UNIVERSITY PRESSES, SMALL INDIE PRESSES, SELF-PUBLISHING, OH MY!

Pathways to Publishing Creative Writing

CONNIE LI

This set of interviews features perspectives and observations from editors and writers with experience working in university presses, indie presses, and self-publishing with the aim of demystifying the publishing process and helping writers and authors consider possible pathways for writing careers and potential homes for their work. I spoke with Raquel Thorne, acquisitions editor at the University of Georgia Press; Lee Oglesby, freelance editor; and Mia Arias Tsang, writer; about the publishing ecosystem outside of the "big 5" and hope for change for publishing to support diverse editors, authors, and readers.

Terminology

Big 5 – five publishing houses which dominate the industry in the USA. They are: Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, Macmillan Publishers, and Simon & Schuster.

Comp – short for 'comparison title', used to pitch books to indicate market interest in an unpublished work

Trade – publishing sector which focuses on producing works for the general public

Traditional publishing – pathway where a writer gets their work published with a publishing house

Hybrid publishing – a combination of both traditional and self-publishing

INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND/JOURNEY TO PUBLISHING

RAQUEL

- Started publishing her own poetry in 2012, and after joking around with another poet about starting a journal, started a publication (cahoodaloodaling), which she ran for several years as editor-in-chief
- Apprenticed with Sundress Publications, a completely volunteer-based publisher out of Knoxville
- Went back to grad school for an MFA, held an assistantship with LSU press, working for the Southern Review as a reader for fiction
- After earning her PhD at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in Southern Studies, she interned for the University of Louisiana Press (regional trade) before coming to work at the University of Georgia Press as the Regional Trade Acquisitions Editor

LEE

- Took the Columbia University 6-week publishing course for folks interested in the publishing process. The goal for that program was to leave with an internship or job.
- Worked for a medical publisher as an Editorial Assistant
- Moved to the Oxford University Press reference department
- Wanting to move from academics to trade, Lee moved to Minneapolis to work with Milkweed Press (a much smaller staff, of 10-15 people total)
- Gained experience with lots of poetry, literary nonfiction, and a few novels every once in a while
- Wanted to return to New York, worked as an acquisitions editor for Flatiron Books under Macmillan
- To get back to the work of editing, Lee now works freelance

MIA

- Studied biology, but started taking writing more seriously during undergrad years, took more English classes, asked professors and friends about building a writing career and the industry
- Got to know Chloé Caldwell after taking a class with her, she became a mentor and a close friend, showing Mia the ins and outs of the industry (all of her books have been published with small presses)
- Felt like an outsider, mainly listened to people at readings and other events
- Carries some anti-big 5 sentiment after seeing success of small presses
- Self-published a debut book of poetry/essays on lesbian heartbreak through the publishing collective Quilted Press
- Mia is now working on a novel

INTERVIEWS

RAQUEL

On the university press model:

The University of Georgia Press is mission driven – "To publish innovative scholarship and compelling stories that inspire and inform the people of Georgia and the world." When it comes to the authors we work with, it's about the mission, not to gatekeep authors or deliberate on who is Southern "enough." University publishers do get some money from the institution they are tied to, though this model differs if the school is public or private, if it's a state school or not.

On regional trade & acquisitions:

There is lots of overlap between scholarly works and regional trade, like environmental & ecology books, landscape design books, gardening books. One publication I am excited about that will be com-

ing out is a true crime book…when doing acquisitions, there are different avenues to explore. It's a dual process of looking at proposals that people are sending while also thinking about what's not currently at the press. Being an acquisitions editor across the board is about knowing the audience, to get an idea of what kind of publishing is happening.

"When it comes to the authors we work with, it's about the mission, not to gatekeep authors or deliberate on who is Southern 'enough.'"

I recommend looking through NewSouth Books, an imprint that I acquire books for, to get an idea of that variety and crossover between scholarly and trade works.

