

# TRADE NEWS

Editor: Joann Davis/Assistant Editor: William Goldstein

## How to College, How to Publish: Primer Press Is Born in a Dorm

by Sally A. Lodge

What do you do if you're a college senior, beginning to get the real-world jitters and have no interest in donning a three-piece suit to interview for jobs with investment banks and other big-dollar, stiff-white-collar institutions? Well, you might just decide to write a book, both to pass the time while your classmates are impressing (or trying to impress) interviewers and to make (or try to make) some money. And what should the book be about? What do you know best? Why, college life, of course.

This is no hypothetical scenario for Bill Jeakle, Eugene Reardon and Ed Wyatt, whose three-piece suits remained in their closets as they transformed a dorm room at Stanford University into Primer Press and spent their senior year (and the months after their June 1982 graduation) writing *How to College: A Humorous Guide to the Four Years* (\$5.95). Between the covers (which look suspiciously—and intentionally—like those belonging to a well-known handbook on things preppy) are found invaluable pointers on such subjects as creative test taking (aka cheating), 10 ways to say you're a virgin and stretching the truth on financial aid applications.

In New York with Jeakle to talk to *PW*, Reardon explains how the book came to be: "There really was nothing else we could do. Here we were in Silicon Valley, surrounded by people cranking out computers. Well, we weren't going to make computers, and we weren't going to be investment bankers, so we decided we had to do something humor-related to stay sane. Bill and I have always made people laugh at the dinner table. He was a writer and was anxious to write something, and I was an economics major and wanted to do something business-oriented."

So writing and self-publishing a book was the project they settled on, and the two recruited Wyatt to help with the writing. A fourth Stanford student, Philip Chalk, became the book's illustrator. Jeakle and Reardon read everything they could get their hands on

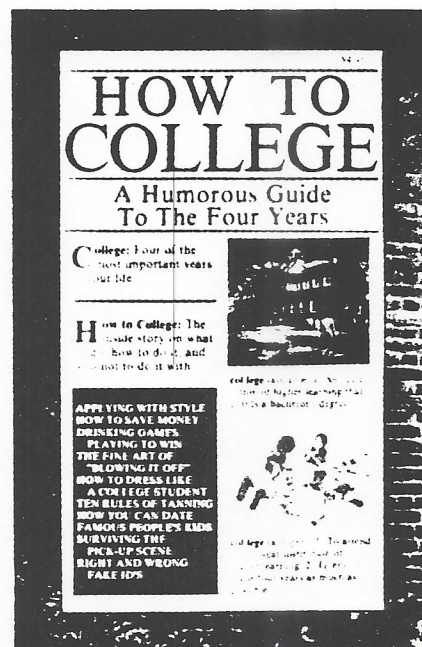


(L. to r.) Bill Jeakle, Ed Wyatt and Eugene Reardon, authors and publishers of Primer Press's *How to College*, below

about starting a publishing company and decided that they had most of the skills required. "We figured that what we didn't know we'd learn somehow," says Reardon, laughing. "And besides, I've always been interested in publishing and even had some experience with it. After all, I was the editor of my high school yearbook and sold every single copy of the book, at \$15, before it even came out. I didn't have a single return!"

On a more serious note, Reardon explains that he "stepped out" (preferable to the more sinister-sounding "dropped out") of Stanford for a while and went to live in Florence, where he worked for a publisher. He was fresh from this experience when he returned to Stanford and began making plans with Jeakle to enter the real world via their own publishing company.

After drawing up a business plan, the two decided that \$20,000 would get Primer Press rolling. "We tried to design our stock option so that anyone would feel good about investing," relates Reardon. "But publishing is so risky that we decided to talk to relatives and friends. Through them we raised \$16,000 in a few months, and then decided to call it quits and try to make ends meet with that."



Writing quarters in the dorm were quite cramped, but it kept costs low as well as allowing Jeakle, Reardon and Wyatt to "breathe, sleep and eat" college. "We were surrounded by other college students," says Jeakle. "We had kids streaming in and out of the dormitory all the time, thinking, writ-

ing, taking photos, pasting up."

The authors ran into their first serious obstacle when it came time to typeset the book. They learned that Stanford had a typesetting facility where work was done for very low rates. "But there were catches, naturally," Reardon notes with a good-natured shake of the head. "We taught ourselves a crash course in typesetting and learned how to use the computer system. But then disaster struck. We had logged hundreds of hours of computer time and had the first three chapters through the lines when the Stanford computer overlords were flipping through the programs on the system and they discovered our book. The system is supposed to be used only by students enrolled in computer courses, and in order to get computer time we had told the computer that we'd signed up for every computer course offered. Suddenly the guys in charge discovered that we'd been logging on under the names of about 15 different students, and we were labeled 'the poaching ring'!

"But we had a friend, a computer whiz, who liked our project and came to our rescue. We stayed up nights learning the very fine points of the system and finally found a back door to the computer room. So for several nights I snuck in, with a hood over my head and dark glasses so as not to be conspicuous. I went through the computer library, found our tape and dumped it back into the system, using passwords that hadn't been frozen out of the system by the computer overlords. Eventually we managed to put the entire book on the tape."

