives and methods of reaching them. Why not write up as detailed and coherent a plan of campaign as you can at this juncture--and toss it back at those (few, apparently) who have been actively participating in this scheme so far? Let a CORE GROUP of people present a CONCRETE PLAN embodying KEY PRINCIPLES on which they all agree. If you present something vague and not well thought out to a wider audience, your own confusion will invite even more. If you present something definite, something you're sure about, you'll attract helpful comment only from those already on your wavelength, and you'll know whom to ignore. If you think you already have a likeminded cadre, including pro writers, who are with you, then write up the program now, let it be edited by your small group of participants, and go ahead and present a well-formulated, group-endorsed plan of action to the larger audience whose participation you need for starters--supposedly, the writers, most of them members of SFWA. The plan should, of course, include a plea for help in filling SPECIFIC ROLES -- e.g., a Webmeister, a business manager, a fundraiser, an editorial committee, etc. When you have an organization in place, i.e., a group of specific people with more or less defined roles, it is this group that confers on how to coordinate their efforts to get the job done. The general goals must be agreed to by all, and then you leave it up to the staff to implement them in some concerted way okayed by a staff majority.

Anyway, I've been the chair of three college English departments for a total of nine unfortunate years, and there are certain

things I've learned about how to get support for--sometimes radical--change. You always have to have worked out a detailed plan in your own head for others to bounce off, even vehemently object to. You hope then to attract definite alternate suggestions that should strengthen your original proposal.

So sit down and write up the Plan of Action, and give a tentative name to the organization, and show your select few what you've come up with.

==Dan

At 01:35 AM 5/10/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] In the approximately two weeks since I started sending e mails exploring an interest in forming a writers' publishing group, I've received responses from sixty four authors. Fifty five (86%) of you expressed an interest in joining such a group, Your levels of interest ranged from an enthusiastic "Let's do it now!", to a more cautious "Count me in if you can get something going.", to a skeptical "If you can show me some results, I'll give it a try.". Of the nine responses that I didn't count as interested, Four were satisfied with their present publisher(s), a salient comment in itself on the present state of the industry. And five were on the order of "It's a nice thought, but you'll never get a group of authors to cooperate on the level necessary to get something like this to work.".

As I suspected, most of you were interested in publishing your out of print works, and several had unpublished works that they'd not been able to sell to the conventional publishing houses, and were willing to publish those with us. A few had enough faith in the idea to be willing to publish brand new works with us. What you've offered will be enough to get us started. I did some brief research, and there are an impressive number of awards and award nominations associated with the names in this group.

I think our next step would be to get some space on a web site for us to post progress reports, and for you to post questions, comments, suggestions, ideas, gripes, etc., so that everyone can keep up to date, and be involved in this venture. If you're willing to set up suitable space on your web site and donate a little time to keeping it current, please contact me. The only way this thing is going to work is having everybody contribute at least a little time and effort. I know that many of you are having to work other jobs in addition to your writing to make ends meet, and don't have much free time, but if you can contribute a workable idea or suggestion, you'll be doing your share.

I've talked to a few of you who are working with small press publishers, and I had the thought that if we could form a network of authors and small press publishers working together and pooling resources for such things as advertising, and using our collective bargaining power and potential sales volume to get better deals from printers and distributors, we could work together to the mutual benefit of all. What

we would have then would no longer be small press, it would be a "distributed press", able to compete on a more solid footing with the mainstream publishing houses. It would also help to get our venture going much more quickly. If those of you who are working with small press publishers would discuss this with them, it would be helpful. We need someone with knowledge of the ins and outs of publishing and a solid business background to coordinate this venture. If you have the qualifications and the time, or you know someone who does, please contact me. I think we would all be willing to give a percentage of sales revenue to such a person for his efforts, and if this thing goes well, it could be a lucrative position.

