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# THE BENEFITS (AND LIMITS) OF PUBLISHING WITH A UNIVERSITY PRESS

You don't have  
to be a university  
professor to  
publish with a  
university press.

By Sandi Sonnenfeld

Last May, as the pandemic tightened its grip and locked-down readers were scanning the dozens of reading lists being posted on social media or shared by distant relatives, one somewhat surprising list popped up on Literary Hub: "The Best of the University Presses: 100 Books to Escape the News."

If the "university presses" flag conjures the image of a stack of PhD dissertations, the variety of titles and the range of genres included on the list should easily erase it: *The Tony Morrison Book Club* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020); *A Confederacy of Dunces* (Louisiana State University Press, 1980); Billy Collins's first published work, *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (University of Arkansas Press, 1988); and Karla FC Holloway's *A Death in Harlem* (Northwestern University Press, 2019), the first volume in a proposed #HarlemBooks fiction series.

The list runs on, offering a rich mix of history, fiction, poetry, science, mystery, and humor—some books you may have read long ago, others you've never heard of—selected by members of the Association of University Presses (AUPresses), and not a dissertation or monograph in sight.

Unlike trade publishers that focus on titles for general readers, university presses primarily publish single-volume books written by scholars for a specific academic audience. Many publish specialist journals as well, for which academic or independent scholars and scientists write peer-reviewed monographs on their respective specialties—pioneering research, innovations in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, medicine, technology, business, or the law.

But most university presses—more than 100 currently operate in the United States—also publish a wide range of books aimed at mainstream audiences, if often with a much smaller initial print run than commercial publishers.

Indeed, to help frame the value and importance of university presses not just to the publishing world but to our society as a whole, the Association of University Presses reports that,

since 2000, 35 Nobel Laureates in Economic Sciences have published work with university presses, as have 31 Bancroft Prize-winning books by noted historians.<sup>1</sup> As for literary authors, in the same time period, 13 Nobel Laureates in Literature have also published books with American university presses, including J. M. Coetzee, Gao Xingjian, Imre Kertész, Peter Handke, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio, Mo Yan, Patrick Modiano, Herta Muller, Orhan Pamuk, Olga Tokarczuk, Tomas Tranströmer, and Mario Vargas Llosa.<sup>2</sup>

University presses are also known for first discovery-publishing first books by unknowns who go on to have major careers. Literary writers looking to publish their first volume of poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction will find more than two dozen university press literary series or annual writing competitions to which they can submit work, including the Yale Series of Younger Poets from Yale University, Pitt Poetry Series from the University of Pittsburgh Press, the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction sponsored by the University of Georgia Press, the Iowa Prize for Literary Nonfiction from the University of Iowa Press, and the Publishing Laboratory Prize from University of New Orleans Press, to name just a few.

You need only to consult a single issue of *Poets & Writers* to learn more about university presses calling for submissions to various writing prizes, anthologies, or chapbooks. (See sidebar for a list of author resources to help you identify university presses for your manuscript.)

Both fiction and nonfiction writers stand to benefit from publishing with a university press, particularly if they write about highly specialized or localized topics. Louisiana University Press publishes books related to all aspects of southern culture, from cookbooks and gardening to Creole folklore and the history of Jim Crow laws. The University of North Carolina Press, the oldest press in the South, was one of the earliest to invest

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in regional titles that cover a wide range of themes and topics, from *Mama Dip's Kitchen*—a perennial bestseller since it was first published in 1999<sup>3</sup>—to its 2021 titles, which include *Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery*, *Sick and Tired: An Intimate History of Fatigue*, and *Good Walks: Rediscovering the Soul of Golf at Eighteen of the Carolinas' Courses*.

Equally eclectic titles can be found on the Brandeis University Press site (*Ducks on Parade!*, *The Eddie Cantor Story*, and *American Jewish Thought Since 1934*), on the University of California Press's site (*The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making*, *Radical Care*, and *Racial Justice* and *Gaslighted: How the Oil and Gas Industry Shortchanges Women Scientists*), or Columbia University Press's site (*Music, Math, and Mind: The Physics and Neuroscience of Music*, *World as Family*, and *Finding Ferrante*).

