

## BOOKS

# Rage against the Publishing Machine



*For nearly 30 years, Nova Scotia's Gaspereau defied the market. Now its owners are moving on, closing the chapter on one of Canada's most uncompromising publishers*

BY THEA LIM



IN 1997, ANDREW STEEVES AND GARY DUNFIELD sought to set up a small literary press. Steeves grew up outside Moncton, but he didn't want the press to be in what he calls a place "littered with the trash of capitalism." Ottawa, where Steeves went to university, was "the Death Star." So Steeves and Dunfield opened up shop first in Wolfville, then relocated to 47 Church Avenue in Kentville, Nova Scotia, a town where, by the terms of community and connection, "the scale was right." They named their new company after the river and the avenue: Gaspereau Press. Gaspereau mostly publishes poetry and short fiction, genres deemed worthless when they don't sell. Steeves takes this matter, rated typically less than paper, and casts it in lead.

Steeves and Dunfield liken "fast books" to fast food—mindless, automated production that appears instant. Instead, the two do literally everything under one roof: acquisitions, editorial, publicity, sales, shipping, distribution, and IT. But more famously, they do all design, typesetting, printing, and binding on site.

In 2002, they bought an out-of-use municipal power building for their editorial offices, but truly for their machines. Today, their bevy includes two printing presses—Heidelberg KORD 64s, one bought for a few hundred dollars from a school for the deaf in Amherst; a linotype, a seven-foot cast-iron monster that weeps molten metal; a monotype, which Steeves describes as the PC to the linotype's Apple in the tech wars of the 1890s; three cylinder Vandercook proof presses for book jackets; paper cutters which resemble, to the untrained eye, giant bread slicers; folding machines; bookbinders; and racks and racks of letterpress cabinets, skinny drawers packed with type, like the walls of a seed bank. "You can't say I'm alienated from my labour," Steeves says. "I've touched every book."

Steeves won so many Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design, he's withdrawn himself from competition. Even his trade paperbacks are art objects: Smyth-sewn, printed on laid finish paper, nestled in letterpress covers hand-fed into the machine. This jargon may mean nothing to lay readers; maybe you have to touch the books yourself. Annick MacAskil, who won a Governor General's Award

for Poetry with Gaspereau, invents a word to describe them: “they durate.” Steeves himself believes beauty stems from utility. One of his favourite words is “useful,” like Thomas the Tank Engine.

The press is so fused to Steeves’s vision that it felt final when Gaspereau announced that, because Dunfield was retiring, the two of them would hand over operation to a new owner: Keagan Hawthorne in Sackville, New Brunswick. By the end of 2025, Kentville’s green Gaspereau building, its tremendous machines, its shelves loaded with slabs of overrun book jackets waiting for reprints, will be gone. George Elliot Clarke, one of Gaspereau’s earliest authors, says his first thought was: “This is my mortality. I am dying.” Carmine Starnino, editor-in-chief of *The Walrus*, has published five books with Gaspereau. He hired me to write this article, to capture something he feared was going extinct. “I want to understand why I feel so bad,” says Starnino—a fraught beginning to a job.

I have my own agenda. Since Gaspereau was founded, a cascade of apocalypses has hit publishing. The number of bookstores has plunged; presses have endlessly conglomerated; the rate of new titles has exploded; and publishers, like other culture producers, have begun to conceal their sales data. But the trial to settle Penguin Random House’s ultimately failed bid to acquire Simon & Schuster revealed the eye-watering stat that 90 percent of books sell fewer than 2,000 copies.

And all this is aside from the disfigurements of AI and the algorithm. An algorithm scans a sea of data points but shuttles all of it—minutes viewed, mouse hovers, your geolocation—into one of two puny verdicts. You like what’s being offered or you don’t. Liking or not-liking is a binary reaction: countable, datafiable. But reasonable responses to art, like shock, ambivalence, begrudging admiration, are freestyle and uncountable. The algorithm allows only the flat narcissism of liking. This gets dystopic when the algorithm has largely replaced human book reviewers and curators, and publishers must conform in order to be dropped on your screen.

Across this wasteland, Gaspereau is like a miracle. Steeves is unencumbered by the algorithm. He courts no traffic. Preorders are not part of the business. He does things by hand—labour intensive (code for expensive) when everyone else is doing austerity. He doesn’t release advance reading copies to woo “Most Anticipated Lists.” He doesn’t follow the seasons of the book world; he sends out a catalogue *after* his year ends. “Fuck Amazon,” he exclaims happily. Somehow, he and Dunfield have kept the lights on for twenty-eight years. How?

