

A Conversation with Jaiden Dembo, SFU WL Alumnus

Photo by Rebecca Blissett

Transcribed by Emily Sun

Edited by Molly MacKay and Kitty Cheung



Jaiden Dembo is a publicist and editorial associate at Arsenal Pulp Press, located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the **xʷməθkʷəy̓əm** (Musqueam), **Skwxwú7mesh** (Squamish), and **səlilwətaʔ** (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations (Vancouver, Canada). Arsenal Pulp Press is a small but mighty independent publishing house who publishes a range of literary fiction and non-fiction with a focus on LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and social issues. Prior to her time at Arsenal Pulp, Jaiden attended the Masters of Publishing Program at SFU in 2018/2019, after completing her BA in World Literature, minor in Print and Digital Publishing (also at SFU). Having worked with the Vancouver Writers Fest, Greystone Books, and *BC BookWorld*, Jaiden is familiar with the tightly knit BC literary community.

Melek Ortabasi: So, Jaiden, please take it away and tell us about your journey with Arsenal!

Jaiden Dembo: I'm a publicist at Arsenal Pulp Press, which means working in marketing with my colleague Cynara Geissler. I'm trying to get people to look at our books like "Hey! Please pay attention to us among all the thousands of other books coming out." As an independent press we don't have the same resources as the multinational houses such as Penguin Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins, and such. However Penguin Random House is the giant conglomerate to rule them all.

So, they [all the big publishing companies] also came in for a conference, for the emerging leaders. Well every February, SFU's publishing program puts on a conference called Emerging Leaders, where we have both multinationals, independent presses, and other industry professionals come to speak and share their industry wisdom. When multinationals are unveiling their marketing plans, they're extremely detailed and there's thousands of dollars behind them, whereas Arsenal has a much smaller budget comparatively. Plus, multinationals have more people power in general, like multiple interns.

And multinationals will say "Oh we have a small team of five in our marketing department" and I'm like "We have a small team of one...one and a half now at Arsenal." So that's kind of what Arsenal is up against, except we're performing extremely well. We hold our own as an independent press. Many, many of our books are award-nominated or award-winning every season. The press itself has won publisher of the year in 2019, and our publisher Brian Lam won the Lambda Literary Publishing Professional Award in 2020. However, what they sometimes call us in the publishing world is a "farm team," in that we discover the talent, we find the people that we want to take a chance on, and they are later signed on by the multinationals. Often, we will find amazing manuscripts that come in through the slush pile (unsolicited manuscripts that are mailed to our office). Lindsay Wong is an example of this. However, when we take these

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chances on debut authors and they're successful, larger publishing houses (especially multinationals) will often come around and offer them a second book, which comes with a much larger advance, since they have the resources for this and an extensive backlist that funds those advances. Even though an advance may only be \$30,000, it's still a more competitive offer.

MO: Which is peanuts.

JD: Yeah! Which is peanuts if you think about it, you spend years working on a book, right? Thirty-grand for a year's salary for any job is low.

MO: You don't give advances?

JD: We do, it's just often smaller in comparison. What we do tell our authors is that we give them the "boutique experience," which does give us a competitive edge. We give our authors a very hands-on experience, with the author present through every part of the process. Our editor, Shirarose Wilsensky, is amazing and one of the most talented editors I've worked with. She will talk on the phone with the authors sometimes for an hour depending on the author and go through multiple edits with them, and with so much thought and care. You do

that anyway with the big houses as well, but you can also just walk into our office and sit down and chat with us.

Then from the design perspective, very often in the big houses, they give you a few options for the cover and go "Well this is what we're going with because sales said it'll work." And the author's like "Okay...I guess." But for us, we've had covers change entirely because authors go "I don't like it, can we do something else?" We will work with them to make the cover they want, and what we also think will work. So, it's compromising, but the author has a lot more say in our house. They're very informed along the route. Our designer Jazmin Welch is also amazingly talented and spends lots of time working with the authors in the beginning stages to come up with cover concepts. Same goes for the marketing process where they're very involved.

