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## Conflicts of Interest: Collecting Fiction as a Self-Published Librarian

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# Conflicts of Interest: Collecting Fiction as a Self-Publishing Librarian

by **Julia Glassman** (Writing Librarian, UCLA, Powell Library; Phone: 310-206-4410) <jglassman@library.ucla.edu>

When my agent sent my novel to publishers, I received some very flattering rejections. It was really well-written, they said. My descriptions of Orange County were hilarious and vivid. My characters were wonderful! But this was in 2007, the beginning of the Great Recession; and publishers weren't taking chances on books that wouldn't make a profit. "We're just not sure it would attract reviewer attention," they said. "We're just not sure it'll sell." In a capitalist publishing industry, an editor's love for a manuscript is only part of the equation. A book has to make money.

For a couple of years after failing to sell my book, I slunk around in a depression, diddling with a second novel and teaching freshman composition. Then I brushed myself off and did two things: I earned an MLIS from UCLA, and I founded a small press.

**Dinah Press**, as my press came to be called, is made up of a publishing collective consisting of me and two other editors. As the treasurer, I handle the bank account and taxes (filing for nonprofit status is a hurdle we can't bring ourselves to face quite yet); but all decisions are made by consensus. We publish works of literary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by underrepresented writers — women, particularly women of color; disabled writers; members of colonized peoples; etc. — or anyone who has received the type of rejections that I did: *Your work is good, but we can't take a chance on you*. We also invite each writer we work with to join the collective as a guest editor for one year. This system allows us to bring fresh perspectives into our editorial decisions and give writers a chance to help shape the literary landscape. After two years of planning, we published our first two titles last fall: my novel, *Other Life Forms*; and *nomad of salt and hard water*, a collection of poems by **Cynthia Dewi Oka**.

Considering the miniscule scope of our operation (we only printed 250 copies of each book), our first round of titles was an astounding success. *Booklist* gave my novel a positive review, and *ForeWord Reviews* claimed that "all good novels take on a life of their own, and *Other Life Forms* is no exception." **Brodart Company**, a prominent library wholesaler, promptly ordered several copies; and bookstores began to sell *Other Life Forms* on consignment. Meanwhile, **Cynthia's** poetry collection received attention by *The Feminist Wire* and *Briarpatch Magazine*, and she was invited to speak at the New School in New York City. As of this writing, we're applying to distributors and beginning edits on our next two books.

Self-publishing through one's own press already raises some ethical questions. Did my novel fit **Dinah's** vision of the type of work we wanted to publish? Do I fit our

definition of an "underrepresented" writer? How much energy can I put into promoting my own book before I start sapping resources from our other writers? Compounding these ethical concerns, though, was my day job: Writing Librarian at **UCLA's Powell Library**, where I'd been hired full-time to coordinate writing and literature-related initiatives — including the library's Recent Fiction Collection.

The Recent Fiction Collection contains novels and short stories published within the past three years. As its subject specialist, I make sole purchasing decisions. The fact that my own novel lay on the margins of what could reasonably be included in the collection presented me with an uncomfortable conflict of interest. I base most of my purchasing decisions on reviews and media attention. If a book tops the bestseller list, then it's an obvious candidate for the collection since college students will most likely be interested in reading it. (*Fifty Shades of Gray*, for example, is seldom on the shelf, so frequently is it checked out.) However, I also attempt to collect titles from small presses that don't receive major media attention — in which case alternative trade journals like *ForeWord* come in handy. If *ForeWord* gives a book a glowing review, I purchase it and market it to students through displays and social media.

But what if a small press title receives a positive, but not ecstatic review? In those cases, I rely as much on instinct as on data. Might students be intrigued if they see the book on the shelf? Can I reasonably expect it to circulate at least once or twice? Is it a book that will fade into irrelevance; or will it make some lasting impact, however small? These were the questions I found myself asking about my own novel. *ForeWord* had called it good, yes...but not *great*. The review had listed more flaws than merits, although overall the recommendation seemed positive. So was my book worthy of being included in the collection? If I'd read the same review for another title, would I have ordered it? Emotionally and aesthetically, I was so close to the book that it was impossible for me to say.

