

Peepal Tree Press: A Review

Peepal Tree has come a long way since Jeremy Poynting launched his first run of *Backdam People*,¹ 400 copies typeset from the daisywheel printer at his college of work. In response to a Guyanese government “keen to keep the means of communication out of opposition hands,” Poynting had promised the author to organise a small run back in the UK.

By the following year, 1985, he had founded Peepal Tree Press.² Based at 17 King’s Avenue, in “a rundown, multicultural part of Leeds,” the press aimed to keep titles in print while giving creative and professional support to developing new voices from Caribbean. Despite a successful first run, Poynting quickly ran into financial difficulties. After selling the first distribution back on the East Coast Demerara, the Guyana dollar devalued from \$8 to \$100 to the British pound. Some time later, the company’s former US distributor went bust and a Trinidadian bookseller skipped town, along with her considerable debts.

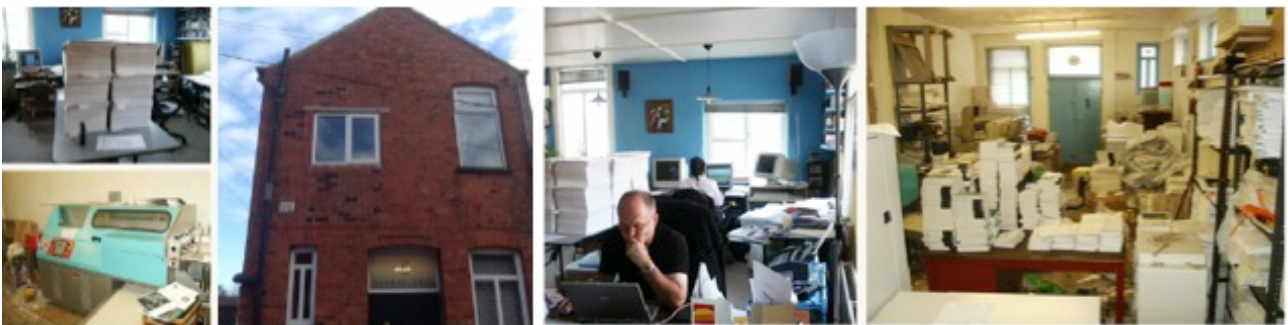


Fig. 1: The office and printing floor at 17 King’s Avenue, circa 2007. Images from Peepal Tree Press.

¹ Written by Indo-Guyanese Rooplall Monar, a friend of the publisher’s, the poems examine the tensions between the two hybrid communities.

² The name originates from the peepal tree seeds brought to the Caribbean by indentured Indian labourers. Poynting sees these as a metaphor for being transplanted and keeping one’s origins while laying roots in a new environment. The logo, a “P” stylised as a tree with roots growing beneath the ground further reflects this transnationalist ideology. “Peepal” can also be read as a pun on “people,” recalling the community-aspect at the heart of the project.

Surviving on a shoestring, Poynting maintained the project as a “serious but quite expensive hobby” alongside his job as a Further Education lecturer. Printing one or two books a year, he eventually came into a second-hand Rotaprint offset printer which allowed him to expand the business with the help of an elastic band and his then-teenage son. A couple years later, Peepal Tree received an Arts Council grant which they transformed into “ear-splitting” folding machine kept in Poynting’s garage. Giving up his job for part-time, he submitted to the Arts Council a business plan “of astonishing naivety.” Fortunately, the Council approved the development bid and (with the help of subsidies from parallel publishers and local NGOs) Poynting was able to continue production albeit a large debt to the bank.³

Ultimately, it was the economic support of two Caribbean poets and businessmen, Ian McDonald and Ralph Thompson, which brought relative financial stability and allowed the project to burgeon into a small company with several investors.⁴ While production continued above and beyond expectation, number of books and editing time was limited. “When it went wrong,” comments Poynting, “as it too frequently did, I hated printing, folding and binding with a passion.”

The digital revolution allowed Poynting to circumvent these limitations as well as the sustained issue of storage (stock was still kept in his Leeds basement). In 2012, Poynting stopped running a print shop and sent books to Imprint Digital in Exeter, while still typesetting and designing the books at home. The conversion made it easier to keep books in print as they were produced for pre-orders and anticipated supply, then re-ordered as required.

³ Peepal Tree have been funded as a National Portfolio Organisation since 2011.

