



### In This Issue

- [Self-Published Books](#)
- [NEW: A Sustainable Life](#)
- [QuakerBooks new website is on the way!](#)

**Book Musings** is an occasional newsletter from staff and friends of QuakerBooks of Friends General Conference. It features books and themes that are of special interest to the author, as well as providing alerts about sales and other opportunities available to readers. If you would like to receive additional newsletters from FGC, [sign up here](#).

Connect with Friends General Conference on



### Events from the FGC Gathering

Did you miss this summer's Gathering in California, PA? You can access recordings of the evening presentations and the morning Bible studies [here!](#)

### Self-Published Books and the Reader

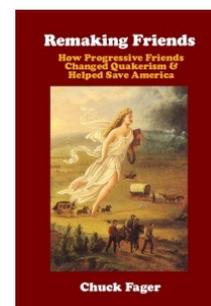
from Chel Avery

Dear Friend,

Life is short. A few years ago, I began to face the fact that I won't live long enough to read everything I really want to read, even if publishing stops tomorrow, which it won't. So I've started to triage. I'm pickier about what I read, and I'm more likely to put a book down halfway through because I've decided not to give it any more of my life.

This recognition has come at an awkward time in the book business. My old ways of predicting whether a book was one I wanted to read are fading away. What happened to the big bookstores where I could browse through categories and flip through pages before making a selection? They are farther between and less well stocked than ever.

And on top of that, what's going on with all these self-published books? How do I know which ones are worth reading? It used to be rare to meet with an opportunity to buy a self-published book, and it used to seem like a safe assumption that a self-published book couldn't be very good. Common prejudice holds that a book coming out of a "vanity press" must be inadequate, or else the author would have found a "real" publisher.



Of course, this has never been an entirely fair assumption. Some acclaimed authors (Pat Conroy for one) and popular books (remember *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You?*) started out as self-published. With all the turmoil in today's shrinking publishing industry, the assumption becomes less and less accurate. There are more self-published books than ever, and the likelihood that a self-published book is a *good* book is higher than it used to be. In fact, some established writers have turned away from publishing houses to produce their newer books themselves, preferring the greater control and larger financial share of self-publishing.

But this is one more stumbling block for the selective reader who wants to choose good books. One more piece of information is gone—the reputation of the publisher. I've always been confident, for example, that if a book is produced by Ferrar, Straus, and Giroux, there is no guarantee I'll like it, but I can depend on the manuscript's having been vetted by editors with high



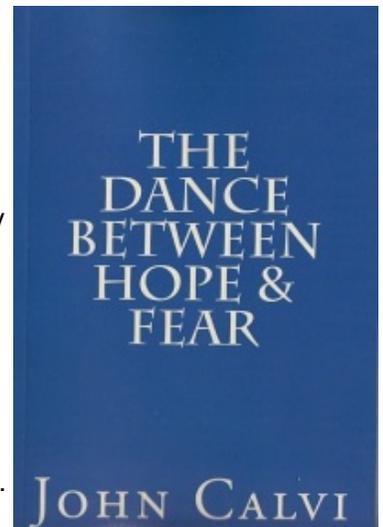


standards. If a Quaker book is published by Kindlers, I know that the perspective will be British. But today, if I stick only to publishers I know by reputation, I will probably miss much that's good. So how do I choose now? Following are my own techniques for recognizing a self-published book, and for deciding whether to read it. It's not a perfect system, but I hope it will be helpful to others.

First, how do I know a book is self-published? The first clue is often subtle—in some hard-to-name way, the book just doesn't look quite "professional." Perhaps the margins seem a tad narrow, the lines of text too closely spaced, the cover art a little clunky, or there is no barcode on the back. Perhaps the price is surprisingly high or low. These are clues that tell me to check the publisher. I recognize the names of the biggest traditional publishers, and I recognize the names of the largest self-publishing services such as Lulu, CreateSpace, Xlibris, and iUniverse, but there are more small and new ones of both kinds than I can keep track of. So if a book is from "Broken Sandalstrap Press," I check the publisher online to see what else they have published—whether they are Simon & Schuster's latest imprint or the author's own mini-operation.

I also check the copyright page. Any professionally published book will have an ISBN (13-digit number) and a Library of Congress listing. Many self-published books will also have these features, although only a book from an established publisher is likely to have detailed "Cataloging-in-Publication Data" from the Library of Congress (rather than just a number). In fact, the more arcane small print I see on the copyright page, the less likely I am to think that the book is self-published.

OK, the writer published it herself. Perhaps that's an admirable indication of the writer's commitment to the work and her confidence in it. It may be quite good. How do I know if I want to risk my money and—just as dear—my time on this title?



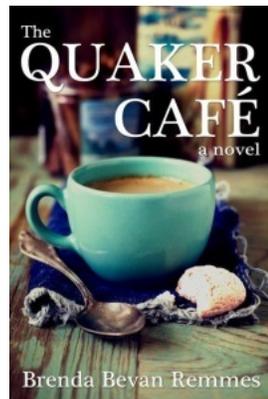
These days, the things I rely on first are my previous experience with the author and word-of-mouth recommendations from people whose judgment I personally value. These criteria keep me satisfied, but they are also regrettable. I'm afraid there is less variety in my reading life because I depend so much on known quantities.