### Alternative Voices

As mission-driven organizations, university presses actively seek to publish underrepresented

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<sup>1</sup> [aupresses.org/the-value-of-university-presses/member-presses-quick-facts/](https://aupresses.org/the-value-of-university-presses/member-presses-quick-facts/)

<sup>2</sup> [aupresses.org/the-value-of-university-presses/member-presses-quick-facts/](https://aupresses.org/the-value-of-university-presses/member-presses-quick-facts/)

<sup>3</sup> [mamadips.com/mama-dip/](https://mamadips.com/mama-dip/)

voices: **They** were among the first publishers to issue works that explored African American, Asian American, and Latinx cultures and the consequences of racial prejudice and inequity. Many of the first anthologies and book series that focused on people of color, women and feminist thought, and LGBTQ+ authors and culture came from university presses as well, including the Margaret Walker Alexander Series in African American Culture from the University Press of Mississippi, Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies from Duke University Press, and the Sexual Cultures series from NYU Press, which just celebrated its twentieth anniversary.

It's worth mentioning, however, as a 2021 study sponsored by the Association of University Presses recently revealed, that the staff at university presses skews even more white than at mainstream publishing houses.<sup>5</sup> So, while university presses do publish progressive work and AUPresses has created a mandate for its members<sup>6</sup> calling for the publication of more alternative voices, they recognize that they still have much further to go in addressing racial inequity both in whom they hire and whom they publish.

## What to Expect When Working with a University Press

As mentioned above, university presses operate as nonprofit organizations. With notable exceptions - Yale University Press, Princeton University Press, and Harvard University Press all have large endowments - most rely heavily on the financial support they receive from their affiliate universities to meet their operating costs. Annual subsidies can vary starkly, from \$150,000 to \$500,000.<sup>7</sup> The potential of additional revenue from a broader audience encourages university

presses' openness to nonacademic titles and offers the chance to expand their reputations.

While the process of publishing with a university press generally works the same as with a commercial publisher or small mainstream publishing house, be mindful of the following issues:

\* **Publishing contracts.** While Authors Guild members (and now, in fact, any author) can refer to the Guild's Model Trade Book Contract to learn more about traditional publishing industry principles, university press agreements tend to have certain key differences. For example, university presses (like other textbook publishers) may want to own the book's copyright; the Guild strongly advocates against this approach, given that a university press is likely to reap the necessary advantages and benefits without copyright ownership. University presses also tend to distribute royalties based upon the publisher's "net" price (meaning the price minus expenses), as opposed to the book's "list" price, which is the norm in trade publishing. This difference can greatly reduce the royalties an author receives.

\* **Small print runs.** University presses generally publish books with a small initial print run, on average just 300 to 1,000 copies. Compare this to the initial print runs of small traditional presses, like Graywolf, Milkweed, or Coffee House, which generally publish 1,000 to 3,000 copies, or those of large New York houses, which typically start with a print run of 5,000 to 50,000 copies, depending on the celebrity of the author, their prior success, or how hot the subject matter is. (To get an idea of how much impact an author's celebrity has on mainstream publishing, Penguin Random House ordered an initial print run of three million copies for Barack Obama's latest memoir, *A Promised Land*.)

\* **Lower advances/royalties.** University presses rarely offer advances, and when they do, they are generally under \$1,000. If you are

4 [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/78549-the-real-work-of-university-presses.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/78549-the-real-work-of-university-presses.html)

5 [publishingperspectives.com/2021/03/university-presses-self-assessment-an-extremely-white-industry-segment/](https://publishingperspectives.com/2021/03/university-presses-self-assessment-an-extremely-white-industry-segment/)

6 [aupresses.org/about-aupresses/equity-and-antiracism/](https://aupresses.org/about-aupresses/equity-and-antiracism/)

7 [thenation.com/article/archive/university-presses-under-fire/](https://thenation.com/article/archive/university-presses-under-fire/)



lucky enough within one of the annual writing prizes offered by some university presses, the prize money may be as much as \$10,000, but note that many of these prizes also charge a small reading fee for submissions, generally running from \$10 to \$25.

