

Episode 1: Johnny Temple of Akashic Books



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Tales From the Edges of Publishing

JOHNNY TEMPLE - AKASHIC BOOKS

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EPISODE
1

A PUNK REBEL ON **THE BESTSELLER THAT SHOCKED THE BOOK WORLD** & HOW TO "REVERSE GENTRIFY" THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Full Podcast: <https://publishingdisruptor.com/a-punk-takes-on-publishing-meet-johnny-temple-of-akashic-books-2/>

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How did an acclaimed punk rock musician start one of the most innovative and talked about small presses on the planet and how did he manage to take a book whose title can't even be said on television and turn it into one of the biggest runaway bestsellers in years?

You're about to find out.

Greetings one and all. I'm Jon Bard and this is DISRUPTOR, episode 1, featuring Johnny Temple of Akashic Books.

I've been in the publishing world for close to 30 years and I've seen a lot of things change, but maybe they haven't changed fast enough. And so I asked the question, are there disruptors out there? Are there people and companies that are really changing things in publishing, pushing us into the future, throwing out the old rule book and creating a new one all their own? I went in search of that and I've found them. And every week here on DISRUPTOR, you'll meet them.

Welcome to the journey. It's time to disrupt.

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Today's episode of DISRUPTOR is brought to you by *Writing Blueprints*, the breakthrough step by step system for writers that creates truly great books. To learn more about the most disruptive way ever to become a successful author, visit writingblueprints.com and use the code DISRUPT to save 10 percent off everything on the site.

The writing world has been shaken. Meet the earthquake. *Writing Blueprints*. This is how you write a book.

Johnny Temple had already conquered the world of punk rock, with his acclaimed band Girls Against Boys, when he turned his attention to publishing. He founded Akashic Books in 1997, seeking to redefine how a small press chooses its titles, promotes its authors, and serves its readers.

Akashic's author roster reads like a who's who in cool featuring among others, Dennis Cooper, Ron Kovich, Melvin van Peebles, Lydia Lunch, Richard Hell, Lawrence Block, and Elizabeth Nunez. Temples' punk DIY ethos has led to a catalog of wildly eclectic, always fascinating works, presenting viewpoints often unheard elsewhere.

In 2011, Johnny published a racy children's book parody, not because he thought it would sell, but because it made them laugh. Within months, *Go the F**K To Sleep* was number one on Amazon. Proof that a little disruption can sometimes yield a huge payoff.

I spoke to Johnny from Akashic's headquarters, a converted can factory in the heart of Brooklyn, New York.

JON: Well, thank you Johnny Temple for joining us on DISRUPTOR. It's an honor. I'm a fan and I've been a fan for awhile of your music and your publishing. Let me begin by asking you the question we always like to ask here on DISRUPTOR. We are here to celebrate the rebels, the mavericks, and the weirdos of the publishing world. Which one of those words best fits you and why?

JOHNNY: Weirdo, Weirdo disguised as a rebel. I just, I've always felt very weird, very strange, very odd ball. And I mean, I think that most people are weirdos, you know? I think it sort of comes with this skin. I have two children and I try to tell them that it's not just okay to be weird, but I would never want them not to be weird. Definitely have a rebellious spirit, but the rebelliousness is not simply political or social justice. rebelliousness. It's also an aesthetic, rebelliousness. And it's one of the things I feel about Akashic. part of the reason why we want to avoid having to become a nonprofit, which we, we've been able to avoid doing that, is because while there are radical elements, social justice elements that run throughout most of the work that we do, it's important for us to be able to publish really strange, strange books that maybe don't have any apparent social merit to them.

JON: Your phrase that you use for Akashic is reverse gentrifying the literary world. What does that mean?

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JOHNNY: First of all, the expression is a bit tongue in cheek. It's not meant to take itself too seriously. You know, publishing is based here in New York City and I think it's a fairly elitist a profession both in its outlook and in its makeup. Most people in publishing are very well educated. I think that there's a snobbery towards less educated people that exists in the publishing world. A lot of people try to cover it up through their political liberalism, but I think this elitism still sort of leaks out. And I also think that, for example, people in publishing complain a lot about how there's fewer readers. It's hard to find readers, you know, what's happening to our values as a society.

