



Fast-Growing Independent Publishers, 2018

To be successful, presses forge a unique path

by Jim Milliot & Claire Kirch | Apr 06, 2018



Filling

underserved niches and meeting the needs of consumers looking to understand changes in the country’s political and cultural environments helped several independent publishers make this year’s fast-growing indie publishers list. A number of these presses are relatively new, having barely been operating for longer than the three-year minimum required in order to qualify for the *PW* list.

Cottage Door Press has had extraordinary growth ever since it released its first titles in 2015, a year after it was founded by former Publications International president Richard Maddrell. The company’s focus continues to be on producing a range of products for babies and toddlers that align with its mission of “promoting reading aloud from birth.”

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According to marketing manager Melissa Tigges, much of Cottage Door’s growth last year, when sales grew 107% over 2016, was driven by increased distribution and an expanded list. In addition to other new initiatives in 2017, Cottage Door published its first licensed

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books with Baby Einstein and the Smithsonian, expanded its bestselling Early Book Song Book series, and added to its Love You Always series, which is done in a padded board book format. The company also took advantage of the gift market, expanding its seasonal offerings with line extensions in its lift-a-flap, padded board, and peek-a-flap formats for Valentine's Day, Easter, Halloween, and Christmas. The company's top-selling title continues to be the board book *Grandma Wishes*, which has more than 850,000 copies in print.

In addition to expanding its title count, Cottage Door has significantly broadened its distribution reach. Though its initial success was fueled by selling titles in targeted mass merchandisers, its recent growth, Tigges says, "is being driven by a diversity of titles and customers, including e-commerce, independent toy and bookstores, and

international markets." The publisher will continue to expand its reach in 2018 with the launch of a trade line that will feature four titles, including Cottage Door's first picture book, *Nothing Is Scary with Harry*, by first-time author Katie McElligott. To accommodate its growth, Cottage Door plans to move to new offices this summer.

Milli Brown, founder and CEO of Brown Books, says the hybrid publisher has been able to grow its sales over the past three years by "staying focused on a select number of authors and frontlist titles each season." That approach, she says, has enabled the company to significantly boost placement at independent and national bricks-and-mortar stores, as well as in school, classroom, and public libraries.

"Our authors create our success and feed their own," says Brown, who notes that Brown Books authors retain full rights and control over their own books. Among last year's bestsellers were *Sage Alexander and the Hall of Nightmares*, *10 Pillars of Wealth*, *Wounded Tiger*, and *Magnet Max*. Brown Books authors also have access to an integrated public relations and marketing firm that produces, on average, exposure to more than 5,000 media outlets per book launch, says Tom Reale, Brown's COO.

The publisher's distribution agreements reach both the trade and education markets. In 2016 its licensing practice began maturing, with rights sales for multiple titles made across Asia and Europe. Now with a backlist of 150 titles, Brown Books' list has expanded beyond nonfiction to include YA fantasy, juvenile, mystery, and coffee-table books.

Wisdom Publications in Somerville, Mass., specializes in books about Buddhism, mindfulness, and meditation, and publisher Daniel Aitken says some of the company's growth last year was due to increasing numbers of people searching for tools to better deal with the change and uncertainty in their worlds. But he points to actions taken by the publisher that contributed to the gains as well. Specifically, he notes that the 30-year-old company implemented a more aggressive strategy regarding its frontlist last year.

"We set a goal of growing frontlist revenues for 2017 by more than 100%," Aitken explains. "We achieved this goal by increasing the number and quality of our frontlist titles. We also tested and refined a number of pricing strategies to help maximize revenue." He adds that the company also streamlined the publishing process and communication among its production, editorial, and marketing teams.

Though he declines to disclose sales, Aitken says that the press's top three sellers in 2017—*The Suttanipata: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses Together with Its Commentaries*, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, and *Bearing the Unbearable*—grossed a total of more than \$350,000. Several new marketing initiatives also fueled the company's growth, including a podcast featuring interviews conducted every other week with leading Buddhist thinkers; the *Wisdom Journal*, a biannual publication with illustrations that highlights new releases and bestsellers; and Wisdom Academy, an online course platform accompanying the books that has provided the press with a separate stream of nonbook revenue.

