

Fine Print

America's oldest university press turns 150



As though Andrew Dickson White—who co-founded Cornell and served as its inaugural president—didn't have enough good ideas, in 1869 he came up with yet another. After touring some of Europe's great universities, he returned to the Hill with a plan for something he'd seen there but that no American institution had: an official university press.

In the intervening 150 years, Cornell University Press (CUP) has come a long way from its humble origins in the basement of Morrill Hall, where students operated a steam-powered printing press. Back then, CUP published few books; its main role was to print student and faculty materials like syllabi and campus newspapers. Today, it puts out some 150 titles a year—in hardcover, paperback, and e-book format. "University presses are bastions of reliable knowledge," says director Dean Smith, noting that CUP's academic titles undergo rigorous peer review. "And they're telling stories that are not being told by the large trade publishers."

CUP's releases cover a wide variety of topics, from political science to anthropology, medieval studies to labor relations. Its most popular titles to date include *Cornell '77*, an homage to the Grateful Dead concert in Barton Hall that many consider the band's finest show; award-winning novelist Barbara Kingsolver's debut book, *Holding the Line*; and *The Handbook of Nature Study* by conservationist and 1885 alumna Anna Botsford Comstock, which has sold more than a million copies. "Money is not the only object; we're not free from that desire, but that's not what drives us," says Fran Benson, a former CUP director and longtime editor. "We're looking for books that make use of education and research and inform the general



BUY THE BOOKS: Some past releases. Far left: Sage House, CUP's stately headquarters.

public to make the world a better place."

Since 1993, CUP has occupied a three-story Victorian mansion perched on a terraced hillside overlooking downtown Ithaca; commissioned in the late 1800s by University benefactor Henry Sage, it boasts stained glass windows, intricate carvings, and elaborate fireplaces. ("There is a love affair between the staff and the building," Smith observes.) The setting does come with many of the typical quirks of an old home, from the trials of temperature regulation to the occasional unwelcome guest. As marketing and sales director Martyn Beeny says with a laugh: "We've had quite a few bats."

The mansion also bears traces of its previous life as the University infirmary, such as marks on the conference room ceiling denoting the tracks of vintage X-ray machines. And as Smith notes, some may consider a former hospital as an apt metaphor for the publishing industry, which is widely seen as ailing in the midst of the digital revolution. But, he says, the press is actively trying to challenge that notion. While print remains CUP's most popular format, he says, "the fastest-growing aspect of our business is our e-book revenues," which have doubled since 2015 and now comprise about a third of sales.

'We're looking for books that make use of education and research,' says longtime CUP editor Fran Benson, 'and inform the general public to make the world a better place.'

In an effort to connect with readers, the press offered a "pay what you want day" last spring, when patrons could name their price for any book (beyond a \$5 minimum); in February, with a nod to its sesquicentennial, it held a four-hour flash sale offering any in-stock title for \$10.50. Through grant funding, CUP has also been expanding its open access program, offering some of its content for free online—a resource, Smith says, that has been accessed by readers in more than 150 countries. ■

—Alexandra Bond '12