

## **Season Two, Episode One: The Benefits of Independent Publishing for New and Emerging Writers with Laura Kasischke and Khanh Ha, moderated by Tobi Harper Petrie**

### **INTRO:**

Welcome to Red Hen Radio, a podcast brought to you by Red Hen Press. We're a nonprofit publisher fostering diverse stories every year. On this podcast, you'll get to hear from the people who are inside the literary world, the authors and publishing professionals who are working hard to keep independent literature thriving. Stay with us as we introduce you to today's segment.

### **Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Hello listeners, I'm Tobi Harper Petrie, chatting with you all from the new podcast studio here at the Hen House. Welcome to another episode of *Red Hen Radio*. Today, we'll be discussing the experiences of being an author at an independent press. And to share their journey, we are joined by Red Hen authors, Khanh Ha and Laura Kasischke. Can you share a little bit about yourselves? Laura, we'll start with you.

### **Laura Kasischke:**

I'm Laura Kasischke, and I'm very proud to have a novel coming out with Red Hen Press in May. It's called *The Lifeguard*, and it's about a tragedy that takes place at a pool in a small Midwestern town in 1969.

### **Tobi Harper Petrie:**

All right, lovely, thank you. And Khanh, how about you?

### **Khanh Ha:**

Hello, I'm Khanh Ha, and I'm a new author with Red Hen Press, and my forthcoming book is coming out in May and it's titled, *The Afterlife of a Threadbare Jester*.

### **Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Both your books are being released in May. Can you let the listeners in on what to expect from your stories? Khanh, we can start with you on this one.

### **Khanh Ha:**

Well, in a nutshell, *The Afterlife of a Threadbare Jester* portrays a former South Vietnamese intelligence officer who spent fifteen years in various communist labor camps after the North Vietnamese communist victory in 1975. He said, "I was a man in his prime at thirty-five when I went to prison. My daughter was only three when I left. Now she's eighteen and living in America with my wife, who left me."

After fifteen years, he was released. He was ordered to report to the authorities in Saigon, his hometown. He had no identification card, belonged to no family register, and must report to the local security police once a week. He realized he was leaving one prison to live in a bigger prison. What bowed him to a tender memory was the little girl he had met 14 years before at the seaside, who reminded him of his old daughter he never saw growing up. And bowed by this memory, he defied the order and set out in his afterlife as a new man—homeless, destitute, and threadbare to his final destination.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Thank you. Laura, tell us a little bit more about yours.

**Laura Kasischke:**

Well, as I said, my novel takes place in the summer of 1969, which is also the summer that there was the first moon landing. It's a story that really is about a whole town. It's told from

multiple points of view, but it all circles around the same incident. A drowning of a child takes place in the first sentence—so it's not a spoiler alert!—on the day of the moon launch. And of course, like in all small towns, there are many people who are considered to be sources of the evil of the town.

However, like in many small towns, I believe the actual source of the evil is far more subtle and mysterious and elusive than that. And my novel...I attempted the novel to have some of the qualities of poetry while also having some of the suspense of prose, of fiction. And I wanted there to be echoes and a sense of revelation happening throughout the novel that would be a little bit like, I imagine...I'm not a photographer, but as I imagine in a dark room, how photographs begin to become their own images.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Thank you. Speaking as a reader, I think independent presses are pretty cool. There are presses like Red Hen that publish a wide range of genres and stories, and there are presses that have a more niche catalog of books. Laura, what drew you to an independent press like Red Hen Press for your book?

**Laura Kasischke:**

Well, I am primarily a poet, so independent presses, to me, are everything. I am not typical, maybe, of fiction writers in that way, in that I go first in...I don't know about fiction writers or *readers*, I would say. I'm not typical of readers, maybe, in that I go first to independent presses as a writer and as a reader. But that is, you know, because for so long...

There are of course poets who publish with commercial presses and they're wonderful poets. I do not in any way mean to condemn poets who are publishing with commercial presses, but they're just a tiny segment of the poetry population. So it is just my belief, perhaps, which began because I'm primarily a poet, that the great writing is being published by independent presses. And if it's true of poetry, how can it not be true of fiction?

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Traditionally, authors submit their works through their agents or open submissions. Khanh, you submitted your manuscript to the Cai Emmons Fiction Award. Can you tell us what that process was like?

**Khanh Ha:**

That process is like the change of weather. Sometimes, from the winter, frigid cold to the spring, incandescent warmth, and I must say, it is full of surprises in that spectrum. I can't expect anything.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, all right, well, I guess for both of you, was the submission process thrilling or terrifying?