\* **Pricing.** Because of the typically small print runs and the costs involved with creating and developing charts, photographs, or other graphic elements essential to deeply researched or complex subjects, the price of a typical academic work issued by a university press, even in softcover, is generally substantially higher than for most mainstream nonfiction books. According to a study of 382 titles published by 20 university presses, the cost of publishing a monograph averaged nearly \$29,000.<sup>8</sup> The good news is that nonacademic texts published by university presses are generally priced closer to those of a typical mainstream publisher. Nonetheless, pricing is something you will want to monitor carefully when working with a university press.

\* **Limited production of e-books and audio books.** While publishing a digital version of a book costs significantly less than either hardcover or paperback trade books, sales of e-books produced by university presses remain relatively low. For example, the University of North Carolina Press reported that digital sales of its books accounted for just 18 percent of its revenue in 2019 and that half of that digital revenue came from the licensing of book content on aggregate online research platforms like MUSE, JSTOR, or ProQuest as opposed to Kindle or Nook sales.<sup>9</sup> University presses also tend to be further behind mainstream publishers when it comes to the production of audiobooks, though a recent academic publishing blog reports that more university presses are likely to start adopting

this format, with Princeton University Press leading the way.<sup>10</sup>

\* **Open access demands.** Open access refers to removing major obstacles, such as the high cost of peer-reviewed journals or monographs published by academic and university presses, in order to facilitate the sharing and reusing of scholarly research. The easiest way to ensure open access is to post scholarly content on the internet. Scholars argue that open access is necessary, despite current copyright laws and the subsequent decline in individual book sales, because by granting all communities the opportunity to build upon a researcher's findings and participate in scholarly conversations, it speeds up the research process in general, particularly for scientists and academics looking to solve huge, complex issues.<sup>11</sup>

In response, in 2018, the Association of American Universities, Association of Research Libraries, and Association of University Presses launched TOME (Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem), a five-year pilot project to change the landscape of scholarly book publishing. Under this initiative, 21 colleges and universities committed to providing grants of \$15,000 per monograph, and 66 university presses have agreed to produce digital open-access editions of their books, license them under Creative Commons licenses, and deposit the files in open repositories.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the progress in making more monographs and scholarly articles available for free or at a reduced price, until university presses can find a more cost-effective way to bring down the costs of monograph publishing, most public libraries and independent scholars and researchers will not be able to afford access to the majority of works published by university presses.

8 [sr.ithaka.org/publications/the-rosts-of-publishing-monographs/](http://sr.ithaka.org/publications/the-rosts-of-publishing-monographs/)

9 [scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/08/06/scholarly-e-books-and-university-presses-part-two/](http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/08/06/scholarly-e-books-and-university-presses-part-two/)

10 [goldleaf.blog/2019/09/14/audiobooks-more-than-just-a-trend/](http://goldleaf.blog/2019/09/14/audiobooks-more-than-just-a-trend/)

11 [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4837983/](http://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4837983/)

12 [arl.org/news/60-open-access-university-press-monographs-published-through-tome-initiative/](http://arl.org/news/60-open-access-university-press-monographs-published-through-tome-initiative/)

## University Presses Versus Academic Publishers

Since the 1970s, university presses have been competing with for-profit academic publishers such as Elsevier, McGraw-Hill, Springer, Cengage, and Pearson, which generally publish research journals and textbooks rather than monographs, particularly as they relate to business or STEM subjects.

Clearly, academic publishers have more resources than university presses and can afford to offer higher advances and royalty payments. Unless you write textbooks or course curriculum materials, however, most for-profit academic publishers wouldn't be interested in the works of a literary or general nonfiction author, so this likely isn't an issue for you.