Daniel Pearlman made the suggestions that we could take our proposal to the SWFA forum for presentation to the membership as a whole, and/or that we could enlist the help of a group of graduate students in a Master's degree program in marketing on a for credit basis, as an economical means of administrating this venture. Let me know what you think.

As always, feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, suggestions or ideas.

5/10/99

[DP] Thanks for the update, Mike.

You seem not to have broached to this large initial mailing group any mention of how mss. would be selected and promoted. Perhaps a separate memo on this would be helpful. After all, lots of us weaker-selling authors want to know how we get anything out of this cooperative. I would not want the impression to be given that the cooperative exists really to bring back out-of-print books by the more successful authors among us.

I'll react as soon as I get the time to your memo addressed to me personally on a step-by-step Plan to broach to the potential membership.

Good going so far!

==Dan

At 02:21 AM 5/11/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] I have mentioned that we are going to offer higher royalties than mainstream publishers do, that's one of the premises on which this whole thing is based.

It is, of course, obvious that we are not getting the major distributors' best deal, otherwise the major publishers would be going out of business. That's why I suggested small press and writers form a network and use the power of their numbers to get the same deal the big publishers get from the distributors. It will take time to set up an

efficient alternate distribution network, and until we have that in place, we've going to have to use existing systems for a large portion of our distribution. However, we can set up our network in a relatively short time and start the bargaining process. If we work together, I'll bet we can cut the cost of distribution through existing channels by twenty five to fifty percent. That represents a very healthy royalty rate increase for our authors, and a very healthy increase in profits for small press publishers who are allied with us.

I have contacted a few small press publishers, and I will discuss this with them. Perhaps one or more of them will have some ideas for getting an efficient distribution network set up more quickly.

I'll post these details on our site as soon as we get it set up.

Thanks again for your help

Mike

>

5/11/99

[DP] Mike,

With the direct-sales avenue opened by the Internet, you can avoid the distributors altogether! They are simply not needed

from the word go. Wake up to this tremendous boon that the Net offers today's authors. Why negotiate for reduced rates with middlemen you don't ... need??? Ask virtually ANY small-press publisher their opinion of distributors, and you'll hear horror story after horror story about destructive business practices--not paying for many moons, by which time a \*small\* press can go bust; forcing the publisher to swallow damaged unsalable books; making the publisher pay the postage on returns. You don't seem to see that, financially, the most important part of any "revolution" you want to effect is dumping middlemen--and that includes DISTRIBUTORS and BOOKSTORES--bookstores, that is, unless the stores agree to far better terms with publishers than they now enjoy. For example, they should NOT be able to send back unsold books. What they buy, they've ... bought, and that's that! Like in any other legit business. Why should the publisher get screwed all the time? The small press can not survive in a distributor/bookstore environment that strangles it. Even the biggie publishers are feeling the pressure.

You ought to make it quite clear that "direct sales" via the Internet--both to private individuals AND to the bookstores themselves--can replace the whole damn middleman foodchain and, in that manner, quadruple royalties and triple profits for small-press publishers. \*Authors\* would do even better publishing via the Writers Collective rather than even with a small press, obviously.

To sum up, a Writers Collective can circumvent entirely the traditional middlemen. THAT'S where your revolution is mainly; only secondarily in utilizing cheaper means of book production.

Throw this message out to your correspondents and see how they react.

==Dan

At 12:53 AM 5/11/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Thanks! I plan on posting the details on our web site when we get it set up. The e mail updates will cover general progress and important break throughs. The site will (I hope) become a forum for discussion as members post their comments, gripes, suggestions, and responses to others' comments, etc. This is hopefully where many of the details will be ironed out.

Mike

5/11/99

[DP] As I pointed out in my DUMP THE MIDDLEMAN message, you've still got to be clear about your overall objectives and fundamental general strategies; the details won't mean a thing if you haven't worked out the Big Plan first.

