11.1 Indie Presses and the Literary Ecosystem: Meg Reid and Will Evans (MM)

Transcript

Mesha Maren

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship.

I'm Mesha Maren, novelist and associate professor of the practice of English at Duke University. It is my pleasure to welcome you to our special mini-season on the literary ecosystem. This season grew out of a symposium that I hosted at Duke in March 2026, a symposium which itself grew out of a series of conversations I had with novel scholar Nancy Armstrong about the erosion of the literary ecosystem. When I say “erosion,” I mean the loss of book coverage in newspapers and magazines, the conglomeration of publishing houses, and the incursion of AI into publishing spaces. I organized this symposium as a countermeasure to these developments and as a space for conversation and community building. We are continuing this community building now on *Novel Dialogue*, with conversations between many of the guests from the symposium, as well as a few new folks.

Today, we're talking to Meg Reid and Will Evans, two of the most highly regarded small press publishers working today. Meg Reid is executive director of Hub City Writers Project in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where she finds and champions new and overlooked voices from the American South. An editor and book designer, her essays have appeared online in outlets like *Diagram, Oxford American*, and *The Rumpus*. She holds an MFA in nonfiction from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, where she served as assistant editor of the literary magazine *Ecotone* and worked for the literary imprint Lookout Books.

And Will Evans is the founder, CEO, and executive director and editorial director of Deep Vellum Press. He oversees the administration and execution of all aspects of Deep Vellum's operations and programming, from mission and vision, to branding and marketing, to strategy and fundraising, to editing and accounting, and a bit of everything in between. He has an M.A. in Russian culture from Duke University, and he was made a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture.

Welcome, Meg and Will. I'm going to get us started by asking you both, what does the term literary ecosystem mean to you, and what roles do each of you play in it? Meg, maybe we'll start with you.

Meg Reid

Sure. Thanks, Mesha. It's wonderful to join both of you and chat about all this stuff. For me, “literary ecosystem” is obviously every part of, you know, around a book, all the people that are involved with the making and production. And, in the book space. That means everybody from people who work in publishing, like Will and I, and all the way down to readers and consumers. There's obviously a lot of people in between. There are people in sales and distribution and booksellers and librarians and, of course, the writers themselves.

And obviously, as you noted on the intro, with all of the changing publishing world that we live in, those things have become very different and complicated and consolidated in many ways. It's a changing environment. But I think Will and I share one thing, that we are sort of navigators, translators, and advocates in these spaces across the literary ecosystem, maybe a little bit more than many other literary presses. This might be partially because we both operate presses and bookstores. And so we have this sort of interesting place in the ecosystem in that we see a lot of sides of it. We understand sort of distributive sides of books and that kind of thing, in addition to the production of books, differently than other people who work in publishing. So I think that Hub City's role, because we operate in all these different spaces, is moving between that editorial side and the civic side of the literary ecosystem, which is, you know, the more community building side of things. And, you know, in everything we do, I'm always trying to build literary infrastructure, trying to build transparency in these systems. And so I think that's what “literary ecosystem” is for me. And that's how I'm navigating it in my work with Hub City and sort of overall.

MM

Thank you. Will, what's your take?

Will Evans

So good to go after Meg. It's like, yep, “just what she said!” And it's great to be on this with both of you, especially after we were all together at dear old Duke back in March. The literary ecosystem is something we both think about a lot. So it's a cool question for us. You know, we're both nonprofit organizations, leading nonprofit organizations, which is a very important distinction to other sort of parts of the literary ecosystem, because we're thinking about this industry holistically in a way that many of our peers as publishers who are not nonprofits don't think about very much. They think about the production of books and the sales of books, and that's pretty much the beginning and the end of the conversation.

But the literary ecosystem is for every reader of every age. It is for every writer of every style. It is for translators. It is for everyone who works in the production and dissemination of books as objects out in the world and those who work in the fields of criticism and those who work in the fields of libraries. It's the life of the mind broadly. It's arts and letters as a concept, as we think of. It is every facet of society everywhere in the world. It's an absolutely beautiful sort of ecosystem in which you have many

different stakeholders who have a lot of sort of power on how things get read and how things get written and how things get disseminated. And as nonprofit organizations, Meg and I are definitely in conversations that we have in the writings that we do and in the work that we do through our publishing bookstore and literary programming offerings.

