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Mission Statement: The purpose of An International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living is to provide a resource for the dissemination of creative works relevant to the subject of meta-living. The journal welcomes both academic and artistic exercises expressed in any medium capable of being transmitted through the physical mechanisms of the journal. Due consideration also will be given to submissions that do not conform to these mechanisms. The journal explicitly forbids the establishment of a regular publication schedule.

Meta-Living: One useful avenue leading toward an understanding of the term meta-living is through analogy, particularly by considering meta-fiction. Wikipedia, the oracle of all contemporary knowledge, defines meta-fiction as “the literary term describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection.”¹ By straight-forward analogy, meta-living is the existential term describing a manner of living that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between existence and reality, using irony and self-reflection among other devices. These other devices include, but are not limited to, scientific inquiry, ontology, various theologisms, sophistry, rhetoric, tomfoolery, transcendental perspectivism and, of course, the omnipresent specter of post-existential relativism.

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metafiction>, accessed 2014 April 16.

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An interview with the Editor-In-Chief of the Poison Pie Publishing House

Abstract: The Poison Pie Publishing House (PPPH) is an independent publisher specializing in post-existential fantasy generated through a non-idiomatic improvisational writing process. The activities of the PPPH orbit within the gravitational attraction of the central concept of meta-living. This uncompromising interview investigates the philosophical underpinnings as well as the practical survival techniques of the PPPH. The interview was conducted by the editorial staff of the International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living in Knoxville, Tennessee during April, 2014.

1. What is the purpose of the Poison Pie Publishing House?

The Poison Pie Publishing House (PPPH) is an active exercise in meta-living and, as such, functions on two disparate but intertwined levels—the first corresponding to a physics-based reality (PBR, not to be confused with the beverage sharing the same acronym) and the second corresponding to existential perception.

Within the physics-based reality, the Poison Pie Publishing House is an independent publisher specializing in post-existential fantasy generated through a non-idiomatic improvisational writing process. The literary products primarily take the form of novels and of illustrated books, the former intended for adults and the latter for both children and adventurous adults. At the time of this interview, April, 2014, the catalog of the PPPH consisted of twenty-one works, all of which are available through online retailers and which include five illustrated books, fourteen novels, one essay and one fantasy role-playing module. The current incarnation of the PPPH was publicly revealed in

September, 2012 in order to better represent the publication of novels and illustrated stories in e-book and print form. However, the PPPH existed in various largely dormant forms as early as 1992.

The Poison Pie Publishing House also functions on a second level, a meta-level, in which the House and its staff consciously and systematically draw attention to their status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between existence and reality, using irony and self-reflection among other devices.

2. Can you provide an example of how the Poison Pie Publishing House functions on the level of meta-living?

Certainly, every action of the Poison Pie Publishing House in the PBR casts a shadow in the meta-realm. As such, examples are easily to provide. For example, the choice of written content that the PPPH supports, namely post-existential fantasy generated through a non-idiomatic improvisational writing

process, demonstrates its commitment to meta-living, because neither the genre, “post-existential fantasy” nor the technique, the so-called “non-idiomatic improvisational writing process” actually exist, by any broad collective consensus. Both genre and technique are individually manufactured articles, which may correspond to products or activities in the PBR, but only on an *ad hoc* basis. There is certainly no widely acknowledged formal category for either subject or technique. As such the question of whether subject and techniques exist is captured in the balance between the PBR, where they are not represented, and the meta-reality, in which they have been created and named and indisputably exist.

As a second example, consider the staff of the Poison Pie Publishing House. Despite their earnest protests to be exempted from the meta-living experiment fermenting within the PPPH, the existence of the staff is highly questionable. Satisfactory answers to such elementary questions as, “Who are they?”, “Where do they live?”, “What are their names, the titles of their positions and their corresponding salaries within the House?” are not available. As Editor-In-Chief, I require each employee of the PPPH to sign a nondisclosure agreement prior to their initial employment, which perpetually binds them, legally and morally, to silence regarding any points that might threaten the uncertainty regarding their existence. I myself have taken an oath never to release them from this contract.

A third and final example of a meta-living characteristic is found in the operational techniques employed by the staff of the Poison Pie Publishing House. For example, in December of 2013, a new writer was added to the illustrious roster of authors whose work is published by the PPPH. According to the information provided on the House website, this author responded to psychic reverberations dispersed through-out the aurasphere of the Earth by the staff of the PPPH, soliciting material from young writers for potential publication. This process cannot be verified in the PBR; however, it did undeniably result in the acquisition of a new writer to the stables of the PPPH.

