

“Recent years have found Microcosm consistently among PW’s fast growing independent publishers, and Biel just received PubWest’s inaugural Innovator’s Award.” -*Publishers Weekly*

BOOKS AND MATH



A MANIFESTO ON PUBLISHING TOOLS

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Global labor conditions are bad, and our roots in industrial Cleveland in the '70s and '80s made us appreciate the need to treat workers right. Therefore, our books are **MADE IN THE USA**.



MICROCOSM PUBLISHING is Portland's most diversified publishing house and distributor, with a focus on the colorful, authentic, and empowering. Our books and zines have put your power in your hands since 1996, equipping readers to make positive changes in their lives and in the world around them. Microcosm emphasizes skill-building, showing hidden histories, and fostering creativity through challenging conventional publishing wisdom with books and bookettes about DIY skills, food, bicycling, gender, self-care, and social justice. What was once a distro and record label started by Joe Biel in a drafty bedroom was determined to be *Publishers Weekly's* fastest-growing publisher of 2022 and #3 in 2023 and 2024, and is now among the oldest independent publishing houses in Portland, OR, and Cleveland, OH. We are a politically moderate, centrist publisher in a world that has inched to the right for the past 80 years.

INTRODUCTION

The best way to begin publishing is to have no idea what you are doing. This creates the freedom to try, fail, learn, and try again instead of repeating the “correct” way of publishing by numbers. And then finding out that those don’t actually work for you. And blaming yourself, instead of the institutions that made your success impossible. If the traditional publishing industry is already working great for you, this guide may not be for you. However, if we cannot figure out why you cannot get ahead, welcome, we’d love to have you. Would you like some tea?

I learned publishing by running a restaurant. I learned cost and scheduling by managing the evening staff and ingredient orders. I learned marketing through door hangers and daily accounting totals. Twenty five years later, when I was introduced to the head of the American Library Association as the CEO of *Publishers Weekly’s* fastest growing publisher in 2023, I explained all of this to her. She looked at me and asked “You had no prior experience

or education?” And I repeated, “Well...I ran a restaurant for two years.” She awkwardly exited the conversation.

Publishing contains a pervasive idea that mentorship, networking, and experience are the secret tools to repeating others’ success, but the reality is that critical thinking is much more important. Figure out where you want to go and the shortest route to getting there. Start small and grow incrementally. Develop your cartography skills and plot your course, then simplify as you are able. Create ways to monitor your progress and be willing to change course as you see how things work in practice. It’s that easy. That is the formula that took Microcosm from zero books and zero experience to thousands of titles in print and millions in annual sales.

So many publishers really have outsized expectations for their first book or their first year. But if you learn the art of shifting your expectations, monitoring your progress, and figuring out what works, you can achieve those outsized expectations over time even better than we did.

—Joe Biel, founder and CEO of Microcosm Publishing and WorkingLit

A SHORT MANIFESTO ON PUBLISHING TOOLS

Elly Blue

Holy crap, publishing is hard. And mostly, that's why we love it: every day the work is different and every day you learn something that upends your whole perspective. It's a creative outlet, an opportunity for deep strategy and analysis, a chance to empathize and connect, a puzzle of influence, sometimes a physical workout. You get to use both sides of your brain at once.

But also... I think a lot of us get into this line of work because we like to do the most. We're not afraid of hard work, but it's more than that: we're the ones who take the hard way on purpose. Fifteen years ago, when I first started publishing zines, I did this with great glee. I had no money, but I could always squeeze another hour or two out of the day. All my processes were tooled to be as cheap as possible. My online sales were all through a paypal button on my blog and I typed all the particulars into a spreadsheet to track inventory and income and check off fulfillment. I'd get a bunch of pre-orders on Kickstarter and get on my bike to deliver all the ones within a five-mile radius of my house. Each time I did this, I saved \$100 on postage and got some great cardio. I rarely actually had \$100, so it felt like a good use of my time.

But there came a day, around my 5th or 6th publication, when I was putting together my list of deliveries and realized that it would be more cost-effective to drop even the local zines into the mail. I was getting

better at managing, and accounting for, my time, and I was learning that spending a day creating new content, doing layout on the next issue, and pitching my work to reporters would bring in more value than I would have saved in postage. I slowly started to invest in other shortcuts, like paying a friend to build me a proper ecommerce website, bartering with another friend for design and layout work, and publishing \$10 books instead of \$3 zines.