## Many of us complain about what we delegate, but we don’t drop thousands of dollars on the apparatus to fix it ourselves.

**I**N PHOTOS AND VIDEOS, Steeves looks like Matt Damon, costumed as a rural machinist. In 2022, he wrote an essay titled “Notes on Printing & Publishing Literary Books” for a writing anthology; then he released it himself as a limited-edition standalone. The essay opens: “I have tried to publish and sell literary books like subsistence farmers raise and sell food.” But despite allusions to dirt and potatoes, what he says next, about how to run a shop built on principles, is mainly abstract. “When someone tells me they would like to be a book publisher or an editor, I often ask some version of the question ‘What is literary publishing for?’” It’s like asking a baseball fan *What’s a flyball again?* and getting in response: *To adequately answer, let’s go back to 1845.*

If you long to know the nuts and bolts of maintaining Gaspereau, his own multiple books may disappoint. Steeves’s 2014 collection of essays, *Smoke Proofs*, admonishes those who admire the beauty of his product (a beautiful book

should not be special, it should be standard), then gives the story of his early life, then gives a critique of rare book libraries. Thirty pages in, Steeves is still talking about libraries. “The staff of the best libraries in your community should know you by sight.” He does, at this point, mention book making: libraries are key because the only way to grasp “the right making of books” is to “make it your very atmosphere.” But I’m on a deadline.

In the flesh, Steeves is wiry and boyish and just as resistant to my plodding, material questions. At a standing desk in his office, he describes the massed, sturdy entity around us as basically a lark. The origin of Gaspereau was simply “curiosity.” Steeves met Dunfield in Wolfville because they had same-age kids. He honed an interest in print culture as a grad student at Acadia and wanted to start a press, and Dunfield had ideas “about the practical side.” Why do a back-breaking thing like learn the means to do their own printing? Steeves is characteristically sly: “Why would I give someone else all the fun jobs?”

In the beginning, they outsourced their printing like almost everyone else. But after they had been running for several years, producing a literary magazine and publishing anywhere from four to eight books a year, Steeves and Dunfield were getting back “bad work.” They asked each other, “Why don’t we just buy a binder? Hey, what if we bought a press?” Many of us complain about what we delegate, but we don’t drop thousands of dollars on the apparatus to fix it ourselves.

Yet around 1999, Steeves and Dunfield went to see about a Czechoslovakian offset press being offloaded by a business associate. They sat in a Tim Hortons and talked about the pros and cons of the machine. They had asked their then printer if they could store the press in his shop. The printer said no way, and that Steeves “was nuts.” “So,” Steeves says, “we just went and bought the press.”

Our conversation is like the Monty Python skit about how to play a flute: “Well, you blow in one end and move your fingers up and down the outside.” But inside this capering trial and error is the key to Gaspereau’s freedom: whether

by happenstance, as Steeves maintains, or by genius, they became owners of the means of production. Steeves says, “We were only just barely getting any kind of Canada Council funding... we realized that to survive, we had to control our own costs and control our own quality by doing it ourselves.”

When Gaspereau acquired Clarke’s *Execution Poems*, Clarke thought it would be a chapbook—small, paper covers, maybe stapled. Released in the fall of 2000, *Execution Poems* was like no chapbook ever before seen. Clarke describes it as two feet long and one foot wide, hand-sewn, hand-printed with a woodcut illustration, in black and red ink with leather covers. Some presses balance the demands of art versus the market by publishing controversial authors, like, say, Jordan Peterson, who shift thousands of units, so the press can take a bath on poetry and short stories. Gaspereau found another way. Fine editions, Clarke says, “could be the key to opening up a market of collectors, people with deep pockets.” They printed a run of sixty-six copies and sold out immediately. They made a trade paperback, and it won the Governor General—before the press was five years old.

Steeves and Dunfield have a cultural cunning that’s thrilling. Literary books are generally a uniform size, because that’s cheaper. Economies of scale: specialness cuts into the bottom line. Authors like Rob Taylor go to Gaspereau when the physicality of their book is part of their conceit, when, as Taylor says, “the dance between the design and the text is really important.” By owning their own machines, Gaspereau has made what’s undoable for other publishers into their emblem.

