EVENT TITLE: Going Small—Writers (and a Publisher) Dish on the Small Press Experience

Event Description:
Big isn’t always better, or even available. Writer panelists will share how they found their small presses, what fit and what didn’t about the experience, how engaged they were in marketing, the role (or lack thereof) of agents and publicists, etc. Cornerstone Press editor will address the publisher’s side of the experience, detailing how their press selects manuscripts, what makes a successful writer/publisher partnership, etc. All panelists will talk logistics, from query to final product.

EVENT CATEGORY: Agents, Contracts, Contests

Event Moderator
Viet Dinh: Viet Dinh teaches at the University of Delaware. He has received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as two O. Henry Prizes and the Alice Hoffman Prize for Fiction. His debut novel, After Disasters, a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Prize, was released in 2016.

Event Participants
Eric Sasson: Eric Sasson is the author of the story collection Margins of Tolerance and the novel Admissions. For three years, he wrote CTRL-ALT, a column on LGBT culture for the Wall Street Journal. His writing has appeared in numerous publications, including The New Republic, VICE, them., and GOOD magazine.
Renee Simms: Renee Simms is a Bread Loaf and NEA fellow who teaches at University of Puget Sound and the Rainier Writing Workshop. Her debut story collection, Meet Behind Mars, was a Foreword Indies Finalist for Short Stories and listed by The Root as one of 28 brilliant books by black authors.
Ellie Atkinson: Ellie Atkinson is the Editorial Director at Cornerstone Press. She will be graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in the spring with a writing, editing, and publishing degree. She has been published in Wordplay, Barney Street, and The Rectangle.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements
Hello everyone, and welcome to “Going Small: Writers (and a Publisher) Dish on the Small Press Experience.” Please note that Ellie Atkinson will be representing Cornerstone Press today in place of Dr. Ross Tangedal.

I’m sure if we looked at our respective bookshelves, we’d find mostly books published by the Big 5. These are, after all, the books that get hyped the most, the books that gain the most attention, the books that mostly dominate the national spotlight. But nestled between those glossy hardcovers are hidden treasures: these are the books published by small presses, books that have as much meaning and impact, but without the distribution channels. Small presses are mighty: for instance, Fitzcarraldo Editions, based out of the UK, has published numerous Nobel Prize winners before their meteoric rise fame. And in the US, small presses have also laid claim to top prizes: think Pulitzer Prize-winners Tinkers, by Paul Harding, originally published by Belleview Literary Press or The Netanyahus by Joshua Cohen, published by New York Review Books. Literary prizes aren’t the only bellwether of quality, of course, but it does signal the significance of small presses going up against their conglomerate brethren. So with that in mind, I’ll ask our panelists to introduce themselves, and then we’ll get started on how our panelists found themselves on their small press journeys!

Participant Initial Remarks

Jody Hobbs Hesler
My debut story collection came out this fall from Cornerstone Press, whose rep is here with us too. I’ll be talking about the exhaustive process of querying and submitting, the delight of finding a press, the process of walking a manuscript through the editorial and galley stages, the unique aspects of working with a student-staffed press, and the rewards of holding the final product in hand.

My novel Without You Here is forthcoming in September 2024. I’m in full swing with this process with a second small press, Flexible Press, right now, so I’ll address these issues and the moderator’s questions with respect to both presses as much as possible.

Eric Sasson
Both my short story collection and my novel came out with small presses. My collection Margins of Tolerance was runner-up for the Tartt First Fiction award at Livingston Press in 2012, and my novel Admissions was released by Braddock Avenue Books in 2018. Since my novel was initially supposed to come out with another small press that ended up going bankrupt (Foxhead Books), I actually have experience
working with three different small presses.

There were definitely some highs and lows in my experiences dealing with these presses, and I’m excited to discuss the many aspects involved: submission, edits and copy-edits, cover and layout, promotion/publicity, readings, and anything else that might come up!

**Renee Simms**
My first book was a short story collection published in 2018 on Wayne State University Press, a publisher that I was thrilled to join for personal and professional reasons that I’ll elaborate during the talk. I’ll describe my process as an unrepresented debut writer, from acquisition through publication and promotion. I’ll also talk about my current book proposal process with an agent and mainstream publishers, and how it contrasts with the 2018 experience. Now that I’m engaged differently in publishing, I see the industry more clearly, including the opportunities available with small publishers.

**Ellie Atkinson**
I have been with the press for a year and a half and have been fully immersed in the industry. I will be discussing how Cornerstone Press functions as a teaching press and my own personal experiences. By teaching the industry to students, they get a real hands-on experience from acquisitions to sales, but also author experiences. Building relationships is very important to the press and the students, which shows that the publishing industry can be collaborative, supportive, innovative, and creative.

**Moderator Questions**

1. With the large number of small presses running currently, what was your process of narrowing down which presses you wanted to approach?
2. What attracted you to the press(es) that you finally chose?
3. (for Cornerstone): Besides publishing high-quality literature, what goes into how a small press forges its identity? What’s the role of small presses in the publishing ecosystem?
4. (for Eric and Jody and Renee): What would you say are the differences between a small press with university affiliations versus an independent small press?
5. If you could go back in time and advise yourself one thing about the small press process, what would it be?