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The Case For Chapbooks

Connecting Your Community With Contemporary Poetry

Le cas des livres de colportage

Connectez votre communauté avec de la poésie contemporaine

Juliana Rupchan 

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The Case for Chapbooks: Connecting Your Community With Contemporary Poetry

Le cas des livres de colportage : Connectez votre communauté avec de la poésie contemporaine

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Abstract / Résumé

Collecting contemporary poetry is often a low priority for libraries, but interest in poetry is rising, and many library patrons have the potential to become poetry readers. Building a collection of poetry chapbooks can maximize the impact of a renewed poetry collecting effort because the poetry chapbook is an accessible, high-interest, and often low-cost form that captures the cutting edge of the poetic field. I introduce the poetry chapbook and its creative and social functions and describe various avenues for building a chapbook collection, including acquisition strategies, examples of digital initiatives such as participatory chapbook repository projects, and notes on promoting engagement. The community-building potential and links to higher-level goals such as diverse collecting, local interest, and cultural preservation allow chapbook collections to add unique value to a variety of public, academic, special, and school library contexts.

Collectionner de la poésie contemporaine n'est pas souvent une priorité pour les bibliothèques, mais l'intérêt en poésie est à la hausse et plusieurs usagers de bibliothèque ont le potentiel de devenir des lecteurs de poésie. La mise en place d'une collection de livres de colportage en poésie peut maximiser l'impact d'un effort renouvelé à collectionner de la poésie parce le livre de colportage est accessible, bénéficie d'un haut taux d'intérêt et est de moindre coût, captant ainsi le côté avant-gardiste du monde la poésie. Je présente le livre de colportage en poésie et ses fonctions créatives et sociales et je décris le moyen de mettre sur pied une collection de

livres de colportage y compris des stratégies d'achat, des exemples d'initiatives tels des projets participatifs de répertoires de livres de colportage ainsi que des notes pour promouvoir l'engagement. Le potentiel du développement communautaire et les liens vers des objectifs plus élevés tels que la diversité des collections, l'intérêt local et la préservation culturelle permettent aux collections de livres de colportage d'ajouter une valeur unique à une variété de contextes de bibliothèques publiques, académiques, spécialisées et scolaires.

Keywords / Mots-clés

library collections, poetry chapbooks, contemporary poetry, emerging poetry, local poetry; collections de bibliothèque, livres de colportage en poésie, poésie contemporaine, poésie émergente, poésie locale

Introduction: Poetry and Libraries

Poetry and libraries have a contentious relationship. Biggs (1993) summarized the popular opinion of librarians on contemporary poetry: "no one reads it" and "there's no extra money for it" (p. 33). It is true that poetry tends to lack mainstream marketability and most poets see only a narrow following (Biggs, 1990, p. 2). However, a study of adult readers in the United States by the Poetry Foundation found that 94 percent of respondents had read poetry at some point during their lives (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 13). While many may not regularly seek out poetry, it is an established facet of reading culture. Poetry is also an important component of the library's mission to share and preserve information. Poetry is uniquely suited to capturing everyday human experience, the "unique quality of life in your place and time" (Veach, 2003, p. 88); with its marginal place in the market, collecting poetry can be compared to protecting endangered species in the "textual ecology" (Pavelich, 2004, p. 20).

Many initial experiences with poetry, whether they inspire further reading or not, occur during youth, often in school, which can create both interest in and prejudices against poetry (Schwartz et al., 2006, pp. 14–31). Biggs (1993) contrasted the thrill of reading contemporary poetry one connects strongly with, with the dry analysis of poetry in schools (p. 33) and the reluctance of even literature professors to judge the quality of emerging poetry (p. 34). The demographics of poetry readers are similar to the demographics of readers in general¹ (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 1), and thereby of library users; the difference is that poetry readers are "overwhelmingly intentional in their pursuit of poetry" (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 49). Sharing poetry with social circles is common as well, including lending and gifting books of poetry and sharing individual poems through email and copying (pp. 43–44). Since the Poetry Foundation report was released in 2006, the rise of social media has multiplied the channels for social sharing poetry, with authors using social media websites to reach readers, and readers using

¹ Women and adults who have completed post-secondary education were represented at higher levels than in the general population among both readers and poetry users (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 1).

these sites to circulate and discuss poems and fragments (Popa, 2019). Popa (2019) suggested poetry readership has been increasing in the digital age: a National Endowment for the Arts report in 2017 found that 11.7% of American adults were poetry readers, a 5% increase from 2012.

