

## **Season One, Episode One: The Origins of Red Hen Press**

Kate: Hello, and welcome to the Red Hen Radio podcast where independent literature takes flight. I'm Kate Gale, co-founder and publisher at Red Hen Press.

Tobi: And I'm Tobi Harper Petrie, deputy director of Red Hen Press.

K: On this podcast, we're gonna be talking with authors, we're gonna be talking with literary professionals, and we are going to give away some of the secrets of how a publishing company works, how the industry works, how it works to be an author, a little bit of the agent story, and what keeps literature moving forward.

T: What do you think is gonna make this podcast different from the thousands of other podcasts already out there?

K: We're working to make this one different. We're going to talk, first of all, about how independent presses work, not just how large publishing works. And we're also going to really look hard at publishing on the west coast. When Red Hen started, I was very interested in thinking about what was different about working in publishing on the west coast. It is different than being on the other side of the Hudson.

T: So today, ladies and gentlethens, we're taking you on a journey from the inception of Red Hen Press to the dynamic landscape of today's publishing industry. To start, let's turn the page to our first chapter.

### **break**

K: Well, the origin story of Red Hen was a little rough. Tobi, do you remember anything about the beginning of Red Hen Press?

T: As a 4 year old, I remember very little about the start of Red Hen Press, but I do remember there being lots of books.

K: There were a lot of books. In fact, at the first house that we lived in when we started Red Hen Press, I don't know if you remember this, but Mark built a very, very large bookcase for us to keep all our books. And I was working right beside that bookcase, and the whole bookcase fell over on me one day. I remember it being almost crushed by that bookcase, and you and your brother were quite disturbed. I think you were carrying firewood for me, when the bookcase almost crushed me, and you were quite disturbed by me being almost crushed by the bookcase. After that, I think he nailed it to the wall.

So when we got the press started, I had actually started the press by myself. And then I later met Mark, and it later became Red Hen. So let me just start with, I was in graduate school, and I was in this group of writers. And I felt like everybody in this group of writers deserved to be

published. We seem like a group of ne'er do wells who weren't finding publishers readily. And part of it was that we were publishing stories that seemed kind of outside of what big New York presses or even solid university presses might have been excited about. And I finally got published by this person who had a press that was in San Luis Obispo, and then my mentor got published by him too. And he did not have a computer, and he didn't seem like he was very organized. And so I thought, wow, if he can have a press, so can I?

So I got excited about the idea of getting a press started, and I published a couple books, but I thought I have a problem. I can edit books, but I need someone else to do the design. And so when I met Mark, I told him I needed a book designer. He's like, "Yo. I got that. I'm already designing stuff for the space station." And I was like, "is that a transferable skill?" And he said, "Of course. Yeah. Just buy me some Adobe products, and I'll figure it out."

Sure enough, he did. Although he would say that the first few books that he designed are not nearly as good as what he's designing 30 years later after many mentors. I'm just going to say that in case anyone listening is saying, "Wow, sounds so fun and easy. I think I'll start a press." A third person would have been good, and that person might have had a marketing degree or possibly even an MBA.

You might also be thinking, "Did you need any money to start the press?" Well, most people do. In fact, we didn't have any money, but I convinced him that he could sell his car. And then one time while he was at work, I sold his furniture as well. It was surprising when he came back and there was no furniture.

And that \$10,000 got the press started. We were able to print a couple books, then the \$10,000 was run out, and we had to figure things out from there. So it's just one adventure after another.

At some point, we needed some free help. That's where you came in, Tobi. Do you remember that part? I think you were 8 by that time.

T: I think I do remember helping with the rejection pile. I would put little slips of paper in them, telling them that they had unfortunately been rejected. Odd way to start in publishing, but I guess rejection is 99% of publishing. So I guess it's a good place for me to get warmed up.

K: Yes. I remember that it made you very sad because you really felt that everybody who submitted a manuscript should be published. We should find a way to put them all in print. You, you did not like that part.

T: No. No. I did not. I've always had a problem with rejecting people. It's not the fun part.

K: It's not the fun part. And what's particularly odd about it, since we are on that subject, we are a press that publishes 25 to 30 titles a year, and we receive maybe 12-15,000 manuscripts a year. So just by the numbers, we are going to have to reject some people. We couldn't possibly just say, oh, well, let's take them all. It wouldn't be possible.

Not all of the books that are sent to us fit under what it is we publish. I always remember someone coming up to me at the LA Times Book Fair and saying, I have a book that is perfect for you. And I was like, "oh, well, great. Well, tell me about it." And she said, "it's a lesbian cookbook." And I was like, okay. And I said, "why do you think this is perfect for Red Hen?" And she said, "you publish so many LGBT titles." In fact, I think it's like half your catalog. And I looked down at our list and maybe half the books on the table were LGBT books, because, as you know, we do publish a lot of LGBT books, but cookbooks are a whole nother thing. They have their own marketing. They have their own way of being sold, and we don't publish cookbooks. So if you're trying to sell a cookbook to a literary publisher, it's usually not gonna work.

Since I've mentioned LGBT publishing, I wanted to bring that into the conversation a little bit, Tobi. So when you came to work at Red Hen, we had already published Judy Grahn, who was part of my dissertation. I should say she was a whole chapter of my dissertation. And we'd published a number of LGBT authors who I was pretty excited about. But I didn't feel like we really had an LGBT program where we were curating readings. We didn't have solid staff who were really looking at what we could do differently at Red Hen. And you really changed the game in terms of that. First, with Quill and also with helping us with curating readings, you've just really changed the game at Red Hen. So can you talk a little bit about the origin of Quill and maybe a little bit of the backstory of how you got excited? Your thesis was part of what led to that just as my love of Judy Grahn was part of my dissertation.