==Dan

At 04:10 AM 5/11/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] I agree with what you're saying, and that's one of the major aims of this venture. If we had a couple of million dollars to spend, we could do it right away. However, since we're starting on a shoestring, we'll unfortunately be forced to use the established distribution systems for a while anyway until we get well enough known to go it on our own. We'll use them as little as possible, but we'll still have to use them.

There's another angle to this, if we can set up an efficient distribution system, we can offer distribution services to the major publishers at lower rates than the major distributors charge, and make money at both ends! For example our web site for distribution could do what Amazon does while only taking 35% from nonmembers as opposed to the 55% they take, we could do that and still make a tidy profit. Members' books would be sold at a discount, while maintaining the higher royalties to our authors, subsidized by our competitors. We will have to get into the bookstores to reach the whole market, unfortunately.

Mike

5/11/99

[DP] Michael,

A system of on-demand publication (e.g., X-Libris style) implies little or no warehousing of books and simply mailing out small quantities at a time to those individuals and bookstores who order them from the Writers Collective Website. For that, an office must be maintained, preferably near the printing operation to eliminate unnecessary intermediate shipping costs. The small staff--for maintaining the Website, dealing with authors, running the ms. evaluation system, and order-fulfillment--could initially

be volunteer-staffed, e.g., by college interns eager for the college-credit experience.

The operation would start small and grow bigger as experience and volume permits. Now, given all this, where is your "couple of million dollars" you imagine that's needed to eliminate the distributor/bookstore middleman system? Maybe \$100,000, which any bank would give you if you show them enough impressive affidavits from authors, etc. Start-up costs for advertising via the Net should be particularly low, and, in fact, your 'Net presence should soon be paid for by advertising from all levels of publishing. So I think you're imagining costs that simply don't have to exist.

Again, if you're going to be revolutionary, start out like a Bolshevik, not like a Menshevik with half measures trying to appease the Powers-that-be while dipping your toes into the future.

==Dan

At 06:15 AM 5/11/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] We need a name for our organization, and a catchy name for our commercial site. (and I'll bet we can come up with something a lot better than "Amazon.com") The floor is now open for suggestions.  
Mike

5/11/99

[DP] One idea might be SFWC (playing off SFWA), for Science-Fiction [and Fantasy] Writers Collective, pronounced "sefwick." Another might be AFAP, Association of Fantastic Authors and Publishers. A site name might be StrangeWord. ... Just off the top of my head.

==Dan

At 04:14 AM 5/11/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] ... I'll get started on making a list of what I think the objectives of this venture should be, and when I'm satisfied with it, I'll post it on the site for comment.  
Mike

5/11/99

[DP] Please don't mind my occasionally forceful tone. I believe in being DEFINITE--and therefore provably wrong, rather than vague, and therefore nowhere and inconsequential.

==Dan

At 12:11 AM 5/12/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Michael Rieves <mriev@bellsouth.net>This is what I've come up with so far, I'd appreciate your comments and suggestions.

Mike

Statement of purpose:

To form a collective of writers for the purpose of publishing, printing and distributing and selling works written by members of the collective.

List of Objectives (note: this list is not in chronological order):

[See Mike's already posted list of 10 points.]

5/12/99

[DP] By way of a quick response (at 3 a.m.), I'd say point 5 needs elaborating. You'll need to mention a ms. evaluation system and assurance of proper promotion of works selected to be published--promotion by way of blurbs, reviews, etc., so that all selected mss. are given equal opportunity for sales.

...

==Dan

At 02:29 AM 5/12/99 -0500, you wrote:

I added this sentence to item five, Is it enough?

Open a line of discussion concerning suitable methods of evaluating new works submitted for publication and properly promoting works.

5/12/99

[DP] Sounds good!