We're looking to invite more people into the literary ecosystem who have felt excluded from it for a long time, and I think that's a very unique proposition between Hub City and Deep Vellum, and that we're both doing it in the South. And so we're all dealing with these very similar problems where you have a lot of really amazing people who have been completely left out of the equation for far too long. And that equation includes them as readers with the books that they are offered. It includes them as writers and the way that they have the ability to get the training on how to be an even better version of themselves to tell their story in whatever genre it may come. And then the access to industry in order to get their story out there into the world. And then from there, what do you do with that?

And so the literary ecosystem is something we think about very comprehensively. We think about it in terms also of funders, which is those who may or may not have ever supported a literary organization before and trying to invite them in as well. So it can support our work in those of peer organizations and colleagues in Dallas and around the state, the country, the world. And so when we think about the literary ecosystem every day, this sort of comprehensiveness of it is something that I'm very passionate about. And Deep Vellum is constructed around the idea that we want to be a part of a literary ecosystem and we want to help invite more people in to galvanize a more active, robust, inclusive, diverse, fun literary ecosystem for all.

MM

Many of the conversations that we're having throughout this podcast season revolve around the conglomeration of the publishing industry, a trend that began in the 1960s but has very much accelerated in the past decade with many of the formerly independent family-owned publishers being bought up by corporate conglomerates and private equity firms, leading to, in the words of scholar Dan Sinykin, who we'll hear from later this season, a, quote, “system in which homogeneity is encouraged for the sake of profits,” unquote.

My question for the two of you is how does conglomeration impact the work that you just described doing? Will, do you want to start us off?

WE

Yeah, this is a funny one for me to start with because Deep Vellum is an independent nonprofit small press that has seven imprints that are a part of it. And four of those we have acquired, two we have created, and one we have in partnership with another organization now, we just launched. And so the process of conglomeration, though, in the way we're talking about it, I acknowledge the humor of it, but we're not talking about

the same thing. The presses that we acquired were all going to go out of business, and we kept them on to keep them alive because they were led by visionary editors. And so we brought them into a publishing fold in which the resources and back-end operations could keep this artistic vision for those imprints, those publishers alive as imprints. And we kept going with their editors after all of them, and that was really important for us. So it's a little bit different.

We talk about the New York conglomeration. I think the thing that has harmed us most as readers is that homogeneity, and not just editorial homogeneity, but also the distribution and marketing homogeneity, right? Is that they seem to think there's only one kind of book for one kind of reader, and that everyone gets lumped into these big, all-encompassing boxes. Then we don't have access to the full, robust, true, lived reality of the human experience, whatever that may be. Deep Vellum started out of the fact that the big publishers, as they kept becoming bigger and bigger versions of themselves in the conglomeration pyramid, were publishing less and less and less work of literature in translation, right? And that's where Deep Vellum started, and the hypothesis I had was that if they were doing that for works in translation, which is where my passion came from with Russian literature, as you mentioned, then it was probably happening for writers in Dallas. And my hypothesis was that writers and readers in Dallas were just as underserved as writers and readers in places like Moscow or Tehran or Tokyo or anywhere in between. I'm trying to get into this book market, and unfortunately, I was completely right.

And so this work of consolidation has meant that these distributors, they don't just own editorially styles of literature. And so something very interesting in this is that conglomeration has been an anti-democratic force in our society. All the bad things we feel in society today, conglomeration with publishing has played a role in. And that is an unmistakable fact. At the same time, they completely own the marketplace. We have a monopoly force, these five companies controlling 80% to 90%. And I feel Dan Sinykin is the ghost in this conversation, right? He's the guy collecting the data for us. But this stuff is—there's so little data. There's so few access points to information about what's really going on in publishing. We're just trying to do it knowing this is reality, but then you have someone like Dan providing the data to really help the conversation.

And so in that anti-democratic society, owning the marketplace means it's very hard to get in. The opportunity in the sort of capitalist way, there's always an opportunity in this, is that editorially there is an amazing amount of extraordinary literature that is not being published by the Big Five.

If they're publishing 80% to 90% of the books, it means that they keep doing these homogenous things. We can go work with the most amazing, vibrant, stylistically innovative, cool, local, whatever it may be, writers putting out the most amazing stories. But access to the marketplace is so difficult. And access to the highest realms of marketplace—it’s hard to break in. It's hard to get seen. It's hard to get reviewed. It's hard to get influencers on you. It's hard to get whatever it may take for a book to achieve the exit velocity that could have happened before.

