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Hunger Unpublished

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Endpiece

[Issue 286](#)

ENDPIECE

Hunger unpublished

How **Mark Axelrod** lined up some of the world's finest writers on one of the world's biggest issues – and still couldn't get them into print.

In 1992, as the sun set on President Bush and rose on President Clinton (two sides of the same star), I had witnessed the situation in Somalia with both consternation and perplexity. Being a mere purveyor of words, I really had no idea of what I could do to help remedy that horror, or any other horror whose focus was hunger. But sitting on a sofa, watching the nightly news and feeling impotent to effect change is not the principle on which remedial action gets taken. What could I do that would get me off the couch and into the universal melée?

Eventually I came upon the idea of organizing and editing a collection of fiction, poetry and essays by writers from all over the world, using a publisher who would donate the profits to a foundation whose mission was to help remedy the burden of hunger. My goal was to interest writers who had either experienced or understood the debilitating effects of hunger and who could express that.

And so I set myself the task of writing to as many writers as I could to see if they would contribute. Over the course of four years I have written to over 200 of them and received positive responses from Martin Amis, Margaret Atwood, Christine Brooke-Rose, JM Coetzee, Maryse Condé, Ariel Dorfman, Raymond Federman, Eduardo Galeano, Allen Ginsberg, Günther Grass, Alasdair Gray, Lucía Guerra, Wilson Harris, Thomas Keneally, Maxine Hong Kingston, Doris Lessing, Alejandro Morales, Giose Rimaneli, Márcio Souza, Wole Soyinka, Ben Stoltzfus, Ronald Sukenick, Luisa Valenzuela, Gerald Vizenor and Elie Wiesel.

There were a lot of missing writers – noble and Nobel Prize winners – who did not wish to participate. But I had a dozen or so of the world's finest writers, all of whom were committed to contributing prose or poetry of some kind. All I needed was a publisher whose interest in social responsibility was forthright and sincere.

I first contacted Grove Press, thinking that such a distinguished publisher of noble causes would surely be interested. And they were. For a time. Until the day came when they informed me that 'the collection would not make much money'. I didn't think that making a lot of money – at least for the publisher – was the point. But I was wrong. Profitability *was* the point. How naive. And in my naiveté I marveled at the loss of the *pro bono* spirit of publishing. No 'kinder, gentler' humanists there. I discovered bottom-line guys and dolls whose quest for the absolute seemed to hinge on a 'new' collection of *Aesop's Fables* or a redesigned cover of Tolstoy or Trollope. After all, those are all 'public domain' with no fees to pay.

Then I thought that, perhaps, Grove was an anomaly; perhaps the publisher of such distinguished humanists as Beckett and Pinget and Genet had somehow changed directions; perhaps when others discovered such a fine collection of writers they would be as enthusiastic as I was; perhaps Noonday would be interested. After all, they still publish Hamsun's *Hunger* which documents the horror, albeit in an artistic way. But that kind of hunger may be easier to publish. And it happened over a hundred years ago – late-nineteenth-century Norwegian hunger isn't *fin de siècle* American or Latin American or Rwandan hunger, and Hamsun won a Nobel Prize and... Well, you get the idea. In short, their answer was: 'This would not be suitable for our lists.' And, of course, 'list suitability' is of paramount importance in the publishing world.

I've continued to scour the Manhattan pavements for a publisher who might be interested in this collection, but it's been fruitless. Without naming names, just about every major publisher has repeated the same phrase to me: 'It won't turn in a profit.' This reminds me of the admonition I once received from a Hollywood producer that I shouldn't write any film script which had to do with American Indians since, well, Indians don't sell at the box office. And, apparently, hunger doesn't sell in the bookstores or on college campuses.

To say that I have been disappointed by the New York publishing 'community' is to say the very least. Perhaps the industry 'reflects' the balanced-budget-at-all-costs tenor, the disdain-for-social-responsibility tenor, the tenor of the times. Perhaps it's always been that way.

Some may think that such an anthology would be a pretty meagre attempt to rectify the notion that in a free-market economy 'some must eat and some must starve, depending on the vouchers one has'. But I felt certain that *somewhere* on the streets of Manhattan, *someone* other than someone who by Grand Central Station sits down to weep, would redefine the issue of the bottom line in terms of the human condition rather than capital gains. Needless to say, the relationship between profit and prophet goes beyond the homonym of spelling and I continue to search impatiently for an editor who can recognize the spirit of humanity.

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- See more at: <http://newint.org/features/1996/12/05/endpiece/#sthash.1w4CUghe.dpuf>