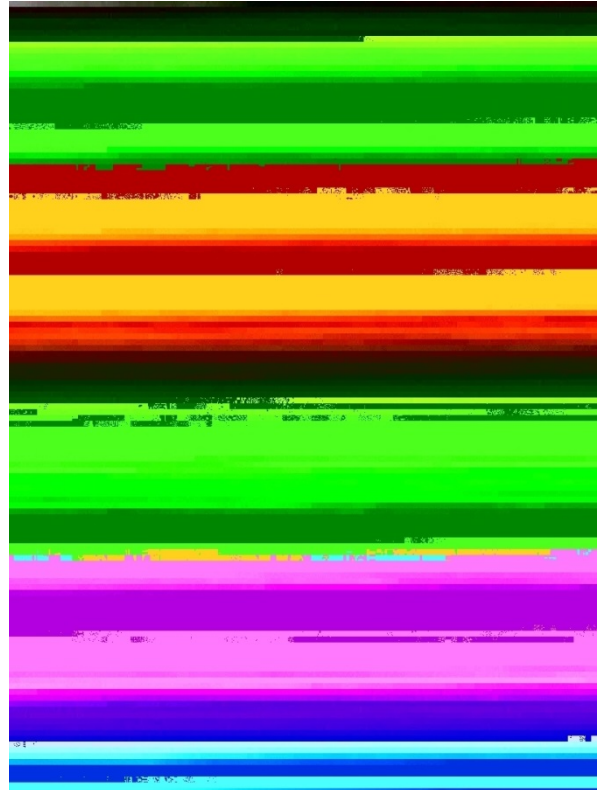


Figure 1. The text of *The Ruins of My Daughter's Cities* from the PPPH (2013), rendered as a visualization using the Null_Sets script. For more information, visit <http://www.poisonpie.com/publishing/text/nullsets.html>.

3. How do you respond to accusations that you are “just making everything up”?

Of course, we are just making everything up. Humans make things up. Some of the things they make up have physical form, such as smart phones and toilets (not quite as smart but no less useful), and the process of making them up is relabeled as “manufacturing”. Other things people make up do not possess physical form, such as ideas and emotions, and the respective processes are labeled “thinking” or “feeling”. Many things made up by humans fall between these two extremes—the purely concrete and the purely abstract. The Poison Pie Publishing House, as virtually all publishing houses, exists in this intermediate regime.

4. So, are you a real publishing house?

That is exactly the correct question to ask. The answer is, by definition, “yes and no”, each answer corresponding to one of the two levels associated with meta-living.

5. Do people read your books?

As with any publishing house, some people read our books and other people do not. We have not yet published either a book that no one has ever read nor a book that everyone on Earth has read. The same can be said of all books. In this respect, we are not laying claim to any extraordinary activity or achievement.

6. How many people read your books? Alternatively, does the Poison Pie Publishing House turn a profit?

The evaluation of a product or a process based on the popularity or financial success of that product or process is not an activity in which the PPPH engages. To be sure, our metrics for success include neither popularity nor profitability. Again, we are not pioneers in this approach. For example, the artist, Mark Rothko wrote, “It is really one of the most serious faults which can be found with the whole conception of democracy, that its cultural function must move on the basis of the common denominator. Such a point of view indeed would make a mess of all of the values which we have developed for examining works of art. It would address one end of education in that it would consider that culture which was available to everyone, but in that achievement it would eliminate culture itself. This is surely the death of all thought.”²

A more general response, without referral to a specific artist, is captured in the musical field of “non-idiomatic improvisation”, in which practitioners attempted to create music outside of any established

idiom, style or genre, which inevitably led them to creating music for which no pre-established audience existed. As such, neither fame (popularity) nor fortune (profitability) are useful metrics for measuring the success of those activities.

²“The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art” by Mark Rothko, written 1940-1 and published posthumously in 2004 by Yale University Press, pp.126-7.



Figure 2. The cover of *The Faerienomicon* from the PPPH (2014), an encyclopedia of Faerie rendered in felt, providing descriptions of “Its Substance and Curiosities, Its Architectures and Landscapes, Its Hitherto Unsubstantiated Histories, And the Habits of Living Of the Diverse Creatures Dwelling Therein”.