And so we're sort of on the outside looking in. But the beauty of that as well is that I feel like Meg and I share a kindred spirit on this. And Meg is about to—I can't wait to hear what she's about to say—because we're looking at this going, you know, we've got to create a whole new ecosystem altogether, a whole new value proposition, right? But we have to invite more readers to turn away from the shadows they've been looking at on the wall their whole lives of the Big Five and to be able to turn to the light and be like, whoa, there's so much out there, right? The Deep Vellums, the Hub Cities, right? It's the Ingram distributed publishers. It's Asterism. What else is going on out there in the world? That's a beautiful proposition, but it's so difficult.

But anytime we have any success, it's like—it really feels like a group success too.

MR

I think it's actually funny that Will brings up his sort of conglomeration because I do think like Hub City and Deep Vellum operate so similarly except on two notes, which is speed and size. But I think that it's instructive, like for the field, also to see how two nonprofit publishers that are deeply grounded in their communities and deeply guided by sort of an ethics and a vision of doing publishing a certain way can do it at completely opposite paces.

So Hub City does eight to ten books a year. We do ten now. When I got here, you know, 12 years ago, we were doing five. So it's double, but it's still very, very few books. And that is what works for us. There's a sustainability there with a small staff and with doing everything really intentionally, and giving every book the same sort of level of support. That is very different from the project that Will is undertaking, which is admirable—he blows me away with all he does. But the other thing is that by publishing eight to ten books a year, we're fundamentally anti-conglomerate, anti-Big Five, anti-corporate because there's no corporate publishers, which Will has, you know, explained really well, that operate at a small scale. It's a volume business because they are—I think the fundamental thing people need to remember about Big Five publishers is that they are owned by, you know, multinational conglomerates, and books are one of the things that they move through systems. They are a form of widget that flows through.

And so another thing that I think we see very clearly because we work in bookshops and we see the sort of, the kind of churn of books. And what I see is the sort of monoculture of ideas, the idea that, you know, PRH [Penguin Random House] with its market share is the dominant, you know, purveyor of information and education and media in this country. Because that's who makes a dominant amount of the books that are on the front tables of bookshops. And bookstores don't even make that decision because it's so presumed, it's so learned that those are the books that go out front regardless of what's inside of the jacket or in the covers, you know.

So I'm very interested in how we go around that, how we go through that, how we re-educate people, how we make readers who can think about where books come from,

whether that's the labor and the people that produce them, which is something that Big Five corporate publishing is also very opposed to doing. You can't find a masthead for a big corporate publisher because it's not about the people.

And so independent presses, as Will said, have an opportunity to offer a completely different value, which is people-driven, which is not AI slop, which is people-produced and people-created. And we see that with our friends at Two Dollar Radio stamping their books with, “Human-Generated” last week, like a new stamp on their books. So I do think independents serve—I'm actually in a really funny place with this because if you had asked me a year or two ago, I was very doom and gloom about conglomeration because it was affecting me, and I felt like it was something we were kind of working under all the time. Things have only gotten worse. I mean, like, things have gotten worse in the last two years.

But at the same time—Will and I talk about this all the time—the level of submissions I'm getting from agents right now are just the highest I have ever gotten. From agents who work with, you know, huge, huge publishers and huge authors. And it maybe took a little bit of a break, and there has been some sort of breakthrough for where people have said, you know, “if publishers, the big publishers are going to be this risk-averse, if they're going to publish this kind of,” as Dan says, the homogeneity, this “replicated, you know, content, then maybe I'll try something different.” And they're coming to places like Deep Vellum and Hub City.

So I think it's not, as I said, it's not the healthiest ecosystem, but I'm actually feeling really kind of weirdly hopeful right now that more people are going to be able to see the value that independent presses bring, acting as a counterweight to the pressure and the monoculture that the rest of media and publishing sort of continues and sustains.

WE

What Meg said is super important, and we didn't have to say it explicitly, but I think the door is open for small and independent publishers to start their own bookstores now, Because at the same time conglomeration was happening, those publishers that were doing and leading the conglomeration loved Barnes & Noble. And they were loving Barnes & Noble as they murdered all the great independent bookstores in our country. And those same publishers are in love with Amazon, and they are totally fine with Amazon trying to go out there and kill Barnes & Noble and every other bookstore.

