

Cultivating literary Dallas

“It was not enough to publish books,” says Deep Vellum founder Will Evans. “We needed a place to invite people in, to put literature at the core of the cultural community.”

Interview by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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Publisher Will Evans (Photo by Mike Brooks)

Will Evans is the founder of Deep Vellum, a nonprofit publishing house in Dallas that seeks to put local and global authors in conversation. Founded in 2013, Deep Vellum has published seven of Nobel prize-winning writer Jon Fosse’s novels in translation and has made a name for itself as a literary translating powerhouse. But for Evans, the most important thing is building a literary community in Dallas, one

reader at a time.

Tell us the story of how Deep Vellum came to be. What was your vision?

I grew up in rural North Carolina, and I was a reader from the youngest age. When I was 14 years old, I accidentally read Maxim Gorky's *The Life of a Useless Man*, and it ignited a fascination with Russian culture that has driven every professional decision that I've made.

What fascinates me about Russian literature is the relationship that it builds between literature and society: this idea that art can and should and does change the world. I'm obsessed with that. In America, literature is often seen as something divorced from everyday life and reality.

In graduate school, I read a newspaper article about a Russian writer who had written some things critical of the government. One day he was beaten outside of his door. In the article, it said that he had just finished the draft of a novel. I thought, "Not only do I want to read that novel, I want everyone to be able to read it." Then I thought, "If I know about all of these great Russian books that are not getting translated into English, it must be impossible to get your books translated if you are Ukrainian or Mexican." When my wife got a job offer in Dallas, I thought, "I bet it's equally hard to get published if you live in Dallas."

I recognized that this is a publishing problem, not a quality-of-writing problem.

Why did you see Dallas as the place for this opportunity?

In Dallas, I saw a great city on the move. I saw a reading culture that had not yet turned into a literary community with a publishing industry. I saw it as primed for a renaissance. My vision was that I wanted to begin by publishing international literature and grow toward publishing local, Dallas-based authors. In order to do this, we needed to build a readership. We needed to draw people into literature who had felt excluded forever by books not reflecting the diversity of the world around them, in a global sense and in a local sense.

It was not enough just to publish books. There were also no independent bookstores in Dallas at the time. We needed to have a place to invite people in and build a cultural community center, to put literature at the core of the cultural community. We needed the whole thing.

I established Deep Vellum as a nonprofit organization with a mission to bring the world into conversation through literature. We do it by publishing underrepresented authors, programming literary events, advocating for literature's role in our society, and cultivating in readers a lifelong love of reading.

What was the first book Deep Vellum published?

All of us who work here operate with a little bit of a chip on our shoulders because we are fighting to be heard. We have this mission and this belief that international literature matters locally and local literature matters internationally. I wanted Deep Vellum to come out of the gates swinging.

There was so little Mexican literature coming out in translation at the time. What better way to show the world what we are trying to do than to find a book about Texas by a Mexican writer? Translation is, in part, seeing yourself through the eyes of another. It just so happened that one of the greatest living Mexican novelists, Carmen Boullosa, put out a book in Spanish called *Texas, the Great Theft* that year. So our first book was historical fiction by Boullosa, translated by Samantha Schnee.

This was something like Boullosa's 20th novel, her fourth or fifth book published in English. She was an established author, and she took a chance to be published by Deep Vellum. I hadn't come from any world that she was familiar with. But I pitched her a passion, an idea, a belief that her book mattered and that we would put it into the conversation where it belonged. She hadn't had a book come out in English in ten years or so at that point. It was perfect timing for both of us.

I'm driven by the question: How could you be cool with a world in which none of Carmen's books is available in English? Unfortunately, there are hundreds of authors like that around the world. I find it criminal that the publishing industry would deprive me of Carmen Boullosa, Serhiy Zhadan from Ukraine, or Alisa Ganieva in Russia. Is it the market? Is it lack of curiosity? Is it some misguided sense that these books don't matter as much as books written domestically? Whatever the answer is, it is an awful answer. And it's probably all of those things at once.

What about your entree into publishing local authors?

Very early on after I moved to Dallas, a woman I met said, "Oh you're starting a publishing house in Dallas. You should republish *The Accommodation*." It's a work of civil rights history that was written in the 1980s, and the business establishment in

Dallas killed it. There was only one copy of this book at the Dallas Public Library, and it was in the noncirculating history room. But so many people wanted to read it that someone had gone in and scanned it and made a PDF. That PDF was sent to me. I recognized that right away: this is Dallas samizdat, undercover literature. The Soviets did this.