T: I think part of my hiring had to do with beginning Quill. I think we were talking about it before even my first day. And we did have Arktoi, which was publishing prose and poetry by lesbian authors every year, And we decided that we wanted to have more of a solid prose because I'm a prose editor and not a poetry editor, and I like to lean into my strengths. I chose to start it as an award, a yearly award. You'd think, how could one book a year make that big of a difference, but it really did. I would say from the start of Quill, not only was Quill getting more submissions, but Red Hen itself was getting far more queer submissions in general. We started Quill in 2015, launched in 2016. And by 2018, I realized that one-third of our list that year was queer. That was pretty exciting.

K: Yeah. It's been very exciting to see the growth in LGBT authors. And, of course, you've done a lot of curating both, Red Hen's reading series, but also in Pasadena.

T: Yeah. I think just being a queer person in publishing, people started to ask me about programming and networking, with other queer authors. I say other queer authors. I'm not myself a queer author, but with queer authors in general. And I think at some point, you found out there was a rumor. I had begun a bicoastal, like, queer book festival. Which is a wonderful rumor. That's not actually true. Maybe one day, but not quite yet. But, yeah, I have done a lot of queer programming, just made a lot of connections. And once you start to get into the world, you learn more and more about it.

And, of course, I did read an absolute ton of queer authors while completing my master's and studying for my thesis. My thesis ended up being focused on *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, who actually passed away while I was finishing that thesis. But I did have the honor of meeting their wife, Minnie Bruce Pratt, later on, which was a wonderful honor.

K: So one of the things that people ask me often was when Red Hen started, "what was the plan?" Let's be clear, there wasn't really a plan.

It's funny because I remember when I was raising my kids, I would sometimes meet other parents who would say, like, "we run a tight ship over here". And I would think, oh, I'm running a pirate ship over here. You know, everybody is allowed on the ship. There's a certain amount of drinking from the captain, and there's a lot of animals on the ship. Red Hen wasn't quite a pirate ship, but a little like that in the sense

T: like a kayak.

K: Like a kayak or a canoe. Yes. Quick to change directions and so on. And part of that was that we were in Los Angeles. I think that if we had been in Minneapolis, where there were 3 other presses, which we could have visited all the time, or even in New York, where there's, you know, umteen presses, we might have had more of a sense of where we were in the literary landscape.

For the first 20 years, I really didn't have much of a sense of where we were or where we were going in the literary landscape. People kept suggesting to me that we move to some other city. Why not move to the Pacific Northwest? Why not San Francisco? Or even many suggestions that we move to New York.

You know, the first part was I'm not moving while my kids are in school, but then it was kinda like, oh, you know, I guess we should just stay here. So I didn't feel like there was a strong sense of Los Angeles wanting Red Hen to be here. But I also feel like we started as a micro press, certainly. And so in the beginning, I thought we were just gonna publish 3 to 5 titles a year. We kept on working to grow the press because we kept feeling like LA needed to have a bigger press.

As we grew it out and it became bigger, part of what I wanted to respond to was the idea that there were more voices that needed to be published. I got excited about certain books, and I would just wanna add to the list. Once Toby came on in 2015, and once she came into marketing, I really felt like what was a rather unruly list became much more contained. Because Tobi was running marketing, was able to sort of look at the list in terms of there's gonna be a spring season, a fall season, and let's have a much more contained list. What I wanted to do was just sort of make magic. And I think like many visionaries, I was just jumping in and moving ahead. The first time we wrote a business plan was when we had hit 29 years. So we weren't

doing a lot of planning. We were really creating vision and working to create a space in the literary landscape for the kind of writers that we felt needed more space.

At some point, for example, I was in Alaska doing a reading. One of our authors there, Peggy Shumaker, explained to me that writers in Alaska had a lot of trouble getting published. That was because they're so geographically far from New York or any other literary center, even, you know, San Francisco or Portland. And I never thought about that, but it had taken me a long time to get to Alaska. Even from Seattle, it is a long flight. Tobi, you just went through the summer. How long of a flight is it?

T: You know, I was on vacation, so I had no sense of time, but I do think it's somewhere around fiveish hours.

K: Yeah. It's a long flight to get up there. And so she started explaining to me that they're geographically disadvantaged from the literary world.

And keep in mind that when you're talking about Alaskan writers anyway, first of all, writers tend to be poor. So Alaskan writers aren't any richer than the rest of us. So just flying down to Seattle is going to be something. And Seattle isn't a huge publishing center. So you're talking about wanting to get to, say, San Francisco or, God forbid, New York, it would be much more challenging.

And so we started this Alaskan imprint called Boreal. And our editor, Peggy Shoemaker, has been amazing to work with and has brought us some fantastic writers. So, Tobi, what would you say is one of your favorite Boreal books? I know you liked H Warren, *Binded*.

T: Oh, yeah. *Binded* by H Warren. That was pretty fabulous, fabulous poetry collection. Also, I was a big fan of *The Curve of Equal Time*. Well, it's about Alaska, and I read it on my way to Alaska. So that was very amusing. I feel like I need to read it again now that I've been to Alaska so I can understand it even better. But I loved that one.

And I also remember the first Boreal book I read when I came on to Red Hen is called *Wander* by Lori Tobias. And it's a really, it's a quick read, but there's a romance wrapped into it and some mystery. But I remember learning so much about Alaska and so much about radio, actually.

The main character works at a radio station, and it was just one of those novels where you learn so much about industries, things that I never even knew I didn't know, like the danger of moose. Moose are very dangerous. Lot of cases more dangerous than bears because a bear actually wants to get away from you. And a moose kinda wants you to get out of its way. So, yeah, fear of moose also. And also it being the idea of it being so, so cold that you would actually have to leave your car running while filling it with gas was beyond my poor little California bloods comprehension.