==Dan

[MR] As I see it, our alternatives are as follows:

1. Strike an equitable deal with the chain bookstores.
2. Deal directly with chain discount stores such as Walmart, Kmart, Sears, Krogers, Food Lion, BiLo, etc.
3. Deal directly with what few independent bookstores are left out there.
4. Deal directly with the chain "Gas, Milk, Bread and Ice" Fast service stores found in every neighborhood in the country, Most have book and magazine racks.
5. Somehow create our own network of retailers in every town and city in the country, or strike a deal with something that's already there to add our product to it's retail shelves.

Those are our alternatives, as I see it. Some are quite possible, some are farfetched, but all have to be considered if we're to compete successfully.

Mike

Again, be realistic! The kinds of books that convenience stores and supermarkets hawk are usually the top #1-#10 bestsellers, or other mass-market titles, especially in the romance, detective, and SF/F/H lines. Apart from indie bookstores, the rest are the least likely outlets to be interested in striking any deal with a publisher of quality, non-mass-market genre titles.

I don't know why you keep on insisting that the conventional bookselling outlets have much relevance for the really innovative approaches you claim to be taking. I sometimes feel that you are riding a train--but in the caboose, looking backward.

==Dan

5/14/99

[DP] Mike,

Here's a reply to some of the points you make below:

[MR's reply is only excerpted within DP's message.]

==Dan

At 02:09 AM 5/14/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] A strong network of independent publishers would have the bargaining power to command the same deal that the major houses get.

[DP] 1. Focusing on the large group of imperiled independent publishers at the beginning of this enterprise would be to channel all your energies into a secondary matter--and a black hole, as my experience has taught me. Your first and main concern is to establish your OWN independent publishing enterprise with its own carefully calculated means of producing, promoting, and marketing ITS product. It is largely on the emerging success of such an enterprise that the process of collectivizing small press publishers will depend. Their fate is up to them: join or (possibly) perish.

2. Do not assume there would be much "bargaining power" in a "strong network of independent publishers." All the indie publishers together in the SF/F field, if their product were removed from the superstore shelves, wouldn't make a visible dent in superstore operations.

[MR] The plain and simple fact is that many people do not make online or over the phone purchases. If we don't have a plan for getting our product to these people, we're missing out on a major portion of the market.

[DP] The "plain and simple fact is that" readers of unusual kinds of literature--in our case, high-quality and often offbeat SF/F/H, etc.--DO make the effort to find the stuff and are not the kind of people who do much of their browsing in superstores. In fact, a very high percentage of "our" sort of readers ARE ALREADY connoisseurs of the latest in online technology, and if they aren't going to find

their kind of reading in the superstores, and if the indie bookstores are closing down, where else are they going to find our stuff except online? So that the "major portion" of your market WILL BE the online market, and the major form of publication WILL BE based on on-demand orders (and if the superstores and the indies want to buy Fastastic Collective books, they can order copies printed on demand like any private individual--except they'd get a big discount for quantity buying--and I mean BUYING, not ordering subject to the stinking current "returns" procedures).

At 06:01 AM 5/15/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] 1. My idea with the small press publishers alliance is to throw the idea at a few of them, and then set back and let them recruit others, while we continue with our own agenda. We won't wait for them to make up their minds, we'll continue our work. This will only take a few hours of my time, and if they can't see that this is the only way they'll survive and prosper, then the loss will be theirs. I think the potential gains are worth a few hours of time spent.

2. True, but a strong network of publishers and writers, assuming we have several writers with a rep for selling in high volume (and we have a few), will have more power than writers alone. I can think of four or five authors who are interested in us, whose works would make a noticeable dent in the superstore operations. If it appears that we have the power to go it without them, they'll be more likely to deal with us. It's the appearance of power, rather than the actual power, that makes the difference, and the more authors and publishers we have in our network, the more powerful we'll look. The old saying, "There's strength in numbers.", isn't necessarily true, but it is true that there's the appearance of strength in numbers. We can make it without the small press, but it'll be easier to make it with them.