Last year, marketing manager Jim Plank described Haymarket Books' sales as shooting up "through the stratosphere" since Donald Trump's election a few months earlier, putting the Chicago-based publisher of left-wing political and social justice titles on our list of fast-growing indie presses. Haymarket's rapid upward trajectory has continued, with sales jumping 187% in fiscal 2017 from fiscal 2015. The sales increase came despite cuts to the number of titles released between 2015 and 2017.

According to Plank, Haymarket's strategy is to "put out books that speak to the current moment." Shortly after Trump's inauguration, Haymarket partnered with Random House Canada and Allen Lane in the U.K. to release a paperback edition of Naomi Klein's *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need*. Knopf Canada took the lead in editing and production, and Haymarket and Allen Lane tweaked the cover design and tailored title pages to their own specifications to drop the book simultaneously in the three countries. It was Haymarket's top title this past year, having sold 60,052 copies.

Rebecca Solnit's three books on politics and feminism also continue to sell well in this era of women pushing back against sexual discrimination and harassment. *Men Explain Things to Me*, published in 2014 and updated in 2015, sold 53,763 copies last year, followed by Solnit's *Hope in the Dark*, originally published in 2004 when George W. Bush was reelected. Updated in 2016, it sold 40,773 copies in 2017. Solnit's most recent work, *The Mother of All Questions* (2016), last year sold 24,804 copies. Another strong seller was Angela Davis's 2016 collection of essays, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, which sold 35,036 copies in 2017.

Plank notes that Haymarket has always focused on publishing books about people's histories and their struggles. "Since the election in 2016, the audience for these ideas has grown exponentially, as many more people are interested in connecting with those ideas," he says.

Since Familius was first started in 2013 by former Gibbs Smith executive Christopher Robbins, the company has focused on publishing family-friendly books. "We create and sell titles that appeal to diverse families and encourage communication and focus on values that make families happy," says Kate Farrell, the new marketing and public relations director. The publisher sells its list across a wide range of channels and last year saw gains in all markets—including chains, independent bookstores, gift stores, libraries, international, club, and specialty outlets.

Among Familius's bestsellers last year were *Beauty and the Beast Book and Puzzle Box Set*, *101 Amazing Uses for Apple Cider Vinegar*, *101 Amazing Uses for Coconut Oil*, *101 Amazing Uses for Essential Oils*, and *Lit for Little Hands: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Last year the publisher slightly broadened its offerings with increased investment in children's and regional children's programs.

Since its launch, Familius has built a backlist of more than 250 titles. Using that as a resource, it recently created the Happy Family Box, which combines books with crafts and other family-bonding activities. The package is subscription based and priced at \$29.99 per month, though consumers receive 35% off of their first boxes.

Looking for new talent, Robbins was at the recent Bologna Children's Book Fair, where he was selling translation rights and scouting for new international illustrators. "The children's illustrator market has exploded globally, and our ability to work with these artists regardless of geographic boundary has been a tremendous benefit for Familius, as these artists have very unique and fresh approaches," Robbins says. "The majority of Familius illustration now comes from international partners."

Page Street Publishing president Will Kiester cites a number of factors for the independent publisher's consistent growth between 2015 and 2017. The first is the quality of Page Street's content. When Kiester first launched Page Street in 2011, he said that if he ever saw the quality of the books decline, he would cut back title output. But that has not happened. "As we do more books, the books are coming out better," he says.

A second factor has been Page Street's ability to better promote and merchandise its books as sales increase. "I think more accounts are finding us and are stocking our books, so when we have a hit, it has more merchandising opportunities," Kiester says.

Certainly, the quickened sales rate has justified Kiester's approach. He notes that in the fourth quarter of 2017, Page Street's bestselling books were selling at three times the rate they were in the fourth quarter of 2016. That growth led Page Street to ship \$2 million worth of books in a single month twice in a row for the first time, this past November and December. Among Page Street's bestsellers in 2017 were *101 Asian Dishes You Need to Cook Before You Die*, *Hand Lettering for Relaxation*, *The Simple Kitchen*, and a number of Instant Pot titles.