7. You have repeatedly mentioned “non-idiomatic improvisation”? For our readers who are unfamiliar with the term, what is it?

The Poison Pie Publishing House released a document on April 2, 2014, titled “A Literature of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation: A Condensed Statement”.³ Rather than reinvent the wheel, we reproduce the text of that document here.

With the publication of *The Faerienomicon*⁴ by the Poison Pie Publishing House and the corresponding claim that the writing within the book was generated via a non-idiomatic, improvisational process, we at the Poison Pie Publishing House have been virtually inundated with virtual requests for clarification of the term. While a lengthy article⁵ on the subject written in a scholarly style is available, most folks want a short and to-the-point description.

Non-idiomatic, improvisational writing is a creative process by which a writer generates passages outside existing genres of literature without the aid of either a previously written draft or extensive post-editing.

Non-idiomatic, improvisation originated in music and the musical analogy remains useful in understanding its application to literature. Music is generated via both improvisation and composition, two forms that typically have readily identifiable differences and relative strengths and weaknesses. So too can writing be generated via improvisation and more traditional composition. The same characteristics, both thematic and stylistic, that distinguish improvised music from composed music are apparent in the comparison of the analogous literatures. There exists a freedom and spontaneity in improvised writing, which attracts those with “an impatience for the gruesomely predictable” (D. Bailey). At the same time, improvised writing may be vulnerable to a lack of complexity, unless the writer engages in an intensive regimen of practice, which maintains the improvisational creative faculties at the ready. Such a model is again taken from the explicitly stated practice habits of non-idiomatic, improvisational musicians.

Some musicologists eschew the term, “non-idiomatic improvisation”, since, once a non-generic style is created and invoked multiple times, it becomes a new idiom. The Poison Pie Publishing House embraces the term “non-idiomatic improvisation” as an ideal toward which one strives, an endless process in which each subsequent creative act is disconnected from the previous. An appealing way to think of non-idiomatic improvisation is as a Zen riddle. Once you create a non-idiomatic process, it no longer exists.

³“A Literature of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation: A Condensed Statement”,

http://www.poisonpie.com/publishing/pdf/nonidiomaticimprovisation_short.pdf, accessed 2014 April 16.

⁴“The Faerienomicon”,

<http://www.poisonpie.com/publishing/text/faerienomicon.html>, accessed 2014 April 16.

⁵“A Literature of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation”,

<http://www.poisonpie.com/publishing/text/aliteratureofnonidiomaticimprovisation.html>, accessed 2014 April 16.

8. Returning for a moment to the issue of profitability, what is the economic model upon which the Poison Pie Publishing House is modeled?

Clearly, the Poison Pie Publishing House is not founded upon any economic model, viable or otherwise. On the contrary, the Poison Pie Publishing House is founded on philosophical principles regarding individuality and creativity. On the subject of individuality, we adhere more or less to the sentiment expressed by the philosopher, Charles Musès, who wrote, “In fact, our greatest contribution to others, and to our self-development as well, lies in the direction of developing precisely along the lines where our greatest uniqueness lies.”⁶

On the subject of creativity, we adhere to the position advocated by trombonist and composer, George E. Lewis, who stated, "I feel that there is an essence of creativity that is a human birthright that doesn't go away, and that we are all basically born with...The challenge is for more and more people to recognize the importance of that birthright...We want to be able to recognize the ubiquity of creativity as a means of recognizing its crucial nature to our experience as human beings on this planet, and maybe on the next planet (laughs)."⁷

From this point of view, the absence of a successful economic model is an important element of our creative process, because of the fact that we persist in the creative process despite decades of the unremitting absence of critical or popular recognition, either of which might lead to profitability. This lack of financial success vouches safe to present and future generations our declaration that the creative process is engaged for its own sake and not for any other purpose, not even for the very practical and sympathetic purpose of providing a means of survival for ourselves and our families.

In direct response to your question, however, we have the practical luxury of not being required to turn a profit based on the fact that the operating expenses of the Poison Pie Publishing House are funded through a generous donation by a wealthy, anonymous patron of the arts, which is, of course, the preferable though highly elusive economic model for all endeavors of the cultural margin.

⁶"Destiny and Control in Human Systems" by Charles Musès, Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, Boston, 1985, p. 171.

⁷"Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant Garde" by Lloyd Peterson, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006, p. 155.

9. Would you please talk about the elements of meta-living that have led to

the illustrated children's books published by the Poison Pie Publishing House?

