

Becoming a Debut Novelist: The Journey From Agent Queries to Book Launch

The path from finishing a book draft to launching a debut novel into the world is thrilling and exciting, but it is also long and full of twists and turns. This panel of debut novelists—with publication dates in 2023 and 2024—will discuss all aspects of this journey, including finding an agent, selling the book, working with an editor, and navigating marketing and publicity. The aim of the panel is to be transparent and to provide helpful advice for all debut novelists to come.

Organizer and Moderator:

Laura Spence-Ash: Laura Spence-Ash's debut novel, *Beyond That, the Sea*, is forthcoming from Celadon Books on March 21, 2023. Her fiction has appeared in *One Story*, *New England Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and elsewhere; her critical essays and book reviews appear regularly in the *Ploughshares* blog.

Participants:

John Manuel Arias: John Manuel Arias is a queer, Costa Rican-American writer. He is a Canto Mundo fellow & alumnus of the Tin House Summer Writers Workshop. His work has been published in *PANK*, *The Rumpus*, & *F(r)iction*. He has lived in D.C., Brooklyn, and in San José, Costa Rica with his grandmother and four ghosts.

Vanessa Chan: Vanessa Chan is the Malaysian author of *THE STORM WE MADE*, a novel, and *THE UGLIEST BABIES IN THE WORLD*, a story collection — both forthcoming from Marysue Rucci Books/Scribner. Her novel will be published in eighteen languages worldwide. For now she lives in Brooklyn.

Jinwoo Chong: Jinwoo Chong is the author of the novel *Flux*, coming March 21, 2023 from Melville House. His work has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Florida Review*, and *Salamander*. He is an editorial assistant at *One Story*.

Jamila Minnicks: Jamila Minnicks won the 2021 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction for her novel *Moonrise Over New Jessup*, which will be published on January 10, 2023 (Algonquin Books). Her work is also found, or forthcoming, in *Catapult*, *CRAFT*, *Blackbird*, *The Write Launch*, and elsewhere.

Opening Remarks:

Thank you all for being here. This panel came about after last year's AWP in Philadelphia, when Vanessa Chan and I attended a similar panel, led by Jonathan Escoffery, and with the panelists Daphne Palasi Andreades, Xochitl Gonzalez, and Cleyvis Natera. We were a year earlier in our journey then, and we found the panel incredibly helpful and enlightening. It seems to us that a panel like this should be on the AWP schedule every year, for all the debut novelists in the pipeline. We hope that our panel will be as helpful for you—we tried to put together a panel that incorporates a wide range of experiences. We are all debut novelists, with publication dates ranging from Jamila's in January of this year to Vanessa's in January of 2024. As such, we are at different stages of the process, and it's our hope that we can therefore share many different experiences and lessons learned.

The process of being a debut novelist is at once thrilling and frightening. Of course, we are all so very pleased to have (or about to have) a book in the world. We are fully aware of how special a thing this is. At the same time, though, there is so much about this process that is unknown. Our goal here today is to share what we have learned as we've made our way through this journey.

We have a lot to discuss today, so we're going to move quickly. Please jot down any questions you may have, and we'll address your questions in the final ten minutes. If we don't get to your question, please feel free to talk to us after the presentation is over. Most of us will also be around AWP in the coming days so feel free to stop us and ask any follow-up questions. I think we all agree that the more information that can be shared about this process, the better!

I'm going to quickly introduce each of our wonderful panelists and then we will begin our discussion. We will focus on four major topics: finding an agent, selling the book, working with an editor, and navigating marketing and publicity. I'm going to be strict about time, and we may need to move to a new topic before we have exhausted discussion on the topic at hand. I apologize in advance, and again, please feel free to ask questions at the conclusion of the panel.

Moderator Questions:

I'm going to ask the panelists lots of questions about each topic and ask that they answer those questions focusing on whatever answer would be most helpful for you all to hear.

Finding an Agent: We're not going to address when we knew we were ready to look for an agent—we'll leave that for another panel to discuss. But—you knew you were ready to get an agent. How did you go about that process? How did you come up with a list of agents to query? How many agents did you query? What was the response like? How many rounds did you make? How long did the process take? If you were in a position to get multiple offers and make a choice between agents, what was that like? What were the criteria that you used to make your final selection? Did you sign an agreement with your agent?

Selling the Book: How long were you with your agent before the book was submitted to editors? Did you go through an edit of the book with them? How many editors were sent the book? Did you have a voice in selecting the editors and houses to which the book was sent? How much information did your agent give you during the process? Were you in constant conversation or did your agent only update you occasionally? Did your book go out on multiple rounds or was it sold in the first round? Was your book sold at auction? Was it a pre-empt? How were those decisions made? Did you sell World rights or North American rights? How long after the sale did you receive your contract? Did you have anyone other than your agent review the contract? If you could do anything differently in this process, what would that be?

Working With an Editor: How long did you work with your editor on the book? Did you meet with them in person, via Zoom/phone or was it all via email and document notes? Was the experience what you had expected it would be? How difficult was it to incorporate the changes they suggested into your book? Was there anything that became a sticking point? Did you have enough time to make the edits? Did they prepare you for all the different stages (the initial edits, the copyedits, the first pass pages, the second pass pages) or did you figure it out as it unfolded? What are the most important lessons you learned? What will you do differently next time?

Navigating Marketing and Publicity: What has your communication been like with the marketing and publicity folks at your publishing house? Has marketing helped you with your social media accounts? Were you involved in conversations about

marketing ideas or were the strategies presented to you? Did you consider or have you used an outside publicist? If so, how does the partnership work between the inside and outside teams? Did you do any of the publicity outreach yourself? What are the most important things to know about marketing and publicity?