On tracking submission numbers and what "counts" as a submission:

This has been bouncing around in my head quite a bit! Thinking through how to count a submission, I thought I'd share Sundress Publication's as an example for how an Indie Press might get this metric that might be useful. They have a dedicated google doc form to accept (and track) submissions. When I was there, these submissions were aggregated in a single gmail account (as opposed to any Press where there might be several dedicated acquisitions editors who are receiving submissions individually).

As mentioned, submission managers are pretty common for journals, which makes thinking about how to define a submission (as opposed to perhaps a pitch or a query or a formal proposal) and how to count them a little easier: George Washington University's Journal of Ethics in Publishing uses a submissions manager called scholastica and The Southern Review has a submissions manager as well. For cahoodaloodaling I used Submittable. Up the Staircase Quarterly, another Indie journal I'm an editor on, also uses Submittable.

But yes, what counts exactly, if you're interested in keeping track of how many submissions you receive as a University Press? Thinking through these from most complete to least complete: A full proposal? A partial proposal (maybe just the proposal without sample chapters)? An emailed query of interest? An elevator pitch (sometimes quite literally during a conference!)? Someone "floating an idea" to get feedback (again, sometimes very casually at a conference)?

LEE

On the big 5 publishers, Milkweed, and freelancing:

Because it's the big 5, the structure of publishers is much larger, and there's a lot more money. With higher advances comes a publisher who wants to have more say, because they're making more of an investment financially. When you work as an in-house editor, you're also acting as a project manager. There's a lot more to tackle in day-to-day operations.

As a freelancer, when helping authors find literary agents or find the direction they want to go, small publishers are grouped together. Small university presses don't necessarily feel that different from the indies. In the last 5 years or so, university presses have been leaning into trade. It might be a desire to expand market share and make more money in an area. I'm not sure about the numbers that would show if academic publishing has decreased, but I can imagine that publishers can see a place to make money there.

We've seen a few people get really successful from university publishing who have reached general

audiences in a way publishers were not expecting. Oxford University Press (OUP) has several divisions, and the one most likely to reach wide readers is academic/trade. Other departments include reference and textbooks, which are more geared toward creating material for students. OUP's mission was probably generic like "serving scholarly readers," and Milkweed's has something to do with "transformative literature, maybe about nature." More of the smaller university presses are able to be creative, like University of Georgia Press.

At a small indie press, the editorial list is defined by one or maybe two people. Everyone else is supporting the publication process. Because it's such a small number of people making editorial decisions, it's a matter of taste. When you get to midsize presses like Catapult, there are more people on the editorial board, more people weighing in, and more outside funding that they are responsible to. They're trying to hedge their bets on ROI. They might dedicate a few books to real experiments, but the rest of the list is more conservative.

To some extent, all publishers are doing that risk analysis, deciding when to take a chance on something. The smaller the press, the more experimental they can get.

On resources that presses have to offer authors:

There are few different ways to approach that. A lot of small presses are nonprofits, so money comes from grants and fundraising. There is enough to make the publisher work, but they're not trying to make a profit. They can offer a lot less $ to authors. In terms of resources like editorial attention, you might get more attention at a smaller press. With the advance you could get from a big 5 publisher, you could hire a freelance editor.

Funders of small mission-driven presses want to see themselves as champions of diversity. It's serving the nonprofit industrial complex. It doesn't filter down so much to the authors and what they're writing, but the press does cater to a class of people who want their money to be a champion of the arts. It's hard to define what that would exclude.

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On what presses (university, indie, big 5) learn from each other:

So much of the business runs on comps – titles which are "competitive and comparable." There's a feedback loop in terms of what kinds of books are selling really well, always a second wave of publishers following those successes. One example is Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall-Kimmerer. It was a surprise to Milkweed and to a lot of other people. There was a wave of that kind of environmentalist literature in the following 3-4 years to capture that success. That influenced larger presses.

On the initial conversation with an author to decide their path to publication:

Ask the questions:

- Do you want to pursue traditional or self-publishing? (Most want traditional, for reputation and validation.)
- Then, what publisher do you want to aim for? What's the style of the particular book, who's done well? If there's someone trying to use multiple styles, maybe go with a small literary

press. A larger press might say it's too weird. Memoirs could be any type of publisher.

