



Adam Parfrey

Writer, Editor,
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Speed-Speed-Speedfreak, formatted in the shape of an amphetamine capsule, is one of the many offbeat titles published by Feral House.

STEVEN HELLER

Print contributing editor, author, co-chair of the Designer as Author program at the School of Visual Arts



ADAM PARFREY

President and publisher of Feral House Books and co-publisher at Process Media

Adam Parfrey founded Feral House in 1989. In the '80s he had run a wholesale used-books business for which he sorted through thousands of books and magazines in dumpster bins purchased from a San Francisco area Goodwill outlet. On a daily basis, Parfrey separated the wheat from the chaff, taking particular note of rare and weird books unknown to most merchants. He joined forces with bibliophile Ken Swezey to start the Amok Catalog, which highlighted offbeat titles ignored or shunned by the trade. The catalog expanded into a store, and Amok Press published eight titles in the mid-'80s, including Parfrey's collection, *Apocalypse Culture*, which trespassed unspoken bourgeois barriers, and, as a result, became an underground hit and sold well. After Amok, Parfrey moved to Los Angeles and started Feral House, which has published its own share of unusual titles. On the occasion of his latest books Siegel and Shuster's *Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero* and *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a. "The Unabomber,"* he talked with me about the vagaries of independent publishing.

[What is the significance of the Feral House name?](#)

"Feral House" was chosen to highlight the fact that our choices—even geographic location—seemed totally outside the industry, which at the time seemed particularly beholden to a don't-upset-the-apple-cart current. In retrospect I think it also had to do with my punk rock and entheogenic-influenced background, in addition to the apocalyptic current that manifested during the Reagan administration and has never really gone away.

[You've produced books on some "feral" topics, such as your latest by Ted Kaczynski, *The Unabomber*. How and why do you select the titles you choose to publish?](#) Feral House titles must hold some interest for me personally. Ted Kaczynski is a sociopath, yes, but

also a genius. Like some technophiles, including Bill Joy, I responded to the alarming good sense of his [environmental] manifesto, which I first read in *The New York Times*. Since the manifesto was published, world events seemed to confirm his Cassandra-like thesis. Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* won an Academy Award, and Kaczynski is locked up in solitary confinement. There is a human history in which some poets, composers, and novelists have been criminals, but their sociopathology should not serve to cancel out their art or thoughts if readers can enjoy or learn from their material.

[Okay, I'll accept that. A book can be \(and probably has been\) done on sociopathic authors. Now, tell me does Ted Kaczynski get an advance against royalty?](#) We accessed



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English-language rights for Kaczynski's book through the Swiss publisher Xenia, though we've been in touch with Kaczynski and the University of Michigan professor Dr. David Skrbina for corrections and further material. [Many of your books are rooted in visual culture. Although you call it "hardcore" culture. What is this?](#) I particularly appreciate books that supplement text with visual information. They seem to hit both sides of the brain at once.

[You run the gamut from American hair metal to bubblegum music. Do you have a message you are trying to express through the books you publish?](#) Feral House only publishes non-fiction, often material we feel that's been forgotten or disparaged but worthy of investigation. Back in the early '90s we published a well-regarded biography of Ed Wood, who was talked about being the worst filmmaker of all time. We didn't agree with this slight, and his Feral House biography was spun off into the Tim Burton/Johnny Depp movie. In '91 we published an admiring take-off on B-style men's magazines of the '50s called *Cad: A Handbook for Heels*. This book seemed to help spur the '90s fad into cigars, burlesque, and exotica music. One of the founders of Disinformation Books publicly credits Feral House for influencing its conspiracy book compilations. In the early '90s we also published a book called *Death Scenes* of crime scene photographs collected by a Los Angeles detective. We were criticized for publishing this book, but it seemed to open the floodgates for similar titles and museum exhibitions. There are a number of other examples of Feral House books being a bit ahead of the curve.

[Being an independent publisher, especially these days, is not easy. What has been the most difficult aspect of publishing?](#) We're discovering that the old model of selling that depends upon close-to-the-bone pricing and



Two of the latest books by non-fiction publisher Feral House feature the story behind Funnyman, "The First Jewish Superhero," and the collected writings of the Unabomber.

volume sales is no longer viable. We have to cut our costs every way we can. [So what is the alternative?](#) We increasingly publish special edition books with short discounts to the trade, and work out ways to sell more directly to customers. We are also getting more engaged in film rights and foreign rights. Jodi Wille, my beautiful wife and co-publisher with our sister imprint Process Media, is now co-directing a documentary about the '60s and '70s cult commune The Source Family. It appears that HBO will be producing a pilot for a series based upon the Feral House book about the Antarctica called *Big Dead Place*. The popular Feral House book about the black metal phenomenon called *Lords of Chaos* is being turned into a film directed by the Japanese director Sion Sono. I co-wrote the script. [You have a new title called Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero. Do tell...](#) Mel Gordon (*Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*) got me interested in this idea for a book years ago, and it's gestated into an amazing thing. Mel and co-author Thomas Andrae discovered the real-life basis of the



I particularly appreciate books that supplement text with visual information. They seem to hit both sides of the brain at once.

character Superman—the Jewish strongman entertainer Zische Breitbart—whom [disenfranchised Superman creator] Jerry Siegel saw as a child in Chicago. After losing a lawsuit against DC Comics to regain the rights to their Superman, Siegel and co-creator Joe Shuster tried to create another superhero: the baggy pants clown-nosed Yiddish-speaking Danny Kaye-like Funnyman character. Funnyman failed to strike a chord with audiences, and it failed after six books. The comic was created in 1948, during that particularly stressful time for Jews when the state of Israel was created. Our Funnyman book also has remarkable information about how the aggressive form of Jewish humor came to exist. 