But the door is open now to a different value proposition, and we've seen so many independent bookstores come back. And you can now see so many publishers doing their own bookstores. Of course, Two Dollar Radio had theirs, Milkweed. You've got—there was a bookstore in San Antonio called Ghoulish Books. You've got non-profit bookstores and for-profit bookstores. And Center for the Art of Translation is in San Francisco, totally, who are opening theirs this fall, which is super exciting with two lines pressed. So the opportunity there is to engage with the ecosystem broadly, inviting

readers in kind of off the street and serving as a flagship for your brand, your mission, the way that you envision the world.

And that is super important for all of us who believe in that alternative ecosystem too. And the alternative is to what? It's the alternative to the Big Five who are the same thing as the big music labels, the same thing as the big movie studios. And they operate with the same impunity and boringness. It's not to say they don't put out some great books and have some great authors, but statistically, it's pretty insane. So amen to publishers doing their own bookstores.

MR

I would just echo—we've had a bookstore for 15, 16 years—and it's the exact thing that makes us able to find books that—especially our region and then nationally, you know—represent the people that live here. It's that authenticity and groundedness in community that also makes us able to run a bookstore that is appealing to the community that we live in.

And that's just a fundamental thing that nonprofit presses have. They are not abstract global concepts. They are community-rooted organizations that are working with the writers and the readers in their community just by default because that's how they, that's how we all function.

MM

That's fantastic to hear and to hear that that's becoming kind of a trend. Let's talk about distribution. I think that distribution, at least as a writer, I find that in conversations with other writers, it's one of the least understood aspects of publishing. So let's—maybe if one or both of you want to lay out kind of a bit about how the books that you publish reach bookstore shelves, what does distribution look like right now, and then how can we improve it?

MR

I can give a quick little answer, and then maybe Will can go back and forth because I'm curious. Yes, distribution is not talked about enough, and it's something that a lot of people don't understand, and it's a thing that a lot of people who found presses don't even understand quite well. It's something that they're like down the line, I will worry about this, and it's changed dramatically from when I entered this business 15 years ago. There were a lot of mid-sized distributors, regional distributors, different kinds of consortiums, not Consortium, the distributor, but kinds of consortiums that delivered books to bookshops. When I first got even to Hub City, we were sending books like to different small places, and as the years have gone by, those have just shrunk and shrunk and shrunk. We've seen it both in the retail space and also in the library space with Baker and Taylor going under last year, and again, just a great consolidating at

Ingram, which is the largest distributor, which both Will and I, our presses are distributed by Ingram-owned distributors.

And what this means is that bookstores have very few places that they can get books from. There's really only maybe one or two major places that you can get books, depending on which side of the country you're on. And so we see this every day with our bookshop. It makes it harder for bookstores to get smaller press books and independent press books. It makes it harder to get university press books also. And I think what this means really is that, you know, really important books are held back by just the size of the distribution system. When I talk to little presses who are looking to move into, you know, questioning whether they should get a distributor, I often tell them now to really think long and hard about it because you have to be at a point where you can sustain losing about 50% off of every book to the distribution, essentially. And if you're very small, you do not have an intense backlist. You do not have a lot of titles to fall back on. You don't have one book that's selling just, you know, gangbusters to keep you going. You are going to be probably going negative for a long time.

And so I will say one thing that's exciting. I think a lot of presses are finding ways around it. Just like we we've been saying all along, the resilience of independent publishing is incredible. I think a lot of presses are thinking about direct to consumer. They're thinking about different subscription models that they can use in order to harness their own following, their own brand, their own social media, et cetera, in order to get books direct to, you know, their fans, essentially. Which similarly, Will, is also what happened with music stores—it has happened with music stores—where a lot of brands that make pedals and things like that are trying to go straight to their consumers instead of going to music stores for the same exact reasons.

What this means, though, is that bookstores are—it just adds to this monoculture. It means that more of the books in the bookstores are those easy to get, easy to order, quick shipped, conglomerate, Big Five books. Even if bookstores have great intentions, even if they want their stock to be varied and filled with, you know, different sized presses, it's difficult. And it's and it's something that adds to their day. It adds to their paperwork.