- How much attention do you want in the editorial process?

On how Lee evaluates projects to take on as a freelancer:

Many projects come from existing relationships. I prefer to work with folks who either already have a book deal and want a person to help reshape the book, or people with literary agents seeking proposal development. However, I don't want to limit only to those people. There are so many people who are great writers who haven't made that first step yet, so I do take on those projects if they feel like a really good match.

That means there are a lot of people with decent to ok ideas about a health cookbook or a memoir that are kind of average. I get a decent number of queries from people who haven't gotten buy-in who have average books. My one hardline is that I only do non-fiction. I edited a book about parenting last year, while still in-house. Though I didn't feel like the best editor because of my lack of experience as a parent, I was able to contribute in ways that were meaningful. I'm more open to considering different matches now.

On the burnt-out publisher-to-freelancer pipeline:

The industry burnout-to-freelancer is its own sub-industry in publishing. It's a quiet thing that happens. Not a lot of people realize how many authors are working with freelancers. Ghostwriting is a huge part of the industry working on memoirs, cookbooks, practical non-fiction.

The publishing industry went through the diversity moment in 2020 and hired a lot of people in particularly prominent positions, but almost all of them have been let go or pushed out at this point. This is a process that goes in waves, there are ebbs and flows. Toni Morrison was an editor, there was another wave in the 90s, and the most recent one was a few years ago.

Authors have a real stake in how their work is presented to readers. That is deeply personal. There can be conflicts between authors and editorial staff. Having a good editor and team in-house that sees the book for what it is is very crucial, and that is at risk. It could come down to one influential book to start the next wave.

MIA

On her journey to self-publishing:

I was just taking in what people were saying about the industry, and Chloé (Caldwell) had a very interesting trajectory. She started with micropresses (presses run by one person), her first two books were published on micropresses. She moved to Coffee House, then to Soft Skull, and then her book *Women* was re-issued by Harper. Her fifth book was published on Graywolf, a bigger indie, so her trajectory had roots in the small press world. She spoke very highly of starting with the indie presses and not shooting for the big 5 right off the bat. I saw how she built a cult following off of working with small presses, so I knew it was possible. My own ethos has been anti-establishment

"There's a myth that you need a big 5 deal to be a successful author. You don't."

too, so the idea of worshiping a major institution hoping that would save my life – I did that with Yale and it didn't work – soured me on the idea of continuing down that path in another framework. So I thought, "let me follow my gut" and see how starting small and going with places that have closer relationships with their authors will go. There's a myth that you need a big 5 deal to be a successful author. You don't.

My book is self-published, but in a kind of different model than even micropresses use.

My colleague who started Quilted Press, Alex Alberto, calls it an author collective. I hadn't been thinking about publishing a book, though I had been working on a novel for a long time. Alex was getting feedback from a few places on a manuscript of essays that took on different forms (like listicle, screenplay, and glossary) that they'd be more successful if they picked one form. They didn't want to do that and didn't find the timeline attractive either, so they did a lot of research into self-publishing, in about 2023 or 2024. They found that a lot of the technological advancements in publishing in recent years have made it a lot easier to self-publish a high quality book than it used to be. The major book distributor that stores use is called Ingram, and Ingram has launched their own internal arm of self-publishing software called IngramSpark, so it will still show up in the wider database, and it looks normal. Before, if you were publishing on Amazon or printing it yourself, it wouldn't show up in the database. IngramSpark is also a print on demand service, so you're not putting in money to order a shit ton of copies that will sit in your house forever. You just print it when people order it, and they will print it and fulfill it for you. It's so easy, it's better for the environment, you're saving money, and it's not as big of a risk financially. Alex's own book was the prototype for this process. Their book did really well and continues to do really really well. KG (Strayer)'s book also did really well, and they asked me. A third author dropped out, and they asked if I had a book.