⁴ Today, Peepal Tree could be seeing a new source of funding, having been one of four shortlisted for this year’s prestigious Clarissa Luard award. The £10,000 prize is awarded to an independent publisher with a less than £1million annual turnover. At the 2017 FutureBook conference, competition judge Sharmaine Lovegrove cited Peepal Tree as at the forefront of innovative ways of reaching readers in a distracted world. (Shaffi: 2017)

The new technology also allowed Peepal Tree to focus its energies on marketing and social media. Run by writer and producer Adam Lowe since 2010, the press is active across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with a cumulative following of over 7,300. Its YouTube channel, which stopped posting four years ago, had a smaller following but ran a series of author interviews, masterclass reviews, book readings and the series “Narrating the Caribbean Nation,” which explored themes of divergence, unity, transnationalism and globalisation in the region’s poetry. The title calls back to George Lamming’s conception of the “Caribbean nation” as a diaspora of different heritages, the inspiration and founding focus for Poynting’s project.

Poynting also cites as influences Anson Gonzales’ *The New Voices*, Eric Huntley’s *Bogle-L’Ouverture in Ealing* and North London’s *New Beacon Books*, which was founded in 1966 by Trinidadian poet and intellectual John La Rose and his partner, Sarah White.⁵ While La Rose’s project started as political activism, participating in and eventually hosting the International Book Fair “transformed the relationship from a purely political one into a broader cultural relationship, and [they] became part of an international network.”⁶ In an interview with *African Connections*, Sarah White explains how, particularly within the Caribbean Artists’ Movement (CAM), African and Caribbean liberation movements were very interlinked, with the Africa Unity House operating just around the corner from the West Indian Students Centre in Earls Court. La Rose’s principals for organisation were “the need for independence, not taking over the campaign and ensuring the people being helped were part of the campaign.” (Bush, 4)

⁵ Another press which Poynting does not mention, but may bear more similarities is Buzz Johnson’s *Karia Press*. Johnson published over fifty volumes within a decade from his Hackney council flat, creating one of the UK’s “most important and prolific black publishing houses on and for the Caribbean peoples.” (Searle, 81) His works may never be reprinted.

⁶ Sarah White on hosting the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, 1982-1995. La Rose’s was also invited to the Pan-African Festival in Lagos in 1977. (Bush, 4)

Peepal Tree appears to work along similar lines. The Inscribe Writers' offshoot provides general advice, mentoring and workshops aimed towards writers of Asian and African descent. Its blog features interviews, events, and call-outs to further promote its new writers. The latest of these is Shivane Ramlochan, whose first poetry collection launched in October this year. The book comes at just 70 white pages inside a dark spine and delicately etched cover designed by the author's Douen Islands "co-conspirator" Kriston Chen. (Roffey: 2017)