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We also just finished developing an author care kit, which explains every process and detail, who you'll be working

with, and how it's going to go. I think publishing is a very mysterious business for a lot of people. I don't think a lot of people understand the work that goes into creating a book. They just go, "Oh the artist comes in and births this creation and it's amazing and it just happens." But that's not at all how it works. I think with this uptake in self-publishing a lot of people think they can just "do it" and that's why there's a million e-books on Amazon that people have self-published without realizing the amount of work it takes to have your book noticed.

MO: Weird how that works.

JD: Weird how it works, that if you don't have a professional editor going through multiple rounds with you, and a professional designer not even just to design the cover but lay out the interior... there's a reason why people trained for these positions and why this is a business. It takes a village to raise a child, right?

MO: Do you want to talk about the road to get to where you are? I think it would help the students who are graduating within World Literature, and several in this room are doing just that!

JD: I was very fortunate in my undergrad to have done an internship. I did a

co-op with BC Book World, which was my first experience with BC Publishing. That's how I started, and I was taking a publishing minor because I thought this was the practical side of books. I love books, I went into World Literature because I love books and reading and stories. I was like well, this will give me some practical hands on, "how I make the book" knowledge, and other parts of how it all happens. Every course I took in publishing, I was like: I really like this! This feels right. I remember in my fourth year, I talked to one of the professors, my favorite professor from the publishing department. I asked her about the Masters of Publishing (mPub). I didn't know what I wanted to do right after I graduated, which was rapidly approaching. I knew I'd figure it out somehow, but I wanted to be in this industry, and I didn't know how to get there without a little bit of help. My professor said that with mPub, you basically sink your hands into the industry, and you meet a lot of people. And I think that's the biggest benefit to the mPub, that they have at least two guests from the industry come in every single week of the whole program.

MO: And you should go to those things. I don't know if it's mandatory...but you should go to those things.

JD: Yes, always go. Because publishing in small arts communities...is about who you know and your connections and unfortunately or fortunately, it can create a community. I can walk into a room in a publishing event and know 90% of the people there. And that's a nice feeling because two years ago, I'd walk into a publishing event and I wouldn't know anyone. I'd know one person maybe and it was very uncomfortable. I was a stranger. So yeah, it was mPub for me, because I wanted to know the practical skills that it takes to be in this industry, and I wanted to meet people who are in this community, so I got into the mPub and it taught me a lot.

I know that people come into the mPub with different levels of experience. There was a woman with us in the program who already had her own design business, where she would typeset self-published books and design their covers. Obviously, her level of design is already way ahead of myself or other people in the cohort. A few people came in with journalism backgrounds, or there were quite a few who came in a similar position as me, just out of undergrad with an arts degree. I really benefited because I had a good foundation from my minor. And reflecting on what I learned in mPub versus the minor...the minor was great,

I was like "I know so much now about publishing!" Then going into mPub I realized my learning curve...was very much steep. And I'm glad I had that foundation, but I learned so much more about marketing, accounting, and other facets of publishing.

But, most importantly I learned about design. If I could re-do six years of my life, I would love to do an IAT minor or something along those lines. I really enjoy design and my skills are nowhere near the level they need to be to work in the industry, but I do enjoy it. So at least it does benefit me in the way that I can critique the covers, and critique the typesetting, and helps me when proof-reading our books when they're in their last few stages.

And, editorial as well. I would still like to supplement my editorial skills...the publishing program does workshops specifically for copy-editing and proof-reading or other sections of editing. There's substantive editing which is big picture, there is stylistic and copy-editing which is more grammatical and detail oriented and looking for inconsistencies. Proof-reading is one of the final stages when you have the manuscript and you're comparing it to the raw text version and making sure it matches. And picking out

design flaws as well. Every house has its own style guide that you follow. For me, I think I would like to work on my copy-editing and substantive editing. I think intuitively I understand substantive, because if you love books and read a lot and you study story, then you can understand the big picture things. And to be a substantive editor, it's the highest position in the house.

MO: Good ones are rare.