The illustrated books, including "The Faerienomicon", "The Mushroomnomicon", "Tales of the Mushroom People" and "Call of Cthulhushroom", combine the three crafts of (i) home-made felt finger puppets, (ii) local photography and (iii) narrative story-telling. The design and creation of the puppets, the choice of locales for photographic backgrounds and the elements of the story are collaborative activities involving all members of the family, adults and children.

Each individual in the family is not only a co-author of the books but also a member of the staff of the Poison Pie Publishing House. The family chooses activities, particularly hiking destinations in the wild places of East Tennessee, which offer potential for inclusion in subsequent books. Bedtime stories are crafted based on current themes of stories under production; if a compelling story is generated in this manner, it is quickly stolen and coerced into the service of the PPPH. To this end, all members of the family are deeply and inextricably engaged in the creative processes underlying the Poison Pie Publishing House, the legitimate existence of which, as you have pointed out earlier, is uncertain. What can be more meta-living than that?



Figure 3. An image in Tales of the Mushroom People II: Call of Cthulhushroom from the PPPH (2012), involving felt finger puppets and local photography in East Tennessee.

10. Have you ever considered that it may be unethical or even dangerous to their well-being to engage children in the questionable activities of meta-living?

Along the spectrum of activities ranging from beneficial to grossly detrimental, it is our, albeit unsubstantiated, opinion that meta-living falls to the safe side of many other much more commonly condoned activities including especially video games, violent or otherwise, which provide an entirely different sort of meta-living experience in which the effect of the meta-element diminishes rather than accentuates life in the PBR. To this end, the meta-living promoted by the Poison Pie Publishing House is sufficiently innocuous. At the risk of offending the more stringent adherents to the PBR, we suggest that the PPPH variety of meta-living adds worth to all participatory levels of living, including the PBR.

11. Would you talk about the elements of meta-living that have led to the novels of post-existential fantasy published by the Poison Pie Publishing House?

Through a glacially incremental process of self-realization, the proprietors of the Poison Pie Publishing House have come to the following realization: Life, at its best, is an exercise in non-idiomatic improvisation. It is an improvisational exercise inasmuch as life is unscripted. Even those who commit strongly to a belief in fate and preordination understand that improvisation or the sensation of improvisation cannot be entirely eliminated from life. Life is idiomatic only if one considers biological existence itself as an all-encompassing idiom, conforming to a general pattern of birth, growth, maturation, senescence and death. Outside that broadest interpretation, while there are general categories for predefined styles for living,

there is opportunity for dynamic processes of living that do not conform to such patterns. Many individuals find comfort in exercising their creativity within these patterns. To the extent that such behavior can be construed as a particular way-of-life, it is idiomatic. Non-idiomatic living is therefore existing outside conventional patterns. It is generally regarded as an unrewarding experience because it perpetually casts both intentional and incidental participants into unfamiliar and therefore awkward roles. For those who prize a clear understanding of their role in the world and have developed a fluid grace with which they can move within that role, the introduction of awkwardness disrupts their well-laid plans and is, ultimately, a most unwelcome guest. Nevertheless, there are those who by nature are drawn to the non-idiomatic role. They are largely avoided by people with the ability to do so, as such individuals are notoriously difficult. The staff of the Poison Pie Publishing House, and the authors whom it represents, are of this ilk of difficult people, practicing non-idiomatic improvisation as a way of life.

This manner of living positively correlates with an interest in meta-living, although the underlying relationship, including whether it is a causal relationship and, if so, whether an interest in meta-living causes the engagement in non-idiomatic improvisation, or vice versa, remains unclear. Regardless, the novels published by the Poison Pie Publishing House are thus simultaneously the fruits of a non-idiomatic improvisational writing process as well as documents of meta-living, in which the post-existential investigation of reality and our role within it is of paramount importance.

To provide a specific example, we reproduce a portion of the foreword to "A Fractured Portrait of Iris", an unpublished novel, incubating within the Poison Pie Publishing House. Of this novel, the author writes in the foreword,

"A Fractured Portrait of Iris" is the fifth and final entry in The Hortie saga, with the first

book describing the family as a whole and the remaining four books focusing on one of the individual members of the family. Each of these books is an exercise in non-idiomatic improvisation. As such, they have as little in common with each other as possible given the fact that they were written by the same author and describe the same family of four.