When I merged with Microcosm in 2014 and started running marketing for the whole joint operation, it felt luxurious to have a team of specialists who could do so many things better than I could. Most revelatory was suddenly having access to a relational database that freed me from the tyranny of spreadsheets. Every time someone new joins our team, especially folks with publishing industry backgrounds, I love watching them light up the same way I did as they realize what our software systems can do.

Even with the best systems in the world, publishing is still good, hard work. But with the right tools, the work is more interesting. You can trade some of the grinding for research, analytical thinking, strategizing, and scheming—still work, but work that’s more likely to lead you to your next big idea. When you’re able to step back and look at the big picture you can prevent yourself from spending hundreds of hours on busywork that results in a basement full of dusty boxes, and instead sign yourself up for exciting projects that might feel riskier but are actually motivating you forward.

That's why we want to make Microcosm's tools available to other publishers. Really, that's the entire goal. We want to see better books in the world and a more robust industry with healthier pay and happier workers who can take a day off once in a while. In an era of consolidation, we know that working together is the best way to stay stronger on our own. And also it's just more fun to try new things together.

WHAT PUBLISHERS CAN LEARN FROM PREPPERS

(from someone who's survived climate disaster and lived to read about it)

Sara Balabanlilar

For the unprepared, every small shift in the publishing industry can sometimes feel like a disaster on the horizon. But it doesn't have to be this way if you have your tools at the ready. Even before the current unprecedented times (TM), there was an influx of seasonal disaster fearmongering from all areas: the whole west coast looks forward to The Big One and wildfires that grow year after year; the northern Midwest has to batten down the hatches for yearly snowstorms that shut down business for days. I grew up on the Gulf Coast, where weather predictions regularly forecast a potential Cat 5 hurricane that might decimate coastal cities.

I'm deeply uninterested in fearmongering, and if I were, I wouldn't be on the administrative side of the independent book world ;). The thing is, the disaster is already here, I've seen it (many of us have), and getting

anxious about a future era of climate dystopia is kinda useless. Y'all saw, or lived, last year's horrific hurricane that swept away entire areas of southern Appalachia and the East Coast, or the terrible fires that reached Los Angeles and burned down entire neighborhoods. The Gulf lives in the shadow of Katrina and a *number* of other hurricanes that did irreparable damage to the landscape and population. Heck, my home city has fatal flash-floods multiple times a year that come and go without much comment.

Something I've learned (and this is where the prep-er stuff comes in) is: the time to prepare is now. Don't get scared, get ready! That might sound a little desperate or fatalist but I don't necessarily mean it like that. Yes, I have met the rural Texans with a large store of firearms, but there are also my beloved queer anarchist friends who preserve food every winter, raise their own animals in the middle of their southern cities, know how to fix their own houses when high winds blow the roof off, and build decentralized, anti-surveillance communication networks. What I mean is, think about what you would potentially lose in the face of a crisis and figure out a sustainable practice to keep what you need. Learn to grow, find, and can your food. As these pals have shown me, teach yourself survival skills outside of the system and see if, instead of feeling paranoid, you just feel like your life has become less fretful and more expansive.

Anyway. Now transmute that ethos into other realms. How do you build a life practice that supports you no matter the eventuality? After all, I'm trying to get at a holistic view of existing in the world that invests in climate safety practices alongside all other

kinds of safety and nourishment. So of course, coming as I am from a WorkingLit point of view, I'm starting with books.

First, let's agree that there's no one impending disaster in the book/publishing industry. Disaster, industry-shifting changes, and outside forces have come and gone in multiple forms, each shift shaping the industry and unfortunately ridding the world of some amazing publishers as it goes. Whether industry-specific, like the rise of eBooks and Print on Demand (see the prescient and thoughtful *A People's Guide to Publishing* podcast episode) or U.S. economy-specific, like tariffs (see...another prescient and thoughtful *A People's Guide to Publishing* podcast episode, lol) and Amazon's relentless pursuit of money at the expense of publishers and bookstores, shifts are wide-ranging.

The same outlets that forecast the disappearance of New Orleans due to rising waters are also persistently forecasting the disappearance of print books, or bookstores. But come on, y'all, the binary deserves to be complicated, there's no Black and White, we already know this. There is no "existence" vs. "complete disappearance." We can forecast that, reasonably, such shifts will continue to occur, just as I can unfortunately assume that another hurricane is going to hit my home city and, in advance, make sure my family has flood insurance, a stock of potable water, and a generator.