K: Absolutely. I remember going to Homer, Alaska, and there was this one pub. And they explained to me that they were one of the last pubs to say that you had to step outside to smoke a cigarette. And I said, how cold is it when people are still stepping outside and they were, like, 40 or 50 below?

And I thought you really got to want to smoke to step outside to smoke a cigarette. So yeah, Alaska is a whole different landscape.

T: Yeah. I just realized we were talking a lot about LA. Just to jump back, where actually did you start the press? Like physically? Where were you working?

K: We were in Sun Valley at the time, we were living in this very old house, and it didn't have heat. So that's the famous story of my mother-in-law, at the time, gave us a cord of wood. So the cord of wood was dumped in the driveway, and you guys came home from school.

And I said to you, "guys, mama has to work on Red Hen Press, so I want you guys to move the cord of wood." So you kinda pushed Steve ahead, and Steve said, "we was thinking that when we finished moving the wood, we could each have a bowl of rice." I acted like I was kind of thinking about it for a minute, and then he added on "with soy sauce." And, then I said, "okay, but make it snappy."

T: Funny because I don't actually remember us ever asking for food. We were very hungry children. Yes. But I'm glad that we thought we needed a trade for that.

K: Yeah. So you guys traded the moving the wood. So I mean, this house was really falling down around our ears that we were living in when we first started the press. And then we moved from there to Granada Hills. No laptops. We were just sitting at our desktop.

T: Typewriter?

K: Typing away there. Yes. It's funny too because I remember visiting Saraband when they were several years in, and they were in these beautiful offices, and they had art on the walls and everything. And I remember thinking, wow, we're still at my kitchen table, and look at them go. It just seemed to me that they were quite impressive at the time, Louisville being an easier place to start a press.

And that was when I came back and we sat down and kind of talked about it. I realized that the minimum wage in Kentucky at the time was, like, \$8 an hour and in Los Angeles was \$18 an hour. And so I had one staff person, something like 20 hours a week, and they seem to have 2 or 3 people who are part time and was a much easier place to be Louisville.

T: So in that beginning, like I know you said in the beginning, it was 3 to 5 per year. What about the very first year? How many did you publish?

K: The very first year, we just got going. And we typeset the first book. So the first book actually came out in 1995. 2 books came out in '95. And then the very first year that we filed taxes, our tax return was \$38,000 And the next year, it was \$65,000. And the year after that, it was \$130,000.

At some point, we hired a real bookkeeper. That was when whoever was doing our 990 kind of complained about me.

T: Oh, you doing the bookkeeping all by yourself?

K: Their complaint was they said that there were 2 problems they felt were connected.

They said one, all of these numbers don't completely add up. And the second complaint, which they felt was connected with the first, was there are wine stains on the figures.

T: Yeah. Fair enough. Fair enough. How else would you get through them? In that case, do you remember what it was like marketing this first book? Or should I say what was marketing like back then? The Internet's barely there.

K: Right? The Internet's barely there. So part of it is walking that back. Distribution was kind of crummy in the early days. So first of all, we did our own distribution for the first few years. And so we were mailing our books out to bookstores, sometimes driving them around.

When we finally had distribution, it was SPD. So many of our listeners will know that SPD just closed. Everyone started with SPD back in the day. I think we were with them for 5 or 6 years. In the beginning, what we would do is as many events as possible.

So events are, as many listeners would know, direct sales, because direct sales were where you made some money, you know, when we would do a lot of direct mailings and direct sales so we could get that direct money in. And then, of course, there was SPD. When we really started making any money at all was when we went from SPD to Chicago distribution. And that used to be the trajectory for most presses. You started SPD when you were, what I think of as a micro press which is publishing fewer than 5 titles a year, then you went to a university press.

University of New England distributes a lot of wonderful presses. I believe that they still do Four Way Books. University of New Mexico does. And Chicago used to distribute a lot of them. That used to be the trajectory.

You just went to a university press, then it just became hard for the university presses to do this. And the whole book world is, there's so little profit at each stage of this. And you and I both teach publishing in UCLA's extension program, And we try to explain this to our students that this isn't oil. In the whole book world, everybody's taking a little bite of it. And the problem with distribution is that university presses have really struggled with this because they couldn't really make enough money to make it worth it for them.

As you know, that continues to be a challenge in publishing. The distribution continues to be kind of a challenge.

T: You made the reference to oil. I think the reference there is that the oil companies, they drill the oil, they refine the oil, they transport the oil, they sell the oil. Almost all the way to the final consumer

K: Right.

T: More or less.

K: Vertical market

T: Vertical marketplace. For us, the author brings the book to the publisher who creates the book and then sends it to the printer to be printed and then sends them to the distributor who sells them to the wholesaler, who sells them to the bookstore, sells them to consumer. And those are all separate entities, especially for independent publishing. And even if you're Big Five, sure, maybe you're your own distributor, but you're still probably not your own printer. You're still not your own bookstore. There's still pieces along the way.

K: Random House does their own printing.

T: Well, go Random House.

K: And yeah, the added problem to that is there's money in oil to begin with, right? And there's so little money in book publishing.

T: They get to raise the prices with rocks where you raise a dollar and there's a riot.

K: Right. Right. So I really think, you know, I know, again, going back to Tobi and I teaching, publishing at UCLA Extension, one of the things I like to tell my students is this is an industry that we're all in for love and that runs on grace.