**Laura Kasischke:**

My manuscript was submitted through my agent, and I would say that it was our belief early on that this would be a small-press book. I do not mean to pigeonhole commercial presses by saying there's not enough sex and violence in it, but there really is not. However, I *do* think there's a lot of suspense in it, so I don't want people to not read it because there's no sex and violence in it.

As you know, I'm sixty-four years old. I've been around the independent publishing presses for a long time, watching what comes out of them and who's publishing where and books that stick with me. Oftentimes, the press that they were published by sticks with me as well. So Red Hen was just always that.

I would say that the reason that the process was nerve-racking was because it took me so long to write this novel, and also because I felt unsure of it up until the last draft. I mean, after a while you have to let it go. But I would say that it was because of the press, having an independent press, that gave me some independence, and also some extra time, was crucial for me.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Absolutely. Thank you. Khanh, how about you?

**Khanh Ha:**

Well, it's not in between. It's not thrilling or terrifying or anything. It's more like anticipating, like waiting for the rain. And sometimes you hear thunder, but the rain never comes. And sometimes

it's a downfall, and suddenly, like the plants and flowers, you feel incredibly reinvigorated. That's my experience.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

So a lot of our listeners are current or future authors. What do you think writers should be focusing on before submitting their work?

**Laura Kasischke:**

I think that writers have to focus on what they're writing and the completion of it to the best of their abilities. I mean, this is not universally true for me.

But I feel that I am a much better writer when I am not thinking about if something will be published, who will read it, if it is published, who will publish it. And that's the great blessing that we have, that there are many wonderful presses out there that are willing to take chances on work that is not...just doesn't just check all the boxes. It would be wonderful, I think, to write something that you could check all the boxes about, but instead, the process is really all you can think about, I believe. To have hope that maybe you're writing something publishable that will be published, but otherwise it's just...you're talking to yourself. And I would say I have published with commercial presses, and I would say that at that time, except for with my first novel and maybe another one, I set out to check the boxes.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Gotcha. Yeah. Well, that is sort of what you have to do, right?

**Laura Kasischke:**

And the fiction that I really love doesn't check boxes, so.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, exactly. It's outside of the box, right? All right, Khanh, how about you? What do you think writers should be focusing on before submitting their work?

**Khanh Ha:**

I should say that to me, at least, that you should have your manuscript polished to perfection before you submit. And even though making "perfect" should be understood as a relative perfection, but once you feel that confidence, having no doubt about the quality of your work without rushing headlong into it, then go ahead and submit it.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Absolutely. What surprised you most about working with an independent press? And Khanh, why don't you start us off?

**Khanh Ha:**

I must say their open-mindedness, in general, and their receptivity. And we exchange ideas back and forth, and you feel gratified about the process, and it pays dividends in the end.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Thank you. Laura, how about you?

**Laura Kasischke:**

Well, I would say once again, as a poet and as a fiction writer—because I've twice published with small presses, published fiction—it's the publishing experience for me. I would say that...yeah, all of the things that you would expect that are different between a commercial press and an independent press, just having to do with contact with human beings, you know, and the sense that you're an individual among other individuals...which is not to say anything bad about commercial presses either.

But with Red Hen Press, I don't feel like I'm a seasonal project and that you'll be done with me, you know, after May. I feel like that there's a commitment, and I've always felt that from independent presses.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

The commercial tendency—I mean, you know, necessity—to have six weeks of the project after publication, and then be done and move on, I think, is why a lot of authors have been moving from commercial to independent, at least from what we've been told. It's brutal to work on a project all that time, have it come out, and then have it be completely done and over six weeks later. I can't imagine.

All right. Well, thank you both for sharing.

A lot of elbow grease goes into making a manuscript into a published book. For an independent press like ours with a small team, we wear a lot of hats, and I'm sure you've both spoken to or emailed everyone on the team at least once. What do you think readers don't realize about how much work goes into publishing a book? Laura, why don't you start us off?

**Laura Kasischke:**

I would say that I feel that, as a writer, I, too, am in the dark about what goes on in the publication of a book. Those of us who write and read books and buy books but are not in the industry at all, I just think we do not appreciate it. I don't think we can. I don't, as a writer, feel like I've done all the work. I don't feel that way at all. But I feel like I reach the end of my abilities when it comes to just producing a manuscript...to have anything happen with it, to have

it out in the world, to have it look good, to have it be free of typos, I'm completely dependent on my press. It's nice to be able to be.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, absolutely. Khanh, how about you? What do you think people don't realize about how much work goes into publishing a book?