Specifically, the first book, "The Horties: An Invisible Novel" (written from February, 2009 to December, 2010) describes the mythical origin of the family, during an epoch when they were all invisible. In structure, "The Horties" displays a modest disregard for the grand tradition of the novel. In content, "The Horties" provides an account of an invisible, but otherwise ordinary, family of four, who flout the laws of Darwin as well as the laws of physics in an attempt to better understand the world and the evolution of their role within it

The second book, "The Sutra of Reverse Possession: A Novel of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation" (written from December, 2010 to May, 2012) explores the existential fantasies of the father, Poppy Hortie. The book is written in the form of a more-or-less conventional novel, in which a man invites various spirits inside himself in a series of experiments intended to discover superior approaches to being a husband and father.

The third book, "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath (Revisited): A Modern Adaptation of the Novella by H.P. Lovecraft" (written from June, 2012 to August, 2012) follows the son, Joshua Hortie, as he travels through Lovecraft's dreamlands with his father on a mission to preserve the happiness of their relationship. The structure of the book largely follows that of Lovecraft's original version, with an emphasis on the

description of the geography and culture of the dream realm.

The fourth book, "The Ruins of My Daughter's Cities: An Imaginary Travelogue" (written from September, 2012 to April, 2013) follows the daughter, Sarah Hortie, as she travels with her father on a journey through imaginary cities designed exclusively to provide father and daughter a better understanding of each other. This book is inspired by Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities" and, to a lesser extent, "Cosmicomics".

Finally, "A Fractured Portrait of Iris" (written from February, 2013 to ???, 201?) focuses on the mother, Iris Hortie. It is an unpublished character sketch integrating a variety of writing styles as described above.⁸

In conventional trilogies or series of books of any number, the same writing style is employed through-out all of the books, in order to maintain a sense of continuity. In the grand and non-existent tradition of non-idiomatic improvisation, one avoids the rut of creating one's own idiom (and thus ceasing to work in the non-idiomatic realm) by making each book in the series adhere to a different non-idiomatic style. A non-negligible consequence of this approach is that enjoying (or loathing) any one book in the series provides no guarantee that the reader will enjoy (or loathe) any of the other books in the series. So be it.

From this excerpt, it becomes clear that these novels are intended to provide literary explorations of the central questions of existence and purpose. There is the explicit acknowledgement that methods have been adopted, which intrinsically discourage the commercial success of the books. These books are intended to exist only in the cultural margins, only as

an artifact of meta-living, providing historical documentation of a family whose existence is ultimately unverifiable.

⁸The PPPH was unwilling to provide this referenced material for this article.

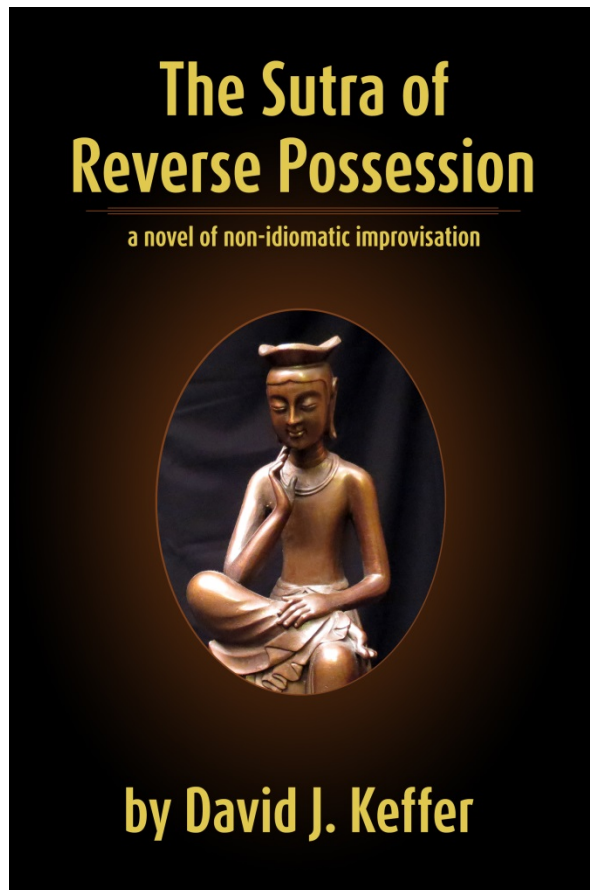


Figure 4. The cover of *The Sutra of Reverse Possession: A Novel of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation* from the PPPH (2012).