And sometimes it feels like there's not quite enough love or grace. Mark, who does contracts at Red Hen, Mark and I, you know, were the co-founders, was speaking with someone today who, after he became the publisher of his press, just couldn't take it anymore because it just wasn't fun anymore. And I thought, wow, I get that, you know, because the joy of it is the love and the grace. I think that's what keeps us all going is the love and the grace.

So I wonder, Tobi, for you, you've been at this for a while. There got to be some times that you think of in the time that you've been working in publishing, that were just like that was a high point. I know of some high points for me. What do you think of as a high point for you in



publishing? Like, something that you remember that you think, wow, I'm so glad I was in publishing and had that experience.

T: Well, there's been a lot of those. I think of a lot of moments that made me really happy to be in publishing.

Getting to call the author who's won the award for a publication is always magical. I've had authors, I mean, anywhere from disbelief to just screaming with joy. It's always a really special moment to be able to call someone and say, like, you know, we went through every submission. We sent it to the judge, and you are the winner. Do you accept? And then, you know, that's always pretty wonderful, getting to really, like, hear that and see that.

Discovering an author is always pretty incredible. That doesn't happen as organically as it seems to always happen in movies. Sometimes you're just by yourself in the dark reading a manuscript, and you realize that this is the book you wanna read.

But sometimes you meet someone in person or you hear someone reading for the first time, you think, my god, I've got to get this person's next manuscript, which I've gotten to do, as you know, with C Bain. The first time we heard C Bain read in New York at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division. That's right. The reading there, I remember hearing C Bain read and thinking, my god. We have got to get this next manuscript. And we finally did, and we got to publish that next book called *Sex Arguy*. And that was pretty excellent.

Every time you get to call an author and tell them they won an award, not just a publication award, but, like, you know, any award is always pretty amazing.

Getting press, finding out that that surprise book was a bestseller. I think, actually, weirdly, one of my favorite moments because that's, I think, when I realized one of the superpowers of Red Hen was the book *Sugar Land* by Tammy Lynne Stoner. Because when it first came out, we were talking with some of our marketing people, you know, some salespeople. We go around the country talking with people about our books, and we got some feedback that maybe we shouldn't press so much into the fact that the main character was a lesbian because we might not sell enough books if we did that. And I remember saying, okay, "you want me to try to market this towards people who don't want a lesbian book and to miss the market of the people who are looking for a lesbian book?"

And they're like, "well, you know, the lesbian market's a little niche. You might want to, like, steer away from that." And this was right when I started off in marketing, I think. And I remember, you know, just going with my gut and saying, like, "no. I'm not going to do that. I'm not gonna market to the wrong audience. Niche or not, I'm gonna go to the right audience." And it became the bestseller of that season. I think it's still one of our top bestsellers of all time. That was when I realized there are some books that people are going to say, "oh, that's a little bit niche." But there's really no story that's truly niche. Everything has universal appeal. Everything is relatable in a way that I think anybody can connect to and, like, find pieces of themselves. And maybe

they're not gonna find them whole selves, but who can ever find their whole selves? You know, we're all unique.

Yeah. I would say *Sugar Land*. And also just working with Tammy Lynn Stoner is amazing. Like, it was a joy anytime I run into her. I remember going to her launch party where she had like cupcakes and like her book cover was all over the cupcakes.

And there's just something about the joy of a book launch that really makes it worth it.

K: Yeah. I agree with you. I think book launches can be really fun meeting authors that you've been reading their work. Like, I sort of can't wait to meet Hannah Sawyer, who is this author we have coming up, *Dreams in Which A Mom is Human*. I really wanna meet her because I love this book so much. So I'll fall in love with the book and get really excited to meet the author.

There have been some big authors. Ursula Le Guin, I was really, really excited to meet, and she was amazing. And when I first met her, she had agreed to do an event with me. And so I walked into this, sort of book bar that she was already there. And I saw I walked up to her and she was like, "hey, Kate. I'm so glad you came. I was thinking," I'm so glad you came. And so I said, can I get anything for you? And she was like, "whiskey straight. Make it good." And I just thought like, oh my god. Like, this is what I dreamed of you being like, you know. And so then we just sat down and had this great conversation about what it was like to be a writer.

And I just, like, so jazzed to be meeting her. And she ended up giving us a short story for an anthology that we were working on. And it's one of my favorite short stories of hers, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, for me it is just such a meaningful story. And so I think that the other thing that I would say is one of my favorite things in publishing is there's been a number of times when I've sat down, Tobi, with you and Monica, and sometimes with with Piper as well now that Piper's part of the team, when we're all brainstorming about something. And, like, the first time I think that it was like, you and Monica and I, and we're just, like, coming up with ideas. Monica is just like a flurry of ideas. Right? And, that feeling of having a great team and realizing that I'm not alone coming up with all the good ideas in the room because I feel like Monica has tons of ideas. You have tons of ideas. Piper has tons of ideas.

Now that we have Sam on the team, I can't wait to see all the great ideas Sam's gonna have. And so I feel like that, trusting your team, knowing your team is gonna come up with 10 times more ideas than you are, is just a revelation and makes me feel like, like, wow. I invited a bunch of geniuses to be in the room with me. And now we're all doing this together. And in the beginning, I often had this feeling that Mark and I were playing ping pong in the dark.

And so if one of us missed the ball, woah, it's gone. And so now I don't feel like that. I feel like there's a whole group of us that are making magic here together.

T: Yeah, that actually reminds me since it was just the two of you back in the beginning, what do you feel like was the biggest lesson that you learned back in the very beginning? Was it like that you needed a bigger team, that you needed to market books, you needed a business person?

What do you remember being that first really big lesson that helps sort of launch you forward? Clearly, you learned a lot since you were doubling the budget every year for many years.