JD: Yes...so that's a job you probably won't get in the early years.

MO: And you can work up to it.

JD: Definitely. Our editor, Shirarsoe, does the substantive editing. She's been in this industry for ten years. And I think it was two years ago that she started at Arsenal. But she's done freelance work for all of the publishing houses. Not a lot of publishing houses can afford in-house anything. So, that's why they usually have one of each and freelance everything else.

So yeah, I did the MPUB. In the first semester, we do the book project which is a journey. It's a lot of work, and a lot of late nights. No one cried in my cohort which apparently is a miracle.

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Someone cries every year. It's very stressful, because you're basically starting a publishing house with four theoretical titles. None of it is real, but it's supposed to be real. You're pitching to industry professionals every week, so you have a panel of people who work in the industry and you're like "These are my books" and they're like "Wrong." Honestly, it was a lot of fun and it was what I want to do, even though it was stressful. I enjoyed it. So at the end of the semester, we do essentially a sales conference where we pitch all of our titles and also give the logic behind them and why they should take them on even though the book won't do well.

After the media project (the second semester in the mPub) you have your work placement. I went to Arsenal almost right after, I had my professors pushing me towards them which looking back truly makes sense when I look at the kinds of social justice papers I was writing. I interviewed with Arsenal, and Greystone

because I was doing manuscript evaluations for them at the time and I like what they do environmentally and their list. And for me, that's what's important. If you're going with a small or big press, you need to look at their mission statement and what they want to do. And I want to do something that matters... something that connects with you on a personal level.

I did a work placement at Arsenal for the whole summer, an internship with an honorarium. They were upfront about the size of the honorarium, and they also told me there wasn't a possibility for a job after. And at the time it was true, they didn't have space in the budget for another employee but they appreciated my work. When doing my internship I worked on a lot of marketing in pitching titles to the media and showed my design skills, designing the press-kits. Which I still do for some of our books. Cynara, our Marketing Director, said to Brian: we need to keep her. And that's actually some advice I got from an editor at one of the multinationals: make yourself indispensable.

Arsenal gave me part time, and I'm there two days a week. They're using a grant to keep me and extending my hours this summer again to prepare for fall. Since

fall is the season where you need to put a lot of your energy, because that's when the big awards come in, like the Giller Prize, Governor-General Award, etc... so you need to put that energy in late-spring and summer to get that fall list off the ground.

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Going back before all of this, I also did an internship at the Vancouver Writers Fest thanks to Dr. O, she hooked me up. And I loved the Vancouver Writers Festival, and they're great. Especially with our new artistic director. With mPub, not only do you have the community of people you meet, but you also have your peers and cohorts and the cohorts before you. I've met with this year's cohort and I've chatted with them and given them advice...My point being, the Writers Fest is full of mPub alumni, and

future mPub cohort members. Working with the Writers Fest, I worked with development, with marketing, with programming, just little things. But it was really good to get to know everyone. So then the following summer as I was doing my work placement at Arsenal, I actually had the volunteer manager contact me and asked me if I wanted to be her volunteer assistant for the festival that year. And it's a promotion in the sense from the festival assistant. I helped coordinate 350 volunteers for the festival, which was a lot of fun. It went really well and we had a lot of lovely volunteers and they're really dedicated. They put in over 24 hours over the festival week. It's wild and fantastic.

MO: So the festival was an invaluable experience?

JD: Completely! If you want to be in the publishing world, you really need to meet authors and the people who are in the community. And at the Writers' Fest they have this building that is stuffed with signed author copies from all the people who've come to the Festival. It's really cool.

MO: Well Jaiden, thank you so much for putting aside time to talk to us! Not having been there for all of it [Jaiden's

academic journey], but for some of it, I can tell you I've seen the difference. It's growth; we all do it and it's huge. I always knew that you were a leader, you wanted to get things done. And to me it was just like, "Yeah, she'll figure it out. She'll be able to do that, and she'll get the experience, and then she'll be able to do it more effectively."

Editors' note: This transcription has been edited for clarity and length.