Because I knew Alex was really on top of things and I was 4-5 years into my post-grad writing career, I had saved up enough money to front my own stuff, and I had a large network. What makes or breaks self-publishing is the network. I knew a lot of authors and publishing professionals through my work at a literary nonprofit, so I knew there would be an audience, and I knew I could get major authors to blurb my work. I had access to things that would make the process easier and the mental bandwidth to put it together, so I thought "let's roll with it and see what happens."

It's interesting because people ask how I chose this, and it wasn't like that. My friend approached me and asked if I had a project, and I created a manuscript because of that.

I loved the process, it took a lot of work, but less than I thought. Having two people to support me who had already been through the process to help me every step of the way was huge. Another thing that drew me to the idea was having complete agency over every step. Even if you're at a small indie, there are things you don't have control over. When you're self-publishing, everything is in your control. The cover was completely in my control, it's the first thing people see, and authors at the big 5 have very little say over what their book looks like, the marketing, who it gets sent to, who blurbs it, but the burden of marketing it and pushing your own events falls on the author no matter where you sell your book. So if you're going to have to do the marketing, why not also have total control of the process?

I did talk to Chloé a lot about if this would hurt my chances at first book contests. She said that realistically the chances of actually getting those are very small, but if you put out a book, it makes you look more attractive to publishers down the line. If it did relatively well, it won't matter that it's self-published. You'll be able to do readings and it will legitimize you in a way that will help you sell your novel when the time comes.

I've done many reading series in New York that people consider "the big ones" just because I had a book out and I knew some writers, and people did not give a fuck that it was self-published. Most people think it's pretty cool. I think the tide is changing a little bit.

On publishing plans for her upcoming novel:

I think I want to take the novel to an indie. The first thing to consider is if I want an agent. The big 5 does not take people without agents. I know a lot of writers who got an agent, and then they didn't do much work to sell the book, but because the agent had signed, they take a significant cut from your deal because they do the contracts at the end. Most of the indies that have name recognition but are still small presses have periods where they will take un-agented submissions. I feel like I would rather take my chances and send it out to those places. I do want to continue self-publishing with Quilted with my books that are more experimental, mainly for the finances. You get 100% of the money, as opposed to the cut you get with the big 5. If your book sales don't meet your advance at a big 5, you never get royalties. It's not actually as "successful" or responsible of a fiscal decision as people think.

Alex and I ran the numbers, and I have made a profit of about $2500 on my book, which is pretty good for an indie book, and I got to keep all of that. These are books that publishers say won't sell. My book is prose poetry with illustrations. No one would publish that traditionally because there's not a concise, snappy one-liner way to market it. Every publisher wants to be able to put your book in a box because that's how they think readers look for things, but when you're writing a book as a queer person, writing queer stories, our readership isn't looking for that. Readers are clamoring for experimental things, but publishing is so fucking behind and will probably not catch up for a while, so until then, we can do our own thing. People are clearly resonating with it.

On feeling like an outsider:

"No one would publish that traditionally because there's not a concise, snappy one-liner way to market it. Every publisher wants to be able to put your book in a box because that's how they think readers look for things, but when you're writing a book as a queer person, writing queer stories, our readership isn't looking for that."

I still feel like an outsider, but now it feels like a badge of honor. I like not feeling beholden to the process and the pipeline. I feel so free not feeling like "oh my god, I'm going to have to query agents for two years and then I'm going to have to wait for them to shop it." Sitting around waiting to be chosen for so long doesn't feel good to me. I've already done that in my dating life. I don't need that in my professional life, waiting around for validation when I know I'm a writer.

People have come up to Alex and me when we have tabled for the Rainbow Book Fair this year saying "It's cool that you did it, but I don't know if I could do it (self-publishing), there's shame in it." I feel bad for them because I don't have that anymore. It is a bias people have, but I like that I did it differently.