Alexander MacLeod, Steeves’s friend, talks about the handwritten rejection letters Steeves sends. *Handwritten*. “I hand-write every rejection I’ve ever sent, because I think that’s hard news to get,” Steeves says. “It puts it in its proper scale.” He says, on average, he’s spent about one morning a week writing these letters. Ten percent of his working life toward reverse revenue. “The human side of this is as important to me as picking a typeface,” Steeves says. “We’re not just selling a

commodity that rots on the vine.”

MacLeod uses the word “obliterating” to describe Steeves’s labours. Steeves estimates it costs Gaspereau \$8 to make a trade paperback their way, when it could be done for around \$2, and they sell for around \$25. “But I can still eat.” Why is it worth it to make the books gorgeous? Isn’t it the words inside that count? In 2010, the *Toronto Star* quoted Steeves saying, “House of Anansi Press ‘published some great books on paper that’s lower grade than what we stock in the Gaspereau Press outhouse.’” Steeves shows me an aged Farrar, Straus and Giroux hardcover—“a great collection of essays” but it won’t stay open: the grains of the paper weren’t bound parallel to the spine. I indicate that, respectfully, *idc*.

Steeves is not deterred. The reader “may not be aware of what has gone in or not gone into an object, but you just experienced it, and your experience of that text is diminished. I’m bringing every bit of my being to being a participant in this cultural activity, of giving things the robustness to see their way through time. You got to show up and be a part of your own life. Why wouldn’t you want to be engaged in your own life?”

None of this really answers my burning question: How can you actually afford this—your values? It’s as if Steeves objects to the premise of the question itself, to accepting the terms of the neoliberal market and its hold on our personhoods. The market is an f-boy ex not worth his time.

Other independent presses like Coach House and Porcupine’s Quill print their own books—Gaspereau uses a paper named for Coach House. But Steeves operates at the highest existential stakes: book making as proof for what matters while we’re alive.

“THERE IS NO ANDREW without Gary,” MacLeod says of Gary Dunfield. Steeves does acquisitions, editorial, and design, and Dunfield says he does most of the rest. He doesn’t even see the titles before Steeves acquires them. Heather Jessup, who published a novel with Gaspereau in 2011, has heard people joke that they’ve never

seen Steeves and Dunfield in the same room. On the spectrum from visionary to mechanic, from Koons to the stubby hands that build the balloon animals, from Steeves to Dunfield, I’m a solid Gary, less interested in a big idea than what it takes to make it run.

“We always had a model that we were a publisher, but we were also a printer, right? When you have the equipment, you can use it for whatever you want. I printed 20,000 placemats for a local restaurant a couple of weeks ago. An elderly person in the local area has a collection of stories they want. They want twenty-five copies for their family. We had a young woman on this summer who puts labels on plastic blueberry boxes. We’ve done it for four summers now.” Dunfield says Gaspereau subsists one-third on book sales, one-third on grants, and one-third on printing contracts.

I’m stunned that Gaspereau, king of the Alcuins, makes diner placemats, blueberry boxes. But actually, the arrangement is familiar. I live across the street from a bestselling author who moonlights editing popular health books.

Dunfield has other literal hacks. He set up Gaspereau’s distribution himself, to cut out the middle, an innovation he’s proud of. Their accounting software was written by Dunfield so they could deal with big retailers, a cost that would’ve run into “tens of thousands of dollars.”

Dunfield is canny about the worth of small and slow and fine: it’s good for the bottom line. “You’re marketing yourself, based on that expectation. How do you stand out, particularly if you are a small company?” Gaspereau has a mission and an aesthetic, but it’s also pure branding. It’s like the only capitalist thing Steeves said: “We’re pretty light on fiction. It’s a harder realm to compete in, especially with the multinationals. I focused on poetry because I didn’t have to take a back seat to someone with a deeper pocket.”

SO ONE WAY to stay true to yourself—“keep your dignity,” as Steeves says—is to operate as if conventional limits do not exist. But what happens when you add other people, who

do live within those drab terms?

Both Steeves and Dunfield insist Gaspereau books are easy to purchase, but Gaspereau is its own distributor. Instead of visiting the usual Canadian wholesale book distributor, to order Gaspereau titles, booksellers must tolerate extra steps, including increased shipping costs. For some, this isn't realistic, leading to booksellers who don't stock their books.