I think the publishing businesses can do a better job of publishing books, targeted not just to the very well educated, Even as the publishing people in the publishing business or complaining about how hard it is to sell books and how people don't read as much, they're also ignoring vast slices of the population. I think that the burden is on the publishing business to make what we do more relevant to the wider society. And I think sort of diy gentrifying the publishing world is a good place to start. In addition to running Akashic. I'm also one of the cofounders and main organizers of the Brooklyn Book Festival and I love book festivals because to me they are part of that reverse gentrification process that needs to happen. At a public book festival, people can come from all walks of life and can find something just for them at a well run, truly public book festival.

And so there's sort of demystifying of the book. This is all informed by the fact that, you know, I have a music background and so music connects with people so much more directly and more easily, while books sort of become this remote and elite form of culture. Music doesn't have that. I think people all over the world from the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum to the top of it, pretty much everybody loves music with a few exceptions and my goal is to help be a part of trying to get books that the same kind of cultural cache music has.

JON: I want to dig in a little bit later into the these niches that you're covering and and because there's some really exciting and interesting things you're doing -- your new imprint on grief for example, That's the sort of disruptive stuff that I think is really fascinating -- giving people books and ideas that that aren't really being presented. But first, let's just get this out of the way because probably the disruption that you're best known for, and I don't want to spend a lot of time on it, but if I try to describe Akashic to somebody else and I say, "Oh yeah, they're the folks that gave us *Go the F**k to Sleep*", that's the one that rings the bell. So let's just spend a minute on how *Go the F**k to Sleep* happened.

JOHNNY: I'm friends with the author Adam Mansbach. The first time we collaborated together was when he wrote a story in 2004 for our anthology of stories about Brooklyn. And he wrote an incredible story called "Crown Heights". A little while later he came to me with this proposal for this book, *Go the F**k to Sleep*, which was the idea was sort of a fake children's book, a book that looks like a children's book, but it's for parents and it's not, not a book for kids. Some people think it's a kids book. It's not again, it's a parent's book and it's kind of the uncensored parental frustration monologue. I think part of the reason why he sent it to me was he knew I was a parent so I might respond to the subject matter and which I did, you know.

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And, we decided to take a risk and publish the book. The risk being we sort of specialize in literary fiction. That's kind of the main thing we do though. Our list is very eclectic. We were doing very few full color books at that time, which are more expensive to produce. And these days we do a lot of full color books. When I say full color, full color on the inside pages -- our book covers have always been full color. Months before publication, word spread about that book and it became this overnight sensation six months before it was even supposed to be published. You know, the world changed for Akashic and for Adam and we sold millions of copies and it's been a very enjoyable process.

Adam's a great guy and it has really stabilized the company.

JON: Why do you think that book in particular resonated and disrupted the way it did?

JOHNNY: It was really the parents of the world that it made the book a success. It was this really organic groundswell among parents who loved this idea.

Go the F to sleep is something you wouldn't say to your kid, but that you would think to yourself perhaps on a nightly basis. One of the great things about that book was when it would get criticized by, say, a close minded Christian group. I'm not trying to criticize all Christians because most people who are Christian didn't have any problem with a book and they liked the book just as much as everyone else. But there were a couple of sort of reactionary Christian groups that took offense to the book. But we never had to defend the book because anytime there was an ounce of criticism against it, there was like a mob of online parents from all around the world, including a lot of grandparents who got very vocal defending the book, so it had, it had like this massive street team behind it. Parents feel it was one of the things about this book that some people who aren't parents don't fully grasp, which is that while it is a humor book, it's not just like a humor book as in something chuckle at, it's like a full body from the bottom of the toes to the top of the head, full bodied laugh because this issue of sleeplessness is one of the central psychological challenges for many, many parents.

It's something that, that people people feel, feel very passionate about. So we were pretty thrilled that we never even had to defend the book against any attacks on it. That there was just swarms of people ready to do that work for us.

JON: Let's talk about something near and dear to our hearts, and that's punk rock. You are in the band, Girls Against Boys, great band, but that's a subject for another day. But, I know that in one of the things about your past that interested me particularly was that you were on Dischord Records. I consider Ian Mackaye to be just one of the great disruptors of the last 50 years, as part of Minor Threat, Fugazi and as the owner of Dischord Records. Talk about what you learned from him

JOHNNY: Ian has been a very important person in my life. And I'm really fortunate to say that he continues to be someone who I engage with in my life as a book publisher and Dischord records has always been very inspirational to me. And I would in fact say that when I started the company, Dischord was probably the core inspiration. And continues to be.