3. Whether it's a major portion or a minor portion, we can't afford to miss any of the market, if we're to be successful. We don't want to miss the casual buyer who browses the bookstores and buys titles that catch his eye, because that is a significant portion of the market. I agree about making the stores ditch the returns policy. It comes down to the simple fact that 45% if something is better than 100% of nothing. If we put ads for our web site on the inside covers of every book, we'll add to our direct sales market., We'll be using our sales in the stores to advertise for our direct sales, missing none of the market and bringing closer the day we can do without them entirely.

The Walmart, Kmart and Kroger's in my area have fairly large bookshelves, and they carry a lot more than top ten books. This is the case in many smaller cities and towns, and their combined book sales volume is much higher than that of the one book superstore in my town.

Conventional bookselling outlets have some relevance now, and until we are solidly established, they'll continue to have some relevance. We'll simply use them to help us get to where we won't need them anymore. We can do it faster with them, than without them.

I'm looking forward, but I'm also looking at the ground directly in front of my feet, so that I won't trip while looking at my destination.

Mike

5/15/99

[DP] Mike,

I think it's time to look into the real costs of on-demand publishing. XLibris claims that, for an author's investment of 3 or \$400 per title, and with the author doing all the formatting online, they'll start printing copies for you, and that it would only take a few weeks between ordering and printing. There are standard covers, and any artwork, graphics, etc., cost extra. (I don't have the exact figures in front of me.) How do you find out the precise details of this publishing system? What's nice about it is that, apart from initial set-up costs per book, you start making money with each order, no matter how small. Perhaps you ought to research, and then explain, the way this works, in order to give potential members of SFAC (?) a very concrete picture of how they profit on every level, from manufacturing to publicity to distribution.

==Dan

At 05:44 AM 5/16/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] The figures John Betancourt got were \$180.00 set up fee with a minimum of 25 copies, full color covers, we supply the artwork (we have a couple of cover artists interested, or the author might do his/her own cover art with Corel PhotoPaint or equiv.), and cost of copies under \$2.00 for paperbacks. We also have the option of renting for \$1300.00 to \$1700.00 /mo an on demand printing system that does everything including covers. Once you have the ms in suitable digital format, you can even do single copies at reasonable cost. This might be cost effective when we get going, for printing copies for review, and very small orders, if we have enough volume.

Mike

5/16/99

[DP] These figures sound exceptionally good!

I'm sure the retail price of such books could also undercut bookstore prices by an attractive margin. It's time now to develop a more concrete model, to present to prospective members, of how SFAC would work and at what economies. A more concrete presentation would now serve to enlarge our membership considerably.

==Dan

At 02:41 AM 5/17/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] Joan Marie Verba is our first applicant for project coordinator, if you have time, review our credentials at our list site, and let me know what you think. I

think she will be helpful in setting up a step by step plan.

5/17/99

[DP] Mike,

There's a serious flaw in the way you've phrased all the survey questions except #4. [BTW, please \*number\* these options!]  
The flaw is that, in all these cases but one, it is not clear whether the works to be reviewed have already been published or accepted for publication by SFAC, or are to be reviewed for the purpose of \*reaching a decision\* on whether to publish. Certainly, this ambiguity is preventing \*me\* from casting any votes here, and as to the votes already cast--what can they possibly mean?

As to Ms. Verba taking charge, she sounds like the right person. But in addition to merely a dry resume, could she post a message to us current and prospective members showing what she envisages doing and demonstrating her enthusiasm for the task?

Also--is there an easy way for you to include in your Website a box for directly posting messages instead of struggling with the multi-step system you've described?

Thanks!

==Dan Pearlman

At 11:40 PM 5/17/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] As I understand it, we will be listing every work sent to us for publication as available for order in our catalogue. That's one of the things that makes thie venture unique.