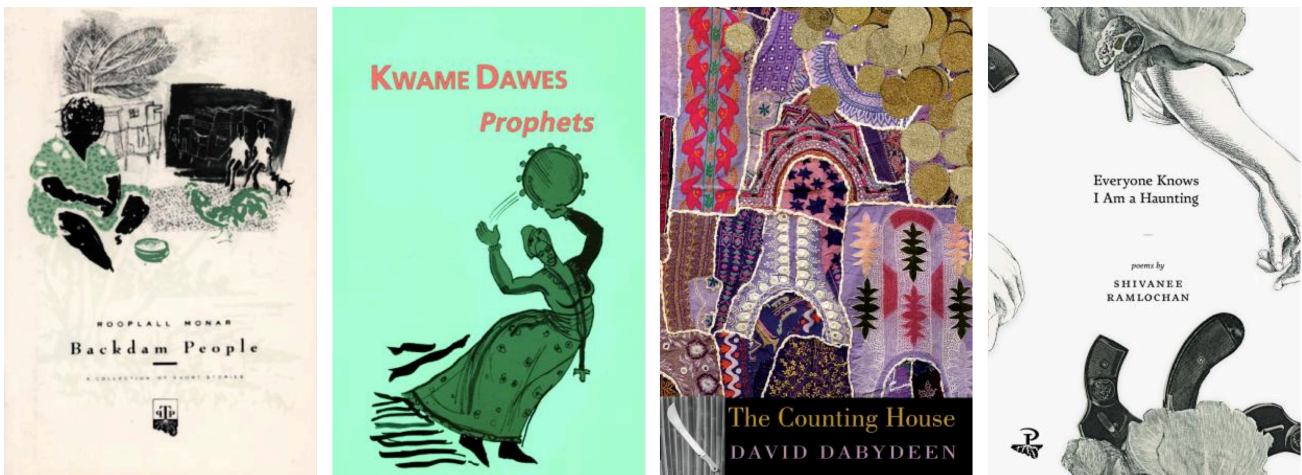


Fig. 3: Peepal Tree's cover design has evolved over the years. From left to right: Rooplall Monar's Backdam People (1985), Kwame Dawes' Prophets (1995), David Dabydeen's The Counting House (2005) and Shivane Ramlochan's Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting (2017). Images from Peepal Tree Press.

While on one side the press supports emerging writers, on the other it works closely with the already critically established.⁷ Kwame Dawes, Dorothea Smartt and Jacob Ross, who won the inaugural Jhalak Prize last March, are employed as associate executives. Similarly, the press' Modern Classics Series (premiered in 2009) is committed to restoring past essentials.⁸

⁷ Among these is David Dabydeen, poet, novelist and professor of Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. Peepal Tree's first assessment of his work, *The Art of David Dabydeen*, was published in 1997.

⁸ Under Peepal Tree, some of CAM's key poet-activists such as Andrew Salkey and Kamau Brathwaite are now being re-published with new introductions.

Ifeona Fulani draws a comparison between emerging Caribbean women's literature and the Ashanti founding myth of Anancy and the Sky God.⁹ Concluding that stories' rightful owners are "the audience whose imaginations and lives they enrich," she argues for a strategy of "literary Anancyism." (64) This would require writers to negotiate compromises (textually with the audience and politically within the industry) as well as building support networks and engaging with influential individuals.¹⁰ While the African spider god's tricky pragmatism is typically constructed as key to his success,¹¹ Peepal Tree must also keep an eye to its grassroots if it is to stay true its founding vision.



Fig. 4: Orlando Jones as Mr. Nancy in Starz' 2017 TV adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. Image from *Vanity Fair*.

⁹ According to the tale, the Sky God had collected all the stories of the world and held them in custody. Instigated partly out of malice, partly a sense of justice and also his own self-interest, Anancy schemes to retrieve them but is unsuccessful. He turns to his wife, Aso, who comes to a deal with the Sky God. He promises to release the stories in return for a python, a real fairy, and forty-seven stinging hornets. Employing all of his trickery and guile, Anancy completes the impossible task and the Sky God reluctantly hands over the stories. He takes these back to his village where he holds a festival so that the whole community can share and enjoy them. Anancy is rewarded by becoming the god of knowledge of all stories.

¹⁰ Peepal Tree have partnerships with Leeds' Soroptimists BAME women's fiction awards, the Trinidad-based CaribLit group and New York's Akashic Books, which publishes unpublished Caribbean-based authors and aims to pass management to Caribbean-based hands. (Poynting: 2017)

¹¹ The prevalence of Anancy in popular culture today is itself testimony to nations transplanted. Most recently, the spider god was portrayed by Orlando Jones in this year's hit TV show *American Gods*, a Starz adaptation of Neil Gaiman's book of the same name.

As Caribbean literature tends to be published in 'exile', its writers are often seen as little known or commercially unviable.¹² However, with new technology allowing heightened productivity even for small groups of people, Peepal Tree is able to distribute its output of over 200 writers and 370 titles in 20 countries across North America and the Caribbean.¹³ The question is less how quickly this new capacity will grow but how it should be exercised and shared.

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¹² Regional folk culture often privileges oral forms such as radio or film. At just under 40%, Haiti has one of the lowest rates of literacy in the world. (CIA: 2017)

¹³ In the UK today, Peepal Tree are distributed by NBN International and Inpress. The Independent Publishers' Group distributes their work in the USA and Canada while Intermedia Americana is responsible for the Caribbean distribution.

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Excellent and interesting choice of press. Well-written review, with good coverage of the press history. Only detail missing is some indication of how the press's titles are reviewed, of its reputation. A couple of points needing clarification : transition between editors ca 2010? And what does the American Gods illustration have to do with the review (Anancy/ Mr. Nancy)? A little bit more attention to the review copy would be useful, as well. Note the occasional misspelling or grammatical fault.