I guess from what I can see, preparing for disaster breaks down to a few major things:

1. *Know what you've got on hand.* Keep track of your stock. Life is a mystery, your assets don't have to be. Publishers: Make your systems as infallible as possible. If you're hand-counting stock in a garage to keep track of your catalog, please please stop. If you've not taken inventory in a while, *please* build it into your schedule at least twice a year. Track your product movement so you're not scrambling to reprint or find space for bestsellers.

2. *Recognize your network.* If you're *just* the "firearms" type of prepper, this is your nuclear family, I guess; if you're the "queer anarchist" type of prepper, this is your family too, but maybe not so much in the bound-by-blood type of way. And if you're a publisher, this is not just your audience of readers but your community of peers. You need them and they need you!

Keep track of the actual stats year over year, don't just make assumptions based on your loudest customers. You'll find out a lot more about your highest-selling accounts, the wild online-only stores that try to return 60% of their orders from you, and the small but determined gift accounts that love what you do.

If you're sure of what you have, you're sure of where it's going, and you're sure of who's doing it with you, then you can...

3. Prepare for the future and any eventuality.

Remember when I said “getting anxious is kinda useless”? Ok, we’re back to that again. Knowing where your weak/strong spots are means that, as time passes and the world changes, you know where your business could use growth and will need support. At all costs, stay the flexible, creative, generative person I *know* you are if you’re reading this. With the stable support of data behind you, you can focus your brain on that critical thinking and spend less time wondering when you accumulated 1000 extra copies of an underseller...

Pile these three together and they lead to the hopefully inevitable outcome that you can:

4. Feel like you’ve got the control to do what you WANT. One of my friends referenced disaster preparedness including a “go-bag” and knowledge of evacuation routes. I’m from the south, baby! We don’t have evacuation routes, we hunker down and keep our “bunkers” at ground level or above. But you do you. You know your apocalypse best; preparedness is not a one-size-fits-all process. In the publishing world... I’m sure you can see where I’m going with this. If you’ve followed steps 1-3 above, you know your context, your catalog, your pals, and your requirements to move forward. You can pivot depending on each year’s needs. In Microcosm’s case, this means owning the software to track sales proactively, thereby weathering recessions with relative ease and



sticking around for decades to sell more great books.

5. *Lift up yourself and your community.* In the Gulf Coast case: make sure you know the person on your block with a boat (it might be you).

As a book industry worker *outside* the coastal hubs, I spend a lot of time, mostly digitally, with fellow book people talking about our geographic challenges. There's something incredibly loving and thoughtful about what I have seen: a growing group of book people who can share their gripes about working in South Carolina, Idaho, Tennessee, Texas, New Mexico, Missouri, etc., but also share support systems and brainstorm solutions together. Non-New York presses were some of the first to pivot when Covid started in 2020, and I think it's because we're so used to existing outside the spotlight, and (already limited) funding, of the literary world. Decentralization is not a gimmick, it's vital that we retain independence and also support our fellow indies. Rising tide and all that.

May we all survive and live to tweet (or whatever the next inevitable post-apocalyptic social media is, as the samsara of app churn continues) another day.

A SHORT HISTORY OF WORKINGLIT

Elly Blue

On December 20, 2014, I sent an email to Microcosm Publishing's longtime programmer Nate Beaty with the subject line "Hello! And some SEO stuff." This was my first week at Microcosm, with the newly minted title of marketing director. Absolutely nobody had told me to take over managing our software development, but I quickly saw that the biggest problem in marketing our books was making sure people could find them online. I picked up the ball and never stopped running with it.

More than ten years before that, Nate had been working in our production department, and casually mentioned to Microcosm's founder, Joe Biel, "you know, a relational database could handle a lot of this stuff better than a person does now." At the time, Microcosm had a rudimentary early e-commerce site and was tracking stock levels on a whiteboard in a decommissioned church basement. Joe said, "Sure, go for it." Several small presses and booksellers pooled resources to fund Nate building the initial app. Nate hasn't stopped running with that ball either.

