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Heyday founder is booked for life For 30 years, indie publisher Malcolm Margolin has mined California's golden stories

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Malcolm Margolin was being himself.

"The problem is that right now I'm not feeling any nostalgia whatsoever, not a drop," said Margolin, who recently marked the 30th anniversary of Heyday Books, the Berkeley publishing house he founded, as he admired the "glorious day outside, with meadows fresh with flowers and green grass, the big-leaf maples set to explode with silent firework displays of pallid flower clusters. I'm surrounded by beauty."

At 63, Margolin is far less likely to be sitting idly behind a publisher's desk than to be out and about -- mesmerizing a Bay Area crowd with yet another story about the place they live in, connecting with American Indian friends at Point Reyes, playing a wicked game of pool or loping up a Berkeley street on his usual thrice-weekly hike into the hills.

Not that he could possibly be anything but a man of letters. "He's incapable of being anything else," declares George Young, a longtime friend and informal Heyday guru. "He could have done a lot of other things, but once he found out what publishing was, he just couldn't walk away."

Can a business as frightfully insecure as publishing be fun? It can if you're Margolin, who treats each of his books like "only children" and gets downright euphoric when talking about his next project.

"Just think of packing all that human intelligence into these pages!" he's likely to enthuse.

Margolin considers his a privileged existence.

"It would be a crime to complain," he says. "I'm doing something that's a total luxury -- dwelling on beautiful things."

He brings a few of these beauties -- new titles for the fall -- with him for an interview in a Berkeley garden not far from his University Avenue offices.

It's hard not to notice that the man is striking. Below his bald-ing dome, a exuberant white beard spills forth, framing a serious face worthy of exploration: a noble nose, deep grooves of wrinkles on an ample forehead and twinkly brown eyes framed by round, gold-rimmed glasses.

The effect is quite like Gandalf the Grey of "The Lord of the Rings" -- without the hat.

"Hierophantic." That's how retired State Librarian Kevin Starr describes Margolin. "Manifesting sacred power, a power larger than life, a savant. There's something rabbinical about him."

In fact, Margolin did spring from a Yiddish-speaking Jewish enclave of Boston, the son of Orthodox immigrants from Lithuania. His father dreamed of his son at MIT; instead, he got an English literature major at Harvard.

There, Margolin met his Polish-born wife, Rina Tice, a Radcliffe student. Harvard also awakened within him a deep desire to write, and he did so, traveling with his bride to the Caribbean, British Columbia and Mexico.

They settled for good in Berkeley in 1970, when their first child, Reuben, was born. The boy was given the middle name Heyday because it "really had been our heyday."

Margolin hired on at the East Bay Regional Park District as a groundskeeper, and went on to give nature walks and run conservation programs.

By 1974, as he realized he'd relinquished his literary ambitions, he wrote "The Earth Manual" about the nature programs he developed at the district -- his only work not published by Heyday. With the proceeds from publisher Houghton Mifflin, Margolin wrote "The East Bay Out," a guide to the East Bay regional parks, and self-published it. When the first 7,000 copies of the book arrived at the Margolins' house, the truck driver asked Margolin, "Is this Heyday books? Where's the loading dock?"

The volumes ended up stacked in the living room, the bathroom and just about everywhere else they could fit. Every day, Margolin would put a few into his backpack and go out to sell them.

"Malcolm often said he came into our store on hope and went out a publisher," said Pat Cody, widow of Fred Cody, founder of Cody's Books, another Berkeley institution.

After the first 7,000 books were gone, Margolin printed another 7,000.

In those heady times, as Berkeley was in the midst of a publishing ferment unleashed by the Free Speech Movement, there were no less than 100 small presses, with (now defunct) names like Shameless Hussy Press and Somber Reptile.

Margolin and Fred Cody, who became fast friends, even organized an Inkslingers Festival one year to celebrate writing and publishing. It was the start of Margolin's steadfast support of the local bookselling community.

