

AWP 2022

9:00-10:15 AM

118BC, Pennsylvania Convention Center, 100 Level

Event Title: Debuting with a Small Press

Event Description: Five small press authors will speak to their experiences debuting in 2021 with small presses. They will cover the benefits and challenges of their individual journeys so far, as well as their own tips for a successful book launch.

Moderator: Jenn Bouchard

Jenn Bouchard's debut novel *FIRST COURSE* was published by TouchPoint Press in 2021. Her short stories have appeared in the *Bookends Review*, *Litbreak Magazine*, the *Penmen Review*, and the *Little Patuxent Review*. She has taught high school social studies for twenty-two years.

Participants:

Khristeena Lute is a writer and English professor residing in upstate New York, where she teaches English at SUNY Adirondack. She completed her Ph.D. in English in 2016, specializing in American women writers. Her debut novel, *Finding Grace & Grit*, was released in 2021 from Thorncraft Publishing.

Maan Gabriel is a mom, wife, & advocate for women's stories in literature. She earned her BA in communications from St. Scholastica's College Manila & MPS public relations and corporate communications from Georgetown University. She works in strategic communications in Washington DC.

Rachel Mans McKenny is the AD of the Writing Center at Iowa State University, and writes fiction and nonfiction. She has been recently published in *The New York Times*, *Electric Literature*, *The Rumpus*, and other outlets. Her debut novel, *THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT*, was released Dec. '20 (Alcove Press/dist PRH).

Joy Lanzendorfer is the author of *RIGHT BACK WHERE WE STARTED FROM*. Her work has been in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *NPR*, *Washington Post*, *Smithsonian*, *Poetry Foundation*, and *Ploughshares*. Grants include the Discovered Awards for Emerging Artists and the Speculative Literature Foundation.

Opening Moderator Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

- Book covers and headshots on LCD projector screen.
- Writers often hear of publishing books with “Big 5” or major publishing houses. The small press experience is quite different, from querying to editing to publication and marketing. We feel that this is a valuable perspective for aspiring writers to hear, and we are excited to share our experiences with you today.
- Each participant should briefly introduce themselves: their book title and brief description of the book, publisher, where they live, what they do for work.

Question #1: From your experience, how was debuting with a small press different from writers working with “Big 5” or major publishing houses?

Khristeena: I think smaller presses lead to closer working relationships with your editor, making the process a little less daunting. However, with a smaller press, writers will need to do a lot more work on publicity and marketing—and for an introvert with way too much anxiety, that’s been a challenge.

Maan: Visibility, marketing and distribution are probably three of the biggest differences in my experience. Some small presses don’t necessarily have a big public relations, marketing or distribution set up unlike the major publishing houses.

Rachel: shorter time to publication, did event management myself, less publicity support, but didn’t have to think about things like bookstore placement (which was awesome)

Joy: I would talk about my experiences with Blackstone, including the publishing story. I had a nine year gap between finishing and publishing my novel, and Blackstone swept in and saved the day and published my book. ([Story here](#) if you're curious.)

Question #2: What has been a benefit for you in publishing with a small press?

Khristeena: My press, Thorncraft Publishing, is a different kind of press, even from other small presses. Shana Thornton started it ten years ago with the mission of telling women’s stories told by women writers. They also sponsor a great deal of philanthropic endeavors in Tennessee, like publishing the pamphlets and maps for the African American History Trail in Clarksville at no charge. I feel proud of the work they’re doing. Shana, too, took the extra time to explain things to me as we went, teaching me a great deal about how publishing works along the way.

Maan: I felt the benefit was more personal, than professional. A small press gave me the confidence and push I needed to see my dream through. I took ownership of my dream, and found myself a partner that believed in what I created.

I’m with a hybrid press so the journey was more intimate and entrepreneurial. It provided me not only creative control but also the freedom to make decisions regarding my publishing path.