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JON: That's one of the things that interested me is when I look at Dischord. There's an uncompromising attitude behind it. He had something in mind. He had certain parameters and he lived inside it and the bands that were on Dischord lived it. And when I look into Akashic, it reminds me of a record label like Dischord.

But also I'm thinking like when I was a kid, if anything came out on Sire records, I knew I was gonna like it. So that's not something you see in publishing and you don't see it anymore in music - where you can just look at a brand, you can look at a label or an imprint and say there's a really good chance I'm going to like everything that comes out from that place because I appreciate the aesthetic behind it. In publishing now you're seeing just, you know, with all the mergers and kind of big mega companies, much like music. It's just lost. It's just a brand name on the, on the side of a book. Akashic though seems to be living that and it seems to be working for you.

JOHNNY: Thank you for saying that. I appreciate that. And uh, yeah, you know, it's an interesting. For me, it wouldn't be any other way than us having an identity. You know, we're not just making books where I feel like there's an artistic imperative that I feel for running a publishing company that was basically the same thing. When I'm playing bass guitar in bands I'm trying to use my influences, you know, whatever influenced you and then trying to discover your own voice and if you're just doing something that someone else is doing, you're not really adding. Not really adding to the landscape. And so I, I don't want Akashic to be redundant with other publishing companies. I want us to occupy our own unique space. And I will say that when we started publishing books in 1997, there were very few a book publishing companies that seem to have that sort of strong, a strong sort of rebellious type identity.

But these days I actually see it all over the place. I think there was a lot of great book publishers that are really doing their own thing and doing it in ways that are either radical or antiestablishment, but one of the things that I really like about Dischord, and I also saw this with Touch and Go records in Chicago, which, my band Girls Against Boys, we put out records on Touch and Go. One of the things that was most inspirational to me about those labels was that they weren't operating against, you know, the big record companies. They weren't, they didn't define themselves in opposition to anything. They were just doing their own thing, you know, making their own road by walking it. And that's, that's a little bit how I see Akashic. When I, when I started Akashic, I didn't have any background in book publishing, but I wasn't scared to just jump in and figure it out.

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And while there's a lot of things about the corporate publishing world that I may disagree with, you know, or wish were different. We're not, we're not here to be against them. We're just doing our own thing. On our own time. At our own schedule, and that's what, you know, that was one of the key lessons I've learned from, from Dischord, was that they didn't really care what Warner Brothers or Atlantic was doing. They weren't, they weren't sitting there scowling at those big companies. They just didn't care about those companies. And they pay them no mind at all. Only you know, the only mind they paid them was there some great records being put out by Atlantic and Warner Brothers and Polygram and all those big companies. And so they would listen to the great musicians that had those record companies put out. But beyond that they weren't like studying their techniques or you know, looking to even poke them in the eye. It would just, just doing their own thing, making their own media, making your own music. And that's, I think what, you know, what we're trying to do with Akashic.

JON: Are you thinking when you look at considering books for Akashic and you're looking at new imprints, are you thinking primarily about, well, how do we inform and entertain the group of people who would naturally be attracted to us or how do we create things that get out into the wild a little bit and maybe reach some more people?

JOHNNY: More the latter because we've now published, you know, 400 books and while there is a sensibility that runs through our books, the list is truly eclectic. And so we have books where we may be sold 5,000 copies of one book and we sold 5,000 copies of another book and there's no two people that own those two books. So there is not like a core Akashic audience there. I mean there's, there's probably a chord struck with people that are really following what Akashic is doing and what we stand for. But at the end of the day, we're really just trying to sell our books to as many people as we can. And our audience encompassed all sorts of different types of people. The person who buys a book that we publish with Punk rock photos from Washington DC might not be so interested in debut novel by the Haitian female author. Um, so yeah, so we're just trying to sort of get our books out into the world and we're not overly conscious of trying to have a unified audience behind us.

JON: Along those lines, I noticed you have just been really interesting imprints – the new Grief imprint that you're starting, a Punk Planet imprint, which is a magazine whose loss I still mourn. And a bunch of other really interesting niches. When you do that, is it part of an overall plan to say, here's where we want to go, or is it just, do you have the ability to say, hey, no, that's really interesting. No one's, no one's doing that. Let's do that?

