

## ALUMNI

# A Leap into Books

*An ex-financier finds his real love is publishing.*

FOR 17 YEARS Paul Dry '66 commuted to the Philadelphia Stock Exchange, where he was a successful, if not terribly high-rolling, stock-options trader. The whirlwind of activity pleased him, as did the autonomy, and the job helped pay his family's bills. Yet by the early 1990s a certain dissatisfaction had set in, which led Dry to make a purchase that he promptly stashed away. But sometimes his mind would turn to the weighty cardboard box in the closet: "Do I dare do it?" he wondered. Filled with expensive stationery imprinted with the name Bedrock Books, the box sat in the dark for about five years. "It was a secret shared by me, my wife, and the guy who designed it," Dry says. "I was a closet book publisher."

Only in 1998, after taking a summer seminar in publishing at Stanford, did Dry decide to trade in the heady world of high finance for the cerebral enclave of a literary press. "This was something I had just not dared to do. Then I saw that one could do it—changing careers and becoming a publisher wasn't beyond my abilities—and that I really wanted to do it," he says. "That still doesn't mean that the business will work—but that it is worth taking that jump off the cliff."



Literary press owners Paul Dry (left) and John Corenswet offer readers an eclectic mix of books.

So far, he has landed on his feet. The company—renamed Paul Dry Books ([www.pauldrybooks.com](http://www.pauldrybooks.com))—has launched 11 titles since the spring of 2000 and has two more due out this winter. It is an

eclectic mix of paperback reprints—fiction and nonfiction—many with new, scholarly introductions. Among them are a 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; a surrealist tale called *His Monkey Wife*; a psychiatrist's study of an Italian Jewish leader during the Holocaust; a biography of two jazz pioneers; and *The Tree of Life*, a fictional journal of a frontier minister. For the most part, these are books Dry read in their first editions, enjoyed, and brought back to life. "I figured if I loved them," he explains, "there must be other people out there who would love them, too."

This fall, Dry and his business partner, John Corenswet '77, branched out to produce one completely new work: *My Business Is Circumference: Poets on Influence and Mastery*, edited by the poet Stephen Berg, founder of *American Poetry Review*. Lazy-day beach reading? Perhaps not. But the books are accessible to devoted readers, in whom the partners have great faith. "We want to develop a trust with readers, so they will say, 'Gee, I really liked that book, what's coming next from Paul Dry Books?'" says Corenswet. "We can be a gatekeeper who will go out and do all the hard work to find the really great books and then give them to readers."

Of his later-life career change, Dry says he “was a good enough gambler not to lose money” in trading, but the risks wracked his nerves because it was not work he loved. These days, the ubiquitous company reports and trading-floor screams of “Buy” and “Sell” have been replaced by manuscripts and questions like “Why do we read?” The prospect of losing money still looms, but its threat is lessened by the joy of engaging with the work itself, he says. “In doing something I love, I don’t think about the risk as much.”

Dry is a soft-spoken man whose social-relations concentration in college underscored his still-buoyant interest in the psyche, creativity, and human expression—which culminates in a passion for books with philosophical underpinnings. A slow reader, he never tires of turning the words over in his own mind, or, more importantly, discussing books. One book group he and Corenswet belonged to read *Ulysses*—out loud—over four and a half years. Another group he and a friend founded in 1986 still meets. Members gather at each others’ homes, where they eat dessert, exchange news, and then (for the most part, he admits) settle down to the book at hand. “It’s a wonderful mix,” he says. “Do you read a book so you can get together with your friends, or do you get together with your friends so you can read a book? The answer is both. You get the pleasure of comradeship, and you get the joy of reading the writing, because the sharing of something—of ideas and stories—that is important to you deepens both experiences. It’s not the reading and the writing so much as the conversation we have about it that changes us.”

