



Home > News > Shows & Events

Art Director, Silver Dolphin & Studio Fun International - ReaderLink Marketing Services

NEXT JOB ▶

# The State of the Book Biz as Seen from PubWest

By Ed Nawotka | Feb 05, 2021



Picture: PubWest

Peggy Burns, Publisher of Drawn & Quarterly (at left), Joe Biel, Founder of Microcosm Publishing, and Carrie Kilmer, CEO of Soho Publishing.

The annual PubWest conference, which took place online, wrapped up yesterday. The virtual event attracted nearly 200 registered attendees. " There has been lots of excitement around the programs, and the positive thing about the

virtual world is that even if you couldn't attend a particular session live, there is a recording to reference, so you won't miss anything," said Michelle Cobb, interim executive director of PubWest.

Cobb said PubWest publishers have done a good job sharing information over the course of the pandemic and that was highlighted again at the conference. "I think we have been successful at encouraging that communication in a virtual environment and ensuring everyone is learning from their peers," Cobb said. " And, although our name is PubWest, our members come from many different locations and a virtual conference removes the barrier to entry that can exist with travel. We program for publishers needs, regardless of their location."

## RELATED STORIES:

- [More in News -> Shows & Events](#)

Want to reprint? Get permissions.

## FREE E-NEWSLETTERS

To wit, the conference wrapped up on Thursday with a panel that featured Peggy Burns, publisher of Drawn & Quarterly, based in Montreal; Joe Biel, founder of Microcosm Publishing, from Portland, Ore; and Carrie Kilmer, CEO of Soho Publishing, which is in New York City. The trio discussed the changes Covid has brought to their businesses.

Microcosm is a publisher of socially conscious and politically left books, and Biel described something unexpected during the pandemic: a spectacular year of sales. The company had stopped working with Amazon in 2019 after deciding to self-distribute its own books and the decision proved fortuitous. "That was the best decision we've ever made because [when the pandemic hit]

were just fully poised for direct to consumer. [2020] was literally our busiest year ever." Biel said sales were up 56% over 2019, and 154% over 2018. "So it's just like we couldn't keep up," he added. "It was just like the exact opposite problem of what we expected when we just thought the entire economy would collapse."

Burns, whose publishing house focuses on graphic novels, shared her experience trying to simultaneously manage D&Q's publishing house and bookstores. "It was much easier for the editorial staff to take their computers home and start working remotely," said Burns of her business, which operates two bookstores in Montreal. "But with the bookstores, which were closed to customers for much of the year, they cannot work from home, so it is much more difficult." She added that since many of her creators, since they are often also artists, put the focus on print books, and D&Q emphasized print over digital books. "But suddenly when the pandemic hit, I got a lot of calls from authors saying 'do you think we can make [my book] into an e-book,'" she said, noting they did ramp up production.

Kilmer, whose company specializes in books and education about knitting, crocheting and crafts, said the biggest blow came from not being able to host live events. "We derived a lot of revenue from our live events, where we typically have 100 education sessions over a weekend. And we do that three times a year, but that was all shut down," said Kilmer. The company shifted to doing more frequent programs online, which Kilmer said was proving successful. "It allows many people who might not be able to otherwise participate in our live events, because of finances or disability, for example, take part."

All the panelists saw several trends come out of the pandemic. For Burns at D&Q it was graphic novel readers embracing adult fiction in the graphic novel form. Kilmer saw the reemergence of the adult coloring book trend, "love it or hate it," she said, as well as books on drawing instruction. Biel cited a spike in sales of books on mental health.

Asked about a "return to normal," the panel agreed that the industry is likely to be different going forward, with more digital events, less travel to trade shows and more diversity and inclusion efforts for publishers across the board.

Biel joked that he's not entirely sure what "normal" looks like. "I think people are really way too hung up on what's normal," he said. "I grew up in Cleveland, a city that was 51% Black and in bankruptcy, so this is not so foreign a disaster to me. So, I'm much more interested in responding like to the reality that I exist in than some former utopian dream state. I really think we just need to re evaluate every system and process from the ground up."