

## Sagging Meniscus Press

an interview with  
Jacob Smullyan



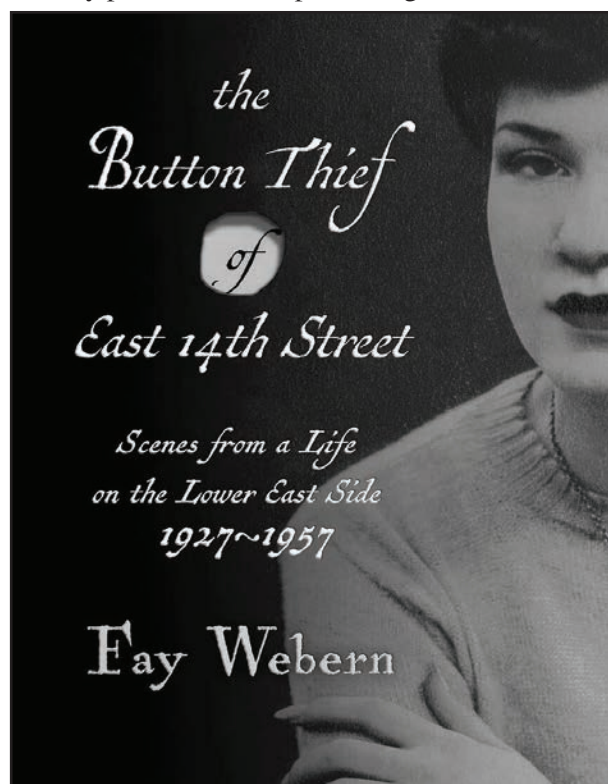
Interior illustration from *The Old Asylum* (2016)

### Could you briefly describe your press's history?

Sagging Meniscus began in early 2015 after the untimely death of our friend and colleague J. F. Mamjjasond, who left behind a sprawling, highly personal manuscript we felt a profound responsibility to publish: *Hoptime*, our signature work and *raison d'être*, from whose text the comically ungainly yet poetic name of our press is drawn. As that project progressed, however, we realized that we were in a position to do much more than just publish one rather bizarre novel: it was our good fortune to stand in a remarkably busy crossroads of self-determined, idiosyncratic writers, mostly unknown and unpublished, whose work, often distributed by unconventional means of one kind or another, cried out to be better known. We soon saw a larger mission in creating a platform where this and other independent writing we deemed important or interesting could be given more permanent form and reach a new public. What is more, we felt that our literary tastes and instincts were well-suited to this purpose, and that the selection we would make from this very diverse body of work would create a coherent series that itself could contribute something new to literature.

### How would you characterize the work you publish?

Many of the books we publish come from what we have called, somewhat haphazardly, the “American underground”: American writers who have created subterranean literary institutions, individually or collectively, outside the mainstream, or found unconventional ways of distributing their work (mostly prior to the self-publishing revolution). For



instance, we have published two books so far by the extraordinarily talented and prolific polymath Roy Lisker, many of whose writings first appeared in the 1980s and 1990s in his hand-produced zine *Ferment*, which Howard Zinn described as “American samizdat”; we aim to publish much more of his work. Our first book to appear, *Voice Lessons* (2015) by John Tynan, had previously been distributed by the author in a beautifully hand-bound edition. Chris Sanderson’s remarkable novel *The Too-Brief Chronicle of Judah Lowe* (2016) had been serialized on Twitter, where it had a devoted following. Another of SMP’s preoccupations is a large body of work connected to an organization of writers called The Institute of Krinst Studies, which was principally active in the 1980s and 1990s; a kind of American Oulipo, its efforts tended to center around scholarly explication of the eccentric twentieth century American underground poet Alvin Krinst (whose works, hitherto passed from hand to hand among his devotees, we are planning to introduce to a larger readership, starting with *The Yalta Stunts*) but branched out in many directions. *Hoptime*, for instance, comes out of this esoteric tradition.

