SMALL WONDER:
HOW SMALL PRESSES AND THEIR AUTHORS PROMOTE THEIR WORK

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EVENT DESCRIPTION
You’ve signed (or are about to sign) your book contract with a small press. Congratulations! It’s a huge accomplishment, but it’s just the beginning. You likely won’t have a full team of agents, marketers and public relations experts at your disposal (versus, say, if your book was coming out with a large publishing house). So, what can you do? Hear authors and small press publishers offer tips and tricks as you gear up to get the word out about your book.

EVENT CATEGORY
Marketing

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR
Brian Petkash has worked for a number of small presses over the years in marketing/selling their books. He holds an MFA from University of Tampa and his work has appeared in various literary journals. His collection of short stories, *Mistakes by the Lake*, is forthcoming.

EVENT PANELISTS
Kimberly Davis is the director at Madville Publishing, a nonprofit independent press based in Denton, Texas. Kim writes mostly fiction and has an MFA from SHSU, and she teaches at the University of North Texas. She spent five years at Texas Review Press.

Julie Hensley is the author of the chapbook, *The Language of Horses*, and the books, *Viable: Poems* and *Landfall: A Ring of Stories*. She is an Associate Professor at Eastern Kentucky University and a core faculty member in the Bluegrass Writers Studio Low-Res MFA Program

Shane Hinton is the author of the books *Pinkies* and *Radio Dark* and the editor of the anthology *We Can’t Help It If We’re From Florida*. He is president of the
Florida Literary Arts Coalition and a fiction editor for Tampa Review. He teaches at The University of Tampa.

**R Dean Johnson** is the author of *Delicate Men: Stories* and *Californium: A Novel of Punk Rock, Growing Up, and Other Dangerous Things*. He is an Associate Professor at Eastern Kentucky University and Director of Bluegrass Writers Studio Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing.

**OPENING REMARKS & HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Welcome to “Small wonder: How small presses and their authors promote their work.” A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know and a printed copy of the presentation will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing perfume.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
- We realize the lines for the bathrooms may be long, but please refrain from using an accessible stall unless you require such accommodation.
- If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please call or text the Accessibility Hotline **503-455-4127** or email **events@awpwriter.org**.

**INTRODUCTION – MODERATOR**

Thank you all for being here. We know there’s a metric ton of panels and book fair events from which you can choose and the fact you chose this one means a lot. I’m hopeful we can offer you some usable tools and ideas to take with you when you’re ready to market, promote, and sell your books.

Admittedly, I put this panel together for, perhaps, selfish reasons. One, I wanted to do something with these fine and talented people. Two, in past AWP, I was oftentimes discouraged, a little, by authors whose panels on promoting their work, even those of first-time authors, often used such fantastical words like “my agent,”
“my publisher’s marketing team,” and “promotional budget.” I knew my book, *Mistakes by the Lake*, a collection of short stories set in Cleveland, Ohio, wasn’t going to land an agent—short story collections so rarely land an agent—and, therefore, likely wasn’t going to end up at a big publishing house where I’d have a team of marketers, or even one dedicated marketing expert, at my disposal. I knew I’d not get to use those fantastical, mythical words.

Not that those panels didn’t offer some wonderful ideas, of course. They did. And I’m going to use them myself and share some of those with you here, too, but I knew when the time came my resources just wouldn’t be the same. So, selfish reason #2, again: I’m hopeful to learn something, as well, from everyone up here.

Quick aside/caveat: this panel is geared toward books from small presses. Self-published books are a whole different animal and, for various reasons, some of the ideas discussed here that work for small presses don’t necessarily translate to self-published works (although there can be overlap). Now …

I am fortunate to be joined by Kim Davis of Madville Publishing who is, gratefully, my publisher, and who does wonderful things for all of her authors, all on a limited budget. I’m also joined by a group of terrific writers and self-promoters: Julie Hensley, R. Dean Johnson, and Shane Hinton.

To get us started, if you could each introduce yourself and give a brief overview of your experience in book promotion. (Afterward, I’ll ask some questions and then open the floor to Q&A.)

**INTRODUCTIONS – PANELISTS**

**Kim Davis**: Twenty years ago, I started designing websites. In 2002, I self-published a book that was picked up by a UK Press in 2004. Through marketing that book, I learned a great deal about many promotional practices that don’t work. I’ve also learned a great deal from designing and maintaining other authors’ websites. A couple of them have seen way more success than I have, and they teach me new things all the time.

