

# BOOK PEOPLE: Publisher Jim Phelps

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# Linking writers with readers

MARGARET VON KLEMPERER

PUBLISHING houses get bigger and bigger, taking each other over and creating monoliths. But size need not matter, as Jim Phelps is proving with his Echoing Green Press (EGP), a small but successful player in the industry.

"A publishing company is a fascinating concept," says Phelps. "It's an intermediary between writer and reader. It's as if writers carve beautiful arrows but don't have a bow, while publishers have a bow, but no arrows. The publisher can't do what the writer does, and the writer can't do what the publisher does." The publisher has expertise, but he also has to put up the money and therefore needs to believe in the potential of the text. He is the one who makes it possible to launch that text into the marketplace, shoot it into the bullseye.

That is what Phelps has been attempting to do for the past five years. He admits he is not out to make his fortune, but is also trying not to lose money. He set up Echoing Green Press so that he would have a profession and an interest when retirement came along, as it now has. Phelps taught literature at the University of Zululand for many years, but is about to leave his home in Empangeni and head off, along with Echoing Green, to Fish Hoek in the Cape.

He admits that there have been a few mistakes along the way. "Like any business, you have to learn, often the hard way," he says. But Echoing Green's successes include a new edition of Ian Player's classic *Men, Rivers and Canoes*; the well-received short story collection, *Sunshine and Shadows* by Abel Phelps; and poetry collections from Norman Morrissey (two), Dan Wylie and hip-hop poet Iain Ewok Robinson. Along the way, Phelps has taught himself book design and takes pride in a quality product, both in content and appearance.

There is a strong KwaZulu-Natal connection in most of his publications. Despite the imminent move to Fish Hoek, Phelps has deep roots here, particularly in Pietermaritzburg where he grew up and went to school and university.

"It's my home, where my psychic roots are," says Phelps, though he admits that his Pietermaritzburg is perhaps more a place of the imagination than the real, contemporary bricks-and-mortar city. The company's name comes from one of



Photo: MARGARET VON KLEMPERER

Jim Phelps, who, like his Echoing Green Press, has deep roots in Pietermaritzburg.

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, and refers to a village green where the human community meets and interacts, both with each other and with the natural world, like the Pietermaritzburg of Phelps's student days.

"It reflects my optimism in what we can do as humans — I see creativity as the highest of our achievements," he says.

Phelps sees enormous challenges ahead for the publishing and book-selling industries. "The medium of the book has changed, and we are behind in South Africa. The United States is leading the move from the physical to the electronic book." It is a move that will come here too, says Phelps. Publishers will have to put books out in three formats — hardback, paperback and electronic

which will be read on something like Amazon's Kindle reader. The problems of piracy are being solved, and the electronic device is something that readers can take to bed, the beach, or wherever they want to read.

"It will be harder for publishers, but I've been thinking how I could develop EGP along those lines — it's part of the fascination of the business for me. I'm going to have to adapt."

While Phelps sees huge changes in the wings for publishing, he does not support the increasingly popular self-publishing option, seeing it as problematic on two levels. The first is marketing. Publishers have connections with the market, the media, a publicity machine and distribution networks. Going back to

his bow-and-arrow analogy, he sees self-publishers as people with arrows, but a makeshift bow that is going to miss the target. And for readers, there is still a stigma attached to self-publishing or vanity press publications. It can be hard to find a publisher, but it is still the best way to go.

Publishing is a knife-edge business, but it is possible, even for a small operator. Phelps relishes the challenges — whether from the growth of electronic gizmos or from moving himself and his company off to the Cape, although those psychic roots will stay firmly in Pietermaritzburg.

• For more information on Echoing Green Press, visit [www.echoinggreenpress.com](http://www.echoinggreenpress.com)