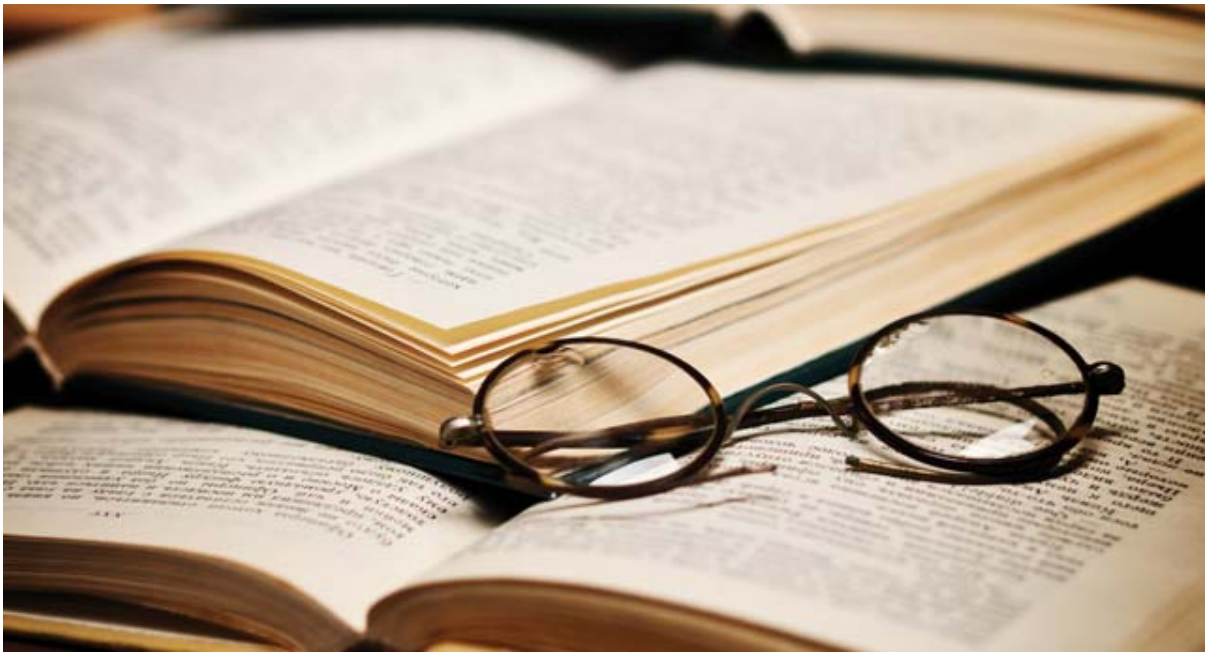
# Different Literary Worlds

by Richard Kostelanetz (August 2016)



Let me suggest that in America today are several literary worlds so different and distant from one another that it's possible for someone to be quite prominent in one and scarcely noticed in the others. One is commercial publishing whose produce is, thanks to hired publicists, acknowledged in the newspaper book reviews and chain bookstores. It's a pump-and-dump business, to use a term more familiar from penny stock promotions, because, as soon as any author's latest publication doesn't sell sufficiently, he or she is dumped, consigned to a invisible trash can from which, at least as commercial writers, they'll never again emerge. Even authors who once sold well can find themselves dumped when they submit a new manuscript, if they dare at all. Some of those dumped reinvent themselves in one way or another, while others unfortunately retire from book-writing well before their natural deaths.

The second literary world exists wholly within academia, consisting not just of authors awarded tenured positions because they once had a commercially published book, but also authors who started teaching as soon as they completed their terminal degrees and never stopped. Not unlike other academics, these writers compete for positions, perks, and power. Among its stars are professors of creative writing at major "research" institutions. If they run visiting lecturer series, they can do deals rewarding each other. Graduate students in literature

are encouraged to do theses on authors whose most visible surviving achievement is a university position.

A third world consists of smallpress authors who don't teach, rarely appear in university magazines, and don't have commercial publishers. They are published because editors don't just like but *love* their work. Even those publishing prolifically in smaller literary journals become stars recognized only within this world. For veterans, consider Simon Perchik, Wendell Berry, and Lyn Lifshin.

A fourth new world consists of independent writers, generally under fifty in age, who have earned readers mostly from Internet publishing. They depend upon not gate-keepers but readers loving their works strongly enough to recommend to their friends who, if they are persuaded, recommend to other readers, in ever expanding circles for those most successful. Russian poets in America nowadays favor Internet posts in their native language sooner than translate or rewrite into English because their Russian texts earn several times more readers. While commercial book publishers appreciate writers who have developed their own audiences, they also understand that it's hard to persuade the fans of fourth-world writers to pay for what they've gotten for free—even if books are comparatively cheap in the current economy.

For yet another world, probably more rarified than the other four, cutting across them, consider living writers recognized in the selective literary histories and encyclopedias. Some were once commercially published and thus recognized in those book publicity media attuned to commercial publishing; a few of these "some" still are. Some are professors; a few are smallpress people. Because the authors of histories and encyclopedias—tombstones, after all—don't want to be recognized clutching balloons, they instinctively ignore writing that couldn't possibly "last," no matter how prominent its authors might seem in some places at some time. Books (and now websites) canonizing writers survive to a degree that, say, publicity blasts don't.

Having been admitted to this last group decades ago, I've noticed that its authors feed off each other, especially when a summary about me or my work in a new history or encyclopedia echoes one that had already appeared. Since my books have never received a favorable review in either *The NY Times Book Review*, the *TLS*, the *New York Review of Books*, or the daily *NY Times*, not to mention less

pretentious media, may we conclude that critical historians know to ignore such flacks? And then that such flacks couldn't care less?

Writers who have succeeded with either commercial publishers or academies cannot understand why they aren't also recognized in such cemeteries. And won't be. In truth, even though they've read and probably studied classic writers and writing, they don't know how to function professionally at that level. Indeed, this world is so far above their smug sense of themselves that, unable to relate to it, they prefer to ignore what ignores them. To them, this world of elite recognitions might as well be in Outer Space.

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Richard Kostelanetz recently completed a book of previously uncollected critiques, *Deeper, Further, and Beyond*. Individual entries on his work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers, Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature, Contemporary Poets, Contemporary Novelists, Postmodern Fiction, Webster's Dictionary of American Writers, The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature, Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, Directory of American Scholars, Who's Who in America, Who's Who in the World, Who's Who in American Art*, NNDB.com, Wikipedia.com, and Britannica.com, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked.

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