Designing and preparing the book for the printer was a breeze in comparison, and the first printing of *How to College*—12,000 copies—was off the press in mid-October of last year. Jeakle and Reardon then tackled the next sizable problem: distribution. "And we're still in the process of working that out," sighs Jeakle. "There are certain questions that we naively hadn't thought of—questions that booksellers and distributors might ask: 'The Primer Press, what is that? Will they take returns?' And we had made the mistake of coming out with a book of national interest; we were a small publisher with a big publisher's book. In many ways it would have been easier to distribute a book called *How to Stanford*."

By the time bound books were available, the authors realized that they were too late to reach the fall college market on a national scale, so decided to first concentrate on getting the books into stores in a few areas. Jeakle explains that in the first months "circumstances dictated where the books ended up. Eugene's brother was getting married in Boston, and when he went east for the wedding, we shipped half the first printing with him. This worked out

very well, since there are so many colleges in the Boston area. He drove around to bookstores and used whatever contacts he had, and sold quite a few books there."

Meanwhile, Jeakle and Wyatt peddled and promoted *How to College* in the Stanford area, where it sold briskly. And, announces Jeakle, his home state of Alabama has "*How to College* fever." The book has done well there, thanks to his use of local contacts; he has appeared on Alabama TV and has been written up in several newspapers.

A second printing of 6000 copies was ordered after Christmas last year and there are no returns to date. The book is now available from a number of distributors, among them NACSCORP, Bookpeople, Publishers Group West, Golden-Lee and Pacific Pipeline.

Having vacated its Stanford premises, Primer Press has moved its home base to 12 Sherman Bridge Rd., Wayland, Mass. 01778, where Reardon's parents live (the book can be ordered directly from this address). Gagsters to the end, Jeakle and Reardon listed Rio de Janeiro on the book's title page as the third city in which the Primer Press is located. Rio de Janeiro? "That's where we were going to open an office if the book hadn't sold," Reardon deadpans. "We decided we could tell our investors to contact us in Rio."

But it doesn't look as though that will be necessary. The authors have high hopes for the commercial potential of their book and, having alerted both coasts (or parts of both coasts), they now plan to introduce the inland U.S. population (and specifically the major chains) to the ins and outs of college life. Jeakle and Reardon believe that *How to College* fever will reach epidemic proportions by September, when they plan to launch a large-scale publicity and promotion effort, including a national tour, to coincide with first-year students' arrival on college campuses in search of a single title that can tell them all they need to know about college (and, the authors say, all their parents were afraid they'd ask).

Jeakle and Reardon leave one convinced that more will be heard from Primer Press. "Anyone can see from our first book that we aren't a small press in mentality," remarks Reardon. "Of course we are right now, in finances and numbers, but we would like to grow." Jeakle, without hesitation, agrees: "Definitely. We'd like our own building, say, in Rockefeller Center."

Two major New York publishers have contacted them about doing other humor books, but Jeakle and Reardon haven't made any decisions yet; they would like to write another book under the Primer Press imprint and have it distributed by a larger company.

But the next project will have to wait awhile, since, as Jeakle simply puts it:

"Our hearts are so much in *How to College* that we really can't stop spreading the word about it and move on to something else until we feel we've done all we can." And in this spirit the young men head out to inform the unsuspecting Midwest that college has become a verb, and that they have a book that can teach anyone how to do it.

## Book Collects Czech Literature

It is now 15 years since the Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968, but while the country's people have suffered under one of the harshest regimes in the Soviet bloc, its literature (in the great irony of the situation) has flourished.

"In its 150 years of modern existence, Czech literature has never known such a flowering of talent . . . as in these very years of its persecution," writes Antonin Liehm in his introduction to *The Writing on the Wall: An Anthology of Contemporary Czech Literature* (cloth \$19.95), which Karz-Cohl Publishing will release on the 15th anniversary of the invasion.

The first complete collection of its kind to appear in English, according to Karz-Cohl, the 270-page book is filled with short stories and *feuilletons* (short, often satirical, sketches of everyday life) by more than 20 Czech writers—many of whom are underground. Others, like Vaclav Havel and Milan Simecka, the publisher says, are currently serving prison sentences.

In 1968, Liehm was editor for cultural affairs at the leading Czech newspaper; he is now professor of Eastern European literature and film at the University of Pennsylvania. His coeditor, Peter Kussi, has won awards for his translations of the work of Nobel laureate Milan Kundera and others.

Karz-Cohl can be reached at 320 W. 105th St., New York, N.Y. 10025; (212) 663-9059.

### Our Overpopulation Problem

In our checklist of books on pregnancy and childbirth (April 22) we were, as we stated in the introduction to the list, so overwhelmed by the number of entries from dozens of publishers that we were forced to cut very heavily for space reasons, and severely limit the number of books we were able to list. We extend our sincere apologies to the many publicists who worked hard to supply us with information we were unable to use.