

## [Guest Post: Why Do University Presses Publish Trade Books?](#)

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By Tony Sanfilippo

*University presses were established to publish scholarly books—that's our chief mission. But it's not all we do. In this guest post, Ohio State University Press director Tony Sanfilippo talks about when and why university presses publish trade books—those intended for a general, non-specialist readership. --Catherine Cocks*

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Monographs are actually books. I bring that up because, among the few people in the world who know what a university press is and what it does, I think they forget that at the end of the day, we're the part of the university that produces books and sends them out into the world.

All this is to say that while yes, our primary duty is to produce vetted, edited, and well-designed scholarship, we're capable of producing almost any kind of book, and many of us do. Most university presses have a trade program, which means a program designed to produce books that appeal to a much broader audience than just scholars. I've worked for two university presses in my career, and both of those jobs have been at universities that were built thanks to the passage of the [Morrill Land-Grant Act](#), which is why they're called land-grant universities. These institutions are a little different than other universities in that part of their mission is to do local outreach, to directly serve the citizens of the state. To educate and enlighten those citizens in the hopes of improving their lives, providing them new opportunities, and expanding their horizons.

So for me, a trade program is an excellent way to meet my university's outreach objective. With a regional trade program, I can provide books to our citizens that teach them about their [history](#), their [culture](#), their [environment](#), and their [neighbors](#). A successful trade program can also help to offset the costs for the scholarly program, which is a guaranteed money-losing proposition.

Some people find university presses publishing trade books a little problematic because they think it's publishing out of our lane, but that doesn't really make sense to me unless you think about the university as an ivory tower where the high priests of knowledge share coded messages with each other. At my university, one of [the five pillars of our strategic plan](#) is not just research excellence, but also excellence in creative expression. Which is one of the reasons why we publish creative works, often authored by faculty or MFA graduates who are required to publish to avoid perishing, just like other tenured professors.

Another [core value of my university](#) is inclusion, and we can often be more effective in promoting that value through our trade program. It can provide a platform for marginalized voices, like this series of [Latinx graphic novels](#), or this [series of essays](#).

While some outside of the university community may think that publishing for a popular audience is

beyond the scope of a university press, I would argue that for many of us, the publishing we do outside of the monographs we produce is some of the most impactful publishing on the market. So check out your favorite university press's website when you're shopping for holiday gifts to see some of the great work we're doing.