### What University Presses Mean for You

University presses continue to play an important role in publishing. They make it possible for academics and independent scholars to publish their research and ideas, and in the world of academia, the old axiom "publish or perish" remains as true today as it did a century ago, particularly for young scholars striving for tenure at a major research university.

Without university presses, much important critical thought in the arts, humanities, and social sciences now being discussed and taught at colleges and universities, especially at the graduate school level, would never see the light of day.

The same is true of research undertaken by universities and other nonprofit research institutions, whose work explores and explains advancements in the natural sciences, medicine, business, and technology for their peers and broader audiences.

Given the ongoing challenges that first-time authors, authors of color, midlist writers, and authors of literary or experimental works continue to face in securing a home for their manuscripts with a mainstream publishing house, university

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presses (along with smaller literary presses) offer a significant opportunity to showcase diverse authors and topics.

Finally, and most importantly, university presses publish a dizzying array of books that are unlikely to find a home with commercial publishers, a boon for which we as both writers and readers should be profoundly grateful. **AG**



## How to Find the Right University Press for Your Manuscript

Unlike the majority of mainstream publishers, most of which accept manuscripts only via a literary agent or a recommendation from a well-known author, university presses accept manuscripts submitted directly from the author. But it falls to the author to identify which university presses, and which of the many university press-sponsored book awards and series, to target.

Below is a brief list of writer resources that can help you choose. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it does provide you with a mix of free and fee-based tools to help you determine which university presses might be right for your latest book project. (Depending on the individual press, they may review unsolicited manuscripts only at certain times of the year.)

- \* **Association of University Presses Annual Directory** (\$30 for print and digital editions, \$9 for 30 days of online access.) This directory takes you right to the source if you seek to publish your manuscript with a university press, including editorial contacts and general submission guidelines.  
[aupresses.org/membership/annual-directory](http://aupresses.org/membership/annual-directory)
- \* **Duotrope** (\$50/year) Duotrope serves as an online database for book publishers, mainstream and subject-specific magazine publishers, writing contests, and literary agents, based on topic, genre, audience, payment rates, and acceptance rates. It also serves as an online submission tracking tool, so you always know the status of your manuscript. It not only

provides access and contact information to the full list of book and magazine publishers, including university presses, but also lets you know which publishers are currently open to submissions and whether they accept unsolicited works. It also tracks and provides information on nearly all credible writing contests in the United States, including those sponsored by university presses.

[duotrope.com](http://duotrope.com)

- \* **NewPages' Guide to Independent Publishers and University Presses** (Free) This online resource is free but limited. The list is organized alphabetically and does not distinguish between small independent publishers or university presses, but you can click through to the individual websites of each press to get the details necessary to submit your manuscript.

[newpages.com/books/publishers](http://newpages.com/books/publishers)

- \* **Poets & Writers** (\$12/year or \$20/2 years) Since 1970, *Poets & Writers* has addressed issues of importance to creative writers, from finding an agent to promoting one's book. With more than 100,000 subscribers, the bimonthly magazine publishes essays on the literary life, profiles of contemporary authors, and offers the most comprehensive listing of literary grants and awards, contest deadlines, and prize winners available. The website includes a database of publishers and literary journals seeking manuscript submissions, including university press-sponsored writing contests.

[pw.org](http://pw.org)

- \* **Publishers Weekly** (\$169/year or \$15/month, but much

of the online content can be accessed for free.) While this industry staple does not offer a comprehensive list of university publishers, it regularly does in-depth profiles and features on individual university presses that can provide an author with a good understanding of what types of books and authors a particular press seeks. The best way to access university press information is to use PW's search tool and type in "university press" for a list of relevant features.

[publishersweekly.com](http://publishersweekly.com)

- \* **University Presses and Scholarly Publishers Database** (Free) Created and maintained by the Eastern Michigan University Library, this database includes several university and academic publishers. You can search by subject matter or alphabetically, and then click through to the individual website of each university press to get the details necessary to submit your manuscript.  
[guides.emich.edu/alt-texts/ups](http://guides.emich.edu/alt-texts/ups)