While "poetry users are significantly more likely than are non-users to be library cardholders," only half of these poetry-reading cardholders have borrowed books of poetry from the library (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 40). Libraries are "untapped as resources for promoting participation with poetry" (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 82). A study by Toane and Rothbauer (2014) on the perspectives of a dedicated poetry community on public libraries found community members were supportive of the library and saw the potential for library patrons to become new poetry readers, but they had mixed feelings about the quality of poetry collections in libraries. Events, increased visibility, and expanded collections (p. 118)—including increased collection of contemporary work, local titles, and titles by new authors (p. 116)—were the most cited suggestions for improvement. Pavelich (2004) also framed the poet as a dedicated but often disappointed library patron who would benefit from a greater presence of "emergent poetry" (p. 12) in libraries. He suggested that libraries can play an essential local role in global poetics by supporting the unproven and urgent new poetic work in their community (pp. 12–13). These studies do not suggest a disinterest in poetry; interest may even be growing. Most readers have the potential to be poetry readers, but most people feel unequipped to navigate the broad field of poetry publishing, and libraries are often missing the opportunity to be their guides.

What Is the Poetry Chapbook?

A chapbook is simply a book under 48 pages long (Craig, 2011, p. 48). Chapbooks have a long history, including as a medium for fiction and non-fiction, especially political writing, and poetic precedents date back as far as Wordsworth and Coleridge's 1798 *Lyrical Ballads & Other Poems* (Willis, 2017, p. 130). Contemporary chapbooks are generally published in small runs, usually via small presses or self-publishing, and may feature handmade accents or unconventional distribution approaches (Craig, 2011, pp. 50–52). The chapbook format was an important facet of early Canadian publishing; the Ryerson poetry chapbooks, comprising 200 volumes published between 1925 and 1962, were the first sustained effort to independently publish Canadian poetry (MacLaren, n.d.). Poetry chapbooks became especially prominent starting in the 1960s, an era of publishing sometimes called the "mimeo revolution" because of the proliferation of small-scale publications made possible by increased access to printing technology (Poets House, 2018). These micro-publications were a central part of countercultural poetry groups like the Beat poets and the Black Mountain school (Willis, 2017, p. 131). With current technology, publishing is easier than ever, and poetry chapbooks, from artful limited editions to cheap "fold and staple" books to digitally published projects, all remain in prolific production.

The chapbook format can be a natural fit for poetry. Johnstone (2022), founder of Toronto chapbook publisher Anstruther Press, suggested the small form mirrors the condensed language of poetry, and the length of a chapbook is ideal in that all of the poems can be read in one sitting while still giving the work due attention (p. 34). Chapbooks can be a lower-risk way for poets to try out new ideas and get feedback, and they are a format that is easy to publish, creating an avenue for alternative voices that "isn't limited by commercial expectations" (p. 35). Treacle (2001) suggested that many assume that the low market value of chapbooks correlates with a low literary value (p. 161). However, while chapbooks are often associated with new poets, this can mean they provide an opportunity to spot new talent early, and established poets also publish in chapbook form when "small, closely circulated, carefully designed books" (Treacle, 2001, p. 162) suit their subject. Poets may choose the chapbook form when they want to publish a closely linked sequence of poems or a single long poem; Ginsberg's *Howl* is a particularly famous example of the latter. Chapbooks are also sometimes used to present work in translation, as a low-cost way of sharing a sample of an established poet's work with a new audience. Ugly Duckling Presse in New York publishes chapbooks of this type, which can be turned one way to read the Spanish text and another to read the English translation (Ugly Duckling Presse, n.d.).

