

Charlie Demers's Robin's Eggs Books is giving voice to other funny people

By: Dana Gee Published on: November 17, 2017

Charlie Demers' latest career move is a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup kind of thing.

The Vancouverite has used the combination of his successful stand up and literary careers to formulate the new publishing imprint Robin's Eggs Books.

Robin's Eggs Books flies under the [Arsenal Pulp Press](#) banner and has a very straightforward mandate: give people who kill on a comedy stage a voice on the page.

"I'm the person who is probably furthest into both worlds of comedy and literature in Canada," said Demers who named the imprint after his late mother. "If I am going to use to advantage my peculiar space in both of those spaces it would be in trying to get people who haven't written books yet, who I know who are very funny talented writers to give it a shot."

Demers' imprint relationship with Arsenal is just another in a fruitful partnership that goes back almost a decade and includes a handful of Demers titles including next summer's new novel *Property Values*.

When it comes to Robin's Egg Books, Demers picks the authors, edits the books and then Arsenal takes over from there. Demers gets paid for editing and gets a percentage of the sales.

Demers had a very simple and succinct pitch when he approached Arsenal's publisher Brian Lam 18 months ago about the new imprint.

"His rationale for it was the fact that humour sections in bookstores were largely made up of joke books or celebrity biographies, but there wasn't really a middle ground for literate smart books on contemporary issues by very savvy comedians, comedy writers," said Lam. "He wanted to be able to provide a venue and a vehicle for these writers."

Demers has had comedy writing on the brain since he was a kid padding around in his Spider-Man PJs.

"It was kind of an idle fantasy for long time," said Demers. "I always loved funny prose and it was always a big part of what made me want to be a writer and it was a big part of what made me want to be comedian."

Fantasy turned to reality a couple of years ago in Toronto when Demers was watching a stand up comedian Evany Rosen kill while she was opening for him at the launch event for his collection of essays *The Horrors: An A to Z of Funny Thoughts on Awful Things*.

Demers says Rosen told great stories and had a real stage presence, a presence that Demers felt would take her smoothly from the stage to the page.

"All I could concentrate on was how brilliantly constructed these stories she was telling were," said Demers. "She has these hilarious and human stories. The words were brilliant and I kept thinking I would love to read a book by this person. I said to her that night that she should write a book. You are such a funny writer."

Flash-forward to today and Rosen's book *What I Think Happened: An Under-researched History of the Western World* is out. The book is a pointed, funny feminist perspective on historical events not a witty memoir, which these days seem to be the common literary landscape of funny women.

"I didn't think my 30 years on this earth had enough of a memoir to it to really provide much in the way of thrilling content," said Rosen who lives in Toronto. "Then I realized I have this failed academic career and that would be such a funny and fun swan song. It's an attempt to return to misspent youth and explore history from a totally different angle as I do love history and always have."

Rosen learned to love history through he father Marc.



“He introduced history to me in this on the ground way,” said Rosen who took many road trips with her father. “It wasn’t him having me memorize dates or learn facts. We would just go somewhere and he would tell me a story of what happened there and what it was about. It really became a live narrative. I really fell in love with history because of that.”

“History was taught to me as a series of stories full of interesting characters.”

Rosen has been doing stand up since she was a first year student at King’s College in Halifax 12 years ago. She is a member of the comedy troupe Picnicface, a voice actor and makes her living as a TV writer. All of those activities are collaborative endeavours so it is not a surprise that Rosen reeled a bit at the thought of being alone with her thoughts.

“It was strange to be kind of an island and brainstorm with myself,” said Rosen who gives credits to her partner and close friends as giving her a kind of false sense of a writer’s room.

“Comedians you have to wear a lot of hats to thrive and survive, but this feels like a whole other animal, community and shape.”

Luckily though the essay format at least offered a little sense of belonging for the 30-year-old comedian.

“My jokes tend to be longer, stories so the shape felt familiar enough that it wasn’t a total shock like a novel might have been,” said Rosen who is a lover of the work of hilarious essayists David Sedaris and David Rakoff.

Rosen’s book is just out now and it is a strong start for the new imprint.

Demers has already secured the authors for the next two titles. In the fall of 2018 Winnipeg Indigenous comic Ryan McMahon’s book of short stories will be released. The following fall Robin’s Eggs Books will deliver Vancouver stand up comedian and podcaster Alicia Tobin’s book of essays.

So far the Robin’s Eggs Books imprint is home to first time authors, but Demers points out that is not set in stone. Funny is the only non-negotiable for Demers backed books.

“At the moment my thinking is to bring people in who have great writing chops and who are really funny and then just letting them play in the space of being on the page,” said Demers.

The future depends on the obvious success business model. If people support the books then Demers will look to increasing the output. But right now he’s a happy comedian holding a book by another comedian.

“I would love to go full Scarface. But you know at the moment a one book a year imprint is a level of power I can stay sane with,” said Demers. “In my wildest dreams things go really well and Arsenal wants to move it to two books a year I’d be thrilled with that.”

For the publisher Lam the collaboration between Robin’s Eggs Books and Arsenal Pulp Press is an energizing one that he says points to the fact that the printed book is doing well these days.

“The death of the book is largely exaggerated. For our press it has actually been our best ever,” said Lam who has been the publisher of Arsenal for 30 years. “We are seeing independent bookstores coming back ebooks were a kind of threat but people are returning to the printed page, the printed work. We’re very happy with the industry right now.”