JOHNNY: Yeah, it's sort of. "that sounds really interesting. No one's doing that. Let's do that". I learned early on in terms of disrupting our own list, after we had published maybe 30 books or maybe 40 books, you know, and, and having thought of ourselves as being, for lack of a better word, sort of cutting edge company with cutting edge sensibilities. It's a cliché, but I'll just use it because it's, it's useful shorthand, but if you keep doing the same kind of things, books over and over and over again, that edge gets dulled. And going back to this idea of an artistic imperative, you know, we want our image to be sharp, we want to be, we want to be forceful in what we do.

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And so I kind of realized early on that we needed to rejuvenate our lists, reinvent is too strong a word because it's not, we're not trying to, like, it wasn't like we're trying to overhaul what we were doing, but we needed to disrupt what we were doing it for the sake of, you know, literary, aesthetic, artistic growth. Now we're a small company, so our editorial team is me and three other people. We have our tastes and it's really hard. We have the opportunity to publish a lot of books, so it's really hard to rejuvenate your own tastes, you know, and there's only so many hours in the day are a lot of our own reading. Time is taken up with Akashic.

So hosting imprints is a way for us to expand our editorial scope and bring in other people's tastes, not at all randomly. People who are like minded,. We had um, Prodigy, the rapper from Mobb Deep. He passed away last year, which was tragic, but for several years he ran an imprint for us called Infamous books. These were books that we on our own are probably not going to identify.

JON: For those writers who are listening, who might want to work with Akashic, give them just a few words of advice. So how, what's the best way to submit to you? Do you take an unagented submissions? What's the best way for people to reach you?

JOHNNY: the best place, the best way to reach us, is to email me or someone else on my editorial staff and just send a query letter. If you know someone in our orbit – like if, if someone who I know and respect sends me an email saying, "Johnny, I just read this great manuscript by this unpublished author and I really think you should look at it. I think it'd be a great fit for Akashic" – that's going to carry some weight and that's going to make us pay attention more. Um, that's now that's, that advice is not altogether useful because not everybody knows someone in our orbit. But when I say in our orbit, it could be an author we've published. And then there's other people in the music world who I know.

So that's kind of a shortcut to submitting to any publishing company is to try to find someone close to someone and have them put in a good word for you. But otherwise it's just a matter of sending us a query letter. Don't make it too long, don't attach the manuscripts. Don't send us the actual manuscript until we've asked for it, uh, and before submitting something to us, go to our website and try to get a sense of our list to make sure that it's actually a good fit.

JON: Tell me a disruptor in history or perhaps someone who is alive today that you really connect with. Who's your favorite disruptor?

JOHNNY: My favorite disruptor is probably Martin Luther King who's way more more disruptive than American history has tried to make him out. People that have not read that much about the civil rights struggle in the fifties and sixties don't realize that how incredibly crafty Martin Luther King was. So many of the protests were geared towards TV sets, you know, the Selma March and, and, and a bunch of his other marches that he organized were intended to disrupt social change in America with images of African-Americans getting assaulted and attacked with hoses.

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And it's interesting what you're talking about there is that sometimes disruption on a large scale only happens when people are shocked into understanding things can go on for a long time, but there's that tipping point when people are shocked when people say, "oh my goodness, that's really happening". And I, and I, I agree. I think that with Martin Luther King, there's certainly an aspect.

And as far as what's happening today, it probably is not something you would like to think about what the word disruption. But Donald Trump is a great disruptor, Not great as in good. It's horrible. I Hate Donald Trump, but, with some of his tactics of disruption, he's doing a effective job of disrupting disruptors.

JON: Let's end on a hopeful note. To those people who are listening, who want to disrupt in whatever field they're in, whatever they're doing, what is your advice to them?

JOHNNY: I think that organic disruption is the best kind of disruption, although I'm not sure if I thought about that a little bit more, I might disagree with myself, but I do think that when people are making art, whether it's literature or music, the way they are going to succeed as an artist is by doing what they do best and not and not worrying about trends and not trying to play other people's games and I think that that's the same with sort of disruption. I think it's your going to be most effective, disrupting in a way that's truly organic to you and isn't sort of an artificial concept from the outside that you're trying to pursue.

JON: Well, thank you. Thank you for that great advice. Thank you for the great music. Thank you for the great books. Thank you for joining us on DISRUPTOR.

JOHNNY: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

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