The book group piqued Dry’s intellect and sociability and “nourished a part of my life that was not touched in trading,” he says. Also influential were his experiences, from 1995 to 2000, as a teacher of January-session courses at Middlebury College with his brother, Murray Dry, a political-science professor there. The readings ranged from works by Shakespeare and Bacon to Rousseau, Henry Adams, and Emily Brontë. “It was a transformative experience,” he recalls. “I loved reading students’ papers and writing in response, writing about reading, and having discussions. I knew I liked being around words,

talking about language and ideas—so why shouldn’t I do this all the time?”

Paul Dry Books reflects an older style of trade-book publishing: described as “decentralized, improvisational, personal; best performed by small groups of like-minded people, devoted to their craft...sensitive to the needs of writers and to the diverse interest of readers” by former Random House editor Jason Epstein in *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present, and Future*. Given that the top 10 trade-book publishers control 80 percent of United States book sales and rely on a stable of bestsellers for profits, Dry’s unhyped titles may offer readers a welcome intensity of thought and feeling not present in Danielle Steel’s latest. “Reading in college was always a chore for me,” Corenswet remembers, “I only started enjoying books when I didn’t have to have them finished by the next morning. I guess we’re looking for readers, not unlike myself, who are looking for books they might have missed.”

THE PARTNERS FIRST MET as neighbors in central Philadelphia. When Dry was starting his business it became clear, he says, that his friend, a lawyer, was not only helpful with contracts, but also “good with money and an excellent editor with a great eye for book design.” One other full-time staff member and a group of freelance editors, copyeditors, and a book designer now round out the team.

Dry and Corenswet choose their titles carefully, cognizant of their role as “recommenders of books to our readers,” Corenswet says. “Every publisher imagines being handed ‘the book of the century,’” Dry adds. “But can you imagine reading Kafka for the very first time? What would you think? As an editor you have to trust your reactions and talk to other people. You have to know the book may be bigger than you are.”

*The Tree of Life* (in its first edition) was the first title Dry’s book club read in 1986—a full 12 years before he became a publisher. “When I read it myself, I didn’t understand it,” he says, “so I brought it to the group.” Nominated for a National Book Award, the novel by Hugh Nissenson tells of Thomas Keene, a Congregational minister from New England who

loses his faith and moves to the Ohio frontier in 1811. Jottings, maps, drawings, and stories of love, brutality, and relations with neighboring Indians weave a compelling tale, in journal form, of frontier life. “It asks the question, ‘How do we live without faith?’” Dry says.

*The Parnas*, which Dry first read in 1981, is a short, intensely moving book about a tormented Jewish leader in Pisa (the *parnas* of the title) during the Nazi invasion. It is a story of suffering and fear, the late psychiatrist Silvano Arieti wrote, but also a story of the discovery that “nobility and greatness are sometimes hidden within mental illness.” It is one of three Paul Dry books touching on the Holocaust, each in a different way. For Dry, who is Jewish, *The Parnas* reveals something of the human effort to understand and accept others’ (and one’s own) strengths and weaknesses, and something of our own encounters with evil. A more obvious commercial venture, Dry notes, was the 2001 reprint of the revised *Lincoln’s Quest for Union: A Psychological Portrait*, by Charles B. Strozier ’66, Dry’s classmate and friend since grammar school. Launched in connection with the airing of the PBS program *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*, the book offers insights into Lincoln gleaned largely from interviews conducted by Lincoln’s longtime law partner, William Herndon. (Dry’s own interest in Lincoln is long-held; he wrote his senior thesis on Lincoln with Erik Erikson as his adviser.)

The firm’s most recent title, *My Business Is Circumference*, presents 28 contemporary American poets who provide a “multifaceted view of the creative process,” Corenswet says. Each poet contributed a new poem, several works that influenced it, and an essay on poetic mastery.

It is this book that perhaps best reflects Dry’s central mission: the sharing with others in a continuing dialogue of writing, ideas, and the roots of the creative process. “We only get deeper by the conversations we have together,” he asserts. “I didn’t get into publishing just to read on my own, where all you do is talk to yourself. You have to ask questions of what you have read. Sometimes the book answers, sometimes your friends answer, and sometimes you answer. It’s a wonderful conversation.” ~NELL PORTER BROWN