MacLeod points out most Gaspereau books have a price, bar code, and ISBN printed on a removable wrapper—transaction and commodification are but a temporary part of a Gaspereau book's span. When I mention this to Taylor, he points out that the author's photo and hard-won credentials are also on this short-lived wrapper. He jokes this is Steeves's way of saying: "This is the bullshit I have to do to sell this book. Now you can take it off. It's the least interesting part of its life." Taylor considers this charming, but Jessup questions if Gaspereau is equipped to do publicity: "It's hard to do everything. Andrew is one being and does probably too much as it is." Steeves concurs publicity is one area where "there's still room to tighten that screw." A Halifax poet says it's regular to hear a Gaspereau author say, "Andrew hasn't put anything about my book on Instagram, but he did post a close-up photo of an *a*."

Norm Nehmetallah, who runs the neighbouring maritime press Invisible Publishing, bluntly offers a new point of contention: Gaspereau has "a very white list." Clarke says Steeves's principled commitment to local authors has meant "a limited demographic," but that's a facet, not a problem. Nehmetallah, a great admirer of Gaspereau, regretfully disagrees.

And then there's how multiple writers tell me Steeves doesn't really edit. Taylor says that if the text is not Steeves's greatest preoccupation, it's only out of eagerness to get it to the stage where the manuscript is made into an art object. But some say editing is fundamental to a publisher's responsibilities. Jessup says, "The slowness of their model is really beautiful. But sometimes they skip over parts of making a book that seem really important to the ethos of that slowness."

It is curious that Steeves, exacting with the smallest printing details, seems to go loosey-goosey on the words themselves. He describes a long-time collaborator's oeuvre as mostly books that "almost always should have been half as long." About *The Sentimentalists*, Johanna Skibsrud's 2009 novel that won a Giller Prize for Gaspereau, he says, "It's a kind of imperfect first novel by a young writer. It's lovely." But it's not as "polished" as other titles it was shortlisted along. He says Alexander MacLeod's book "should have won."

**A**FTER *THE SENTIMENTALISTS* was shortlisted for the Giller in 2010, Gaspereau was asked how they'd up their small-batch production to meet the demand. The "Giller effect"—the sales bump from nomination—is a coveted article. Steeves and Dunfield said they wouldn't. Without their artisanal process, "it would no longer be a Gaspereau Press book." They might as well have set fire to a bathtub of money. The reaction was outrage.

Then: Skibsrud won. "Public denied award-winning book by territorial East Coast publisher," said *Toronto Life*, lamenting that "the very people responsible for promoting [Skibsrud's] work now stand in the way of her success," and if Gaspereau didn't relent, Skibsrud would lose "major sales." Steeves once again inspired neologism: "Giller is enough to drive you to Gasperation," said the *Globe and Mail*. The *National Post* broke out the thesaurus: "Pretentious. Antediluvian. Mean-spirited."

The coverage did not view Gaspereau's stance as impressive. The headlines were both vitriolic and dim, like telling a poet they should try writing beach reads. Fifteen years later, is it possible to reread Gaspereau's choice as a bold refusal of fickle market forces that dangle capital in front of cultural workers and tell them to dance, no matter the cost? At the time, Steeves told the *Toronto Star*, "I sell books by doing them a certain way. It's important to my life and how I stay sane in the middle of a lot of insanity." Ultimately, Gaspereau sublicensed the book to Douglas & McIntyre, which

shipped 30,000 copies ten days after Skibsrud's win.

I ask Steeves, the original resister, what he thinks of the thirty-seven authors who collectively withdrew their books from consideration for 2024's Giller Prize—a boycott organized by CanLit Responds to protest Giller sponsors invested in Israel's occupation of Palestine, starting with Scotiabank's multi-million-dollar stake in Israeli weapons maker Elbit Systems. Surprisingly, Steeves is more concerned with decorum than refusal. "As long as it doesn't turn sort of witch hunt. It's a lot more problematic to tear down.... It's hard not to say something judgmental about someone who's killing children, but we have to give dignity to those that we oppose."

Why didn't Steeves increase production when *The Sentimentalists* was shortlisted? His answer is even more jarring. He hoped the book wouldn't win, "because that would mean that people are not shitty." He's referring to how Skibsrud signed with a high-profile literary agent in September 2010. Then it was reported the agent knew of Skibsrud only because a Giller juror, Ali Smith, told the agent about *The Sentimentalists* before the nominees were announced.