Even if I do go into a more traditional version of publishing down the line for other projects, I feel empowered to stick to what I want and advocate for myself when I'm faced with people who want to make certain decisions for me because I now know how things work. I think a lot of debut authors who are starting out with a major publisher have no idea how anything works because everything is tight-lipped and no one wants to reveal what money is or isn't involved in these things. I feel like I

have insider knowledge because I chose an outsider path. When I am doing readings with three other authors who are on big 5 deals and I'm there, I'm like "we're all in the same room" but I took a short-cut to get there. I don't feel the insecurity that I used to feel, but I don't feel like an insider necessarily because my perspective is skewed in a good way.

On university presses:

Truthfully, I don't know too much about university presses. The scale is similar to that of indies, and I think people might feel a sense of legitimacy because there's a more recognizable name. I also think they might skew slightly more academic, but I'm not really sure. In terms of small presses, I put them on the same tier in terms of access that people are getting. The level of distribution and prestige feels similar, though it's not identical.

Alex and I developed a publishing crash-course seminar, a two hour seminar that went through every part of how they did their books, from manuscript to fundraising to book design to printing. We provided actual sales numbers and we did charge for the seminar, but we want more people to have this information. It was such a hit that we are planning on doing it again, and we're working on developing a more in-depth version of the seminar, but we have no qualms about sharing the information. It's all out there. Our philosophy is that more stories in the world, especially queer stories, is a positive, so if we can help people figure out how to do it, that is a win for us.

On what she'd like to change about publishing:

What don't I want to change? At AWP 2026, our booth had a wall where people could answer "what are your dreams for the future of publishing?" and people were putting a lot of incredible things on there. Number one, I would love it if publishers would be more open to non-traditional stories, hybrid works, genre-fluid/bending/blending things. I think the success of our books at Quilted show that readers are longing for more original stories. Publishing at large is so risk-averse and doesn't want to take chances on anything, and while indie presses are known for taking risks, there is a limit to how far they are willing to go, which is a shame because they market themselves as such.

A lot of the time, the data they work with is outdated. I want them to take more risks! I want small presses to be real and understand that they need to be more creative with marketing. A lot of that starts with diversifying the people who work for you and the authors you're publishing. If you just have white people, straight people, rich people running it, obviously they're going to think that people who look like them are the people reading books. That is simply not true and has never been true. It's a dying model and it's why so many publishing houses are struggling. They don't understand that they are behind the times. It's time to realize that they need to pivot. Publish better shit and actually pay attention to your writers and trust in readership more. Think outside the box more. A lot of that starts with meaningful and intentional diversity in staffing, not just like "if we have to hire a person of color let's go to Yale or Harvard where we're going to pick someone who's been so whipped into shape by white supremacy culture that they're going to act like we do." That defeats the purpose. I'm not saying there are not outsiders who

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go to those schools, but we're also not the ones who get hired. They have to mean it. Just pipelining people of color into your organization means nothing if you're not going to listen to them or include their point of view on anything.

People are starting to see diversity as a liability now. It's hard to tell when progress is being made, but I will say there are gayer books being made. It's one step forward three steps back, but there are all kinds of small communities like us and zine makers, people returning to physical media. I think hyperlocal physical media is going to become important, and is already beginning to destigmatize self-publishing. That gives me a lot of hope. Maybe the people "in charge" will start to see the value in that. But I don't have a ton of hope for the majors, I think that's a losing game. I think it's about seeing how you can make institutions work for you – how you can utilize them, not how they can use you. Don't sit around waiting to be chosen. Chart your own path. It's scary, but if they're going to have you do 90% of your marketing, you might as well do 100% of it. Self-publishing is a great way to stay connected to your art all the way through.

About the author

Connie Li

Connie (she/they) is an artist and writer raised in Georgia, currently living in Baltimore, whose creative practice across multiple disciplines concerns our dynamic relationships to place, memory and embodied knowledge, and kin. Community gatherings and collaboration anchor her work as a trainee of the 2640 Space Collective, a student of herbalism and Chinese medicine, and a violinist/composer. They also write poetry, essays, and reviews of experimental performances and recorded music, found in I Care If You Listen, Burnaway, and Which Sinfonia. Connie is a current MLIS student at the University of Maryland, College Park, concentrating in Archives & Digital Curation.