K: Well, I would say two things. One was that what Mark and I started the press on and then what pushed us forward, I would say, for the whole first decade of the press was the idea that risk was what was important and the willingness to take risk. And both of us had come from, you know, the sort of crazy childhood where at some point, you're gonna end up sleeping in your car and telling yourself, "this is fun. This is an adventure. This is great. Look at the stars." But, when you're running a press, you know, living that close to the edge is slightly less fun. That risk taking, living on the edge kind of thing was what had propelled us forward as young people and what we took into publishing.

And so I think that after the first 10 to 15 years, we move toward the idea that we needed people with marketing ability, who understood marketing, and most of all, who understood media. The current marketing media team at Red Hen of four people all have skills and ideas that we did not come to this game with. The other big thing, though, was that when we got started, we became a nonprofit, and it did not occur to us at all that we were gonna have to raise money. And when it did occur to us, immediately, we thought, "oh, great. We'll write grants. We're already fiction writers, so we can do that." And then we sat down with a bunch of different people, and they said, usually about 10% of the funding comes from grants. And we were like, woah. I would say that my learning curve with editing has been steady, And that my learning curve with what it takes to raise money has been sort of like, if you looked at the trajectory of the Matterhorn, if you ever looked at that, yeah, pretty much a quick steep thing up. That's kind of, that's what you're looking at there. Like a list of things I need to learn might have started with, like, how to dress and and, you know, do not swear when you're at meetings with people, probably.

T: Oh, yeah. That must have been difficult for you.

K: It was very challenging.

T: It's amazing that we have not sworn so far.

K: I know it is amazing that we have cleaned up our language, but just cleaning up my language at a lunch at Nobu and wearing clean, appropriate clothing took years to learn, I gotta say. But it's actually much, much more than that. I mean, that's actually just the frivolous part of it. I really think that what I needed to understand, and it took me a minute, was this. If you sit down with somebody who's excited about what you're doing, and you remember that this person, first of all, could be funding something else, but they could also be doing something else that's much more exciting than sitting there with you hearing what it is you're working on.

You didn't get a choice in your life. Somehow, you were born crazy. And I think about myself and I think I have a PhD in English, I could have lived a solid middle class life and raised my kids and had a normal existence. But the point you've decided to start a nonprofit in Los Angeles that's publishing books, you'd have to say you were born crazy. So you're sitting there with this person, and they're excited about hearing about my writing in the school's program or my LGBT program, or they're excited about hearing about this African American literary prize that we've started or this Letras that we've started for Latino writers.

They wanna hear what they could do to help the press. That person has chosen to leave their life and be with me for an hour and hear about the exciting stuff Red Hen has done. I don't know if they're gonna help me. Maybe they're gonna introduce me to someone. Maybe they're gonna introduce me to a foundation.

Maybe they wanna be on the board. Maybe they just wanna hear my story and maybe they're gonna support the press, but maybe they're just going to, say, you should be meeting someone else. But they could be doing something else, and they've chosen to be with me today at this lunch. And so what I think as I'm sitting there is what I'm feeling every single moment of that meeting is gratitude.

#### **break**

K: So, Tobi, we've talked about some of the things that gave us a lot of joy working at the press, but we've also had some challenges, some fun times.

Yeah. And as I always like to say, challenges is what make us have a lot more character, which I think would qualify us as people of great character. What do you think first of all?

T: Well, I've also always heard that you're either having fun or you're learning. And by that we are learning a lot. We must be very, very smart.

K: Yes. We must be just like, very high.

T: I will say we usually are also having fun. But my God, do we learn a lot?

K: We do. We do learn a lot. Also, the other thing, attached that is, that you learn the most from your mistakes, which again would make us so so knowledgeable.

T: So knowledgeable. I mean, geniuses, frankly.

K: Yes. That's what I would say as well. So given all of that as an intro here, when you think of big challenges that we've had, what is one of the biggest ones that comes to mind? And I'd like you to think of this in context for our listeners who may or may not understand all the challenges of publishing, because I've been trying to talk about this with my students who are kind of

confused by everything that's changed in terms of publishing. And one of the things I've talked with them about is that, like, the way I edit a book hasn't changed that much. Sure. I'm using track changes. Even the way I'm raising money has changed a little bit over time. Lisa Greer would say it should change a lot more. She'd probably be right.

But there are parts of publishing that have changed a lot in the last, particularly 10 years that have produced some big challenges, particularly for your team. Can you talk a little bit about that?

T: Well, I feel like marketing and media are always changing. We were talking about marketing before the Internet, worlds apart from what we're doing now. And then, you know, something new comes on the scene. TikTok is on the scene, and suddenly TikTok is everything. And everything about media has to be about TikTok. And it's a great avenue to, like, find people. It has a tighter algorithm. You can, like, really find the people who are looking for the books that you're putting out. But it's also not the easiest one to break into.

I mean, media and marketing are always changing. I mean, the pandemic obviously changed absolutely everything. We had to go completely virtual with everything and somehow manage to survive. I think the projection at the time was that indie presses were gonna lose 70% of their book sales that year, and we managed to stay steady mostly because we had a fabulous backlist, and we had lots and lots of books people already knew about and a lot of people were reading, but post pandemic is a completely different world for how we're marketing, how we're finding people.

And the thing with marketing is I don't think I would enjoy marketing in general. I think I enjoy marketing books because I'm not trying to convince somebody that they need this pair of shoes. I'm not trying to convince someone that they'll be more beautiful if they do this or do that. You're not trying to tell someone, oh, you'll be smarter if you read this book. You're trying to find someone who's going to love and connect with the story in the book.

