

“Not Just for Scholars: How to Publish Fiction and Memoir with University Presses.”

Saturday, March 26, 2022

9:00–10:15 AM

Room 120AB, Pennsylvania Convention Center, 100 Level

Sharon Harrigan (moderator): I’m thrilled to be here today, and I’m so glad you all came.

I have published two books with university presses: the memoir *PLAYING WITH DYNAMITE* and the memoir *HALF*. Other writers often ask what my process was. Did I enter a contest? If not, how did I know which presses to submit to? Did I send a proposal? A query letter? How long did the process take? How did I choose who to send to? Authors’ guidelines on university press web sites are clear about how to submit academic titles but sometimes opaque about how to submit work for more general audiences. Some have editors who specialize in fiction or creative nonfiction, and some do not. Some are known for their hands-on editing and beautiful design. Some publish books that get reviewed in major newspapers and win major awards. Others have skeletal staffs and a do-it-yourself approach. How do you know where to begin and what to expect?

To answer these questions, we have with us today a panel of experts with a diverse range of experiences: Kelly Fordon, who has published two collections of short stories with the same university press; Yang Huang, who has published two novels with different university presses, both through contests; and Dennis Lloyd, the publisher of University of Wisconsin Press. We have had amazing experiences and frustrating ones. We will share what we have learned so you can avoid our mistakes and repeat our successes.

Yang Huang: I am fortunate to be here with all of you. I have three published novels, and each one had a different journey. *MY OLD FAITHFUL* was a linked story collection, published by the University of Massachusetts Press. My latest novel *MY GOOD SON* was published by the University of New Orleans Press. For both books, I went through the “Writing Contests” section at the Poets & Writers website. I submitted *MY OLD FAITHFUL* to the Juniper Prize, because a friend at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference won one year. I admired her work and thought, maybe I should submit my collection, too. It was a huge surprise that I won.

I once had an agent shopping around for *MY GOOD SON*. He didn’t sell it, so I shelved it. After I published two novels, I planned to revise it. The story was set in China. I wanted to move it to Oakland Chinatown. As I was reading it, I found the story was tightly constructed. It was its own thing. If I rewrote it, it would be a completely different story. I decided to try my luck with the contests. So on the night of September 30, I looked at the contests before doing laundry. I did a spell check of my manuscript and submitted it to the UNO Publishing Lab Prize. I sent it right before midnight California time, but it was 2am on October 1 their time. I thought I missed the deadline. What could I do? I went to do my laundry.

A few weeks later I got a call from the UNO Press. They told me I was one of ten finalists. I thought that was nice. But I had been a finalist many times before, so I didn’t think much of it. Another week later, I got a second call and was told my book was chosen. I was so, so grateful.

My experiences with both university presses were excellent. I had an amazing editor, Chelsey Shannon, at the UNO Press. She compiled the extensive editorial feedback: 5,500-plus comments via track changes and 13 pages of global comments. I worked hard on the developmental edit: tuned the timing of plot points, brought out the themes, and rounded up the symbolism, which deepened the story. MY GOOD SON was reviewed in *The New York Times*, and now it has an audiobook that I love.

Kelly Fordon: I've published a short story collection and a novel-in-stories with Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, and I will be discussing similarities and differences between the university publishing landscape of 2015 versus 2020. In 2020, the publication of my second book coincided with the beginning of the pandemic lockdown and also happened at a time when Wayne State University press was undergoing a significant editorial and administrative overhaul. Did those mitigating factors impact sales? In order to unpack both experiences, I'll also be comparing the first publication when I worked solely with the in-house publicist versus 2020 when I hired an outside publicist. What were the costs and benefits of hiring an outside publicist? Did it result in increased community building, networking, or sales? Do awards impact sales? And lastly, how did publishing with WSUP differ from publishing my poetry collection with Kattywompus Press in Boston, a micro publisher specializing primarily in chapbooks, that does not utilize small press distribution or have a publicity budget?

Dennis Lloyd: It's a pleasure to be here, speaking with and learning from you and the other panelists. I've been the director of the University of Wisconsin Press for nearly 7 years and have been the editor responsible for the fiction list since 2018. I sometimes acquire memoir, but not our *Living Out* series that focuses on the lives of LGBTQI+ individuals. I oversee the poetry list, though I am not part of that screening process.

I thought I'd focus my remarks on how university presses tend to operate (I've worked at a total of six different UPs), rather than how to submit to a university press, as each one has slightly different requirements.

[Rough outline follows]

Currently 154 members of the Association of University Presses

126 are based in the US

Approx 100 are based at universities or colleges; 60% of those are at public institutions

(Others at societies, museums, think tanks, or research centers)

According to the Association's subject area grid (attached pdf), or viewable at

<https://aupresses.org/resources/aupresses-subject-area-grid/>

57 presses actively publish creative nonfiction

40 presses actively publish fiction

Important to bear in mind that almost all of these presses are non-profit or not-for-profit publishers. Most aren't able to offer large advances, support multi-city tours, or pay high royalties. BUT, they do offer quality manufacturing, books stay in print for a long time, and with few exceptions even creative manuscripts must undergo peer review before being approved by a faculty editorial board.

Share Life-Cycle-of-a-Book infographic. (PDF attached). Created by my colleagues at the University Press of Florida a few years ago, and shared with permission.

Questions (and a few very brief answers):

--Can you walk us through the process from submission to acquisition—and if you've worked with more than one press, how was it different at each one?

--At one of my first readings, someone asked, Why didn't you publish your book with a bigger press? You know, like Random House? (I had to laugh. Silently.) But seriously, there are many benefits to publishing with a university press compared to a big commercial publisher (although money may not one of them). What are they?

--What do you wish you had known before you embarked on the adventure of publishing with a university press?

--Tell us about your experience with marketing. Did you hire an outside publicist, in addition to the publicist the press provided? Why or why not? What tips can you pass on for marketing university press books—or small press books in general?

--What is the role between where a university press is located geographically and what kinds of material it publishes? What other considerations are there when choosing which presses to submit to?

--What are the misconceptions around University Press publishing?

[Not just monographs, not primarily textbooks, most very strong regionally.]

--What sort of expectations should authors bring with them when they sign with a university press?

[Longevity, authority, imprimatur, benefit of peer review and copyediting, author doesn't pay for printing, participation in promotion is key but not wholly on author's shoulders]

What does the University of Wisconsin Press look for in fiction, CNF/memoir, or poetry?

[Historically fiction and memoir list has been strongly grounded in LGBT lives and stories and regional. For fiction, looking to move beyond that into literary fiction more broadly, but we avoid most genre fiction; for memoir we are hewing close to our strengths; poetry is very broad.]

Are there benefits to working with an agent when pitching to university presses? *[Depends on the press, but generally speaking projects that are agented do not receive extra attention or rewards because of the presence of the agent.]*

What makes a book a “success” in terms of sales?