If I made the decision to collect my own novel, funneling library funds into my own press in the process, I worried that the move would be seen as a cynical ploy to use the library to advance my own business interests. Perhaps I could defend the decision if the book ended up circulating; but what if — and this question touches on a fear shared by librarians and authors alike — no one ever checked it out? Indeed, when I weeded the collection for the first time last summer, I found a small handful

of books that, for whatever reason, aged out without ever having been read.

Complicating my problem further (or, from another perspective, simplifying it) was **UCLA's** official conflict of interest policy, which bars librarians and other **UCLA** employees from buying anything from a business owned by a **University of California** employee or that employee's near relative, professor, or principal investigator. Since **Dinah Press** is technically under my name, my hands were officially tied, unless I wanted to go through the intimidating process of requesting an exception.

My initial preference, which I'll admit is not a very healthy one for a self-publisher, was to keep my job and my writing life completely separate. I'd exclude my book from the collection, pretend to believe that it would add no value to the library or hold any appeal for undergraduates.

But this plan went against the very ideals I was championing through my other initiatives at the library. I'm currently in the process of starting a zine<sup>1</sup> collection with a special emphasis on zines created by **UCLA** students. I want students to have a sense that a library reflects the community it serves, that it doesn't simply function as a passive repository for professional or credentialed writers.<sup>2</sup> I'm also currently developing a workshop on alternative media production, which aims to help students identify areas in which their experiences differ from those depicted in the mainstream media and then choose a print or Web 2.0 platform that best suits the story they need to tell. In short, I *love* self-published material. I seek it out. I feel a professional obligation to collect it. So why should I automatically exclude my own work? Despite these ideals, though, I couldn't work up the courage to advocate for my novel.

Luckily, our library's guiding themes ended up solving my problem.

**Powell Library** bills itself as "a place for inquiry, creativity, and community" with an emphasis on fostering and promoting student research and creative activities. **Kelly Miller**, the head of the library, decided before I was hired that those themes include inviting faculty and staff engaged in creative endeavors to serve as models for students, thus giving those students opportunities to learn from these faculty and staff and engage with them professionally. In short, she and other stakeholders imagined **Powell** as a place where librarians and students could work together to build a culture of creativity. As it so happened, a fellow **UCLA** librarian who goes by the pen name **Lisa Stasse** had just published a young

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adult novel when I joined the staff and had been invited to hold a reading and Q&A that would be led by one of the editors of the student arts journal. Because it's only natural that we should collect the works of authors we invite to read at **Powell, Stasse's** novel was included in the Recent Fiction Collection.

Once I had settled into my job, **Kelly**, having set a precedent for staff readings with **Lisa Stasse**, asked if I wanted to hold a reading for *Other Life Forms*. Relieved and excited, I sat down with her to discuss logistics. Was it reasonable for the library to obtain a copy of the book? Of course. What about the conflict of interest? We decided that, even though I collect recent fiction, I shouldn't be the one to place the order; so we're currently exploring other, more ethical ways to add the book to the collection. We haven't dealt with **UCLA's** official conflict of interest policy yet; but the fact that the decision fits within existing policy, is based on a clear precedent, and comes from the head of the library rather than me personally puts us in a much stronger position to obtain an exception. And if the exception isn't granted, then I'll buy a copy myself and donate it.

The conflict of interest policy, while well-intentioned, creates a frustrating barrier to collecting self-published work — not least because, when collecting zines, I must email dozens upon dozens of writers to ask whether they, any of their family members, or any of their students are employed by UC. If it happens that a self-publishing writer has, say, a brother on work study at **UC Davis**, then I'm faced with the choice of asking them to donate their work, not collecting the work at all, or making the case to Campus Purchasing. However, if that same writer is represented by a large publisher or distributor, I can order their work with a few mouse clicks. Libraries simply cannot treat self-publishers like large distributors or publishing houses if they want to have any sort of equitable collection development policy. Many librarians before me have said the same, and it's wearying that we must continue to repeat it.