I feel like I am trying to authentically find the people who are going to truly enjoy this book because I'm not trying to convince them to watch a movie for 2 hours. I'm trying to convince them to spend the next 5 to 15 hours sitting down, alone, reading this book or listening to it. But either way, that's just something, it's a lot, it's a lot to ask of someone. It's a true connection. It's not just, you know, you can't convince somebody to do a 5 to 15 hour activity.

They have to really want to do it. You have to find them, not create them.

K: Right. One of the things I like to think about is that when I was in grad school, I wandered around the Duttons of Los Angeles, and that's where I found almost all the books that I fell in love with in grad school. Was at those Duttons bookstores, the one in Brentwood and one in North Hollywood.

There aren't as many indie bookstores now. When you think of finding readers, we publish books at Red Hen, and you want those books to find their way to readers. This is something we talk about a lot, both with students and just whenever you and I are giving talks. Can you just briefly give our listeners the difference between marketing and media? What part is marketing and what part is media in terms of a reader finding it at Parnassus?

T: Depends on who you talk to. I would say for most people, I consider media is part of marketing, but not all marketing is media. The way that we separate it here and I think the way a lot of book people do is that the marketing part of it is very much behind the scenes. That's me basically organizing and overseeing and working with my team to pull together all of the metadata, which is, you know, every piece of information you see on the Internet about any book that goes out on the Internet or is online or is in databases. So we do that.

We're also presenting books to our sales reps so that our sales reps at Publishers Group West get excited about our books and go and talk about them to the bookstores. I'm sort of, like, through data trying to convince people of how cool these books are, and not just convince them, but, like, show them how cool our books are. And so my job essentially as marketing is to get the book into the bookstore. And that means I'm working with the distributor. I'm making sure the books get where they need to go in the warehouse.

That means that I'm convincing the sales reps about the book so that they sell them to the bookstores, and the bookstores actually buy them. So marketing is me getting the book actually into the bookstore, which is one step away, obviously, from the very important part of the reader actually going to that bookstore or going online and clicking and actually purchasing that book.

So if marketing is getting the books to the bookstore, media is getting the person to the bookstore who buys that book. Because if we did all marketing and no media, I would have nothing but returns. It'd just be a lot of books on shelves that eventually got returned because there wasn't a person who was excited enough about that book to go to that bookstore or go to that website and click buy or take it to the counter and and really buy that book.

It really does take both. You know, I've had people say, well, you know, which one's more essential? Like, well, technically, you can do marketing without media, but it wouldn't go anywhere. It's kind of like having tires and no engine. You know, you kinda need both to get the car to get anywhere.

So media is I'd say marketing actually has maybe changed less than media has. It's like where you find people. Like you said, people used to go to bookstores, and they do. Bookstores are thriving. I would say they're doing even better.

But a lot of people are finding them online, which means it's not just a cool book that a bookseller is gonna say, like, "oh, yeah. You're looking for a cool, like, adventurous romance? Like, here you go. Here's a book." What you're kind of hoping is that they're going to Google adventurous romance and that we have done our jobs well enough through metadata and SEO

and all of these technical things that our book is gonna come up in that first page Google search because, you know, god forbid it's on the second page. You'll never find it, which is also, I think, why you were part of why you were saying that marketing and editorial have gotten a lot more connected. Because sometimes, you know, we'll have a a book we're really excited about, but the title is something like, you know, Green Grass, which is a kind of a beautiful title, but, like, would never you'd never find it on the Internet. If you Google green grass, like, you know, weird example, I don't think we've ever had a book called that. But it would be a terrible book title, not because it's not beautiful, but because you would never ever find it on the Internet.

K: Right. One of the things we do when a book is sent in is we go on Amazon and see if there are other titles by that name. I remember a poetry book that was sent in a couple years ago, and there were, like, 40 different between video games, book titles, and just everything, there were 40 different things of that name. And we were just like, sorry, you have to change the name, it's gonna get lost. So that's one of the first things that we do. And that sort of comes under marketing.

Also, obviously, under marketing is you and I go together to Winter Institute, which is a conference where we get to meet with with booksellers, American Library Association under marketing. But again, this is getting the books out there. So there's a lot that goes under marketing. And then I just think of media as just like being on a train that's moving so fast. I go to New York 4 or 5 times a year, and I'm meeting with all these different people and asking them questions about, you know, which media is most important.

And I feel like if I go 4 times a year, I might get 4 different answers. Like, oh, Instagram. I feel like when I go in September now, if I find out that TikTok and Instagram are running head in head, I won't be surprised. Although the last time I was there, I was told Instagram just because things change so quickly.

T: Now it's all about Tik Tok.

K: Yeah. It is.

T: Hashtag BookTok.

K: Right. So things change very, very quickly in the media world. And so we don't wanna be running to catch up. We wanna be right on top of that.

T: Right. Which is why it helps that we are in a canoe.

K: Yes, exactly. Exactly. We just change turn our little canoe and quickly we're on top of the latest media phase, doing that and having our authors involved as well. And one of the things that's been great with working with our authors is we have a lot of author partnerships.

T: People ask me what makes a successful book, and I really think it has most to do with the partnership with the author.

Also, authenticity, like, you know, authenticity in all things. But, really, you've gotta have a really solid partnership with the author. Press, we can do everything we can for a book. But unless an author's there to really meet that energy and continue to push it along, the book is very unlikely to be as fully successful. Our top selling books have always been with a really involved, excited author who worked with us. Not just side by side, but truly worked with us, and, like, we made plans together, and we made things happen together because that's really how it happens.