By the time I got involved, Microcosm had become the most demanding user of what was now a sophisticated system that integrated fulfillment, accounting, title management, and royalties. It was called "Clixel admin" or usually just "admin." Nate was squashing bugs and tweaking features and fending off a half dozen Mi-

crocosm workers coming at him with malformed and contradictory requests. Joe had a big vision for what it could do and a huge backlog of ideas, with more coming all the time.

Coordinating all of these ideas and requests, learning to deliver feature tickets and bug reports, and thinking through ways to change one system without breaking another or overcomplicating someone's workload soon became my favorite part of the job. It's thinky work with tangible results that allow people to do their jobs more easily and focus on the parts of the work that matter. We've added so much more complexity since then and each new feature has taken a burden off of at least one person or department at Microcosm, for instance letting them focus on strategy instead of data entry, or improving their systems instead of rushing to catch up.

And more important: WorkingLit helped Microcosm survive and grow. We're convinced that we survived the recession of 2008, the publishing industry downturn of 2012, and the early months of the pandemic in 2020 solely because we had this software that removed barriers and steps from every part of the process of marketing, selling, and fulfilling a book and getting paid. We were able to leave our giant trade distributor and strike out on our own, growing 5-fold in as many years—and survive that growth—for the same reason. We know how many books to print and when, which warehouse an order should ship out of, and how long it will take any title to become profitable. We send out over 650 royalty statements quarterly and it takes one person four hours of work to do that. We own all

of our product data and send it out to industry partners on our own timeline and on our own terms. We can easily fulfill a large order from a candle shop across the country or a zine about someone's local punk scene that they need by Friday.

In 2019, we had tea with our friend Ryan and were telling him how our new self-distribution was going far better than we'd expected, and it was all because of our software. He gently pointed out that the software itself might be something other publishers could use. Cartoon light bulbs appeared above our heads. We talked about it nonstop and spent five years alternating between jogging with that ball and setting it down while we tried to keep up with Microcosm's massive growth spurt.

Around this time, Laura Moulton, who started Portland's amazing trike-based library Street Books, emailed to say hi and we invited her to come by the office and drink tea and catch up. She brought her husband, Ben Parzybok, along with her and we all had a good talk. We already knew of Ben because his novel *Sherwood Nation* was a favorite of our biggest customer, Tom at Artifacts in Hood River, Oregon. We were obsessed with this software idea so of course we brought it up, and Ben told us that he ran a software company that he'd started and built from scratch. More light bulbs went off. We met again and Ben gave us some great advice and also revealed that back in 2002, Nate used to do sticker layouts for Ben and Laura's Gumball Poetry project (a micro-literary journal that is still run out of a gumball machine at a coffee shop). We talked about him joining the team. And then we set the ball down again while we grew.

Also in 2019, we met Nellie McKesson at The Next Page publishing conference organized at Kickstarter by industry firecracker Margot Atwell. Nellie's another rarity: someone with feet in the publishing and tech worlds. Her company, Hederis, helps automate book layout. In 2021 we were busier than we'd ever been with Microcosm so we figured it was a great time to start building a new tech company in earnest and Nellie came on for a year to build a prototype site.

Microcosm's internship program went remote during the pandemic; this didn't work out great and our last class of interns was in 2021. One of them was Ru Mehendale, an MIT student who was one of the best editorial interns we've ever worked with. They mentioned at one point that they'd taught themselves to code, and after their internship ended, Nellie passed them the torch. Ru spent the next couple years building out the WorkingLit you can see today, honing in the royalty math, the user interface, and the logic that gets you around the app, writing a ton of documentation and setting up project management infrastructure along the way.

A couple of years of intensive coding later, growth at Microcosm had slowed down to a manageable level again and we had a WorkingLit app fully functioning in beta. By the end of 2023, publishers were signing up and using it to run their business, which felt amazing. Ru decided to step away from the computer and go into labor organizing, so we got back in touch with Ben. We humbly told him that we were overwhelmed, that running a growing publishing company was more than a full-time job for each of us and so was running a software startup, and asked him if he wanted to run the joint.

A remarkably short period of time later, in 2024, Ben came on as CTO. He shook his head the first week after familiarizing himself with our workflows and sheer backlog of stuff to do, but “There’s definitely no shortage of low-hanging fruit” was his only comment. He hit the ground running, bringing in coders, creating a system for onboarding users, and starting to communicate regularly with our audience. He created the momentum and time so that I could sit down and write this short history, and he’s creating the conditions for more history to be written in a few years.

