

*“Zines, Chapbooks, and the Independent Spirit  
of the Underground Press”*

Sara Doherty

Nothing warms my heart like a zine, unless it's a chapbook. I fell in love with them two years ago, after a visit to the Way Station bookstore in downtown Lansing. I had run out of exciting reading material, and decided to buy whatever I could find for less than five dollars. I met Randy Glumm there; the owner of the store, the former editor of Way Station Magazine (an independent literary journal), and the man who would soon become my primary zine dealer. In the back for the store was a small shelf of zines and chapbooks.

A zine (rhymes with "mean", not "mine"), for the uninitiated, is a small, independently published (if you call photocopying "publishing") book. Zines can address anything they please, from politics to crushes to the mechanics of fixing a bicycle. A zine dedicated to poetry or fiction is generally called a chapbook. I didn't know any of that, but they looked enticing nonetheless, and they were cheap (most photocopied zines range from free to 3 dollars). I picked out a couple of chapbooks and left the store happy. Even though my selections were poor ones, I immediately fell in love with their insistence that no publisher can dictate a writer's worth, and that no copyright law should ever restrict the free flow of information.

I decided that better zines must exist, and that I must discover them, so I came to Way Station almost every week that winter, scrounging the shelves for something new, something beautiful that I could discover. I found online zine distros (distributors) from all over the country, and independent printing presses that kept the underground spirit alive, saving great writing from the indignities of photocopiers.

Even those zines and chaps that were professionally published by independent presses retained a fierce do-it-yourself ethos. Zinesters are deeply imbedded in anarchist and punk culture, and with good reason. All three rebel against authority, whether it comes from the government, societally-constructed hygienic standards, or a publisher's rejection notice.

I wasn't fully hooked, however, until I wrote my own chapbook. I have printed three chaps of my own mediocre and angst-ridden poetry. They made me realize that the zine community is an interactive one, fully accessible and without scorn for newcomers. Any reader, however young, however untalented, can be a participant in the zine world. This means that the quality of zines and chapbooks varies wildly. Some make me want my money back. Others, (the few, the beautiful) like Doris, Invincible Summer, and On Subbing, are worth ten times their cover price, if not more. All products of the independent press, however, preserve the spirit of the zines that I first fell in love with. They uphold noble principles, despite their sometimes shabby packaging; our rights to be heard, unencumbered by copyrights, publishing contracts, and editors.

