



Beyond the Book®



DENNIS STOVALL, OOLIGAN PRESS PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

Q: Welcome again to a program and our reporting from the Publisher's Association of the West, Pub West Annual Conference, which is being held this year, November 2008, in Portland.

Joining me is Dennis Stovall, who is the publisher for a very unusual publishing company, Ooligan Press. And Dennis, do tell us, where is Ooligan Press based? And I think that's the way to tell us what it's about.

A: Ooligan Press is the laboratory for graduate program and book publishing at Portland State University, which is a seven year old program, actually entering its eighth year. It has 80 graduate students. And the purpose of the program is actually to give people who are entering the profession, a broad, generalist understanding of all of the elements of division of labor.

Q: OK, that's your pitch. But really I have to ask you, why would anybody go to school to learn publishing? Back in the day, I know I did some of this, you came out of school, you finished school, you were happy to be done with school, and then you went to work as an editorial assistant. Who are the kinds of people who are going to school for this Master's program? And why are they choosing to do so?

A: Well, the majority of them actually come out of the sort of background that you just mentioned. They were English majors, they were writing majors, and they decided at the end of their undergraduate careers that they need to find some way to make a living with that particular degree. And it's not always easy.

And traditionally, as you noted, people came into the industry and bootstrapped their way along by getting a job, getting in the door. My feeling was that if people had a strong understanding of all of the elements of publishing, they would be at a much richer position for employment in places other than the big publishing houses. Other places where they might need to wear one hat or two hats in order to actually satisfy the needs of the business.

Q: Which are exactly the kind of publishers that attracted to join groups like Pub West and others. And the way the technology is evolving it's making that smaller press much more viable than it was in the past. But as you say, it does require people who have a range of skills.



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- A: Not only a range of skills, but I think an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. Because it's not just knowing how all the things work, it's knowing what you can do well, and what you really need to rely on other's expertise to complete.
- Q: Now somebody who, like myself with a background in journalism, might want to make the change at a point mid-career, if you will, from journalism to book publishing. Do you find people coming to you at that point in life and looking to change the direction of the career, or who just want to change careers entirely?
- A: Actually all of those are the case. I think that there's a significant number of people who are middle aged, slightly younger than I am, who are in the process of changing careers. And then there are a group of people in their 40's, predominately women, who's children are gone back to school, who are trying to make use the degrees they got in their early 20's. And they see publishing as an opportunity. So they want to have the complete overview. They don't want to start from scratch as basically interns at the lowest rungs in some company. And they really need a map in order to find their way in.
- Q: But the point to mention, people can't see it, but they can go on line, and do tell us what the URL is in a moment. But you're a real publisher. You publish books. This isn't just pretend.
- A: You're right, it's not pretend. In fact, the students in the program are organized into workgroups around the ordinary division of labor. They're responsible for everything from the acquisition of the incoming manuscripts, the vetting of them and the proposals, to assigning editorial functions, to other people in their workgroups and doing the design, the marketing and finally the sales. The press has national trade distribution through Ingram Publishers Services.
- And it means that the student's work is really right out there on display. And the responsibility to the authors is a constant pressure for responsibility to the work. Makes it actually a pretty high pressure graduate student environment. People take it very seriously.
- Q: And can you tell us about any of your graduates, what kind of work they've gone to do?
- A: Yes, I can. We've been cataloguing this for our own sake. But we have two who are now in German publishing. We have one who's been publishing in Kuala Lumpur. We have another who has recently gone to Britain and publishing. We have one at the University of Nebraska Press, quite recently. We have probably 20



employed in publishing houses in Oregon right now. Perhaps another 20 have started their own publishing firms, or publishing service related firms. Including three literary agencies.

Q: That's fascinating, because the audience that we draw on for Beyond the Book includes all those kinds of people. And I thought talking to you might spark some thought in them that really might take them to a new turn in the career. And that would be very exciting for them.

A: I agree. I found when I got into this that I had no idea beforehand the complexity of the collaboration that's necessary to really do a book well. We can publish, we can certainly put ink on paper, or words into the digital environment. But that's not the same thing as developing a work, delivering it appropriately to the right audience, and learning all of that requires more than just a simple internship.

So, this is a way for people who have a real love of the word, and a desire to be part of the industry, to make the career changes that will allow them to actually draw a tremendous amount of pleasure out of their next career.

Q: Well, as we can hear with the laughter in the background, (laughter), publishing conferences are hardly quiet, dry events. And I want to thank you for your time. But before we go, I was reading in the background about Ooligan Press that there's an interesting tale behind the name. Tell us that.

A: Yes, Ooligan is the word – it's a north coast Native American Word, Chinook Jargon word, for the common smelt, which is also known as the candlefish, because it, when dry, it was burnable. You could render out of that an oil which the Native Americans did for over a thousand years, and used it as a trade commodity from the Pacific Coast all the way to the Great Plains, and the Great Lakes.

When the word crossed the Continental Divide, it went from the Chinook Jargon, which had an L, to the Athabaskan Jargon, which replaced the L with an R, turning it into Oorigan. Which, for western European trappers and traders, was a sense of destination and wealth, both. Probably referred to the Simon River Valley in Canada. But – or the Fraser River Valley in Canada.

But, in fact, the term made such a tremendously rich fish story, that when it was presented to me by the graduate students, as we cast about for a name for the press, it seemed like it locked in notions of diversity, cultural history and place. And it also sounded like Hooligan.



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Q: Well, it's a wonderful name. I appreciate your time. Dennis, thank you very much for joining me for Beyond the Book.

A: My pleasure.

Q: Dennis Stovall is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Publishing Curriculum at Portland State University. Ooligan Press is a Master's in Writing Program within the Department of English there. They're online at Ooligan.PDX.EDU.

My name is Chris Kenneally, thank you for joining us here at Pub West Annual Conference and another episode of Beyond the Book.

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