

## [Navigating the Changing Landscape of Scholarly Book Publishing in Literary and Cultural Studies, Part 5](#)

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A post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

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*This post was developed from a virtual panel conversation that took place at the Modern Language Association 2022 meeting in January, organized by the [MLA Publications Committee](#). Throughout the week, the Elephant will publish one post per day from each of the six interlocutors on the themes of Change, Generations, Experiments, Open, Fit, and Labor. As always, readers are invited to continue the conversation in the comments. -Eds.*

### **Fit**

Zack Gresham, acquisitions editor, Vanderbilt University Press

Budgets have shrunk. At our press, that means we publish fewer titles than we might prefer. *All killer no filler* is our ethos, and “fit” is everything. But you might not realize that when I, an acquisitions editor, size up your project for fit, it isn’t just about the fit between your book and our list; it is also very much about the fit between you and me.

Luckily there is someone for everyone, and likewise there is an editor for every author (though not for every manuscript, I hasten to add). As authors—and the sooner you come to terms with the fact that you are an author the better—you can sigh into your pillow knowing that somewhere out there is an editor who is dying to meet you and your work. That should be encouraging news.

A few caveats:

1. Author-editor relationships are intimate. Editors are potential partners, not gatekeepers. The language of publishing betrays this: I don’t *collect applications*, I *accept proposals*. A lot of love travels back and forth with the edits, revisions, rewrites, reviews, and permissions. If you don’t have time in your life for another long-term relationship, publishing might not be for you.
2. As in any love letter, your person should be discernable in your book proposal. When you protect your writing from your personality, you produce sanitized prose that I will never believe, even if every word is indisputable. The pursuit of the universally palatable will suck the joy right out of your work. Then out of the writing process. Then out of the book. Pass.

3. I am vibe-gauging our initial conversations. Do the same. It's a date. We each need to know what the other is like to determine if we want to work together—intensely, for years—but that process is a farce unless we're both honest and a little vulnerable. So if you're loose, be loose; if you're laced up, lace up; if you curse a lot, lay it on me; if you're uncomfortable, say so. This is serious shit. Neither of us has time to talk about the weather.

A few caveats to the caveats:

1. I am not encouraging anyone to be deceptively wacky. That's even worse than pretending you're a robot, and it tells me just as little about you. I want your authentically weird self. If your work is great but our weirds don't jibe, at least I will know whether to send you to Mahinder at Cornell or Rebecca at SUNY.
2. There may be editors who believe I am offering specious advice. Some may prefer an assumed professionalism that looks and sounds a particular way, whether it represents the author's self or not. I don't think that is the future of scholarly publishing, and I don't think it reflects the best of its past. A book is a piece of art, you are the artist, and our joint pursuit is the sublime. The best books in my catalog bear that out. But I could be wrong.

When you were a student, you were surrounded with yourself—your schedule, your future, your grades. If you failed a test, nobody suffered but you. My favorite parts of being in school were the partnerships: working in a bookstore, playing in bands, making whoopee. Those are all much closer to the author-editor relationship than is defending a dissertation.

So when you go out looking for a publisher, if you feel like a student trying to get a scholarship or an A+, consider shifting that energy to the part of your brain that starts a band or goes dancing or shares a cigarette with a stranger. You are looking for a partner in the right editor; believe that the right editor is out there looking for you.

**Zack Gresham** is an acquisitions editor at Vanderbilt University Press, currently acquiring in anthropology, Latin American studies, Iberian studies, public health, and regional trade. He serves on the AUP acquisitions committee.

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