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As told to Taylor Lewandowski, 2237 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Collaboration, Identity, Politics.

On finding your path and your community

Editor and writer Amy Scholder discusses founding an influential publishing company, editing as an essential act, and leading with your values and priorities.

Throughout your career, you've always centered writers that push against society's tendency to repress, censor, and normalize. Where did this place of resistance originate from?

You're asking where did it come from personally? Well, I grew up in the Los Angeles suburbs. I never saw myself reflected in the world around me. Growing up in the 1970s and being queer from a very young age—it was just a different cultural world then. I had no sense of myself or my potential self in community. Then, as I got into my twenties and moved out of college towns and suburbs, I finally found affirmation, validation, and conversation; I felt included in cultural space, and that experience became very important to me.

Where did your love of literature come from?

It was not always only literature, but my path began when, as a shy, queer kid, reading was a great refuge. Later, when I had no real idea of what I wanted to be when I grew up, I became an English major in college just because I liked reading, and nothing else really excited me the way good storytelling did.

Where did you go to college?

I got my bachelors degree from UC Berkeley. I had started at Tufts but was completely a fish out of water in the Boston area, having grown up in the wilds of Southern California. So I ran screaming from there, took some time off, and finished at Cal. I was drawn to living in the Bay Area, and especially drawn to City Lights Bookstore. For lack of any kind of career plan, and going on instinct, I felt like that's where I needed to be. So I got a job in the bookshop, and talked my way into an internship with the executive editor, Nancy P. Peters.

How did City Lights change everything?

The confluence of starting to edit and publish books, forming my first real sense of community in the city, finding friends and a social life, a club life, an urban life, just as the AIDs epidemic took off—that changed everything. As my community very rapidly shifted into a health crisis, and a political crisis, I started to understand that I could respond in the cultural sphere as a book editor. So that's what I set my sights on.

How would you describe the importance of a bookstore? You know, three days ago in Indianapolis a local bookstore received a bomb threat because they host a drag story hour. It's scary in Indianapolis right now. So what is the importance of a bookstore? I think some of us take it for granted.

Wow, that's terrible! Bookstores have always been an enormous pleasure and education, because of the function of discovery they can offer. (I found the same thing in record stores.) I love being able to browse in a curated store and find books I'm not necessarily looking for. That's very important for readers, and, of course, important for those writers and publishers who are on the margins of the marketplace and don't have the resources to advertise or promote their books nationally.

How did you transition from City Lights to the legendary High Risk Books?

I met Ira Silverberg around 1990 through our mutual friend, Kathy Acker. I had just published in the *City Lights Review* a forum on AIDS and cultural life. Ira and I discovered that we were thinking along the same lines, about how AIDS was stigmatizing radical writing and works of the imagination which might be considered "high risk." So, we decided to edit an anthology, which turned into *High Risk: An Anthology of Forbidden Writings*, and then a few years later, *High Risk 2: Writings on Sex, Death and Subversion*. (It was published by Dutton, an imprint of Penguin.) They were incredibly successful books, considering the subject matter, and seemed to resonate with readers across generations and identities. *Serpent's Tail*, a literary press in the UK, bought the UK rights, and after their success there, Pete Ayrton, the publisher, invited us to start a New York-based imprint, and we began publishing single author volumes in 1994.

How did you split the tasks between you and Ira?

Ira and I both brought authors to the imprint. My expertise is editing texts and packaging/design. Ira's expertise was marketing and publicity. So our skills were wonderfully complementary. I think it's worth mentioning that for our design, I enlisted my friend and former City Lights colleague, Rex Ray, to create those beautiful covers. He had also designed the *High Risk* anthology cover, which was unusual at that time, for a company like Penguin to let us bring in our own designer. But I think they didn't know what to do with us, and in the end we were all happy with the iconic image of our first *High Risk* cover—our new logo set against a background that was a photo of Rex's black leather jacket.

How would you describe the shift from the '90s to now in terms of publication? Do you think its in decline? Do you think it's in this post-covid success? Or does it really even matter?

I know that so many things feel different since the '90s. It seems that most people buy books on Amazon, which means they already know what they're looking for when they shop. (I think that's partly why celebrity books are so much more popular now.) That said, I don't feel like everything used to be better; it's always complicated.

For example, self-publishing, which is relatively new, is interesting. On some level it feels like a scourge because the input of editors and designers and other professionals into the publication process is beneficial to any writer's work. At the same time, the gatekeeping in publishing is very skewed. So the fact that anyone can make a book and throw it up on the same marketplace that Random House and other corporate houses use is also a good thing. I think the work that comes out of independent publishers is still super exciting as it was in the '90s.

What advice do you have for writers querying or pitching a book?

I know for myself that I want to feel like I'm being addressed or pitched an idea because of the specific work that I support; that it's not just a generic Ask that could be sent to anyone. If someone is writing to me and asking for my time and attention to look at their work, it should be because they know something about my sensibility and track record. I always tell writers, when you are submitting your work to an agent or editor, try to personalize your letter as much as possible and show that you are aware of what that person has brought into the world, what they care about, and make a case for your own work with that in mind.