So I just always am someone who wants us to think about these things really clearly and open-eyed because ignoring distribution and what a headache it is for somebody like me, who handles it as a one person for our whole organization, is just ignoring sort of a reality of how these books actually get to market and get to consumers. So I would love to hear Will's take on it because we haven't actually talked about it in a minute.

WE

There's only so much we can say on the record about distribution. But for the record, Deep Vellum has been with a distributor called Consortium from day one before we ever published a book. I pitched a vision to the director, Julie Schaper, who just retired, who was kind of a legend in the Minneapolis literary establishment. She ran Consortium for a

long time. And then for those who read *Big Fiction*, Consortium is a distributor that was born out of Bookslinger, which was born out of the sort of original, the genesis of the nonprofit literary arts movement in the 80s in Minneapolis, which is what Deep Vellum was founded to do. Kind of everything that happened in Minneapolis in the 80s, Deep Vellum wanted to do in the 2010s. That was like—I wrote that down. And embarrassingly, the first interview I ever did with the *Dallas Magazine*, the headline was "Deep Vellum Wants to Make Dallas More Like Minneapolis." Not the ideal headline for someone starting something in Dallas, Texas, but it was well-intentioned.

Okay, so all that to say. So distribution is absolutely, like Meg said, the most confusing things for readers and writers alike. And so, as a publisher, we play middleman between readers and writers. That's our goal, right? And distributors are the ghost in the machine between us and the reader, right? And so the writer doesn't see a lot because it's kind of infused. And we had to talk about this one time with an author, about the difference between marketing and publicity. And marketing and distribution are really tied together, right? Marketing is essentially, as we tried to explain this to them, you don't disagree with me, but it is the message we control. And so the easiest way in the distribution sense about the message we control, as opposed to publicity, which is the world taking it and doing with it what they may. In marketing, the easiest way to think about it is the Amazon page, right? Everything on the Amazon page is there for a reason, and it is there explicitly, and it is all sorts of different ways of putting together what we all know and love as "metadata." But authors and readers don't know anything about metadata, and they're like, that doesn't sound like publishing.

But metadata is the information of the book, and the information can be the description at the top of the Amazon page. It's the biography. It's all those quotes that go down. It's the size of the book, the page count, all that stuff, and the cover, of course. And so in that sort of world of distribution, there is also this problem that we run into that Meg alludes to very beautifully and very politically nicely, which is that there's a difference between the book being available in distribution to every bookselling account in the world and available in those bookselling accounts, right? Or let's just say in the bookstores, right? So every bookstore in the world is not going to have every book, right? And most bookstores in the world aren't going to have your book at all, or any book by this publishing house or Meg's publishing house, right? And so when you narrow it down, you're trying to find the bookstores that are into what you do and then try to invite more in. And then also you have to sell it on Amazon and all the digital platforms everywhere in the world.

And we have international distribution for a lot of our books, and so we have to make sure it's set up to go everywhere in the world with currency conversions, global warehousing, shipping, freight, all that kind of nonsense. And then at the same time back here in the States, readers and writers, don't know anything about distribution. Distribution is about taking books and putting them in a warehouse for people to be able to order. And when you put books in a warehouse, they cost money every single month for those books to sit on that warehouse shelf. And the problem that every small press runs into, whether you're doing one book or we've been around for 40 years, is that in

this day and age, you are expected to have an infinite amount of inventory on hand at any time in case something spikes, right? And so everyone expects every book available every second of every day. Agents expect it now, right? And they demand it of publishers. And if the book is not for one second, they'll try and revert the rights. It's readers demand it so that if they just read some review that was published three years ago or they saw a TikTok account about it today, they want to get the book right then. This is all fair.

But at the same time, as a small press, inventory is expensive. You have to pay for it up front months, often years before it's going to make you any revenue cash in your account, right? And so as a small press, where's the money going to come from to float you? The only way is from other books that are selling, right, or grants and donations, but usually, as Meg and I know, sales of other books, right? And so in that ecosystem and in that marketplace, you're kind of balancing the needs of inventory at all times against the cost of having those books around and available. And so to make it so that there is enough inventory to sustain the need month to month, but to have it available to turn on to get more of it anytime. At the same time in the last six years, we've been going through the world's craziest logistical crunch imaginable. And so in the distribution marketplace, it costs two, three, four, five, ten times more than it used to ship a book, right?