It was also mission driven. I decided to go with my publisher because I believe our visions are aligned. We both want to advocate to a more inclusive and diverse publishing industry as well as to amplify female voices. The curation process was also top notch, so I knew I was in good hands.

Rachel: able to maneuver through the supply chain issues with greater ease (best of both worlds to be distributed by PRH but managed by a small press in this way)

Joy: Blackstone is the best of both worlds, with an established history as an audiobook company, so they were able to get good distribution and professional representation of my book, but they also listened to me and gave me the more intimate attention you would have with a smaller press.

Question #3: What has been a challenge, if any, that you have encountered?

Khristeena: Publicity and marketing. I had no idea of the scope of need or even what I should have been doing and when. I feel like I understand this a great more now, so going forward, I think I’ll be in a better place to pace my novel’s release.

Maan: The relationships of small presses with bookstores – indie or chain – are sometimes not as well established, making it more difficult to get debut indie authors into their shelves. This is not to say the industry is not changing. I experimented at a big chain bookstore once where my book was shelved far away from costumers. I asked the manager how I could get my book on the big tables out front. I was told it was a decision management makes. I signed my books, they put it on the front table, we pushed on our social medias, and in less than a day, it was sold out. In my opinion, they take lesser chances with small presses.

Rachel: cover design; publicity support

Joy: Marketing, 100%. It has been difficult to get the book out there--good luck getting on lists or big book clubs--and it was a lot of work for me as the writer.

Question #4: OK, anything goes here. What is something else that you've learned along the way?

Khristeena: Pacing the release and creating extra pieces that should circulate before and as your novel releases. A bit of freelancing on topics connected to your work published here and there where you might find readers could really bring attention to your work.

Maan: I think it's important to jump into the publishing process with a mindset that there is no such thing as small press or big press. It is a decision we make before we signed the dotted lines. There are projects I want to publish myself, projects I want She Writes Press on my side, and some projects I feel will benefit the backing of a large enterprise. It is entirely up to us. Small press or big press, we own the space we occupy and that we should explore our creativity further by crafting a plan to engage with our readers more, build relationships with indie bookstores, and join this beautiful writing community ready and willing to learn as well as to teach, to receive as well as to give.

Rachel: it helps to have had experience in the writing world, making connections, before publishing with a small press, because you need all the support you can get. I think that's true in any publication process, but had I published with a small press just beginning my career, I would have floundered. also, the journey of a novel doesn't end with the first year. I lucked out with mine being picked up for a major state reading award and it's having life past its debut year. Patience is key.

Joy: I might talk more about marketing here, and how I learned a few tricks that I'm going to employ next time I publish a book.

Question #5: It wouldn't be a writers' panel if we didn't talk about what we're working on now. I just started querying my next novel PALMS ON THE CAPE, which is another foodie women's fiction novel, this time set on Cape Cod. What are you all working on?

Khristeena: I am working on my second novel, a work of Appalachian Gothic work set in various decades of the twentieth century. It's slow going, with teaching and directing a writing center, but it's really starting to take shape this spring.

Maan: The title of my second novel is TWELVE HOURS IN MANHATTAN. Filipino-American struggling communications consultant, BIANCA CURTIS, travels to New York City to escape life in Jersey and to try to make it in the big apple. An insanely famous South Korean actor, PARK HYUN-MIN, travels to New York City to escape fame and be invisible. Two very different characters, from two very distinct worlds, share the same need to alter their existence. They meet and spend Twelve Hours in Manhattan together – they talk about life, love and happiness, and the freedom they both seek to fully exist and not merely to survive. What happens next can crumble their worlds together, or create a whole new world apart. Out April 18, 2023

Working on an anthology about four women navigating lives filled with lies, betrayal and loss. Doing it with my college best friends, set to come our Spring of 2024.

The biggest project I'm working on right now is a historical women's fiction set in the Philippines during the Japanese American war. Lots of research.

Rachel:

Joy: I have an essay collection that is being shopped around by my agent and I'm working on a new novel.

We'd love to now take your questions.