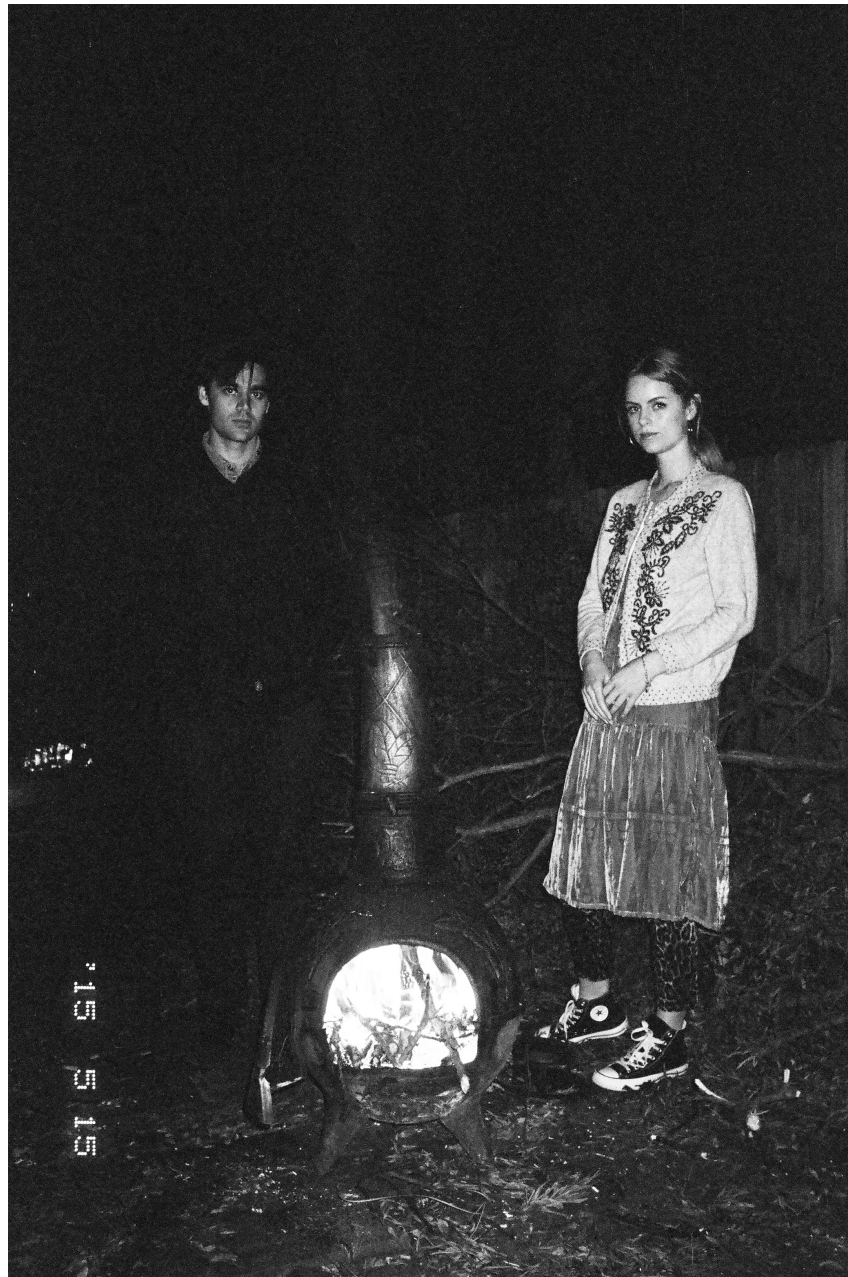


publication, interview, essay

Bad News Books - an interview August 2018



Harry Culy and Lucy Aitchison of Bad News Books (photo: Sam Stephenson)

In the first of an occasional series, Mary Macpherson spoke with Harry Culy, co-owner of Bad News Books about the company's

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sensibility or an addiction to describing your world through images. In the case of Harry Culy, co-founder Bad News Books (BNB), his love of books and photography grew from skateboarding.

From the age of 10 Harry's been fairly obsessed with his board. When he was about 12-years-old his Dad gave him a camera and he and his brother started taking pictures of each other on their suburban street as they practiced their moves on ramps, grind boxes and rails built from scraps of plywood. Then there were pictures in the skate magazines like New Zealand's *Manual* and *Thrasher* and *Transworld* from the US, the graphic influence of comics such as *X-Men* and a love of reading novels. When he started getting serious about photography he headed to Massey University's well-stocked library to explore the many different photobooks on offer.

Officially, Harry describes BNB as is a small, not-for-profit publishing company, based in Wellington, New Zealand. The company collaborates with artists and photographers across the Asia-Pacific region to make short run photobooks (editions of 25 – 100) and also distributes books created by others.

Its owner/directors are Harry (31) and his girlfriend Lucy Aitchison (30) while Hank the cat (6) lends a paw or two when times are tough. Both Harry and Lucy juggle publishing with busy lives; Harry as an MFA student at Massey with a busy art practice and commissioned work, and Lucy as a graphic designer who now works at ParrotDog Brewery.

They share publishing tasks such as editing, art direction and print oversight at BNB but Lucy takes more of a leading role in design while Harry specialises in communications.