Today, Berkeley is still an indie publishing nexus. In the midst of it is Margolin, whose high-quality books on California literary and cultural life continue to be lovingly produced and sent out into the world.

"When a book comes in, I look it over to check that it has its fingers and toes," Margolin says. "Then I'm uninterested in it until it makes its way into the culture, with all that human activity." Heyday's fall and winter catalog boasts 104 titles -- ranging from the American West, art and literature to the environment, poetry and natural history. It's a combination of books "you can't imagine selling anywhere," says Andy Ross, the current owner of Cody's.

The success of the house is due in no small part, friends say, to Margolin's encyclopedic intellect and prodigious curiosity.

"Malcolm is one of the great polymaths," says Paul Yamasaki, buyer at City Lights Book Store in San Francisco.

Heyday's catalog reflects that dizzying diversity of interests: "Bear in Mind: The California Grizzly," "Precious Cargo: California Indian Cradle Baskets and Childbirth Traditions," Gary Snyder and Tom Killion's "The High Sierra of California," and the sumptuous "Drawn West," selected paintings of the Robert B. Honeyman Jr. Collection of early California and Western art from UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library.

"Drawn West" premieres in October. Also out this fall: "Letters to the Valley," the latest writing of Central Valley farmer-writer David Mas Masumoto, and "Each a Mighty Voice," a century of influential speeches -- from Teddy Roosevelt to Khrushchev -- at the Commonwealth Club of California.

"His books aren't just books," says Hut Landon of the Northern California Independent Booksellers Association. "They're really these little cultural volumes."

"The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco-Monterey Bay Area," written by Margolin 25 years ago, is a classic now in its 16th printing. Margolin started it in the late 1970s as a brief pamphlet about how Indians used plants. Soon he got less interested in the plants and more interested in their civilization.

"I'm nearsighted, so I kind of deal with what's in front of me," he says.

"Ohlone" was followed by "The Way We Lived: California Indian Stories, Songs & Remembrances," which Margolin edited. But it was Heyday's publication in 1987 of News From Native California, a quarterly magazine devoted to Indian communities of California, that forged bonds that Margolin calls "one of the great inexplicable joys of my life."

Frank LaPena, a retired Cal State Sacramento art and Native American studies professor who is a Nompitom Wintu from Northern California and a columnist for the publication, sees the magazine as giving "a public voice to the Native American community. It's also a venue for discussion and has allowed the thoughts of the people to reach a broader audience."

Integral to the magazine, LaPena says, is Margolin's respect for the culture.

Publishers can be useful, Margolin reflects, as long as they don't lose that sense of humility.

"I am tremendously aware of being a non-Indian," he says. "So I keep under the radar. It's about being a guest in someone else's culture."

If he moves with grace in that world, it's because Margolin is an ecologist at heart, says Fritjof Capra, author of "The Tao of Physics" and founder of the Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley.

"Malcolm really knows what we call deep ecology, a deep connection with nature," says Capra. "It comes through in his way of speaking, his work, his publications and his whole personality."

Heyday also publishes Bay Nature, a magazine devoted to exploring nature in the Bay Area.

It all reflects Heyday's audacious reach into "the unsung corners of California," Margolin says with relish.

All this reaching, however, hasn't always been lucrative.

"I'm not going to make a lot of money publishing books on California Indians," he reflects, with no visible regret.

But despite the vagaries of the publishing industry, Heyday has survived, indeed, thrived, thanks to foundation grants and partnerships with heavy hitters in the cultural world: UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, the California Historical Society, the Commonwealth Club of California and the California Council for the Humanities. For its ambitious California Legacy Books project, which has reprinted important books on California, Heyday teamed up with Santa Clara University.

Thirty years of nimble partnering has helped fill 10 Rolodexes in California.