**Julie Hensley**: I’ve published a chapbook and a poetry collection (both with small, independent presses) and a novel-in-stories through a contest with a university press. An introvert who was notoriously unengaged on social media, I’ve had to compensate for some serious natural inadequacies to self-promotion.
**Shane Hinton:** I’ve written two books and edited a third, all with the same small press. I’m lucky that my publisher has a publicity machine in place, but I’m not at all naturally inclined to sell my work. I see the business of selling books as completely separate from writing them and I’m not very interested in that aspect of the process. I love interacting with people at events, and my publisher knows this, but I’m not any good at the motivated-self-starter style of book promotion. We’ve come to an understanding about what I’m comfortable doing in terms of promotion.

**R. Dean Johnson:** I’ve published two books, one with an indie press and one with one of the big New York publishing houses, and in both cases the bulk of the promotion fell upon my shoulders. I’d like to say it was like having a second job, but much of the time it was more like volunteer work because I really believed in the cause but the pay was often non-existent. But, when my third book comes out, I’ll have a much better sense of what to do and how best to do it, and I’m looking forward to hearing what my fellow panelists say so I can add a few more items to that “to do” list.

**Brian Petkash:** As mentioned, my first book is coming out in May from Madville. So, I’m in the thick of things in terms of promoting and marketing it. But, I also spent 10+ years working in sales/marketing for a variety of small press publishers: from genre publisher White Wolf (who actually had a budget, at times) to graphic novel and comic book publishers like Blue Dream Studios, The Astonish Factory, Mighty Gremlin, and Archaia Studios Press. And while comics are a slightly different animal, I’ve found tools I honed in promoting those books useful for my own.

**QUESTIONS**
[Responses in this outline will be expanded/expounded upon in many ways during the actual panel.]

**What were your expectations? What were your press’s expectations?**

**KD:** From a publisher’s perspective ...

**JH:** My expectations were low. I figured I’d be lucky to sell a few hundred copies and that I’d have to work very hard to accomplish that. I’d heard that even authors published by New York houses were having to do the bulk of promotion on their own. The presses provided very limited swag. They encouraged me to schedule readings and other live engagements, to seek opportunities for reviews and interviews, and to look for contests that could create more exposure.

**SH:** My expectations were very low. I don’t particularly care so much about book sales aside from the fact that I want my publisher to stay in business to keep
doing their good work. I see each individual sale, reader interaction, and review as a success, but I’m not very concerned with the quantity of any of those.

**RDJ:** I think this is a good place to start since authors really should give this some thought so their efforts match their expectations.

**BP:** From a numbers standpoint, I’ve heard from more than one small press that a successful book sells around 500 copies. So, that is my baseline expectation and that may differ from my publisher's expectations ...

**What have been some of the more effective techniques/tools you’ve used to promote your book?**

**KD:** Readings and signings: Successful authors treat promotion like a job, setting up events and traveling with their books year round to schools, libraries, and bookstores. They do interviews and write editorial pieces on spec to get their names out there. They build mailing lists through email marketing and create a fan base. Look closely at who you know and what organizations you belong to. Approach them. Find the book clubs in your area. THE LIONS CLUB is a great resource. Find them. They are looking for a speaker every single month. (Thank you, Johnnie Bernhard for teaching me this.) Take a big box of books when you go. One author I heard about was approached after speaking at a Lions Club luncheon by a man who offered to buy books for every school library in Houston. Social Media is also a good brand builder. It’s the fastest way to build your “mailing list.” Look for others with big friend bases, and leverage who THEY know. Above all, be consistent, write regular blog posts and share them to social media sites.)

**JH:** My poetry book has actually sold better than the novel-in-stories that won a national contest and came out with a university press. I attribute this to the appeal of the subject matter to a non-literary audience—it centers around motherhood and infertility, chronicling several miscarriages. I’ve had people I met on planes or restaurants or the gym order the book after that topic came up. I’ve had people tell me they read it upon the suggestion of a friend of family member in the midst of a fertility struggle or were given it as a gift. I think finding a conduit for a general, non-academic audience can serve sales. The author Bren McClain (*Mama Red*) told me that what helped launch her novel, which focuses on the relationship between a boy and a cow, into international sales was a half-page ad in an agricultural trade journal.

**RDJ:** Bookfairs and festivals are where I’ve seen my best results. First, you have a lot of people attending these events because they’re not only interested in reading but they’ve come to buy and many of them like to meet the authors of the books they’re buying. Some bookfairs also offer workshops and panels, and I highly recommend participating in these. It gives an audience a chance to
meet you, to get a sense of you as a person and an author without having to stand in front of your table at the fair, which can be awkward for some people. I’ve often had people who had never heard of me but attended my workshop on Friday come by my table on Saturday and buy a book.

**BP:** I’m still awaiting the final results in terms of how it affects actual sales, but social media (as averse to it as I am) has gotten quite a bit of traction. I taught high school English for 15 years and 800 or so of my friends are former students. Posts I’ve made regarding my book have garnered a ton of Likes and correlated with those posts have been giant blips in traffic on my author website. I also have high hopes for contests (that I’ll likely run via my own social media, but may also do through Goodreads) and signings in and around Cleveland.