For new poets, the value of the chapbook lies primarily in community building. Craig (2011) quoted a poet who described the chapbook as a way to have a concise sample of one's work that can be given away and read by one's peers, with the focus being on the "coffee-house atmosphere" (p. 50) of participating in the conversation of poetry rather than on mainstream reviewing and distributing. The chapbook stands in for the poet's identity and seeks to build social and cultural capital (Craig, 2011, p. 50). For emerging poets, the placement of these chapbooks in the library can add validation and permanence to their poetic identity (Veach, 2003, p. 90).

Why Build a Chapbook Collection?

If one considers immediacy, uniqueness, and social orientation as key features of the poetry chapbook, many possible benefits to collecting chapbooks emerge. With poetry's relatively small niche, many libraries' poetry collections tend towards the safe bets of classics, prizewinners, and anthologies. However, chapbooks are generally inexpensive, and acquiring even a small number of poetry chapbooks each year could add a unique flavour to a poetry section. Furthermore, an analysis of collection policies in western Canadian public libraries identified "community-oriented collections" and "collection diversity" as widespread priorities (Wiebe, 2021, p. 54); poetry chapbooks provide an opportunity to share a wide range of perspectives, and to share voices often marginalized by the publishing industry, especially in the case of self-published work.

For less-frequent poetry readers, or those who mainly read poetry online, the short, focused, and often visually appealing format of the chapbook could be an accessible way of trying out a deeper poetry-reading habit. The Poetry Foundation report found that the most common negative perceptions of poetry among readers were that poetry is difficult, boring, or irrelevant (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 51); "bite-sized" collections representing a greater range of styles and topics might alleviate these barriers for many

readers. Nor would poetry enthusiasts be neglected. For a community with an active poetry scene, taking an interest in collecting from local poets and local micro-presses can add currency to the library's collection, open doors to further collaborations such as readings, and over time lead to a collection with unique value that keeps a record of the community's poetic activities.

The primary challenge to building a collection of this kind is similar to that of collecting any non-mainstream work: Poetry chapbooks might not be available through major distributors and are less likely to be reviewed, and some librarians may not be confident in evaluating unknown or self-published works. The following examples illustrate some of the diverse ways of approaching this task. Broadly, approaches to collecting include connecting with local figures such as writers, booksellers, and publishers; seeking works on a particular theme; and inviting direct participation in self-publishing through the library. Approaches to maximizing the impact of the collection include digitizing, creating browsing displays, and linking the collection with events or programming.

Chapbook Collections in Practice

Community building is not just a desired outcome of a poetry chapbook collection, but an essential part of the development process. For work that is not widely distributed, directly connecting with the poetry community is essential to accessing the work. Veach (2003) suggested some broad approaches to identifying local poets, such as through bookstores, arts councils, newsletters, and web searches (pp. 88–89). In Canada, most provinces have writers' guilds and publishers' associations that can help collectors track down the established voices and distributors in their local literary communities.

Monitoring dedicated chapbook presses and chapbook contests for materials of interest can create a strong foundation, but to find less-distributed chapbooks, making personal connections by attending poetry readings and other literary events is ideal. If there are not many events in one's community, bringing poets into the library could be another avenue for building connections; using library space for readings and workshops can establish the library as part of the social system of poetry (Pavelich, 2004, p. 23) and expand the audience for poetry by facilitating a crossover between the poetry community and other poetry-curious library users (Toane & Rothbauer, 2014, pp. 119–120).

While evaluating poetry can be intimidating, making selections does not have to be laborious. Veach (2003) suggested using the simple rule of "if you like it, it's good" (p. 89); the whole point of emerging poetry is that there is not yet a critical consensus. Camper's (2023) suggestion of using a "five-minute rule" for collecting zines could also be applied here: librarians should choose chapbooks that capture their attention when browsing, and if a chapbook does not pique their interest within five minutes, they should move on. If this seems like too open of an approach, one could also try selecting broadly from within a narrow scope that fills a need in the library, such as local-authored work, environmental poetry, or LGBTQ+ poetry.