**Khanh Ha:**

I can say in three words: a whole lot. For readers who never wrote a novel, I would start with conceiving a novel, and it could take months, and then writing it, and that could take months and sometimes years. And then after you finish writing it, you revise it, and that could take several attempts and several months. And after that, you start submitting it, and the process would take months. And then once or if it gets accepted, then starts another editorial process, and it will take months. And then once it gets published, then you begin another journey, selling it, promoting it. Some writers are cut out for it, some writers are not. But that's a long, winding road.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think people don't realize the difference between being a writer and an author is a lot more work than writing.

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**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

How hands-on was the book process for you?

**Laura Kasischke:**

Well, I'm a problem child wherever I go. I'm no less so at Red Hen than with any of my previous presses. I revise up until the last minute. It's an anxiety thing, I'm working on it!

So the patience and reassurance that I receive is the only thing that makes it possible for me to even open up my laptop sometimes and even look at it again. So I would say again, you know, not being involved in that process, all I can say is for any kind of success, and if the novel is successful as it's written, I owe everything to the press for the time, for the inspiration to do it, for the support.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Thank you. Khanh, how about you? How hands-on was the book process for you?

**Khanh Ha:**

Well, I must say that I'm always directly involved in that process. Only when I'm asked to, I'm asked to participate in that process, then I'll be willing to share my thoughts. And usually, it takes two to tango, and we go back and forth on things like editing or cover design/ideas, something like that. And then in the end, receptivity from the presses usually impresses me most. And they take inputs from the authors, and they make it work. So I do appreciate it.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Thank you. Well, given both of your experiences, why should writers consider submitting their manuscripts to independent presses?

**Khanh Ha:**

You mean Red Hen Press.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Well, I mean, to any independent press. There's many, many of us. But I think sometimes people really think, like, I have to submit to a commercial press. And I think maybe there isn't as much heard about, or at least it's not as shown in movies... Yeah, but I mean like Red Hen Press.

**Khanh Ha:**

The problem with mainstream or "Big Five" publishers, New York-based publishers, is that you have to go through agents, and most of them are looking at something in the veins of something else. If someone is successful and they said, "Okay, I'm looking for manuscripts, authors that can duplicate that," you know...and then they shut you out. If you come from the Iowa workshop as a graduate student, then you get accepted. But the independent presses, indie presses like Red Hen Press, they promote diversity and they represent underrepresented voices. That's what drew me, at least, to them.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Absolutely, yeah. Thank you. Laura, how about you?

**Laura Kasischke:**

As I said before, I feel like the independent presses are where it's happening. I think it's where the art is. It's where the literature is. I have had experiences with many different presses, and I would say there's absolutely no guarantee of fame or riches from any press, but there is a guarantee of a kind of support that comes from an independent press that often is not the case with a commercial press.

And I would say that I think I come at this maybe backwards, because of poetry and because of fiction. I feel that so much wonderful fiction that is often experimental and taking risks is published by commercial presses, but not as much as is being published by independent presses. I think it's probably not uncommon among maybe poets of a certain age or those of us who like to think that...especially like in the 80s, that we were a little on the avant-garde side...

I feel that I am much prouder to say that I'm publishing with Red Hen Press than I am to say that I'm publishing with a commercial press. I feel like it gives me...okay, this could be wrong, or it could be pathetic that I need it, but I feel like it gives my novel...a kind of legitimacy as potentially art or poetry, but while I'm trying to maintain the traditions of the form of fiction.

So I would wonder, why wouldn't you? I mean, yes, if there's money to be had somewhere, go get it. But I would say that if you want to get some money from publishing, you should set out to do that before you start writing. You know, for a while there, I had no problem thinking I'm writing this for money. But now...I'm kind of winding up my years on the planet and I want to write what I hope will be meaningful to people, or it's meaningful to me at least.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. So, for me at least, independent presses matter more now than ever because independent presses work with amazing authors, with more and more readers who are looking to deliver the stories that they're hungry for, right? Stories that stay with you for a lifetime and change the way you look at the world and the people around you. I think it sort of echoes a little bit of what we've all been saying.