More than twenty years later, we still approach everything as “how can the software free us up to do the parts that require a human?” It feels like magic, but it’s people + math. Thanks for reading our story—we hope you join us for the next chapter and make it part of your own!

THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL

Joe Biel

Peter Workman (of Workman Publishing fame), according to multiple sources, believed that each successful book relied upon a sturdy “three-legged stool:”

1. The book must have the right price, format, and trim size for its shelf and subject.
 - a. The content must challenge existing wisdom.
 - b. It should be the best possible book in its category and become a “category killer,”

making the other books on the shelf obsolete.

- c. It should be an attractive value with emotional appeal.
2. The author and publisher must have a great relationship, and the publisher must have an authentic relationship with the book's audience.
 - a. Content is created.
 - b. Book is introduced to professionals and the trade.
 - c. The author and concepts are introduced to the audience.
3. Commerce at every level: the book must benefit everyone who touches it.
 - a. Author, publisher, sales rep, account, and reader must all benefit from "value stream."
 - b. This prevents disruptions in the supply chain and keeps deep discounting from retailers like Amazon from undermining a book with a community behind it.

If any of these legs were missing, Workman believed that the stool would collapse and the book would fail.

In 1984, Workman Publishing Company released *What To Expect When You're Expecting*, one of the first books about pregnancy for new mothers. The primary author, Heidi Murkoff, had no medical expertise or credentials to write the book and was motivated by the lack of resources available when she had a baby. Worried about the credibility of the author, Workman strength-

ened Murkoff's second leg by pairing her with medical experts and specialists to check the risks and accuracy of her advice and began sending her as a speaker to professional conferences. *What To Expect When You're Expecting* is now read by 93% of people seeking a book on pregnancy and has become Workman's flagship title. More importantly, the book has entered the cultural fabric of the U.S. When a movie wants to convey that someone is pregnant, the director puts the book on screen. The book is so authoritative that it visually embodies a common emotional experience and has sold nearly twenty million copies.

Look at your books from the perspective of your reader, who has 159 million books to choose between. What are your key advantages? How does your book benefit everyone who touches it?

WHY WE USE MATH INSTEAD OF AI

Joe Biel

There's a lot of hubbub about how AI is going to revolutionize, well, just about everything. The trouble is, it's not. It's a fun party trick but a poor tool. At the PubWest conference in 2024, the keynote tried to impress the audience with the promise that AI would replace internship programs. It was fascinating to watch the audience unite against the speakers who hadn't realized that most of the publishers in the room had started as interns, whose role is traditionally to learn the craft rather than provide cheap labor. This claim is shaky in all industries but espe-

cially false in publishing. AI replaces the wrong kind of work with the wrong kind of results.

We do get excited about new tech, and were admittedly excited when AI entered the marketplace. We began testing it to see how it could improve upon core functions of our operation. The trouble is, it doesn't work. At least not anywhere near as well as a well-trained person works. If you're very tired at the end of your workday, AI could create work that bears facsimile qualities to your own weakest abilities. So we abandoned AI almost immediately, with periodic tests for our amusement. As one friend put it "Actually, AI is very good at creating my Hallmark movies about a luchador who does not get along with his toaster." However, even my experiments in creating parody publications with AI were thoroughly ineffective. Humor is an emotion and thus something that AI cannot grasp. AI does not even understand why its own failed efforts are amusing.

The most fascinating thing is that if you listen to the people who have worked building AI technology the longest, they can explain how AI has the appearance of "thinking" without any of the advantages of actually being able to do so and that it has already hit its virtual glass ceiling.¹ You can see this if you have ever interacted with AI "customer service" robots. Or asked AI to write a description of something. It contains all of the parts of writing without any of the usefulness.

¹ As Nikhil Suresh, an Australian data scientist has explained over and over, ludic.mataroa.blog/blog/i-will-fucking-piledrive-you-if-you-mention-ai-again/

During an Independent Book Publishers Association webinar about WorkingLit, publishers cheered when we explained that we use math instead of AI to run our software. I tried to explain that this wasn't a moral move so much as math is a hard science, whereas AI asserts misinformation with the confidence of an inaccurate Google review. As the publishing marketplace gets increasingly crowded, AI becomes less and less effective. It's partially a signal-to-noise ratio problem but also, with more and more books and fewer and fewer distributors on the market every day, the quality of your work as a publisher needs to exceed that of AI. This doesn't just apply to writing books, but your marketing language, cover development, and the overall thoughtfulness and utility of your approach.

