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, 2024, and 2025—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:
Laura Spence-Ash: Laura Spence-Ash’s debut novel, Beyond That, the Sea, was published by Celadon Books in March 2023.

Moderator:
Marcela Fuentes: Marcela Fuentes is a Pushcart Prize-winning fiction writer and essayist. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she is a former fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. She is an Assistant Professor at TCU in Fort Worth, TX. Her debut novel Malas is forthcoming from Viking Books.

Participants:
Temim Fruchter: Temim Fruchter is a queer nonbinary Jewish writer living in Brooklyn. She is the recipient of fellowships from Vermont Studio Center and the DC Arts Commission, as well as a 2020 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award. Her debut novel, CITY OF LAUGHTER (Grove Atlantic) is out January 2024.

Jon Hickey: Jon Hickey (Anishinaabe) is the author of BIG CHIEF, forthcoming from Simon & Schuster. His stories have appeared in VQR, Gulf Coast, and the Massachusetts Review. He earned an MFA from Cornell University and was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University.

Chin-Sun Lee: Chin-Sun Lee is the author of the debut novel, UPCOUNTRY (Unnamed Press/2023). Her work has appeared in The Georgia Review, Joyland, and The Believer Logger, among other publications. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing at The New School, and lives in New Orleans.

Denne Michele Norris: Denne Michele Norris is the editor in chief of Electric Literature, winner of the 2022 Whiting Literary Magazine Prize. A 2021 Out100
Honoree, her writing has been supported by MacDowell and Tin House, and widely published. Her debut novel, When The Harvest Comes, is forthcoming from Random House.

Opening Remarks:

Thank you all for being here. This panel came about after last year’s AWP in Seattle, when a similar panel was presented with John Manuel Arias, Vanessa Chan, Jinwoo Chong, Jamila Minnicks, and Laura Spence-Ash. Based on the reception and response to that panel, we decided 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 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 Chin-Sun’s in November of last year to Jon and Denne Michelle’s books in late 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?