Book contests have become a popular way for authors to have their books published. But how do these contests work? And what happens after you’re announced the winner? Join editors, marketers, judges, and winning authors for a discussion on how the contest and publishing processes work and how journals and presses have made collaboration possible. Have your questions answered on whether contests are worth entering and what you can expect if you win a contest that includes book publication.

**TYPE OF EVENT: AGENTS, CONTRACTS, CONTESTS**

**Participants**

- **Moderator:** Elise McHugh is an acquisitions editor at the University of New Mexico Press. Her acquisition subjects include poetry, fiction, and literary nonfiction. She also serves as the in-house editor for the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize and the Mary Burritt Christiansen Poetry Series.
- **Joe Mackall** is the author of *Plain Secrets: An Outsider Among the Amish* and the memoir *The Last Street Before Cleveland: An Accidental Pilgrimage*. He is cofounder and coeditor of *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative*. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and on NPR’s “Morning Edition.”
- **Angela Morales**, a graduate of the University of Iowa’s nonfiction writing program, is the author of *The Girls in My Town: Essays*, a collection of personal essays and the winner of the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize and the PEN Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay.
- **Joan Frank** is the author of eight books of literary fiction and two books of collected essays. A MacDowell and VCCA Fellow, Joan also teaches, edits, lectures, and reviews literary fiction and nonfiction. Her book *Try to Get Lost: Essays on Travel and Place* won the 2019 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize and has just been released.
• Phillip Lopate has written over twenty books, most recently, Portrait Inside My Head: Essays, To Show and to Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction, and A Mother’s Tale. He has also edited the anthology Art of the Personal Essay and is an MFA nonfiction professor at Columbia University.

Planned Questions
Elise will open the discussion with a brief overview of the panel’s purpose and an introduction of the panelists.

1. For Joe: What made you and Daniel Lehman decide to start a nonfiction book prize? Please tell the audience a little bit about the journal’s prize process and explain what the winners receive from River Teeth if they win.
   • The prize is another opportunity to get a book in the world.
   • I’ll discuss the prize process from start to finish.
   • I’ll discuss what winners receive from River Teeth.

2. For Elise: What does the publishing process look like after a winning book has been chosen?
   • Once a winner has been chosen, the press works directly with the winner on the book contract; I contact the winner to discuss a contract within a week of Joe and Dan sending the author’s contact information to me.
   • I work with the winner if he or she has any revisions for me to look at prior to sending the final manuscript to me.
   • Since the book is to appear in next spring’s season, I work with the author if he or she has any revisions to make prior to submitting the final materials to the press, and then I coordinate the delivery of the final manuscript, typically no later than the end of March.
   • Once the winner sends the final manuscript to me, I get it into production immediately so it can be published the following spring (the press is always working twelve to eighteen months in advance).
   • The book goes through the copyediting, design, and printing processes.
   • The book receives the same marketing treatment as other UNM Press books; this includes book review copies being sent out, the book being entered into post-publication awards, and setting up book events with the author.
     • The book is also listed as the winner of the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction
Prize, a designation that appears on the book’s cover, on the press’s website, and in publicity such as press releases.

- I recommend talking with your editor about other projects that you are working on. UNM Press staff believe that we publish authors, not just books. We want to support an author’s career, and we like to work with authors on new projects when the opportunity comes up and the project is a good fit for the press.

3. For Angela and Joan: Why did you choose to enter a prize?

Angela:
- The timing was right; my manuscript was mostly complete, and the River Teeth deadline was near.
- I had published in River Teeth before, and I loved the journal, the editors, and the quality of writing.
- The contest judge was Cheryl Strayed, a writer I’d followed and admired.
- UNM Press looked like a good fit for my work.
- I did not have an agent or any other publication prospects at that time, so the prize seemed serendipitous and alluring, like a small portal had opened and I’d best toss my manuscript through it before it closed up again.

Joan:
- I’ve turned to contests, like very many, when other options have been exhausted. Contests are read and curated by educated believers. They are judged by respected, working writers and published by professionals who want to make an excellent product.
- Contests have birthed fully half of my published body of work.
- I’ve spent a lot of money on contest-entry fees. It’s an inescapable necessity.
- I often submitted the same work to the same contests year after year, and I eventually won a couple of them. Judges often change each year.

4. For Phillip: Why did you agree to judge this particular contest? Did you have a sense of what you were looking for or hoping to find, and how did things take shape for you once you received the finalists’ manuscripts?

- Phillip will respond to the question.
5. For Angela and Joan: What have been your experiences, positive or negative, having won a contest and been published by the press? Would you encourage others to enter contests?

Angela:

- I would absolutely encourage writers to enter contests, but I would recommend that writers do the research and make sure that the publication, judge, and timing feel right, or would at least be a viable match for your work—an informed gamble.
- My experiences have been all positive. This had been a very gentle way to enter the publishing world. I have not had to worry about sales, rankings, or numbers. UNM press feels like a loving home for my work without the worries and pressures of not selling enough books. After winning the PEN award, I learned that university presses can compete with the big publishing houses, too. I’m very grateful to *River Teeth* and UNM Press for this experience.

Joan:

- Small presses are multi-tasking heroes who nourish and protect serious literature.
- Contest winners are judged by working writers of literary excellence whose choices and aesthetics are not market-driven. They pay serious, artistic attention.
- Publication via contests, teaches: Editors, copyeditors, publicists, and distributors can help you make your work better.
- You gain good relationships with skilled, dedicated people.
- *Do not, do not, do not expect fame and fortune* if you win a contest. Instead:
  - Be thrilled that a judge you admire selected you.
  - Be delighted by publicity, online attention, and good critical responses.
  - Rejoice when you hold the real, bound book in your hands that permanently joins (or launches) your body of work.
  - Savor adding a new line to your CV, which will now lead bylines, bios, and queries.
  - Enjoy praise, congratulations, and good feedback.
- Contest publication enables eligibility for various awards and prizes post-publication.
- *Most important:* a contest win gives the internal go-ahead to consider yourself a working artist. Accept that affirming push toward the future of your writing life.
6. For Elise and Joe: What drives *River Teeth* and UNM Press to hold this contest and publish the winning book?

Joe:
- The contest is another opportunity to place a work of creative nonfiction in the world.
- It allows us to keep up on trends and themes.
- We are able to work with a press concerned more with literature than with sales.
- The contest is one way in which we take part as fully as possible as literary citizens.

Elise:
- This contest allows us the opportunity to partner with another creative outlet for publishing good work.
- We are able to work with the editors to discover new voices that might otherwise go unnoticed.
- Creative nonfiction is a part of UNM Press’s publishing mission, and this contest provides a great addition to that list each year.
- As Joe notes, it helps us to keep up on themes and trends in creative nonfiction.
- It is a privilege to meet new authors and work with them on their winning book and—hopefully—on other books in the future that might be a good fit for UNM Press.

Elise will open the floor for audience questions.