One of the major complainths I've heard from writers is of works being turned down because the publisher thought it was aimed at a splinter of the market and wouldn't sell enough copies to make a profit, or the publisher just couldn't come up with a publicity angle for the work. From our point of view, if we sell only a few thousand copies of a work, it's profitable for us, and the author gets at least a little money for the effort spend.

As far as the publicity angle goes, that's part of what we're working on right now. The free chapter, review, synopsis, grade, rating, whatever, will give the potential buyer a chance to look at the meat of the work, rather than a bunch of publicity hype, and make an informed decision as to what to purchase. If he likes what he buys, he'll tell his friends, and we'll gain a bunch of loyal customers. Of course, if we publish everything, we're going to get some crap too, and this is why we must have some method of letting the potential buyer know what he's getting when he orders a book from us. Believe it or not, some people actually like crap! (Just check out the rental figures for the movies "Plan Nine From Outer Space" and "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes".). And, of course, we've got to make a decision as to what we push to our retail outlets, especially if we're to defeat the "returns policy" syndrome. Since writers tend to be poor judges of the merits of their own works, we need a rating/review system that they'll respect.

In the case of just plain bad works, we could insist that the writer pay the printer's set up fee before we list the work in our catalogue, but we must have a policy that both writers and potential buyers will trust.

I was intentionally ambiguous about the timing because I wanted feedback from our members, and ambiguity is an easy way to generate discussion. The numerical results of the survey will mean very little, but the results of the ensuing discussion will determine our policy. (I hope).

I'll contact Ms Verba, and suggest that she do that.

If you just want to post a message to the list members, use the "Post Message" section, it will send an e mail to all members. If, however, you wish to post something to stay on the list site, because of it's continued importance, you must use the method I described. It's not as complicated as it sounds, it actually only takes a couple of minutes. You can use any word processor to generate the text file, and you can copy suggestions from e mails or any other documents, and paste them to the text file, so that part isn't particularly difficult either.

5/18/99

[DP] Michael,

It worries me that you are thinking of publishing, under the SFAC aegis, \*everything\* sent to you. That dilutes SFAC into a vanity press operation, yet at the same time you expect to keep good and even reputed authors committed--but Gresham's Law says that bad money drives out good. And you'll be receiving a lot more bad than good.

Why would the better writers want to mingle with garbage? If the reader coming to the SFAC Website is faced with a multitude of crap he has to sift through--because SFAC hasn't winnowed out the chaff for him--he's not going to respect SFAC as a quality publishing operation. Publishing shit is not going to generate many sales, and it will undermine a major goal of the organization: to bring QUALITY books that the biggies won't print to the hands of the DISCRIMINATING reader. Bookstores also would order from SFAC only if they feel you are a discriminating publisher, and bookstore managers don't have time to sift through crap--lots of crap, maybe even well-hyped crap, because lots of crappy writers can get their more reputable friends to write kind reviews for them.

You think the reader will be able to discriminate based on "reviews" or a first chapter? But why burden the discriminating reader, who wants \*only\* the stuff receiving the Stamp of Approval of SFAC, with the need to wade through loads of crud? Who wants to waste time like that? The very presence of a work on the SFAC list should signal QUALITY, should signal its survival of a demanding review process. In short, for the sake of making a few extra bucks, you would threaten to undermine the whole nature of SFAC before you even got started. [Why would ANY quality writer, simply because of the low cost of publication, want to be associated with a publisher that is 80% vanity press?]

I suggest that you post this debate of ours on the Website ...  
and ask for everyone's opinion. Meanwhile, I'll copy this message  
(with yours) to Ms. Verba to apprise her asap of this most crucial matter.

==Dan

5/18/99

[DP] Michael,

The arguments you give are no reply to my own. You sidestep the  
issues I raise with side-issues that are really non-issues. Point  
for point: [Michael's full message is only excerpted here in the  
body of DP's]

At 06:48 AM 5/18/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR]: How do we exercise editorial control over what gets published, without becoming  
just like the major houses? Who makes the decision, and based on what criteria? We  
can certainly reject any work for lousy grammar, sentence structure, spelling,  
etc., but how do we decide on content?

