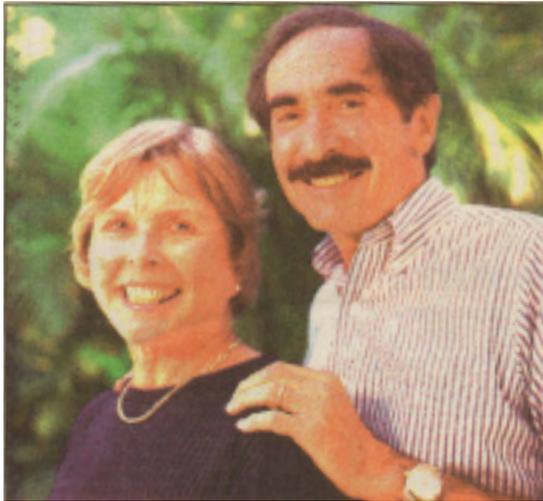


Building a bridge over a literary gap Palm Beach couple invest their skills in small, high-quality house.



Staff photo/PRESTON C. MACK

**Warren and Barbara Phillips live and work
four months a year in Palm Beach.**

By CHAUNCEY MABE
Book Editor

When Warren and Barbara Phillips decided to reinvent themselves as publishers of literary books of fiction and nonfiction, they set about researching the industry as if they were reporters. It was a logical approach — Barbara is a seasoned free-lance writer and editor, while Warren is a former publisher of *The Wall Street Journal* and retired Dow Jones CEO.

Well-intentioned industry insiders gave them two pieces of advice: No. 1, stay away from anything literary; No. 2, forget the whole idea.

"Everyone said don't use the word 'literary,'" Warren says. "It's the kiss of death."

"They all told us not to do it," adds Barbara.

Fortunately for readers, writers and even a few established publishing houses, the two part-time Palm Beach residents forged ahead anyway, starting Bridge Works Publishing five years ago in Bridgehampton, N.Y.

Using a team strategy that takes advantage of each partner's strength — Barbara chooses and edits manuscripts, Warren markets the books to reviewers — Bridge Works broke even within three years. Publishing four or five books a year, the company earned modest profits on gross sales of \$250,000 a year in 1996 and looks to repeat that success this year.

"This is absolutely the most phenomenal success story in small literary publishing since Algonquin emerged in the early '80s," says Jed Lyons, president of the National Book Network, the country's second largest book distribution company and the distributor for Bridge Works.

Perhaps more important, Bridge Works has helped offset the decline in serious books being published by established houses, which

can no longer afford to take a chance on unknown literary writers.

Working with writers who, in many cases, have been rejected by large publishing companies, Bridge Works has produced books that earn rave reviews in the mainstream press. Several authors discovered by Barbara Phillips have gone on to more lucrative contracts with larger publishers.

These include Alan Isler, whose Bridge Works novel *The Prince of West End Avenue* ("Rich and complex... supremely original," said the *Los Angeles Times*) won the 1994 National Jewish Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He's now with Viking.

Tom Perotta's *Bad Haircut* ("Wonderful stories... more powerful than any coming-of-age novel read recently," according to *The Washington Post*) earned him a deal with Putnam.

Lorna Landvik signed with Ballantine following the success of her Bridge Works novel *Patty Jane's House of Curl* ("Fun and funny," gushed *USA Today*).

"The numbers don't add up for large publishers to do these kinds of books," says Lyons. "Their overhead is too high to make money on the 5,000-copy print run of a first novel. It's not that they don't want to. Readers and writers have to look to these small publishers."

By the time a would-be writer gets to Bridge Works, he or she has already received an education in the realities of the publishing world, says Warren Phillips, and gladly accepts the paltry \$1,000 advance for the opportunity to be published.

Because they know their most successful authors are likely to leave for greener pastures as soon as possible, Bridge Works signs its authors to a two-book deal, often sweetening the advance a bit for the second book.

"We'd like to keep our authors," Warren says. "But the economics of small publishing means we can't compete with a Random House."

Of course, selling 5,000 copies of a well-received first novel doesn't make much money for Bridge Works either. To their surprise, Warren and Barbara Phillips discovered that most of the company's income derives from subsidiary rights — foreign and paperback.

"It was the key to our survival," Warren says.

For example, German publishers bidding against one another jacked up the price of *Patty Jane's House of Curl* to \$67,000. Bridge Works splits the money from subsidiary rights 50-50 with the author.

Equally key, according to Lyons, is Barbara's ability to select the most promising manuscripts out of the 1,000 or so Bridge Works receives every year.

"Barbara has exquisite taste," Lyons says. "You cannot overestimate the importance of taste. A lot of publishers have forgotten that."

Despite the successes, Bridge Works has experienced its share of disappointments, often with critically acclaimed books. *Zip Six*, by Jack Gantos (a "raw yet paradoxically exhilarating prison novel," said *The Boston Globe*), and Robbie Clippner Sethi's *The Bride Wore Red* ("Precisely observed... graceful narratives," according to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*), both did poorly.

"I don't know what it is that sells and doesn't sell," shrugs Barbara.

"She has a good track record," chimes in Warren.

So does he. Lyons credits much of Bridge Works' success to the subtle touch Warren has with marketing Barbara's books to reviewers.

"We knew we had to do work that was going to be recognized or we'd be dead in the water," Warren says.

His approach is to call reviewers, take them out to lunch or

dinner, and in the course of a lengthy conversation, introduce Bridge Works' upcoming list of titles. This personalized soft sell is the reason so many of the company's books have been widely reviewed, despite the initial obscurity of the authors.

"Most small publishers depend totally on product to sell itself," Lyons says. "But Warren knows that even a great book needs marketing."

Warren was filling his retirement hours by teaching at Columbia School of Journalism and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard when Barbara got the idea of starting a publishing company. She had been participating in writing workshops around Bridgehampton and was impressed by the talent she saw there.

"These people had no chance of finding an agent or getting published," Barbara says. "We both loved literature and the world of ideas and working with lively minds."

The two have been married for more than 40 years. He's a Republican; she's a Democrat. He readily admits to being 70, while she adamantly refuses to divulge her age.

"Ageism is a big problem in this country, and it's worse for women," she says. Plus, "Men will tell anything. They have no sense of subtlety."

The Phillipses live and work four months of the year in Palm Beach, where they keep in touch with the Bridgehampton office by fax, phone and computer. "Most people never know we're gone," says Warren, and Barbara adds, "There are many disadvantages of being self-employed, but choosing where you work isn't among them."