When our books were distributed through an outsourced relationship, we spent our time negotiating which orders were too large or small based on what we knew of the size of each book's market. Today, that same time is spent actually selling and shipping those books. This metaphor is probably the best way to explain the difference between AI and statistics. When someone's workload is too overwhelming, they simply cannot do a great job at everything and have to make choices. AI is fed the largest pool of subjective data on Earth (often illegally) and told to draw sensible conclusions from it. It's like when I visited Niagara Falls as a child. It was clear that tons of water was falling a tremendous distance but I had more to learn about water from the small puddles left on my neighborhood sidewalk after it rained.

Statistics are as accurate as the data that you feed your system. That's why we developed WorkingLit to create the right computations with your data as a problem-solving tool. Giving yourself all of the information allows you the agency to make decisions and think critically instead of AI attempting to misdirect you. If AI was better at publishing than publishers, we'd all be out of a job already. Even Amazon, when attempting to use fully automated purchasing tools, hired experienced book buyers to review the work. Why? There's a lot of expert knowledge you need to have about the life cycle of a certain title, genre, author, or format. As you teach AI about the many conflicting rules of each of these, it gets increasingly lost in the contradictions while your expert knowledge combined with a healthy set of statistics leads you to responsible decision making.

Over the next ten or twenty years, it is probable that AI will have a similar impact on our workflow as smartphones or the web did. Once functional systems are introduced, AI will change how we engage our workflows rather than disrupt it. But right now it's just a lot of noise.

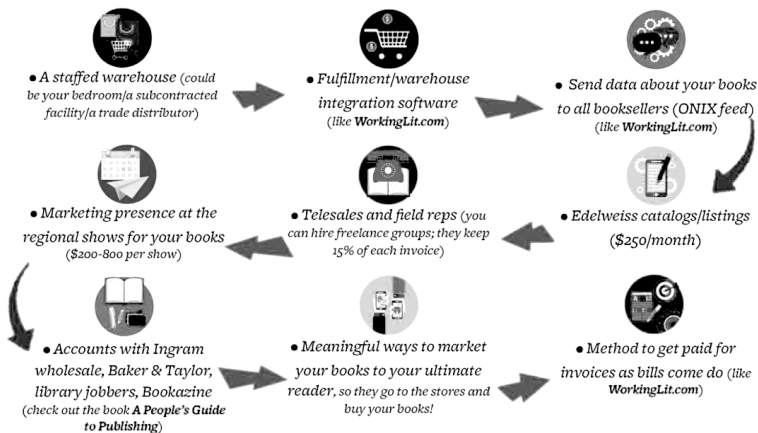
THE NINE PARTS OF DISTRIBUTION

Joe Biel



A TOOL FOR PUBLISHERS TO MANAGE THEIR DATA, ROYALTIES, INVOICING, ACCOUNTING, AND MORE

What do you need to distribute your books to stores?



What else does WorkingLit.com software do?



WorkingLit.com is cooperatively owned and operated, by publishers, for publishers and created by Microcosm Publishing, a Publishers Weekly fastest growing publisher for the past three years

In 2018, Microcosm fired our final distributor in favor of self-distributing. A relatively obvious advantage to us is that we would no longer need to bend the knee to Amazon's demands and market dominance. Amazon took larger discounts with every contract renewal and so we made the decision to ignore them, as any adult ignores their ex who insists on continuing to behave badly in public.

Our sales more than doubled over the next year. For reasons that I cannot entirely grasp, the headline was never "Microcosm's sales double by self-distributing," it was always "Microcosm doesn't sell to Amazon." Indeed, seven years later, I am still asked about this in every interview, rather than the fact that our sales have now more than octupled in the past decade through this decision. I digress.

What is "distribution?"

- 1. A Staffed Warehouse.** This can be your bedroom or basement; you just need a way to store inventory, find it when you need it, and ship the orders. For years, my "warehouse" was a shelf that I kept together with liquid nails in a closet and a computer in the adjoining hallway. Within ten years, we upgraded to a grade-level basement garage where we could roll pallets in the front door and then access cartons by going up and down stairs. Within another ten years we were desperate for a loading dock because receiving ten pallets of books is much faster this way. But start where you are and

build up as you find the limitations. Don't start big. Learn as you grow. You'll have fewer risks and more fun.