12. We end this interview with a delicate question, one which we have saved for last, for fear that it might irritate you and cause you to terminate the session immediately. There are some voices on the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living who suggest that certain titles in the published catalog of the

Poison Pie Publishing House have never sold a single copy. They furthermore suggest that the creation of the Poison Pie Publishing House, rather than constituting an experiment in meta-living more closely corresponds to an elaborate ruse intended to obfuscate the reality of the utter failure of your literary endeavors. How do you respond to these accusations?

Far from irritating me, this question excites me because it thoroughly engages the crucial issues of meta-living. If one is engaged in an experimental activity, the possibility of failure must exist. Without the possibility of failure, there is no experiment, only the rote reproduction of what has come before. To this end, we, in general, embrace an investigation that tiptoes along the interface with failure.

Specifically, the issue of making available a catalog of titles, regardless of their commercial success in the literary marketplace of the day, has an existential basis. If one writes, in fact is compelled to write by one's nature, the ultimate impact of that work is immaterial to the writing process. Not a single word of the text is changed whether zero, one or a million people read the book. From this absolute point of view, the size of the readership of a work is irrelevant to the merit of the work. When one speaks of "a failed writer", one thinks of an individual who was unable to sustain a livelihood as a writer, due either to the sparse resources at one's command or to the lack of commercial appeal in the writing, or both. To fail in this respect as a writer is, of course, a badge of honor, as it validates the purity of the act of artistic creation.

If we take one step back and imagine the author who writes but never releases the work, he is more susceptible to the accusation of being a "failed writer", for he has failed to put forward some work, which has the potential to be examined by the public eye. In this respect, the Poison Pie Publishing House

eliminates this source of failure through the publication and broad distribution of these works. The public lack of availability of the material can no longer be wielded as the underlying argument for calling the authors represented by the Poison Pie Publishing House, “failed writers”.

These writers are categorically not failed writers in terms of neglecting to perform the activity of their trade, for they irrefutably have produced volumes of written work. If one stubbornly insists on broad recognition as a metric for the success of a book and its author, the failure of the commercial appeal of these books lies in one of two places. The failure could be placed with the Poison Pie Publishing House, for failing to possess either the acumen or the resources to properly promote these books. (This is an admittedly difficult challenge owing to the experimental nature of the texts.) Nevertheless, the staff of the Poison Pie Publishing happily embraces the title of “failed promoters”. There is an unsavory element to promotion, especially self-promotion, which those who adhere to old-fashioned ideals pride themselves on avoiding.

Alternatively, the source of failure can be attributed to the contemporaneous literary audience in the world at large, who chose to ignore these works, despite the modest promotional efforts of the PPPH. Such ignorance is easily excusable. The proliferation of media outlets and the creation of non-traditional means of publication in which the entrance barrier is nominal have contributed to an abundance of publicly available writing. Successfully locating particular works in this medium in which one may have a shared interest is not a foregone conclusion. Moreover, the screening filter, ostensibly an assurance of some minimal level of quality, provided in the past by institutionalized publishing houses is no longer present. Thus one encounters a vast and unfiltered body of work, which is difficult to digest. What distinguishes a book in this environment is not so much literary merit as it is promotion. We have already acknowledged that the staff of the Poison Pie Publishing happily embraces the title of failed promoters.

At the same time, it cannot remain unspoken that the Poison Pie Publishing House is well aware of the fact that laying the blame for one’s failures at the feet of “the world at large”, is generally an indefensible position, associated with the unwillingness to accept responsibility for one’s actions. Here we can take a cue from mathematics, which is governed by a set of inviolate axioms. If one begins with a known truth and meticulously applies a sequence of manipulations of known validity, no matter how many in number or how onerous in evaluation, then the result, regardless of the fact that it may seem non-intuitive or even counter-intuitive, must be true. Certainly, the comfortable, absolute axioms, lemmas and corollaries of mathematics do not exist in the admittedly murky world of meta-living. However, we can attempt to follow the mathematical analog. Specifically, when one engages in a creative activity, while adhering to a set of well-defined artistic principles, the intrinsic merit of the result is clear, even if it seems to contradict popularly held black and white definitions of success. From this point, one enters naturally into the realm of exploratory meta-living in the attempt to rationalize the reality of the conflict. The Poison Pie Publishing House takes pride in providing the vehicle for this exercise in exploratory meta-living.



Figure 5. An image in *The Mushroomnomicon* from the PPPH (2013).