Since 2013 when they started making zines with friends to showcase their projects, BNB has grown into a small

I had heaps of friends who had done really great little projects that I thought should live on in the physical world – not just in boxes or hard drives hidden away. And I didn't really see many other outlets for that kind of stuff locally. I

guess taking that DIY mentality from skateboarding - we just started doing it ourselves. We started off making little zines about 5 or 6 years ago after Lucy learnt book making from her graphic design course. We thought low cost, handmade booklets would suit these very simple photo projects, so we started our field studies series – which are just black and white photocopy zines – the first one we did was by Tim Watson in 2013 from a short trip he did to Haiti. We made a few of those, people seemed to like them, then we made a couple newsprint booklets, and when I think we had made around 5 books/booklets we thought that this venture should be a real thing with a name.

Where did the name come from?

About two weeks before our first official launch, I woke up one morning and the name just popped into my head - and it had a certain ring to it. I thought it kind of suited the outsider feeling we wanted to create and was memorable.

Is it exclusively about photobooks or do you incorporate other genres?

So far it has all been photobooks, but we are doing a book of illustrations with our friend Shannon Rush late 2018/early 2019 and hope to do some projects with different mediums in the future too.

What lessons have you learnt about photobook publishing along the way?

We are really just a couple of kids making books in our spare room, in our spare time, so we are making it up as we go

the way, those relationships are important things we have gained out of this whole process. We still have so much to learn especially about the money side of things...

What makes you agree to publish a photobook? What are you looking for?

I think we are just looking for a body of work that has a feeling; something that shows how the artist looks at the world, a point of view, or an engaging concept; something that would be maybe difficult to publish in a traditional publishing company. We're interested in what kind of work is being made in our part of the world. There's lots of great photography out there in the world, but I guess there is a certain indefinable feeling we are always searching for in a project, which we know when we see it in a body of work.

What makes people respond to and buy a photobook?

I'm not sure! I think people like seeing local things made by local artists. I think when a viewer can connect with the work in some way that really is the main part of the equation. The book also needs to convey a narrative or emotion and of course, that includes being decent quality, and well designed and sequenced. But I honestly think it's such a subjective thing to each individual that it is impossible to guess.

What are some of your favourite photobooks and why?

she dances on Jackson - Vanessa Winship (UK)

Disko – Andrew Miksys (US/Lithuania)

Niagra – Alec Soth (US)

Pictures from home - Larry Sultan (US)

Pre-marital bliss – Tim J Veling (NZ)

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and how that can be translated into an emotion or narrative through the accumulation of images on paper, how the images build dialogue with each other, the design and other physical elements of the 'story' of the book. All the examples I gave you have these things in common. There are so many other books that I love but those ones immediately sprang to mind.

Are there any photobook publishers in New Zealand or overseas that you particularly admire and why?

Mack books are the ultimate in terms of the artists and projects they publish, quality, and simple, timeless design. But recently, I met Yumi Goto at Photobook NZ and I was blown away by her experimental design and physicality of the books she makes through her master classes (they make 15/20 book dummies before they get published!). I think what she is doing is really pushing the medium. There are so many good photobook publishers out there. I think it's the golden age of photobooks right now.

At the panel discussion you took part in at Photobook NZ, I got the impression that you specialise in publishing photobooks by your peers usually in very limited runs - is that how you think of your operation?

Yes we do limited runs (editions of 25-100), mainly because we don't have enough money to do big print runs and the scene in this part of the world is pretty small. Yes we have made books with our peers (that's why we started making books in the beginning anyway) but we are starting to branch out, working with more established photographers like Derek Henderson whose book is forthcoming in 2018 and others like Christine McFetridge who lives in Australia. We still do the things we originally did, like the field studies zine series, but also use more high production stuff too; professional printers and binders (if it suits the work). Essentially, BNB are aiming

Distribution and sales are the hard part of any photobook operation - what channels and strategies work best for you?

We have a website, but we also do book and zine fairs too, and are just starting to be stocked in a few stores. I think personal relationships are the most important; your group of peers and supporters, the people you meet at fairs, at shops, etc. But having an online store where people from anywhere in the world can buy from backs that up. Social media is good too. We really need to get savvier and try distributing more books in Aus and at other bookstores. We may try doing an international book fair in a couple of years. Talking to Perimeter Books at this year's Photobook NZ made me see the value in travelling to make those connections outside of NZ.

Do photographers have to bring funding to the project for you to be able to do it?

Sometimes – the more low cost projects we pay for it ourselves. But for the bigger, more expensive projects we need financial support. This support has come from several different places; from the artist, CNZ funding, or pre-sales as a way to offset costs. In some projects we have split the cost with the photographer, other times the photographer has paid for the print run and kept all the profits. We are still figuring it out! It is a labour of love, I'm still a student and we don't exactly have any kind of financial backing so it kind of runs on love and people doing stuff for free. We are still trying to figure this part of the business out.

What kinds of people buy the books you publish? Are they all photographers and based in New Zealand?

A lot of artists/photographers from NZ and Aus, however,

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for the great work coming out of Aus and NZ. We do want to be a bit more bold or experimental, keep pushing what we do, while staying true to what we love. It would be nice if the company could pay for itself and everyone's time. Everyone

who gets involved in this world knows there's no money in books, but it's worth it just to get the work out into the world.

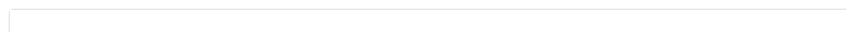
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