Here is what I do not rely on:

- awards won by the author or the book—unless I know something about the award or the organization that bestowed it. (These days there are almost as many awards as there are titles, and some truly awful books sport them.)
- back cover blurbs—unless I know personally or by reputation the person who wrote the blurb, and even then I'm wary.
- customer reviews at online sites—unless there are lots and lots of them. (If there are only 15, they were probably posted by the author's friends and family. If there are many, and if the site allows the option, I look at both positive and negative reviews. Sometimes the comments of a reader who dislikes a book are a higher recommendation than 10 encomiums.)

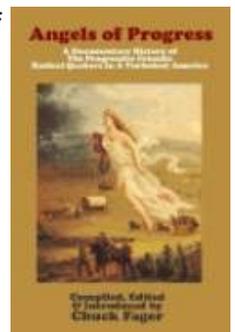
If the book is nonfiction, in an area I know something about, I look at the citations. What resources did the author use, and do I think I can learn something new from them? I look at the quality of editing and proofreading. I expect that an author who was sloppy about these matters was probably not meticulous in checking facts or testing her own reasoning—this may or may not actually be the case, but it is my bias. If the book is fiction, I dip in and read random paragraphs, which doesn't tell me much about the overall content, but it will let me know if the author's voice is one I want to spend hours with.

### Here are some self-published (or author subsidized) books I can recommend to you with enthusiasm:

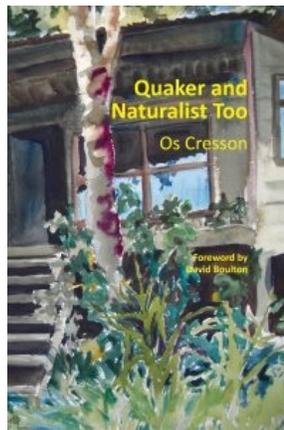


Until this summer, I had never read a self-published novel that I liked well enough to recommend it to others. But a few weeks ago I stumbled on [The Quaker Café](#) by Brenda Bevan Remmes. A rural town in North Carolina, originally populated and still much influenced by Conservative Quakers, is haunted by a rarely-spoken-about lynching that took place half a century earlier. The white citizens would like to forget about it; the black ones can't. When new information comes to light, involving a secret long kept by one of the town's most respected individuals, will it lead to healing or to a bitter breakdown of the community's fragile tranquility? These serious matters are interlaced with the typical features of the southern small town novel (think Fannie Flagg): a web of complicated, interesting characters and relationships, absurdities, and wry wit.

Taking a leap from fiction to history, and from one branch of Quakerism to another, a new angle on our background is offered by Chuck Fager's study of Progressive Friends, an overlooked but influential Quaker movement from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which, Fager argues, did much to push Hicksite Friends along the route that led them to become the liberal Quakers of today. The Progressive Friends movement involved Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and many others active in abolition and early feminism. Fager's shorter book, [Remaking Friends](#), is for readers who are interested in the overview of the story. For readers who want to see the documentation, the minutes and correspondence and other matter on which Fager bases his conclusions, the book to read is his [Angels of Progress](#), which includes the background materials.



When Os Cresson first became involved in environmental work with Friends, he observed: *Many . . . wanted to reform science because they saw it as the cause of our environmental problems as well as our spiritual problems. We all loved nature and shared many goals, but they were spiritualizing nature while I was naturalizing religion. I felt a new urgency to speak to Quakers about science, and to scientists about Quakers.* Cresson's book, [Quaker and Naturalist Too](#), is a collection of writings that explore the perspectives of a lifelong and fully committed Quaker who also describes himself as a wholehearted naturalist (someone who believes that our reality is entirely based in nature and finds no need for any kind of supernatural existence). As one of the voices of the emerging nontheist movement among Friends,



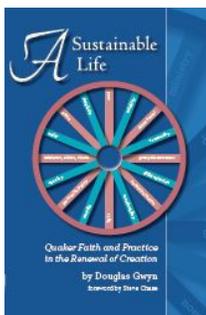
Cresson is committed to unity, with a place for all the theological variations we come in. His book is very readable.

[Public Secrets and Justice: A Journal of a Circuit Court Judge](#) is still on my to-read pile, but my colleague Graham attests to its worthiness for inclusion here. Laura Melvin offers a personal account of her experiences on the Bench that led her to question her understandings of justice, to resign her appointment, and to take a new look at what it means to have a calling to “do justice.”



[The Dance between Hope and Fear](#) is a collection of articles, journal entries, songs, and speeches by Quaker healer John Calvi. It includes reflections on his work with victims of torture and with people suffering from AIDS as well as the impact of his healing work in his own life. Many of the selections have been published elsewhere; a good portion appears here for the first time.

## [NEW A Sustainable Life: Quaker Faith and Practice in the Renewal of Creation](#)



What are the qualities of Quaker faith and practice that contribute to living sustainably in the world today? How have Quakers learned to create the kind of individual and community life that can prepare us to live fully and responsibly in a time of social and planetary change? Douglas Gwyn explores how Friends—historically

and now—strive for a balance within a network of principles, including Light and Seed, equality and community, unity and differentiation, peace and nonviolent action, and more.

From QuakerPress of FGC. Paperback, 208 pp., \$14.95 (Coming soon—ebook version \$8.)

## **New QuakerBooks website on the**

**way!**

Watch for the new QuakerBooks webpage! We have had some technical bumps to smooth out, but construction continues, and you will get a message as soon as we launch. Look forward to: simpler searching



and browsing, more convenient checkouts, and easier downloads of many more ebooks than ever before!

[Bestsellers](#) | [New Books](#) | [Categories](#) | [Interviews](#) | [Book Tables](#) | [Used Books](#)