On the kids side, *Epic Lego Adventures with Bricks You Already Have* and *The Superkids Activity Guide to Conquering Every Day* "are paying the bills," Kiester says, as the company pushes deeper into the children's market. This fall its first children's picture books will land, and they follow the recent release of the publisher's first young adult titles, *Beneath the Haunting Sea* and *It Should Have Been You*. Sales have been slow, Kiester acknowledges, but he says the books have been getting "rave reviews," and he will continue to provide marketing support to give them an opportunity to get attention and traction.

Kiester also notes that as Page Street's title count increases, he is seeing more opportunities—and stronger sales—in different areas and subjects: "It's nice to see the heavy hitters spread out nicely from our cooking list, with surprising strong sellers like *American Duchess Guide to 18th Century Dressmaking*, and the year before, *A Touch of Farmhouse Charm*, which in turn is creating new opportunities. The goal is to continue to create quality content in every category into which we venture."

Seven Stories Press posted double-digit gains in both 2016 and 2017, leading to a 62% increase in 2017 over 2015. Publisher Dan Simon says there were a number of factors that have led to consistent gains over the past three years.

The company started its children's list in 2012, and sales began to show solid growth in the fall of 2013 with the release of *A Is for Activist*. In a relatively short period of time, Seven Stories has built a strong children's backlist, and titles including Howard Zinn's *A Young People's History of the United States* and Cory

Silverberg's *Sex Is a Funny Word* sold well last year.

On the adult side, last year Seven Stories had two big books: *Requiem for the American Dream*, Noam Chomsky's bestseller on income inequality, sold more than 40,000 copies, and sales of Kurt Vonnegut's *Complete Stories* topped 20,000 copies.

Simon points to two other factors that had a positive impact on sales in 2017. The company relaunched its website, which he says has made it "far more effective than it had been in building our community online." Last year also marked Seven Stories' fifth year as client of Penguin Random House Distribution Services. "The better you get to know your distributor, and the better they get to know you and your books, the more effective the partnership becomes," Simon notes.

Jump is living up to its name: net revenue in 2017 leapt 40% from 2016, with 2016's revenues up 14% from the previous year. "We have achieved fast growth over the past three years by staying laser focused on meeting a major need in the education and library market; there's a shortage of high-quality low-level books for emerging and struggling readers," president Gabe Kaufman says of the company he founded in Minneapolis in 2012 to serve the library market.

In 2016, Jump entered the education market by publishing books in paperback for classroom usage, as well as in a hardcover format with reinforced binding for libraries. The various series, published under three imprints—Tadpole Books for children beginning to read, Bullfrog Books for high-interest low-level readers, and Pogo for readers in grades two to five interested in STEM topics—are made "easily recognizable" to teachers and librarians, as well as young readers themselves, Kaufman says, with "clean white covers and bright, warm interior spreads" that feature vibrant photos and simple text.

Two series that especially pushed up sales in 2017 were STEM Careers, a series (under the Pogo imprint) of eight volumes that has sold 1,200 collections, and Celebrating Differences, a series (under the Bullfrog imprint) with five volumes that has sold 1,300 collections. "With everything that's going on in this country, it's probably not surprising such a series as Celebrating Differences would do so well," Kaufman says.

Compendium, which is better known in the gift market than in the publishing industry, has landed for the first time on *PW's* list of fast-growing publishers after 2017 sales jumped 38% from 2015. Its title output went up 21% in the past three years, with 35 frontlist releases in 2017, up from 29 in 2015. The Seattle-based company specializes in publishing children's books, gift books, guest books, notebooks, and journals, as well as greeting cards, boxed note cards, stationery, and pop-up cards, although trade books do account for a portion of its overall sales.