I ask Steeves if this seemed like insider trading. "What do you mean 'seems'? It was." He was instantly leery of the agent. "She said, 'I just happened to read this book on a plane. It's so wonderful.' Nobody picks a fucking first novel from a small press because they just happened to read it on a plane. It's bullshit. The first words out of her mouth were a lie."

Steeves heard "too many other things" implying Smith was fixing the competition in Skibsrud's and her agent's favour; the agent was telling book fairs *The Sentimentalists* was set to win; ahead of Skibsrud's win, Indigo called to ask if Gaspereau needed help "getting the print run together." Steeves heard other shortlisted presses were not fielding similar calls from Indigo, which, to him, confirmed his worst suspicions that the retailer already knew Skibsrud would win. He gave up foreign rights to the novel for free. "I don't need liars and cheats and people that misrepresent things for their own

advantage.”

Unlike the media, Skibsrud was not troubled that Gaspereau had made no plans to mass-produce her book, until she won. She was not banking on royalties, because she was keenly aware she was the “darkest horse”—her words and the *Toronto Star*’s. This was shored up by Steeves’s reaction to the nomination, which Skibsrud vividly recalls as “he thought nothing would come of it.” (Steeves says he wouldn’t have published the book if he didn’t believe in it.) When I relay Steeves’s version, of conspiracy, she’s so startled, she laughs out loud. To her, this sounds like a story Steeves wrote after the fact. She herself has served on juries, and the idea that a single juror could—or would try to—dominate the outcome is far-fetched.

Instead, what hurt Skibsrud, and sundered her relationship to Gaspereau after two poetry books and a novel, was hearing Steeves publicly refer to her book as “a mediocre first novel” after Douglas & McIntyre stepped in. (Steeves says he called it “flawed.”) This was in stark contradiction to the first things Steeves had said to her. Skibsrud says she’ll never forget the elation when she received a message saying Steeves wanted to publish *The Sentimentalists*, that “it was the best thing he’d read all year.”

She was devastated when she realized that to Steeves, the novel’s worth was less in its content than its brand. “As soon

as *The Sentimentalists* left his ambit, as soon as it wasn’t under the covers of Gaspereau, both the content and me as an author were valueless.”

**M**Y INQUIRY has gone nowhere. On the way back to the airport, I get lost. I have to fill up the rental car before my plane leaves, but the GPS takes me to a gleaming Irving Oil in total dark. The pumps are brand new. I poke the display screen. Nothing happens, like I’m touching a rock. The road bends away on both sides, a gas station at the end of the world.

I wanted to know how to stay true, and the answer is predictable, but still depressing. There is no schematic. Principles are a game of whack-a-mole, set to bleak mode. We can’t all buy the means to production and hang around school drop-off until a programming and business wizard strolls by.

If Steeves has defied publishing’s physics, the ending of his Gaspereau era is earthly. Gaspereau did not go bankrupt, their revenue squandered on fancy thread. Rather, everyone is beholden to someone—Steeves to Dunfield, and Dunfield wants to retire. “I will leave the business, either retiring or not, of my own choice,” Dunfield says. “This wasn’t what I wanted,” Steeves says.

When the decision was final, Steeves phoned his eldest son in tears, asking, “Am I going to be designing pizza

flyers? How am I going to get by?” The anguish of this end, not of Steeves’s own making, is acute. It’s late into our conversation, the November sun already set, and he cries. He says, “I’m done with partners.”

In a classically Steevesian way, the takeaway, his impact, is annoyingly diffuse. Even after everything, Skibsrud’s voice breaks when she thinks about her early experiences with Gaspereau. “I will never stop—I’m actually having trouble speaking—I will never stop being absolutely grateful.” Of the fine edition Steeves made of MacLeod’s short story “Lagomorph,” MacLeod says, “I needed to buy like five copies, just for my family, so that when I’m done, these five—” MacLeod motions with his hand. *This is what will remain.* Nehmetallah says, “We’ll always have the list. I’ll always have my Gaspereau books,” like the rare pressings of an iconic record label. And Steeves’s son’s reply to his father? “You’re going to be fine.”

I ask Annick MacAskill if there is something we can propagate, a leaf cutting. MacAskill has worked closely with Steeves for four books. She has a direct way of speaking. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to be ignorantly optimistic about the possibility of recreating a model like that. On the other hand, I admire, you know, the fierce hope of trying.” 📖

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