**What are some ideas that didn’t go as well as you would’ve liked or that, in retrospect, you’d like a do-over?**

**KD:** Events (like AWP) are places to make connections and build brands—not sell books. Attendance is expensive, and if they’re taking home any books at all, the attendees want the books for free or nearly free. They’re a lot of fun, though! Just understand that on the spreadsheet at the end of the year, you’ll be thinking about whether or not it was worth it.

**JH:** Bookstore signings that were not attached to readings, particularly in places where I did not have family and friends to spread the word, proved ineffective and embarrassing. I sat for an hour, gave away a lot of chocolate, and maybe sold one book. (The only upside was writing off family travel if I could somehow attach it to book promotion.)

**RDJ:** I did a Goodreads giveaway/contest that didn’t seem to do much. Plenty of people entered, and there was a surge of people putting the book on their To Read list, but as best I can tell it didn’t affect sales nor was there a surge of ratings on Goodreads.

**BP:** Jury’s still out, but I know getting essays placed in other publications (and, for me, I really targeted Cleveland) has not really done much. You don’t want to make these essays buy-my-book oriented—perhaps focus on place or craft—but submitting such essays through normal submission channels has not borne much fruit. At other panels, I know some authors have found the help of their agents and/or larger presses useful in editorial connections and placement. Perhaps I need to amp up my own outreach to such publications.

**Were you asked to do things with which you were uncomfortable or did not agree? Were there things your press was willing to do but could not do for some reason?**
**KD:** There is so much we’d love to do, but the problem is always money. We’re non-profit for a reason—no profit! We’re short staffed, so I really appreciate it when my authors research the prizes they want to be nominated for and give me a list with all the current contact info and dates. If I can pay the fees I do, but sometimes the author pays the fee.

**JH:** The editor of the small press that published my poetry collection snuck a full wine and cheese spread onto an AWP side stage. When asked by security to remove it, she just sort of concealed it. As a general rule-follower, I felt a little uncomfortable, but I also felt grateful that she was willing to go renegade for her writers. I am terrible at verbal self-promotion—you know, the kind of thing you have to do at book fairs to lure over the readers who are filing through the auditorium. I use two strategies to decrease that discomfort: 1) include a card with the subject matter on the table in front of each stack of books, and 2) have an ally in another row (usually my husband or some other writer friend) to reinforce the promotional rhetoric. (I talk up their book, and they talk up mine. Somehow, that feels less awkward, and, just maybe, potential readers are less suspicious.)

**RDJ:** I don’t like the way my press writes about the book, but I have no control over that. But, their ideas for promotion have all been reasonable.

**BP:** Nothing uncomfortable, no. I am full of ideas, though, so it can be tough when, for money reasons, a publisher isn’t able to do everything you’d hope. For example, I’ve curated a list of independent bookstores in the Midwest and Great Lakes area (since my book, I hope, would play well in those regions). I’d love to do a mailer to 35-50 (or more!) of the press’s catalog + bookmarks, but nice catalogs cost money as does mailing them.

**How do you line up readings for yourself and/or what are your strategies for giving a good reading?**

**JH:** I called in all the old favors, contacting mentors and classmates whose work I had showcased over the years. I also contacted bookstores, libraries, and colleges when I knew I would be traveling through an area. I tried to align myself with other writers so potential programs could feel they were getting a “two-for-one” deal. In terms of the actual performance, I try to bring some personality into the narrative set-up. They want you, not just the text. I have also begun to hold up the text as I introduce it but then read from a manuscript that features expanded font—I don’t want to stumble over the material because of my old lady eyes. I’m generous with the Q&A—that is another opportunity to connect and make a sale. Just because people aren’t purchasing the book that night doesn’t mean that they won’t be moved to order it later.
**RDJ:** I contact bookstores through almost every means I can find—email, Facebook, Twitter, etc. I don’t call because it feels awkward to me, and I want to give them my pitch along with links to my website and the book’s publisher. I always try to make clear what my connection to the area is in terms of family, work, school, and friends, or connect to the store in a way that makes sense to their specific mission.

**BP:** Because my book’s setting is so specific, I researched both the Great Lakes Independent Booksellers Association and the Midwest Independent Booksellers Association. I live in Tampa, so I also knew a few local bookstores in Tampa/St. Pete. I reached out to a number of them via email and, so far, have set up a few readings (with more to come, I hope). I also tried hitting up libraries in both the Cleveland and Tampa areas but have not yet cracked that code.

**Q&A SESSION**

At the end, there will be time (5-10 minutes) for Q&A. (Pass the wireless mic to the person posing the question or repeat all questions.)

**HANDOUT**