[DP]: First of all, it should be obvious that ANY publisher MUST exercise  
editorial control, MUST apply specific criteria, or else said publisher  
is not needed and becomes merely a mechanical secretary or rubber-stamp  
agency. To have any identity as a publisher, you have to have a BIAS.  
I thought you understood this from the outset, and that's why I'm very  
upset by this suggestion of yours that, as though in pursuit of some  
ideal democratic system, you would abandon all literary standards.  
Let's not talk nonsensically about bad grammar, etc., as reasons for  
exclusion. Talk about reasons for ACCEPTANCE.

You appear to want to bow out of responsibility for exercising literary  
judgment. In that case, SFAC is no better than the vanity press X-LIBRIS  
that publishes on demand via the Web. Why would I, as a writer with an  
as yet small but very discriminating audience, want my work published by  
SFAC if potential NEW readers are not drawn to my work by prior  
knowledge that SFAC is a refereed, QUALITY, selective press? No one  
would have reason to browse even a description of my new book, which  
would be lost in the shuffle among heaps of trash. And if SFAC,  
exercising real literary judgment, were to reject my new book, I might  
grouse but I'd respect SFAC for having criteria in the first place!

I can't figure out the subtext of your evasion of my arguments. Are  
you, apart from being a longtime fan, also a writer with a manuscript  
or two that's been rejected by all and sundry? If so, do you want  
the opportunity to publish without the potential hazard of passing  
under editorial scrutiny? Then X-LIBRIS is the place for you. ...  
Or are you visualizing SFAC as primarily a money-making operation  
that'll take anybody's crap and publish it, let it sink or swim,  
taking no responsibility for its appearing under SFAC's name?  
Can you imagine what such a policy would do to SFAC's reputation?

Sorry, buddy, but your "democratic" model self-destructs. You can't have it both ways. If you want writers of prestige (among your members) to be willing to promote lesser-known writers you publish, and thereby approach a DEMOCRACY OF QUALITY [should I say E-QUALITY?], you must be highly discriminating in what you choose to publish.

I would say, for starters, that SF/F books that have already been published by non-vanity presses large or small, should automatically be accepted for reprint by SFAC. Those titles have already undergone tough selection criteria. I would even agree that already published (non-vanity press) writers, i.e., those who have already published at least one book in the genres of interest to SFAC, be automatically accepted for publication by SFAC. Such a policy would be fair enough, and it would also guarantee that many SFWA members who have published at least one book already would gravitate without hesitation--and without the anxiety of going through a "fan" evaluation of their new work--to SFAC's list.

But those numerous writers who have not yet passed muster in the "real" world of publishing, who have NOT yet been published by either a big press or small press, OUGHT to have the opportunity to be evaluated. It would be good for THEM as well as for SFAC. I don't doubt that there are a good many mss. out there, quirky but of high literary quality (who knows how many R.A. Lafferty's are out there?), that deserve publication by a reputable press but haven't broken through for reasons that have nothing to do with lack of quality. There are no doubt many mss. out there of great quality that are nevertheless flawed in ways that could be pointed out by an editorial review of caring readers--the kind of review rarely given by harried big or small presses--so that such writers could be helped toward publication. The most important point is that SFAC's editorial review procedure would be the FAIREST IN THE BUSINESS, the most respected in the biz for NOT INTRODUCING CRITERIA EXTRANEIOUS TO CONSIDERATIONS OF LITERARY QUALITY.

Now, I think you suspect that, when I harp on the word "literary," I would want SFAC to exclude good commercial potboiler sort of work, or, let's say, slasher-horror work that may still have a small but steady buying audience. What I mean, however, by the words "literary" or "quality" work would include both good commercial stuff and the high-end kind of stuff that might be published by Wordcraft of Oregon or Wildside, and everything in between, but WELL DONE for its intended audience, technically well executed for what it tries to be.