This White journalist, Jim Schutze, was hired to answer the question: Did Dallas have a civil rights movement? What he discovered was a campaign of White terror against Black citizens of Dallas in the '40s and '50s to keep them out of White neighborhoods. It was this horrific Klan-led, church-led, oligarchy-led campaign to disenfranchise and take away property from Dallas's Black citizens. When the book was finished, the editor threw it on the press to get it out as fast as possible. The next day, the editor called Schutze and said, "Sorry, man, the book's just not going to happen." The printer had gotten a call and pulled it off the press.

The book centers on this organization called the Dallas Citizens Council. Back in the day of the history that the book recounts, it was called the Dallas White Citizens Council. The group essentially runs the city. According to the stories, Schutze called up the head of the Dallas Citizens Council and asked, "Did you kill my book?" And the man answered, "Damn straight, and if you ever try anything like that again, I'll kill it again." So Schutze found a publisher in New Jersey who was willing to print 5,000 hardcovers. No one bought it except one Black-owned bookstore in Dallas. So the publisher shipped the books to that bookstore owner, Emma Rodgers, who was willing to buy every existing copy. The night after the books arrived, her warehouse in Dallas burned to the ground.

So 40 years later, it took a lot to work through the details of the rights to the book and the politics of Dallas to republish the book. We wanted to situate this book about Dallas in a larger narrative, connect to the communities that had been hurt, and do this in the right way. Gradually, I was able to meet the Black business leader who had the rights to the book and convince him that Deep Vellum could do this in a respectful way and earn Schutze's trust, and in 2021 Deep Vellum was able to republish this book. We printed 5,000 copies, sold those out immediately, then printed 5,000 more and sold those out. Then we printed 30,000 paperback copies and gave those away as part of reviving a defunct citywide book club. It became the single biggest publishing event in the city's history, and we did the first event at the place in the neighborhood of Deep Ellum (for which our press is named) where the warehouse had once burned.

That book changed everything for us in Dallas. It put us on the map. Honestly, this was more important for us than when Jon Fosse won the Nobel Prize in Literature last year. We were the ones publishing him in translation, and we didn't even really get a write-up in the local paper about that. But conversely, when we changed the city and the culture in Dallas, no one in New York noticed or cared. We could have been on the *New York Times* bestseller list with *The Accommodation*, but because the books were sold at nontraditional venues, they didn't count.

What about #literarydallas? Where did that inspiration come from?

When I moved to Dallas in 2013, the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture had been meeting for 30 years, having the conversation, "What would it take for Dallas to become a literary city?" The first conference like this I went to, they brought in an outside consultant. I thought, "Dallas is already a literary city." We already had all the things that the guy said we needed—the literary festivals and so on—it's just that there was no money behind them, no stakeholders involved.

Around the same time, I went to a bookstore—a national chain called Half Price Books—and I found a book on the shelf in the Texana section called *Literary Dallas*, published by Texas Christian University Press.

That's how #literarydallas started. My theory was: literary Dallas already exists. It's just that we have to take the narrative back and assert it. Another bookstore in town started using it, then the newspaper started using it to get information to readers for its book section.

Then Javier García del Moral and Paco Vique moved here and started a coffee shop/bookstore like the kind they had loved in Barcelona, the Wild Detectives. They didn't sit around waiting for someone else to do it. And there is something very Dallas about that attitude. If you want to see it done, do it. But you can't do this alone; no one can.

I've been reading some pretty depressing statistics about book sales, and I've been wondering how there even is a book industry at this point. What's your take on that? What's your survival strategy?

Remember, Deep Vellum publishes literary fiction. That's our speciality. Do you know how small a slice of the whole publishing industry that is? It is the tiniest, tiniest possible slice. A little bit of context helps. Because when people talk about

publishing, people in my world anyway, they often mean literary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, but that's not what publishing is. Publishing is bigger than the Hollywood film industry. There are 500,000 to a million books published every year, and very little reliable data is available on actual book sales.

There's a line from one of my favorite bands, Gogol Bordello, "There was never any good old days. / They are today, they are tomorrow." There were never any good old days in publishing. You can look at the number of readers—real or imagined—and say, "Things are bad, so why bother?" or you can say, "Unbridled opportunity."

Every person in Dallas should be reading something. Every city and state deserves to have a literary community that reflects its diversity. Good books have never been read in the numbers they deserve, and best-selling books suck up a lot of the oxygen in the room. Big publishers suck up a lot of oxygen and table space. But we who are looking for something different have to create a different community so that we can discover what we've been looking for, what we've been craving.

Jorge Luis Borges talks about how some books act as portals, and when you walk through them, you are changed. That's what we're after at Deep Vellum. To anyone who walks through the door or even just walks by, we can say, "Come on in. You are a part of this community. You have a stake in this. We want you to come and be a part of Deep Vellum."