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# Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.

By **Ron Charles**

✉ Email



(Compass Rose Publishing)

**Nothing makes my heart sink faster than an email with the subject line “A New Publishing Model.”** Inevitably, the proposal involves magical algorithms, TV celebrities, TikTok serum or pixie dust made from unicorn horns to revolutionize the inherently cumbersome process of finding good manuscripts, editing them and then looking for interested readers.

“The book is like the spoon,” Umberto Eco said. “Once invented, it cannot be improved.” Maybe the same could be said about publishing.

And yet I paused on a curious note from Robert Mrazek. He’s a former U.S. congressman from New York and the author of a dozen titles. He has the audacity to think he might have devised a great new way to create and sell books.

**Compass Rose Publishing**, which is being described here publicly for the first time, involves no AI sorcery. Instead — *get this* — the company will partner with staff members at independent bookstores to develop and market one new book per month. As a business model, it’s intriguingly innovative and charmingly old-fashioned.

After all, a century ago, some publishers maintained their own bookstores. (A few small presses have revived that arrangement.) And, of course, bookstores are already intimately involved in the marketing of books. Publishers routinely send manuscripts to booksellers to garner reactions, judge potential sales and drum up enthusiasm. Buyers at big box chains sometimes influence cover designs.

But Compass Rose staff, including senior editor James Bock, plan to involve booksellers much earlier in the process. The publisher is creating an advisory board of about 15 partners drawn from giants like Politics & Prose in Washington to smaller stores like Water Street in Exeter, N.H. They’ll offer editorial advice and provide input on future content. The point is to benefit from the wisdom of these savvy literary entrepreneurs who rub covers every day with actual readers.

Mrazek was inspired by a conversation last winter with his friend Steve Israel, a fellow former congressman from New York who also left politics for the literary life. He now owns Theodore’s Books on Long Island, which got Mrazek thinking about the collective economic power of indie bookstores. Israel introduced Mrazek to Oren Teicher, the legendary leader of the American Booksellers Association, who retired in 2019.

With Teicher’s help as co-chair, Compass Rose Publishing began to take shape — conceived as a vast partnership with booksellers who could help promote its books.

This doesn’t come cheap. Mrazek says, “As a former congressman who became a novelist instead of a lobbyist, my purse is not substantial enough to set up a publishing house.” So he brought on four outside investors, who have given the company enough funding to run with no revenue for a year and no profit until the third year. That seems doable. “If our model is what we hope it will be, we’re going to be profitable much sooner than three years.”

Compass Rose plans to release its first book in February. Mrazek insists I keep it confidential for now, but it sounds like one I would assign for review if I were still editing. And the second book, coming in March, is sure to attract attention, too.

“Our target demographic are readers who are looking for books that provide some level of hope and optimism for the future,” Mrazek says. “Things like honor and courage, empowerment, love, sacrifice — those were the themes I attempted to put into all of my books, and I think they’re valuable, particularly in these times. We’ll publish any book by any author that comports with that general philosophical approach.”

Mrazek’s necessary optimism is tempered by a clear understanding of the market forces that Compass Rose faces. “Is there tremendous competition? Of course, there is. The bookstores are besieged by the business representatives of the Big Five as well as independent publishers saying, ‘Please promote our book.’” But he thinks a team sincerely dedicated to involving indie booksellers in the process could carve out a little nook of success.

Teicher agrees. “The secret sauce of independent booksellers is their capacity to handsell books to consumers because they *know* their consumers,” he tells me. “That’s a fount of information and data. Let’s put that to work.”