When I started doing Deep Vellum, Media Mail was $2.70, and now it's, what, $6, Media Mail to send one book? That's massive. Readers aren't seeing that cost yet, right? The cost of printing a book has more than doubled in the time I've been starting. I've been doing Deep Vellum for only 13 years, right? And the cost has more than doubled, but the cost of books, the print cost, the cover cost has not doubled. And so publishers are eating that cost right now. And we're drowning in this, trying to make it so that readers aren't overpaying, trying to make it so the readers are getting invited in with something that is both beautiful and logistically available at all times and also priced in a way that still invites them in and doesn't price them out.

It's an impossible game, and distribution is at the heart of all of those issues. And so anytime you complain about distributors, we do have to take it with a grain of salt. But they are the ones who, when something moves, they got to help us get the books out there. And so in the world today, the complaint that I have had is that we need distributors who are not treating us like little baby clients, right, but who are like, “hey, look, something is moving. Let's work together and invest.” And we have asked a lot of Ingram and Consortium in the past couple of years as we've been dealing with Deep Vellum's growth. And they have stepped up, I will say, as much as they can right now. I would love more. I have proposed to them more. They have said no so far. I will continue proposing them more because no is the second-best answer you can ever get.

And so in distribution, it's like, look, in this day and age, we're trying to get more books in the hands of more readers, and we need to work together to do that. If we sell more books, you make more money. Meg said 50% of the cost of each book. It's more like 65%, 70%, right? When you're taking distribution fees, too, there's the cost of bookstore

gets off, and then there's distribution fees. And so when you're talking about what a publisher is making, remember, paperbacks were set up as a volume business. And so the more paperbacks you sell, the better it is because you're only making, like, pennies or dimes off of every book, not dollars. And that's a huge thing that readers and writers don't typically understand. And sometimes I'm like, they should. And I'm like, maybe they shouldn't. We need to keep all this in the dark. That way we can just enjoy books. Otherwise, it's going to make you sick to your stomach about the way all this stuff actually works. You know what I'm saying? So thanks for that rant time.

MR

Well, and I would also say we're not talking about formats here, but it does play into formats. I hear this constant complaint of “why do publishers still publish hardcovers when nobody likes them?” And it's because the economics of hardcovers make more sense. Actually, none of it makes any sense. But hardcovers do make more sense in that you can make a lot more money from a full print run. But the thing is, you also have to be able, a small press has to be able to extend $12,000, $15,000, $25,000 for one print run of books. So that's also not something that's available to especially a brand new press. And then you have pressure from your sales force saying, this is a debut novel by a Southern person that no one's heard of. In my case, like, why is this a $30 hardcover?

And so to Will's point, sometimes when it does sell through, suddenly they're like, well, we need more books. And there's never a point where they say, “we were wrong. This did, people were interested in that.” So you never get that as a publisher. You never get that you were right and I was wrong moment. So you just got to move past that. But I do think, I think the fact that prices of books have not changed considerably in the last 20 years is a huge burden on publishers. And one that we are always trying to navigate how to keep book access high, how to not drive our small independent bookstores out of business by raising our prices. But also the fact is, you're going to continue seeing more small publishers be unable to make the numbers work under the current climate that we're in.

MM

I want to close us off really quickly by talking about the Literary Arts Fund, which for listeners who don't know, in October 2025, the Mellon Foundation announced that it had joined with six other foundations to create the Literary Arts Fund, which will dispense $50 million to literary nonprofits over the next five years. The Literary Arts Fund just announced their first round of grantees and both of your organizations are on that list. So congratulations! Briefly, what does this mean for you, Meg and then Will?

MR

It's honestly one of the most significant things to happen in literary arts world for a really long time. Also, there were 10 presses and Will and I were two of them. So I think that

that's absolutely incredible. But it was because not only because of the amount, but kind of more what it represents, which is that we, I think, at least in my experience in this field, I have just not seen any sort of large philanthropic investment or even push to make investment into books in my career. And I know it happened in the 90s. That's where, you know, there was a first [unintelligible] in which Dan talks about in his book. And there's a reason that some of the presses that invested it well are still the presses that we hear about the most now because they did great things with it.