Not that we don't want to make money—obviously, we do—but not just what's going to make money, not just what's going to sell hundreds of thousands of copies and then end up in a landfill in two months, but like the kind of books that you like keep on your shelf because you want people to see it and you want to recommend it to your friends. For me, it's also like the books that you think about for years—those books that I've read that I feel like I read them yesterday because I've been thinking about them ever since.

So, what would you tell writers who feel discouraged or unsure about submitting?

**Khanh Ha:**

For people or authors or writers who feel discouraged or unsure about submitting their work, I must say there can only be two things. Either they feel inadequate about the quality of their work, or they fear rejection. In the first case, then you should go back to your manuscript and polish it up. Make sure that you get the rock-solid feeling, rock-solid confidence in your work. In the second case, if you can't take rejection, then don't try to become a writer.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, I warn people all the time, publishing is 99% rejection. People think it's just the authors, but authors get rejected, publishers get rejected. We're submitting books for reviews, for awards, we're trying to get op-eds done...so many of the things we're trying to get books sold...and 99% of what you do at every stage of publishing is rejection. Got to fight through it. I know people who aim, like...until you get a hundred rejections, you're not going to get accepted, you know? If you don't like rejection, you got to stay out of publishing.

**Khanh Ha:**

You know, Stephen King, he has this story that he said when he was a school teacher, before he became famous, he said he decorated his walls with rejection slips.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, absolutely. There's a famous scene in *The L Word*, Jenny...that's a rejection. She puts it on her wall, and it zooms out, and her whole writing office is wallpapered with rejections. I hope people aren't doing it to be self-critical. I think of it as being inspiring. The thing about rejection is that it's not personal. Red Hen only publishes twenty-five books a year. Most independent presses, even commercial presses, have a limit for how many books they can publish every year. Like the rejection is so often not personal. Sometimes it's for a matter of like...

They just don't have that many books, and yours is just slightly too similar to another book they've already accepted for that season. There's just so many different reasons that a book can be rejected. And sometimes, right, like you said, Khanh, it just needs a little more polishing. It's just a little bit too unpolished for an editor to take it on because the risk of what it actually is versus the potential, you don't really know exactly how it's going to turn out. And so you kind of need it closer to that end product before you take a risk on it. But Laura, what would you tell writers who feel discouraged or unsure about submitting?

**Laura Kasischke:**

There's absolutely no law that says that you have to publish in order to be a writer. So, I mean, you can listen to that and should probably listen to that feeling, mostly because, as Khanh was saying, you have to be able to take rejection before you submit anything. If you're waiting to get some affirmation in order to decide if you're going to continue to write, you might as well just quit now.

But I think the best thing to do is to write and write and write until you feel that something is strong enough and important enough. If you...you can get yourself to that point of self-esteem, which many writers can never get to, and hence the reason for the writing, is this attempt to discover some self-esteem. The writing has to be primary. You have to privilege the writing. If you're going to be a writer, and especially if you're going to write long things like long prose or

sustain it for a lifetime...you have to be enjoying the writing, and you have to make time for the writing and make the writing primary in your life so that nothing else can bother it. If it means that you are going to feel badly about yourself if you're rejected, you just aren't ready to start trying to publish yet. If you are afraid that your marriage is going to interfere with your writing, you must not get married. If you accidentally do...I'm just saying.

I mean, there are times where I don't send things straight off because I know that it would hurt my feelings too much to have them rejected. But luckily, I write a lot. And so I often have the feeling, and I did even when I was a little kid, feel like, well, there's more where that came from. If they don't like this poem, I'll write another poem. And I don't quite live like that anymore.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

I always warn people when they say they're writing to get published, I say, yeah, you can't write to get published. You've got to write to write and then find what's worthy of publishing, you know, or what other people are going to want to read. Writing to get published is self-defeating.

**Laura Kasischke:**

And you can also—I mean, this is infuriating as well—but you can go to most bookstores and find a lot of garbage that got published with no trouble whatsoever. So what difference does that make? It would be nice to make money from writing, but there's a lot quicker ways to get rich or to pay a bill. A small bill, even.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, really. I forgot when I was talking about the rejection thing that I Google this now and then to see how the numbers have changed, but I think there are roughly 2,200 publishers in this country as opposed to like 20,000-ish in India. Part of the rejection is simply there are not enough publishers to publish all the great work that's out there, and to like...usher it in.

And self-publishing has helped a lot, but because anyone can self-publish, they don't go through the process of editing and marketing and promotion and the sort of molding that is helpful with a team. And not like artists can't do it on their own. But you know, like most things, if you see it in a gallery, the artists didn't just paint that and get it into a gallery. There was a process by which that art was refined. Somebody picked which of their pieces should go into that gallery or helped them.