Founded in 1985, Compendium attributes its recent sales increase of books to the fact that librarians and educators have finally discovered the company's products, due in part to the somewhat unexpected success of company president Kobi Yamada's What Do You Do series of three picture books: *What Do You Do with an Idea?* (2014), *What Do You Do with a Problem?* (2016), and *What Do You Do with a Chance?* (2018). "We're a small company, and we do almost no marketing and advertising," says marketing manager Angeline Candido. "Yamada's first book hit the *New York Times* bestseller lists a year after it published. It was all word of mouth." The three books together now have a million copies in print.

Compendium's sales are also being driven by backlist titles, particularly adult activity books such as *The 5 Book: Where Will You Be Five Years from Today?* by Dan Zadra, which, almost a decade after its release, continues to appeal to the lucrative gift market for graduations, job promotions, and retirements.

After a soft 2016, Morgan James came roaring back in 2017, posting a 35% increase from last year, giving the company a 32% sales gain in 2017 over 2015. According to president David Hancock, the rebound was led by titles from its core business—entrepreneurial business nonfiction. But he adds that the publisher did have its first fiction bestseller last year: *On the Clock* by Tim Enochs and Bruce Tollner hit #1 on the *Los Angeles Times* and landed spots on the *New York Times* and *USA Today* lists. The novel was one of two frontlist books to be among Morgan James's top five sellers last year; the other was *Expert Secrets* by Russell Brunson, whose *DotCom Secrets*, released in 2015, was the company's top seller in 2017.

Overall, Hancock says, Morgan James is seeing continued solid sales from its growing backlist, mostly in trade paperback. Unlike most larger trade houses, Morgan James has seen an increase in e-book sales, and growth has been strong enough that the company is preparing to launch an e-book subscription service through which subscribers will have unlimited access to all Morgan James titles for a \$10 monthly fee.

The company also expanded its international efforts last year, opening an office in Vancouver, which lifted sales to Canada. It also now has an office in Melbourne and just opened in London. As part of Morgan James's international expansion, Hancock says he expects to soon sign an enhanced distribution deal for global print sales with Ingram Publisher Services that he hopes "will help our international sales significantly."

Finally, Hancock says he is "strategically" releasing more hardcover titles, and the publisher is joining with the rest of the industry in taking advantage of the boom in audiobook sales through the recent hire of an audio publisher "to lead the charge."

Charlesbridge director of marketing Donna Spurlock says the Boston-based publisher's double-digit sale growth in 2017 over 2016 was due to gains across all of its markets, with increases in sales of both its frontlist and backlist titles. Among the publisher's bestselling 2017 frontlist titles were *Malala: Activist for Girls' Education*; *Lola Gets a Cat*, the latest in Charlesbridge's popular Lola Reads! series; and *Baby Loves Thermodynamics* and *Baby Loves Quantum Physics*, the newest books in Ruth Spiro's Baby Loves Science series, which launched in October of 2016. A couple of titles that were released in 2016—the picture book *Whoosh! Lonnie Johnson's Super-Soaking Stream of Inventions* and *Samurai Rising*—enjoyed higher sales in 2017 due to award recognition.

Spurlock also says that Charlesbridge's STEM/STEAM titles had sales gains last year, as did its general backlist, led by *Baby Animals Black & White* (1998) and *I'm New Here* (2015). Sales also remained strong for the perennial back-to-school favorite *First Day Jitters*, originally released in 2000, while its companion book, *Last Day Blues*, remains popular.

Last fall saw the publisher launch a new young adult imprint, Charlesbridge Teen. The inaugural list included titles covering paranormal, contemporary fiction, and political issues, with Spurlock noting Charlesbridge has plans to further diversify the list. To help market its growing list, Charlesbridge has increased its overall advertising and promotional efforts, and it has also adopted a more aggressive direct-to-consumer approach through social media and boosted posts.

Agate Publishing bounced back in 2017, from a down year in 2016, to post a 7% gain over 2015. Besides a boom in sales of books and other educational content in its Agate Development unit (its digital content development service business), Agate founder Doug Seibold says last year's improvement was spearheaded by *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*, written by Derrick Barnes and illustrated by Gordon C.