The “underground” label is of course inadequate; the truth is that to be an honest writer of any kind in today’s world is most likely to be an underground writer. Getting an audience is a fierce and unforgiving struggle. It would be more pertinent to say that our mission is to publish work of a strongly individual cast by writers who march to their own drummer, whatever their circumstances or nationality. The key characteristic we seek is aesthetic self-determination—the discovery of a personal, independent sense of artistic value, rather than the mere attainment, virtuosic though it may be, of a consensually received or mandated excellence. Of course, this dichotomy is not an absolute one, and while much of the work that attracts us is avant-garde, experimental, formalist, absurdist, or just plain weird, some of it is perfectly conventional in form. (For that matter, the tradition of modernism that supports so-called experimental art is by this date highly conventional in its own right, even old-fashioned.) The flavor of true freedom is a subtle thing and may exist in any artistic tradition. So while our fondness for the zanier side of (post-)modernism persists, that is merely another convention, which we feel free to flout. If this means that we publish whatever we like, so be it.

For poetry in particular, just being a poet is underground enough to qualify as far as we are concerned. We have been delighted to publish, in addition to John Tynan and Jacob Smullyan, the great Aaron Anstett and the wildly energetic Joseph Reich, both of whom are featured widely in journals and have published many collections previously—but we don’t hold that against them.

### Who is your audience, and in what ways are you trying to reach them?

Many of our titles would especially appeal to readers of a certain modernist literary culture that would not be flummoxed by our special emphasis on experimental/absurdist/formalist literature and poetry—a small but very congenial audience which we are slowly beginning to reach. We are lucky to have friendly support from the good folks at Small



Press Distribution, who have highlighted several of our books in various ways, and when we go into an independent bookstore to talk up a book, we often find they have heard of us from them. Our marketing is mostly by word of mouth right now; resources are meager and penetration is slow, but we are persistent.

As mentioned before, we are trying not to limit our list solely to our modernist comfort zone, and as a result are beginning to reach other audiences as well. Antabanez’s *The Old Asylum* (2016), for instance, comes from a more popular literary tradition than most of our books, and has already reached a different group of readers, while very much meeting our fundamental criterion of artistic self-determination. Fay Webern’s memoir of the Lower East Side, *The Button Thief of East 14th Street* (2016), should appeal to a wide range of readers, including many of a sober respectability that might be incompatible with our wilder publications. Tyler Gore’s comic essays in *My Life of Crime* (2013) should similarly delight smart-assed cynics of all persuasions.

The bottom line is that we have a deep, romantic, unabashedly childish love of books, and we want to share that love with any and all sympathetic readers. For this reason, we care about the total reading experience, and it particularly matters to us that the books we produce, while mass-produced, are physically beautiful, inside and outside. We have spent a great deal of effort on book design, and the brilliant cover artist Royce M. Becker has had a deep influence on the series.

### What is your role in the publishing scene?

Our role is of course marginal, almost infinitesimal—but arguably its significance derives precisely from that, as major publishers have largely left new and neglected writers to small presses, many of which, like ours, have scant resources. This abdication of their cultural duty, while regrettable, means that the work we can do, minimal though it is, is particularly meaningful. We remain astonished at how much literature of real importance and interest remains unpublished, and how much difference we can make by publishing it.

### What’s in the future for your press?

In general we aim to publish five to ten books a year, roughly a quarter of them poetry titles.

We are extremely excited about our next releases, which include some masterpieces: fabulous comic novels by Stephen Moles and M. J. Nicholls; a magnificent memoir by Fay Webern; other-worldly stories by the beloved poet-sage of Oakland, Jack Foley; poetry of suburban desolation by Joseph Reich; utterly unclassifiable absurdity by Alvin Krinst; and of course, at last, our ferocious cornerstone, *Hoptime*. 2017 will start off with a long-awaited collection of comic essays by Tyler Gore, and we have many projects lined up beyond. There is endless creative genius hiding in plain sight around us, and it is our job to find it and celebrate it.