Okay, so just in general, for writers, for people trying to get published, do either of you have any other advice that you would give to those people?

**Laura Kasischke:**

Figure out what it is that you like to write about and then write about it. And also if it's something you're really interested in, even if it's just, if it's a lifelong interest, well, then, you've got a lifelong excuse as a writer to read all the books, see all the movies, find out everything you can about embroidery or whatever it is that you use at the heart of your fiction. And that can move around.

And then figure out what makes it possible for you to write, which will change over time, but I think is really important. Even stuff like the right pen, the right journal...you have to eventually settle on something. You can't say, "Someday, I'll get the desk that will make it possible to write." But whatever it is that makes it easy for you to write...

The kind of writing that you like to read is probably going to give you some answers as to "what should I be writing?" And maybe looking into how those authors wrote their books might give you some idea about what your process could be for a while.

So just write and make sure you like it, because it might be its own reward and its only reward. I have a number of novels that luckily I enjoyed writing, because no one has enjoyed reading them. Otherwise, I would just be like, oh, there was seven years of my life that I'll never get back. Not a solid seven years, but yeah.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

That's a good point. Yeah, totally, Seven ongoing...

**Laura Kasischke:**

Of hope, and just being real invested in something.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

It is, it's funny, I haven't heard anyone say that in a while, but it is really important as an author to know, you might really enjoy writing a book sometimes, but...I've talked to someone who wrote a book, an incredible book, edited it over and over, wrote it twenty years ago, but nobody would accept it, nobody was interested in it. In fact, I think what she said was that people said it was too queer.

And then they were submitting it about...five years ago, at this point, and then people were saying it wasn't queer enough, but for us, it was like, boom, Goldilocks zone, exactly what we were looking for. And it was plenty queer enough, I don't know who told her that.

But sometimes, I think it's also the right book at the wrong time. Sometimes you write a book and you've got to leave it behind. I know a lot of authors who are like, well, I've written this one book, and I'm trying to get it published. And I can tell they're not writing more. Sure, submit that,

but keep writing. Don't wait till this is published. Be on the next project. Don't obsess over this one. Like, you could be writing a whole other book in the time that once a week you send this off to submission a few times.

**Laura Kasischke:**

That is so true, or feeling like you don't have a license to write unless you've published something, which actually, you just have to keep renewing your own writer's license by writing a little bit every day, is what I always say.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Another... advice I'd heard was that if you write something and you don't like it, it actually means you're a good writer because you can recognize it's not good enough and that you need to either edit it or write something else that's better.

**Laura Kasischke:**

That's so true. It's horrible, but it's true that, you know, when you get to a point... I mean, I can't read my things I wrote three years ago because I can see what I didn't know or couldn't do then. And you can't just keep rewriting the same stuff because it's boring. It's something to think about when you publish, too, because that puts a bit of an end on it, you know? There are those of us who maybe, the longer we take the better.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Yeah, absolutely. Maxine Hong Kingston takes a decade to write every book. I've heard her say it, she's like, I will not write faster than that. Ten years is how long every book takes.

**Laura Kasischke:**

Yeah, it's been ten years since Donna Tartt had a book, and I'm just waiting for one every ten years.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Khanh, how about you? What advice would you give to aspiring authors and writers?

**Khanh Ha:**

I can only say based on my experience, and I write what I know best. But when you grow older, your imagination expands, and so you tend to write something that stimulates you. And it depends on how you approach it. Like some people would just sit down and write, and they don't know where it would take them, but the more they write, getting into it, the more things open up for them, and they become a story in the end.

But myself, I usually do a lot of research before I write. Sometimes something comes across that really stimulates me, and then I could just take it down and then think if it can be written into a short story or it could merit to become bigger into a scene in a novel. But basically, you start out with writing based on what you know best.

**Tobi Harper Petrie:**

Absolutely, thank you. One piece of advice I always give to people is don't give up. That's the only way you're gonna fail. If you just keep on trying, keep on polishing, keep on submitting, eventually you're gonna get there. But anybody who gives up right before that acceptance...is the only way to not do it.

All right, well, this was a great conversation. I really appreciate you both joining us. Thank you for sharing your experiences with all of us. For listeners, thank you so much for listening, and check back in for your monthly episodes of *Red Hen Radio*. Thank you all very much!

**OUTRO:**

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