The SFAC editorial board, to insure fairness and prestige, should vary depending on the type of work submitted. If well-known fans are to be manuscript judges, they should judge mss. that the author describes (in an appended introductory note) as lying within a certain subgenre. I would sure hate to have a novel of mine judged by, let's say, Stephen King fans. If the book passes muster at that first editorial level, it should then pass on to a prestige author willing to give it a blurb/review. And if the first such author won't oblige, then it gets a second

chance with another prestige author on the SFAC list. One could, in fact, make as a condition of SFAC publication, the stipulation that any SFAC-published author be willing to review X number of new mss. per year either as a member of the initial review committee or as final blurbist. However you want to set it up, you would still have the most flexible and democratic editorial board in the Western world, and one that has NOT relinquished quality as its main criterion.

[MR]: We want to be a publisher who gives everyone an equal chance to publish. There are many works which are of interest only to a small section of the SF buying public, and we can make money on sales of a few thousand copies, where the major houses can't.

[DP]: Well, I think I've spoken to the above in the comments I've just made.

[MR]: Selective publishing is similar to censorship, how do we know where to draw the line?

[DP]: That is the most absurd statement I've ever heard! If I've selected a woman to be my wife, does that mean that I've unfairly rejected, that I've "censored," all other applicants for the position? Come on, fella.

[MR]: Just because it's listed on our site, doesn't mean it's going to sell, and we need a workable method of aiming each work toward it's target audience.

[DP]: The point is that we shouldn't WANT to list anything on the SFAC site that we don't WANT to promote with all our might. That's the whole point of having identity as a QUALITY publisher. Remember, others are already into the potentially lucrative field of on-demand publishing, and they are all vanity presses out primarily for the buck, but SFAC must from the outset distinguish itself, by its goals and procedures, very carefully from the horde of opportunists out there.

[MR]: The free chapter is a start, but it's not enough. If we can solve this problem, we're pretty well assured of success.

I'm not insisting that everything gets published, but we've got to have a fair and equitable method of selection, or we're no better than the big boys.

Mike

[DP]: I have given you, above, an outline for a "fair and equitable method of selection," and I have tried to make you aware that editorial discrimination is the sine qua non for "success." Again, if you don't mind, I'm sending this conversation to Ms. Verba, from whom we both, I should think, await a reply.

==Dan

5/20/99

[DP] Mike,

My reply to the first part of your message:

At 07:49 AM 5/19/99 -0500, you wrote:

[MR] The idea of including negative reviews is a PR angle, it leads the potential buyer to believe that the seller is taking an honest approach to publicizing it's product. You simply give a few very negative reviews to a few books that aren't going to sell much anyway, then you push the mediocre stuff, and let the really good stuff sell on it's own merit.

[DP] I believe that your premise here is terribly mistaken. You do not need negative reviews--putdowns of your own product!--to assure readers of your "honesty." Readers are assured of your honesty by being assured, first, that the ONLY product you will put forth is TOP-QUALITY. You do NOT assume that ANY of your publications is "not going to sell much anyway"! That's ridiculous!! And you do NOT push "mediocre stuff"--because \*you do not publish such stuff\*! Anything you select to publish, for whatever niche/subgenre market, is understood to be top-quality for that market.

... Any criticism included in our reviews should be constructive in nature, to advise the potential buyer of the pros and cons of the work, and to let the writer know what to avoid in future efforts. ...

[DP] Again, NO NEED FOR SELF-PUTDOWN. Most potential readers of an author whose work they do not know will indeed read reviews of the work in order to AVOID work that receives even the slightest hint of negative criticism, no matter how "constructive." Reserve such critiques for private communication to the author and publisher.

==Dan

[To the Reader: the Dialogue continues in many voices on the SFAC-LIST referenced above.=DP]