Yet his publishing peers say he checks his ego at the door. "A lot of times, there's a certain high-mindedness -- that, as independent publishers, we're doing God's work here," says Charlie Winton, chairman and chief executive of the powerhouse Avalon Publishing Group in Emeryville. "Given that today, a half-dozen publishers control 75 percent of everything that's published, it's not without reason that some people who choose this sort of path might be on their high horse a bit. But Malcolm's so far away from that. He presents himself in an 'aw shucks' kind of way. I find that refreshing.

"In the Berkeley publishing scene, Margolin's seen as an elder, somebody whose consistency of vision has been executed over a long period of time," Winton adds. "He's still doing it, and he's doing it better than ever. And he's been able to maintain his scale, which is kind of interesting."

Heyday's still small, with 15 staffers. Yet, over the years, it's helped young professionals cut their publishing teeth.

"You just soak up the energy at Heyday," says Stephen Becker, executive director of the California Historical Society. "You can't be around Malcolm and not get just over the top, invigorated with the idea of building a book."

At the office, "Malcolm's an interesting combination of exacting and relaxed," says Jeannine Gendar, Heyday's editorial director. "We have high standards for what we do. It's not just Malcolm but the rest of us who are fairly critical and demanding, (but) at the same time, we have a pretty low organizational stress level. People enjoy being around here."

Still, Margolin, who is up with the birds, slips into the office before anyone else, leaving typewritten notes on everybody's desks. He still uses an electric Brother typewriter for staff notes as well as business and personal letters.

"He tends to be a bit of a micromanager," says Young. "He's always befuddled that other people aren't at the same level." Once he had to let a young employee go. Stacey Lewis had been an intern who wanted to go into marketing. The only job at Heyday at the time was office manager, so she took it.

"Nine months later, he sat me down and fired me," says Lewis, now 33. "He did in a gentle way, saying he didn't think it was working out. Then he put me in touch with everybody in publishing and wrote me a glowing recommendation. It opened doors."

Lewis was then hired by City Lights, where 10 years later, she is the publicity and marketing director.

"It was the only time in my life I was ever fired, and it turned into this great thing," she says. "I feel pretty indebted to Malcolm for helping me get started."

Employees are also treated to Margolin's quick bursts of wit.

Once, when an author wrote an overlong acknowledgment for his book, Margolin e-mailed Gendar, "Good grief. He forgot to thank his dog, cat and hamster."

Most of Margolin's humor is self-deprecating. A release about Heyday's 30th anniversary went this way: "There's nothing in the world more ingratiating than a self-congratulatory press release. For its 30th anniversary, Heyday will not be wallowing in nostalgia. The staff -- many of whom were not born when the company was founded -- won't be donning hair shirts and talking about the good old days."

As Starr declares: "There's not a pompous bone in his body."

That's one of many reasons why, when Margolin was given the Fred Cody Award for Lifetime Achievement by the Bay Area Book Reviewers Association in 1995, people stood on their seats to cheer. Not that his unorthodox approach hasn't sometimes caused peers to roll their eyes. "Malcolm's completely focused on publishing as a craft," says Ross. "People have been annoyed at him, and sometimes, I've been annoyed at him, for turning down commercial projects."

Marching to one's own drummer has had its price, Margolin concedes.

"Money has always been an insecurity," he says. "There's no house and a retirement plan is a little bit hard."

But money was never what he wanted to acquire, and his three children, he says proudly, are finding their way quite well in the world. Reuben, 34, is an artist; Sadie, 29, has a graduate degree in public health and is about to be married; and Jacob, 23, is an actor.

"They're all optimists who trust in the belief that you can create your own life," he says.

The child he monitors just as closely is Heyday, which this year became a nonprofit organization.

"I'm the executive director and moral force," Margolin said. "But 25 books coming out next year -- this is a little bit much for one aging hippie to pull out of his hat."

Margolin's not planning to retire. But he admits that a legacy, like a garden, requires some loving thought.

"The whole thing seems too sweet, too lovely, too fragile and a little bit important not to keep it going," he says