

REVIEWS

BOOKS

Quack Remedy

Authors Francis When and Julia Jones on how their company Golden Duck, run from a rural cottage in Essex, is helping to turn publishing into a cottage industry

It's book-delivery day, and Julia is cleaning out a wheelbarrow that normally carries hay bales to the horse's stable. The printer's lorry, complete with hydraulic rear platform, is too big to turn into our drive; the wheels on the specialised pallet truck are too small to run on gravel. They're designed for the smooth concrete floors of Amazonian warehouses and loading bays, not for a trip up a bumpy drive, across a paddock and into the green caravan that serves as the corporate HQ of Golden Duck - a publishing firm we launched two years ago from our cottage in Essex.

Naturally, we assure the driver that no one ever comes our way and naturally, all of a sudden, they do. But it's not a problem. The passing (or not-passing) cars belong to our neighbours and most of them are running some small enterprise of their own - curing bacon, baking artisan bread, selling eggs from their front gate. Sure enough, the first car to pull up as we're unloading copies belongs to a local farmer who's diversified into direct-selling organic beef.

'Five hundred pristine copies of The Oaken Heart are deposited on the side of the road'

We chat pleasantly about prospects for next week's point-to-point race as the ramp comes down and the shrink-wrapped pallet is trundled off. Five hundred pristine copies of *The Oaken Heart* are deposited on the side of the road and we begin loading them into the wheelbarrow. Another car arrives, and very welcome it is too. This belongs to a neighbour, Jeremy Beale, who after years in London publishing now runs an independent imprint from his house a mile up the lane. We gaze in awe at the

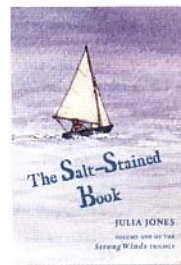
professionalism of Jeremy's Harbour Books: he has brought along a hefty sack-barrow.

The Oaken Heart seems a fitting book to inspire such community spirit and practical ingenuity. It's a first-hand account of the early years of the Second World War written by Margery Allingham, the famous detective novelist, from a tiny Essex village in the 'bomb-filled' winter of 1940-1941. It's Golden Duck's current bestseller, having reached the giddy heights of number 432 in the Amazon chart - an event celebrated with several glasses of prosecco (£5 a bottle, bought by the dozen from a neighbour's shed).

But publishing in the countryside doesn't need to be parochial. Jeremy's most recent title is *The Music's All That Matters: A History of Progressive Rock* by Paul Stump, and his next will be a literary novel. At Golden Duck we're working on a children's title, *The Salt-Stained Book*, volume one of an adventure trilogy that could be described as a *Swallows and Amazons* for the 21st century. Our nearest neighbour in the opposite direction, a couple

of hundred yards away, is the book designer Roger Davies, who went freelance in the early 1970s when Oxford University Press moved out of London. He has worked for journals as various as *Early Music* and *The New Review* and has been chief designer for the British Museum - all from the garage of a redundant Essex pub. A series of seminars at The London Book Fair this year focused on 'the self-publishing revolution'. Internet sales and print-on-demand systems, which offer everything from

Golden Duck's rural publishing headquarters



proofreading and jacket design to marketing and distribution, mean that anyone with a typescript in the bottom drawer and a few hundred pounds in the pocket can bring out their own book. Already in the USA more titles are issued annually by self-publishers than through traditional channels, and the first self-publishing millionaires are feeding the dreams of the rest.

That's not quite what we think we're doing at Golden Duck. Admittedly, *The Salt-Stained Book* has been written by Julia, illustrated by our friend Claudia Myatt (who has her own publishing company, Starfish Books), designed by Roger and marketed by the freelance reps who also sell Jeremy's titles. But we're sticking for as long as we can to traditional litho printing and sales primarily through bookshops.

Julia founded and ran a village bookshop, and when we're in Woodbridge, Aldeburgh or London, we both love browsing and buying in proper shops. Yet at home in Essex, where book shopping means a 12-mile drive, it's far easier to click on a website. Eventually, we'll be producing eBooks - and how will that help the independent booksellers whom we cherish?

Meanwhile, at least we've not been bowled out first ball. The most recent slicing out of the garden wheelbarrow was necessitated by the third *The Oaken Heart* reprint in two months. At this rate we might soon be able to afford a dedicated sack-barrow - and to fix the leaky roof in our corporate caravan.

♦ *The Oaken Heart* by Margery Allingham (Golden Duck, £13.99), 384pp: www.golden-duck.co.uk