But my entire time in this field has really been trying to politely fight with my peers over the scraps that we are given out of from the NEA or from, you know, local funding, state funding, that kind of thing, which is wildly different depending on what state you're in. And so obviously, it's very, very meaningful to be in this sort of inaugural cohort. I was really impressed not only with the size of the funding, but also with the fact when that list came out, we knew that we were on it, but we didn't know who else was on it. And I was so impressed to see the variation across the board for geographic variation and diversity and also stylistic diversity. And it was a surprising group of presses. And so, I'm not surprised by many things in this industry, I guess is what I'm saying. I'm not deeply cynical, but it's, it feels like a really new form of grant making for literary arts. And I'm just kind of amazed that anybody wants to put this much attention, because it's a really hopeful, hopeful thing.

And, and in terms practically, like I said, we're usually fighting for $10,000, $25,000 grants from the NEA or from, you know, other places. And you can't do sustained deeper work with that money, you just have to focus on: that's just one year plug some travel plug some advances, you know, it just really is just very small goal stuff. And so, you know, we lack in the literary funding sphere, the sort of like patient capital, like the kind of capital investments that are sustained over long periods of time, because that's where you get risk taking. And that's where you get deeper, more interesting work. And that's what the Literary Fund kind of opens up that opportunity for us, in what was kind of a fraught moment of terminated grants and that kind of stuff. It kind of reset us to thinking about what we can do and the possibilities and taking some risks and just doing the deep work of continuing to support literature in all the ways that we do.

WE

Yeah, Meg, you say it so beautifully. And it's, it's an extraordinary recognition and a validation, right, in a nice way. And it's remarkable to look on the list and see the varied geographic locations and the sort of styles of work that were supported. Because when we talk about “literary ecosystem” at the beginning, it's a rare, full, comprehensive look at what the literary ecosystem is. And that was awesome to see. And, in the nonprofit space, I completely agree with Meg. There has not been any historic investment in the literary arts. It is the least funded of all the arts, as we know. In Dallas, there were no historic funders who had ever touched the literary arts at the city level, at any of the foundations, no private individuals that had done anything at the arts. It was like one or two programs. It was very small. And so this is a really galvanizing moment because this is the kind of fund with the kind of players who validate what you do. And success

begets more success in fundraising. Right. And so you can go to different organizations now and say, “Hey, look like a Mellon backed project is supporting what we do. Let’s—the fight is not over. Let's keep going. We have so much more to do together.”

And then there's opportunities now through the same fund: the kind of thing that I was, I was pleasantly surprised about was they didn't give all the money away in one fell swoop either. So this is going to keep happening, which is really nice because the NEA has always been, like Meg said, not the biggest funder of projects. Right. It's nice. It's been amazing. They've been great partners historically, and hopefully we'll get that back again in the near future. But with the Literary Arts Fund, it's like a visionary way of giving. And then there's the opportunity. Now they're really encouraging collaboration through these special project grants they're doing. It's really cool to see.

And of course, when we look around the literary ecosystem, we're very grateful to get recognized, but know that we're—there were a lot of also amazing organizations that apply that didn't get it that we know. And we're hopeful they get it in the next round because everyone's hurting, and we're feeling very, very grateful in a very difficult time.

And hopefully we're going to pay this forward, right? We're going to do community work that pays back. We're going to support the authors. We're going to support the other presses. We're going to have them here in our bookstore. We're going to put them on our literary festival. We're going to invite their authors into our programs and have them teach classes, whatever we can do to try to sustain the ecosystem, that's what it's all about. We did the same thing in the pandemic. We got like one of those rescue grants. And so we immediately opened up a fund and gave away $30,000 to writers in Texas who needed help.

And so like whatever we can do in these kinds of times, it's like, everybody needs it in this literary ecosystem. And so we got to find a way to pay it forward and to see what else we can continue to do together. And I hope it does continue to encourage collaboration. That's something really cool. Like, among all the different pieces of the literary ecosystem, we're not encouraged to play together as much as you would think. And I don't just mean presses, but even presses. I mean, in Dallas, there's an amazing creative writing organization here. There's an amazing literacy organization here and we don't do enough. There's no funder who can galvanize it. So we're always seeing each other and are like, “we should really do something together.” And then we're just off in our own little sandboxes, you know? So hopefully this is a way we can actually—now's the time. Let's go do something that we couldn't do without this opportunity and this visionary way of seeing the problem and the potential solutions.

MM

That sounds great. I'm really excited to hear how that all plays out! Thank you both so much for joining us. At the end of another Novel Dialogue, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, Public Books for its partnership, and the Ric

Edelman College at Rowan University for its support. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Our music is by Scott Selisker.