I remember talking to the vice president of sales at our distributor, and I asked, you know, "what's what's the secret? Is there a secret? How do you make a successful book? And she's like, oh, well, that's easy. Really successful book is a magical unicorn of a moment. I was like, okay. Well, weirdly, I felt a little better because it's as difficult for the vice president of sales as it is for me, but also that it really is. It's a magical moment. It's about the content. It's about the author. It's about the timing, and it's kind of about a lot of it's kinda magic and luck. It's about, oh, no. I don't wanna say 50%, but my god. It feels like 50% sometimes magic and luck that really gets that amazing book in front of the right people at the right time and the moment where they're gonna read it.

Like, even the best book if badly timed will not launch. And even kind of like a book that you know is amazing but has kind of a small market, it can hit that timing just right and just launch into the sky.

K: Right. I mean, I always think of books like, you know, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I don't know how well that book would sell now. It's got a lot of masculinity going on there. The women aren't treated as well as they could be in that book. But at that moment, it seemed to be a book about breaking out fighting against the man. And that was the moment when everyone was talking about that. That was its magical unicorn of the moment when you have an idea that meets a moment and you have an author who's fully willing to participate in, you know, kind of riding that wave, that's when it all kind of comes together.

And that's part of the reason why, you know, publishers try to have enough books out there that one of them might sail that wave. You know, again, when we were publishing 3 to 5 titles, our chances of having that, quote, bigger book weren't as good as they are now that we're, you know, publishing 25 titles, which brings me to the question of the future. And I'm going to come back to that future question, which I think is a very good place to land on. But I have one more question for you, Tobi.

So I know we're talking about moments of joy. And I kind of wondered also for you, when you think of your time at Red Hen, what feels like a time when you'd really accomplish something great? Or you felt like, I'm so glad this happened? A moment where it just felt like it was all kind of coming together? It's hard for me to answer this question because I don't feel like I have any



moments of success in isolation. I feel like the moments of success are always like a team success or success with the author.

T: So I just realized it really is the moments of like pure success feel like when we all want at the same time, and I don't necessarily feel responsible for that success, but I know that I was a part of it. And I would say that actually one of the best moments of that was with our beloved poet, Kim Dower. We've had many books come out with Kim, and she had this book that we worked we all worked really hard on together. We really wanted it hit a gift market. We wanted to make sure it was beautiful.

*I Wore This Dress for You, Mom.* And we timed it out to be for mother's day, so we carefully made sure it came out, you know, a few weeks before Mother's Day because that's the timing. And Kim Dower pushed so hard on it and did so well and is herself a publicist. We were working hard. She was working hard. The book was beautiful. The content was beautiful, and it became an LA Times bestseller when we were talking about the magical unicorn moment and, you know, the timing and the success and the content and how it all has to come together perfectly. Like, that book really, really did. Even as a poetry collection with the LA Times bestseller. And I just remember thinking, my god. Like, we did it. Like, look at Kim go. Look at this book go. And so, again, it doesn't feel like my success. It was definitely our success.

I think anything with marketing is our success. Now we have another one coming out with her, and we're gonna try to hit that magic moment with Valentine's Day. That one really did feel magic. Something about just every single piece of it felt like it came together perfectly. And sometimes we're surprised. You know, there's books that we know deserve more accolades than they got, or we know it deserved that book award, and somehow we had Viet Thanh Nguyen published that year. And, of course, he got it because Viet's incredible. And how can you beat him? Sometimes no matter how amazing a book is, the timing just doesn't quite hit for it. But, like, you know, another one recently, *A Punishing Breed* by DC Frost, got the New York Times review. And the New York Times review is very difficult to get, and that one felt like pure magic. And it's been doing so much for that book, and it's so well deserved. But still, I think I remember thinking, my god. Like, we got a New York Times review? Very difficult to get The New York Times to look at you in an election year if you're not a politician. That one felt amazing.

And then, of course, Percival Everett and his collection that just came out with us, *Sonnets for Missing Key*. You know, this book, we accepted it a couple of years ago. How could we possibly have known that his book, *Erasure*, was gonna become *American Fiction*, which is gonna win, you know, the Oscar and just has absolutely launched this book. And people keep saying, oh, I didn't even know he was a poet. And we've been publishing Percival for what, 15, 20 years? This is a 6th collection with us. And that's sort of how it is. Everyone likes to say, oh, you know, that so and so is an overnight success. And Percival's what this is his, altogether, 20th, 30th book. He's been doing this for decades. He's always been an incredible writer. Then suddenly, something happens, and everybody sees him all at once. And Entertainment Weekly just featured his poetry collection with us. Like, that's the sort of magic.

I don't even we're not even sure how Entertainment Weekly found it. And we are so excited they did because this book is great. And it's very personable. It's fun. It's sarcastic. It's witty. It's very much like *Erasure*. Of course, *James* is incredible. For all of it to happen all at once, I think, is the magical unicorn of a moment that you hope for.

K: Absolutely. You know, Percival does seem pretty laid back about it because that's kind of his nature. I always like seeing how laid back he is in the face of great success. But now that he's getting to be quite famous, he continues to be quite laid back. So I think that, as we're wrapping this up, I wanted to say something and then see what your response to this would be, Tobi.

When you get to 30 years, people start asking you, what is the next 30 years going to look like? And or at least with the next 10 years are going to look like? What I want to do is publish the same number of books that we're publishing now, but publish larger and then eventually much larger print runs. That's really what Graywolf did when they got to a certain stage is they started having lead titles that had these larger print runs. And that this is basically what Tobi's been talking about is that her team is really digging in on what they can do to grow their marketing and media presence and their footprint in the marketing media world. And so we're starting to have these books that have larger print runs that sell in a bigger way. And that's what we're looking forward to in the next few years is really taking on books that sell very well. I can't wait to, in future podcasts, introduce some of the authors that we're going to be publishing in 2025, who are literally fantastic. But I really feel that with Red Hen's fantastic team, and with some of the books that we have coming up, that what we have to look forward to is very significant book sales, audiobook sales, foreign rights sales, but much more than that. What we have to look forward to is an amazing team working closely together to create literary magic, to create literary community, and to work with our authors so that each one of them has a great experience working with Red Hen, and that they can feel themselves creating homes for their books all over the world. What would you add to that, Tobi?