Ultimately, despite the vicissitudes of the business and the marketplace and the publishing landscape which changes and changes again, the one constant is that publishing is about relationships. The way you work together can often determine how successful the art will be. So when I'm approached by someone I'm thinking in the back of my mind about the fact that they're asking me to be in relationship with them for a time, and so how that relationship is instigated matters.

What books have you been excited by recently?

I really loved Constance Debré's book, *Love Me Tender*, and I'm looking forward to her other books Semiotext(e) is going to publish of hers. I just finished Martha Wainwright's memoir and enjoyed her stories about family and being an artist. I love to read narrative nonfiction, memoir and biography especially. Learning how people figure out how to live an examined life has always been of interest to me.

How has music informed your career?

I'm not sure it has. But I have always been excited to work on books by musicians. I worked with Joni Mitchell on an autobiography that was never finished. I was hired as her ghost writer in 1996 and spent time with her to develop a manuscript. That was one of the great pleasures of my life.

I made a beautiful book in 2003 with rock and roll photographer Myriam Santos-Kayda. She was close with David Bowie and had photographed him backstage when he performed in all five boroughs of New York. Rex Ray designed the book and David wrote the foreword. It was called David Bowie: Live in New York, published by Powerhouse. That was thrilling to me because I've been a Bowie fan my whole life.

I worked with the extraordinary singer/performer Justin Vivian Bond on her memoir, *Tango, My Childhood Backwards and in High Heels* when I was the executive editor at the Feminist Press. It's a moving, wickedly funny book about adolescent sex and getting even with the school bully. (Viv's motto: Glamour is Resistance!)

You've edited books by Andrea Dworkin, Kathy Acker, and David Wojnarowicz. What does it mean to be a part of a writer's legacy? And what does this mean for your own life?

Well, I learned during the AIDs epidemic, when I lost a lot of writers and artists in my life, that I could be of service to keep their work alive. And, sadly, I've lost a lot of writers since then too. In the first season of High Risk books, I published June Jordan's stunning Haruko Love Poems while she was in cancer treatment and died not too long after that. I collected and edited Cookie Mueller's writings for Ask Dr. Mueller shortly after she passed away. When David Wojnarowicz was at the end of his life, we were so sorrowful that we didn't get to work on more books together. (I had published Memories That Smell Like Gasoline, which came out shortly before he died). So we discussed how I might edit his diaries and his short fiction/monologues, which were published posthumously as In the Shadow of the American Dream and The Waterfront Journals by Grove. Acker's death at fifty from cancer was so shocking at the time; it helped me to mourn and honor her by editing a number of books by and about her after she passed.

I think about how these High Risk books formed a space, which certainly resonates with others, and speaks directly to your teenage self back in the suburbs of LA where your surroundings existed as a complete disconnect. Books are oftentimes a very private experience. When I was a teenager, I'd be reading Jean Genet's The Thief's Journal on a family vacation and no one would have any idea or think to ask about it.

Yes, reading can create a bubble for you—solitude for your imagination to go into a different world.

Now, how has your life as an editor feed into your work as a producer?

Disclosure, directed by Sam Feder, looks at the history of transgender representation in film and television. There has been this fascination with characters who traverse gender—who we now call trans and nonbinary—since the beginning of storytelling in moving images. Disclosure features archival footage along with interviews with trans creatives who work on both sides of the camera, including Laverne Cox, Lilly Wachowski, and MJ Rodriguez. They reflect on a history that is often dehumanizing but is also evolving and sometimes humorous. And Disclosure shows how visibility in Hollywood isn't the end game, but just a precarious step toward gaining full human and civil rights. We can see now especially, after just three years since we finished the film, that trans lives are subject to increasing legislative and physical violence, that increased visibility has not brought about safety or dignity, which everyone deserves.

Everything that has informed my career in the arts—empowering underserved communities to tell their stories—prepared me to produce Disclosure and my second film, My Name is Andrea, directed by Pratibha Parmar, about the radical feminist life of Andrea Dworkin. The ongoing editorial and film work are all motivated by the same values and priorities.

Amy Scholder Recommends:

Waiting: I've only been waiting twenty-four years for a new Everything But the Girl album. And it's finally here. Some pleasures take time, and this one is definitely worth the wait.

Returning: Every year I reread Sapphires's books of poetry—American Dreams and Black Wings & Blind Angels. And I'm reminded that she is one of America's most gifted and profound writers. I can't wait (but will wait!) for her next novel to be published.

Walking: Sometimes I need to hear the voices in my own head and the morning songs of birds who live in my coastal neighborhood on my morning walks. Other times, I welcome the opportunity to tune into a long-form podcast. I was riveted by Mother Country Radicals by Zayd Dorn, about the legacies of the Weather Underground and radical outlaws of the 1970s.

Lighting Up: These days, I limit myself to the most hypnotic, grounding, and addictive scents of candles and essential oils made by Morphologically. Earth and Telluric rule!

Name

Amy Scholder

Vocation

editor, writer, publisher, and producer

Fact

Judy Sisneros

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