James. The children's picture book, released as part of Agate's new multicultural children's book line, Denene Millner Books, was published in October 2017 to critical acclaim. The book was a runner-up for some of the most prestigious awards in U.S. children's book publishing: it was named a Newbery Honor book for content, a Caldecott Honor book for illustrations, and a Coretta Scott King Honor book for both text and illustrations. *Crown* also appeared on several year-end best-of lists for 2017, and it is now in its fifth printing, bringing the number in print to 65,000 copies. It's the fastest-selling book Agate has published since 2012, which was the first year Agate appeared on our fast-growing list.

Seibold also notes that *Crown* was only the third title in the Denene Millner line, as the imprint debuted in spring 2017 with *My Brown Baby* by Millner. One new Denene Millner book will be released this year, *What is Light?*, with three of four books planned for 2019. Seibold also has high hopes for *Ruth Bader Ginsberg: In Her Own Words*, set for release later this month.

After only minor growth in 2016 over 2015, Berrett-Koehler had a stronger 2017, leading to a 7% sales increase from 2015. Though print book revenues were flat between 2015 and 2017 and e-book sales had a small decline, other B-K initiatives drove up total revenue.

Audio sales doubled in 2017 over 2016, in large part because B-K now releases nearly all of its new books in digital and CD formats, says Katie Sheehan, senior communications manager. Subsidiary rights income also had a nice increase, rising 15% in 2017 over 2015. B-K has long conducted various types of conferences, and its Servant Leadership Online Training Summit held in October attracted nearly 20,000 participants from 146 countries.

A move that B-K hopes will set it up for future growth came last July, when it acquired Management Concepts Press. The purchase added 127 titles on project management, federal acquisition and contracting, federal financial management, leadership, and public administration. Sheehan says B-K is using those titles as a beachhead to establish a professional publishing program, which will expand into other professional subject areas over time.

Austin Macauley Takes Root in N.Y.C.

Austin Macauley Publishers, a hybrid press founded in the U.K. in 2006, opened a New York City office last year. The American office has enjoyed rapid growth since it was launched, signing more than 200 authors. One of Macauley's big releases last year was entertainment attorney Lloyd Zane Remick's *Two Times Platinum*, a legal mystery that looks "behind the scenes of the sports and entertainment industries," the company says.

International director Jade Robertson is expecting a huge increase in title output in 2018, and to accommodate the growth, more staff has been added to the New York office; the press is now being distributed by Baker & Taylor Publishing Services. "It's been truly rewarding to see how the New York office has grown since opening its doors in 2017, and we are committed to continuing to broaden our presence both at home and abroad to support our expanding list of talented authors," Robertson says.

In addition to the London and New York offices, Austin Macauley has an office in Sharjah and plans to expand into Australia, Canada, and South Africa in the next few years. Overall, Austin Macauley reports that worldwide sales between 2015 and 2017 rose 330%. —John Maher

Fast-Growing Indie Publishers

Publisher	Sales Growth	Employees		Titles	
		2015	2017	2015	2017
	2017 v. 2015				
Cottage Door Press	1,222%	13	24	18	158
Barrington, Ill.					
Brown Books Publishing Group	287%	15	15	25	31
Dallas, Tex.					
Haymarket Books	187%	11	16	67	59
Chicago, Ill.					
Familius	104%	4	5	40	56
Sanger, Calif.					
Page Street Publishing	94%	8	22	34	67
Salem, Mass.					
Seven Stories Press	62%	8	9	29	36
New York, N.Y.					
Jump	59%	4	9	85	125
Minneapolis, Minn.					
Compendium	38%	57	64	28	24
Seattle, Wash.					
Morgan James	32%	38	49	141	188
New York, N.Y.					
Charlesbridge	28%	21	22	46	50
Watertown, Mass.					
Wisdom Publications	22%	14	14	28	44
Somerville, Mass.					
Agate Publishing	7%	17	17	24	24
Evanston, Ill.					
Berrett-Koehler	7%	26	28	40	40
Oakland, Calif.					

Correction: This article initially misnamed Wisdom Publications publisher Daniel Aitken as Doug Aitkin.

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