AWP 2024 Event Outline

**Title:** “Defying Category: How to Sell, Edit and Market a Genre-Bending Novel”

**Number:** F117

**Date/Time:** 9:00am - 10:15am on Friday February 9, 2024

**Location:** Room 2103C, Kansas City Convention Center, Street Level

Organized and Moderated by Lucy Carson, The Friedrich Agency

**Opening Remarks:**

Welcome to “Defying Category: How to Sell, Edit and Market and Genre-Bending Novel”. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, that’s me, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Thank you all for being here with us, bright and early! I’m honored to share this space with 4 panelists whom I deeply respect, whose roles in the publishing process lend them each a unique insight into the challenges and joys of publishing a book that defies easy categorization. This panel was born from a swirl of complicated emotions on my end— the novels that don’t fit into simple or straightforward categories are the ones that tend to excite me the most, and I’m certainly not alone in this! But there are challenges to launching voices both new and
established into a space that is, by definition, not confined to ONE space. Often when I submit a genre-bending novel, even if it ultimately goes to auction, there will be editorial responses from both general imprints and specialty imprints that struggle to understand “who it’s for”. That’s ok! Finding the right editor means you only need ONE, but the frustration got me thinking. And wanting to open this up to a deeper conversation with you all.

Genre defying novels can be seductively expansive in their reach, but in the publishing world, we need to be able to talk about books in a kind of shorthand. We don’t always have the luxury of relying on a full-bodied press release to hook the next reader—much in the same way that, when a family member asks you at Thanksgiving, “what’s your novel about?” you feel that pressure to distill it to a few sentences before the conversation naturally shifts away.

It was important to me to foster a wide-ranging conversation where we cover what we love about this growing literary space, as well as how we continue to navigate its unique challenges, from the early stages of a book’s presentation to the moment it meets its readers. To that end, I’m going to ask my panelists to introduce themselves with a short bio, and to share a little bit about their own relationship to genre fiction.

Panelist intros (order will shift based on seating):

- Hello, I'm Silvia Park and I'm the author of Luminous which will be out with S&S in 2025. Luminous is set in a future where Korea is unified and robots are nearly indistinguishable from humans. The heart of the book is a family drama, following three siblings who have been estranged for years: a war veteran who now solves robot crimes, a genius designer of robot companions, and their robot brother whose sudden disappearance broke their hearts. I also teach genre and literary fiction at the University of Kansas and the line between them seems to be blurring more than ever. Very excited to discuss what it might mean for genres to blend and crossover, and how these books find their readers.
• I'm Annie Hwang, and I'm an agent at Ayesha Pande Literary where I represent primarily literary fiction that plays with genre. I'm excited to get into what that all means on this panel, but in the meantime a few of my authors who have written books that I think are representative of what I think of when I think "genre-defying" include Carson Faust (WHEN THE LIVING HAUNT THE DEAD, Viking / Fall 2024), Sequoia Nagamatsu (HOW HIGH WE GO IN THE DARK), and Jihyun Yun (WHEN THE RIVER DRAGS YOU DOWN, Knopf in Fall 2025).

• Hello, everyone! I'm Amara Hoshijo, a Senior Editor at Saga Press. I specialize in speculative fiction of all kinds—science fiction, fantasy, and horror—with an eye toward ambitious worldbuilding and fresh cultural lenses. I absolutely love romantasy, cozy fantasy, and dystopian scifi that might be classified as literary, depending on who you ask. I first cut my teeth as an editor in the crime fiction space, so brisk pacing and a plot that ties together well are both crucial to me! I also gravitate toward themes of coming-of-age, societal disenchantment, and family legacy.

• Hi! I’m Carina Guiterman, and I’m an Executive Editor at Simon & Schuster. While I occasionally acquire narrative nonfiction, my primary focus is literary and upmarket fiction. I acquire contemporary fiction, family sagas, works of domestic and psychological suspense and some works of historical fiction. While worldbuilding and plotting are important to me, the primary thing that draws me into a work of fiction is a captivating voice. I’m drawn to complex, often flawed characters and love novels that give me an inside look into the most intimate of relationships—whether those relationships are between romantic partners, friends, or family members. Basically, I’m nosy, and want to peel back the layers of a character or relationship.

Guided questions:
• When do you feel that determining a literary category for a novel is useful, and when does it get in the way?

• Do you feel the evolution of genre labels is positive/progress or just more confusion? For example, terms such as ‘New Adult’ and ‘Dystopian’ aren’t used nearly as often as they were several years ago, whereas new terms like ‘romantasy’ are entering the conversation, and ‘speculative’ has become a kind of umbrella term. Are we evolving purposefully or just changing the names to spruce things up?

• Would any of you care to share an anecdote in which genre or categorization misdirected readers somehow, or could have been handled differently in retrospect? This question was prompted by my own memory of an unfortunate marketing decision—we had worked on a book that was a beautifully written, character-driven novel about the aftermath of a crime in a small community, and because there were long sections about the crime itself, the publisher opted to market the book as a “suspense novel”. Goodreads reviewers were not happy, even though the book itself was gorgeous and quite special. It just wasn’t really what the publisher advertised, so readers felt betrayed. Has anything like that happened to you all?

• We all share the challenge of effectively pitching a genre-defying novel, and we’ve talked a bit already about how traditional cut and dry category labels simply fall short, for certain titles. How can the artful combination of “comp titles” become better support for the pitching process? Can anyone share an example of how comp titles have served them more effectively in the past? I can start us off with a book that I sold to Carina this past Fall: it’s a story about a grief-stricken NYC chef who is able to taste the presence of ghosts, and eventually learns he can briefly resurrect them by cooking what he tastes. It’s a love story, a ghost story, a foodie book and in places, even a high fantasy of sorts. So I pitched it to Carina as “The Bear” meets “Hadestown”. Anyone else want to share?
• We have panelists from many stages of the process, so let’s walk through the general life cycle of a book. Silvia and Annie, as author and agent, how do you craft, target and pitch genre-bending projects—Silvia to the agents you queried, and Annie to the editors you submit to? Were there any specific strategies or things you kept in mind throughout the process?
• Now that we’ve covered the art of the pitch, let’s move on to the editorial side! Amara and Carina, can either of you offer insight into how a genre-bending book makes its way through the Acquisitions process?
• A follow up: once you’ve acquired a book that blends various genres, do you approach editing those titles with any particular concerns about target audience?
• On the marketing and publicity side, how do the S&S teams grapple with the “if it’s for everyone, it’s for no one” challenge, given how expansive and ambitious a genre-defying novel often is?

The remaining time will be devoted to a Q&A session in which we welcome the audience to raise any questions pertaining to this topic.