Still, my peculiar position as both a self-publishing writer and a librarian has given me insight into the questions and problems that arise when large libraries attempt to collect self-published work. One must work around imperfect policies and ask uncomfortable questions. But examining library policies and bringing colleagues and supervisors into the conversation can help mitigate the confusion.

As for me, I'm anxiously waiting to see how many students check out my novel. If even one student reads and enjoys it, then our decision to collect it will have been the right one. 🐼

**Endnotes**

1. Zines are commonly defined as low budget booklets or chapbooks, often photocopied and stapled by their authors. Zines have their origins in science fiction, punk, and Riot Grrrl subcultures and are a major outlet for feminist, radical, and other marginalized perspectives. **Barnard College** and the **University of Iowa** are among the other institutions whose libraries collect zines.

2. This is not to say that academic research, expert opinions, and critically acclaimed literature do not occupy a vital space in libraries. A problem arises, however, when librarians fail to interrogate the power structures that decide which voices are amplified and which are suppressed in the American publishing landscape. For a deeper exploration of this issue, see my 2012 *InterActions* article, "Stop Speaking For Us: Women-Of-Color Bloggers, White Appropriation, and What Librarians Can Do About It."

## Comments on Self-Publishing from a Small-Press Publisher

by **Rory Litwin** (President, Litwin Books, LLC) <http://litwinbooks.com/>

**A**s a small-press publisher in the library field, whose first batch of published books included two that I compiled or authored myself, I have a unique perspective on self-publishing and librarianship. I often work with authors who might consider self-publishing as an option. I also occasionally miss an opportunity to work with an author who chooses to self-publish a work that I respect. More often, however, I work with authors who submit book proposals to us as a part of an effort to "get published" or authors whom we seek out as capable writers to take on projects that we initiate as a publisher. I have acquired some insights into why authors choose one route over the other and can say a few things about our contributions as a publisher that writers should consider when weighing the option to self-publish.

First, I would like to say something candid about how I feel about self-published books in the library field. My attitude toward a given self-published book depends strongly on how good I think

that book is or how seriously I take its author as a writer worth reading. If the book is good and I think its author is making a significant contribution, I feel a sense of unease at the implicit threat that my work as a publisher may be unnecessary. I comfort myself by considering what we could have offered this author that he lacks as long as he is "out there on his own," but the uncomfortable (for us) fact is that self-publishing is a viable alternative for a serious author. Self-publishing is attractive for the author who keenly values absolute independence and is only interested in reaching an audience that is already aware of him. On the other hand, if a book is so bad that we would not have published it or if the self-published book has serious flaws that we would have corrected, I am pleased to see it because it makes

an argument by example for the relevance of publishers and induces authors to submit manuscripts to publishers by contributing to the poor image of self-published books. Consequently, the rise of self-publishing and the profusion

of articles that encourage self-publishing do not trouble me because the more people are encouraged to self-publish their works, the more bad books will be self-published. This factor helps establish small-press publishers like ourselves as a place for books that deserve to be taken seriously.

Not all serious writers feel a need to prove that their work is good enough to pass through a gatekeeper. For example, **Crawford** is a self-published writer whose personal reputation makes it unnecessary to seek a publisher's imprint to establish legitimacy. So with **Crawford** in mind, along with other authors who might be in his position soon, I will make an argument for the role of publishers in terms of the contributions we make that are *not* falling away as a result of technologies that facilitate self-publishing. Authors who are considering self-publishing may want to think about the role of publishers in these terms.

To begin, librarians know that their own institutions often regard self-published books less seriously from a collection development perspective. But aside from serving as a gatekeeper to the "realm of legitimately published books," we also serve, to a certain degree, as a gatekeeper to the structures of bibliographic control and official recognition. Although

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