T: We haven't said this actually yet, but there are not enough publishers in this country. Rough statistics, I look it up every once in a while. I think now we're somewhere between 2-3,000 presses in all of United States. I think India has about 18,000 in comparison. So there are not enough presses.

So we are looking for that author that really fits in the Red Hen family. Right? Like, we are looking for those perfect authors. And, you know, with those books, we're looking for we don't need the perfect reader, I suppose. But we are, you know, you're aiming for the perfect reader.

You know, you might find all sorts of people around it. You're looking for the reader who's, like, sort of the perfect audience for that book. Like, maybe you're just looking for magic. But all around, we're looking for that partnership. We want our readers to say, like, "oh, wow. I wanna go see what else Red Hen is publishing. I wanna see what else this author is publishing". We wanna be giving the experience to the authors, to the readers, even to our own team. It's not a lot of money in publishing, but there's a lot of passion. There's a lot of excitement. And we

wanna be sharing that passion, that excitement, and making sure our authors love their covers. You know? Like, you've had the experience where, like, you had a book arrive at your front door that you wrote, where they changed the title and they changed the cover, and it doesn't feel great. It doesn't make you feel like you're in a partnership, like you're in that magic family. I mean, it's a partnership.

We are kind of accepting each other. They want us as a press. We want them as an author, and we all wanna find readers together. And we're looking for the kind of books that we feel like change the world. Change the world, change ourselves, I guess, which does change the world.

So I read *Stone Butch Blues*, and that was the first time I found myself in a book. I saw a genderqueer nonbinary person in that book. A lot of people see a trans man. A lot of people see just, like, a really butch lesbian. Everyone can see what they like.

But what I saw was a genderqueer person, and I'd never seen that before. But I found myself in that book, and I've never seen myself in any other book in quite the same way. Like, I literally didn't know what I was until I read it. And finding that in a book really absolutely changed my life and changed the trajectory of my life and made me want to help other people find themselves in books as well. And that's part of why I say that I think our superpower is making the niche universal.

Finding community in what felt like a point of isolation, I think, is a universal experience that we're all really looking for. And then we're also all trying to learn about each other. Like *Wander* is about, like, you know, a straight woman in Alaska who works at a radio station. And I am not any of those things, but I learned so much about all of those communities. And that still changed my life. And I still think about that book all the time.

I feel like in publishing, I'm looking for people to find themselves, but also find each other in unique and lovely and amazing ways that, like, they just never would have found otherwise. And I'm just gonna stay with them for the rest of their lives.

K: One of my first books that I fell in love with that made me want to work in publishing, just the one you'll feel a sense of belonging here, was *Jane Eyre*. Because when I read it, I was like, oh, yes, orphans always have to eat burnt porridge.

T: Exactly.

K: Exactly.

T: You see yourself.

K: I saw myself eating the burnt oatmeal. And I was like, it must be just a staple in orphanages that we all have to eat the burnt oatmeal.

I want to mention 2 other books that are mad love Red Hen books. One is *Bad Stories*. I'm looking at it right now on our shelf by Steve Almond.

T: Bestseller of all times.

K: Yes. *Bad Stories* is a fantastic book. It was about the 2016 election, and it kind of explains how we ended up with that election. I think that again, no matter what side of that election you were on, it was kind of a moment you were like, woah, what's happening here? And Steve Almond dives into it and kind of looks at America through the lens of George Orwell and Moby Dick and tries to explain American culture. It's still very funny because Steve Almond is hilarious. So it's one of our books that is well worth reading.

Another book that I'm looking at right now, I wanted to end this with a book that Tobi found. Amber Flame's *apocrifa* has become quite a staff favorite. This book is just absolutely glorious. How did you end up acquiring this?

T: I was introduced to Amber Flame by Kristen Millares Young of *Subduction*, which is one of my favorite books to talk about. I absolutely love *Subduction*. Such a Red Hen book, so excellent and complex and just like the kind of story I've never really read anywhere else. And Kristen Millares Young is just an absolute media freight train in just the most magical way. One of my favorite books of all time.

So Kristen, I remember when Kristen told me ahead of time, you know, there's a poet I really want you to meet. If Kristen thinks that there's somebody worth meeting, I absolutely wanna meet that person. And I think Amber Flame said it best at some point. We met each other, and it was just like editor author love at first sight. As soon as I met Amber Flame, I thought, my god, we are definitely gonna publish this book just the way that Flame talks. I was already glancing at their poetry, looking it over, and I just knew that we were gonna publish this book. And I had absolutely no business even bringing you a poetry collection, let alone trying to get you to really take it. So I was very pleased when you liked it well enough to take it as well.

K: Yeah. Amber Flame is one of those people that you feel the flame, you feel the love, you feel the joy, and that is a Red Hen story.

So thank you all so much for being with us today. We look forward to more conversations like this. Thank you all so much. Thank you, Tobi, for being part of this amazing conversation, and, of course, I'm so glad to be here with you and Red Hen Press.

## **Ending Conclusion**

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We couldn't do this without you. Thank you as well to our Red Hen podcasting team, Samantha Diaz on media and marketing, Piper Gourley on sound editing, and Kate Gale and Tobi Harper Petrie on the mic. Tremendous thank yous to our special guests for their generosity of time and wisdom. For more information, find us at [redhen.org](http://redhen.org). In the meantime, keep reading, keep writing, and keep dreaming.

Talk to you soon.