A particularly interesting example of a chapbook collection comes from a dedicated poetry library at San Francisco State University (poetrychapbooks.omeka.net), where

an "open access digital repository for poetry chapbooks" was developed (Eleftherion Carr, 2013, p. 313). Eleftherion Carr (2013) highlighted the idea that chapbooks convey urgent, of-the-moment poetics, and also emphasized the role of chapbooks in facilitating collaboration and exchange (p. 313–314). The books in the repository remain freely available for the public to read online (Eleftherion & Ficarra, n.d.); poets are invited to submit their work to the repository and gain access to a forum to discuss the books and network with each other (Eleftherion Carr, 2013, p. 314). The model of cooperative curation and preservation is rich with potential. It appears that the scope of the repository has remained relatively small, and library staff would need to consider balances such as curation versus openness, and scope versus the library's resources for maintaining the site. Still, it is an exciting example, and Eleftherion Carr (2013) closed her summary by stating that libraries often have the tools and expertise to facilitate these kinds of crowdsourced publishing projects (p. 315). This may be especially true in university libraries where open access publishing services may already be in place.

Another example of a participatory model is a high school outreach project run by Wayne State University Library, the Digital Commons Chapbook Project launched in 2006 (Martin et al., 2007, p. 160). In this case, the creation of poetry chapbooks was a vehicle for information and digital literacy education. In the process of creating the chapbooks, students learned how to use word processing software, how to digitize their work and use the university's repository, and how metadata works. Students then performed selections of their poetry as the finale of the project, and the books were to remain accessible in the university's repository, though they are not currently publicly available (pp. 160–162). This example shows some of the outside-the-box directions a chapbook initiative can take: the outcome was a robust range of digital literacy skills, from basic formatting to the use of a real repository and professional software, along with the opportunity to share creative work.

In general, digital initiatives and chapbooks often go hand in hand; many academic and special libraries have undertaken initiatives to digitize rare collections of chapbooks (Rankin & Lees, 2015, pp. 134–135). Chapbooks are a popular target for digitization because they are relatively short and high-interest materials. For example, Poets House (2018) launched a digital exhibition of chapbooks to highlight famous works from the 1960s through the 1980s, a highly prolific era for grassroots publishing. Particularly if a chapbook collection is focused on artist-book-style works, or on building a historical record of a particular poet or community, digitization can create lasting value and provide preservation and access for materials that might be too fragile for wide circulation.

Whether digital or physical, the discoverability of the collection should be carefully considered. Chapbooks, often lacking a titled spine, can be lost in the stacks visually, and they need to be catalogued with subject details to utilize the unique appeal of each volume beyond just "poetry." Toane and Rothbauer's (2014) study identified a need for "greater visibility and promotion of poetry collections" (p. 117), and chapbooks are especially vulnerable to this problem. Principles from zine-collecting literature can be useful for addressing this challenge. For example, Koh (2008) suggested that irregularly

sized and formatted materials can have a better "shelf presence" and easily be browsed in front-facing displays, or Princeton files like those used for magazines if space is more limited (pp. 49–50). Suggestions such as creating in-house guides to the collection as well as linking to free online materials on the library's website (Koh, 2008, pp. 50–51) could also be useful for maximizing the reach of a chapbook collection.

Conclusion

In the interest of serving all community members, poetry should not be neglected in library collections. Poets and poetry readers are often dedicated library users, and interest in poetry may be increasing in the digital age. Poetry can capture the unique experiences of life in a library's community, but only if librarians make efforts to connect to local writers and publishers and overcome the stereotype of the dated or limited library poetry collection. Chapbooks can provide the greatest diversity of perspectives and topics for this initiative because they often have focused themes, increased immediacy, and a lower price tag than full collections, all in an intriguing and eye-catching format. Furthermore, because most chapbooks have limited print runs, a librarian may find their chapbook collection eventually contains rare and unique items that provide lasting value. Just as the chapbook form has been used to present a diversity of styles and voices, a chapbook collection can take on a form to suit any library. Whether showcasing self-published student or community work or collecting limited edition books from artisan publishers, building a chapbook collection can quickly broaden the scope and appeal of a library's poetry section.

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