2. Fulfillment/Warehouse Integration Software. A way to manage inventory and turn orders into shipments and then itemized invoices. This is the earliest function of WorkingLit. In the industry, this is called an “Enterprise Resource Planning” system (ERP), with some costing over \$1M. Similarly to your warehouse, you can also use spreadsheets and a clipboard until you outgrow the limitations of that or start with our free plan.

3. Share Your Data. Potential buyers need data about your new titles, and to know when something changes about any title in your back catalog. ONIX is the format used by larger companies to share this data. It is theoretically publicly owned and open source but in reality it's almost impossible to get information about sample feeds and best practices. Worse, everyone wants a slightly different ONIX feed and some companies claim to want the newest version but only accept ONIX 2.1, which has been outdated since 2009. We built these features into WorkingLit when we needed them for our own functionality. It took many stressful months of adapting this in a way that vendors would accept. So enjoy the fruits of our labor.

4. Create Industry Demand. In order to market your books, you'll need to meet with librarians, booksellers, and buyers, which has historically

happened at trade shows. There are national and regional shows of all stripes for both bookstores and gift stores. Each one costs about \$200–2,000 plus shipping, hotel, and travel. If that's not punishing enough, publishers are expected to give better deals at these shows and the immediate results are difficult to gauge as most orders are written outside the shows, to your sales reps. In the past few years, shows have provided less of a tangible impact so this is no longer essential. After we found the pandemic was transformative for new buyers discovering books on new platforms, Microcosm shifted to direct mailing and managing more personal relationships through phone calls and emails. At the same time, you will find key buyers at these shows. The difference is that you may pay \$1,000 each in customer acquisition costs at these shows and find that it takes three years to earn that out in sales.

5. Edelweiss Catalogs and Listings. Edelweiss is a private, for-profit company that owns the digital cataloging for the entire publishing industry. All serious publishers are expected to have their titles listed on Edelweiss. They can accept an ONIX feed and your sales force will utilize these listings as well as printed catalogs when meeting with buyers. Again, it's not essential but it's where trade buyers expect to find books from professional publishers so the cost is part smoke and mirrors—demonstrating your credibility vs actual value of discoverability.

6. Telesales and Field Sales Force. A strong sales force is the major difference between a successful publisher and the competition. These are “boots on the ground” that physically walk into bookstores, show your titles to buyers, and are knowledgeable about all of your lines. They know how to repeat the marketing handles, talking points, and anecdotal stories about your books and authors in ways that make them seem like natural conversation. A good salesperson is like a neutral third party intermediary; relaying information from the field back to the publisher’s office and vice versa. However, consolidation of the industry has also hit field sales forces so there are major swaths of the country that don’t have adequate coverage and others where there are inadequate numbers of reps per square mile. As such, you’ll want to have some amount of telesales people telling stores about new books and collecting reorders. This could be you, your extrovert friend, people shared across publishers, or a commissioned sales force. Commissioned reps need to believe in your publishing program (or be forced to sell it by their employer) and charge 15% of invoice rather than hourly pay. Find rep groups by picking up catalogs at trade shows or PDFs online from larger publishers who publish books similar to your own. In the back, the catalogs have a page listing their rep groups by territory. Since there are places where reps don’t wander, sometimes because of geographic isolation, sometimes be-

cause it's outside of their contracted territory, and sometimes just out of habit, consider how to reach these places. I cannot tell you how many times there have been two stores across the street from each other and our reps only meet with one of them. For this reason, we employ our most experienced staff to send out samples and make telesales. They also handle specialty accounts like Fuego and Urban Outfitters as well as accounts like record stores, hardware stores, grocery stores, and mercantile shops. While this is expensive, the monthly sales of each person rival that of an entire rep group.

7. Accounts with Wholesalers. You'll want to be available through all appropriate wholesalers that service your type of publishing. Usually a bookstore will make their first order direct with the publisher, but once a store is in the habit of stocking your book, they make weekly restocks with wholesalers like Ingram and Bookazine because it's easier, faster, and more efficient. If you publish children's books, Follett will likely be a major customer for you. Similarly, libraries order through Follet/Baker & Taylor or other library "jobbers." New Leaf is a mind/body/spirit specialty store wholesaler. Military Families Books services just who the name implies! If you publish Mormon books, you'll want to connect with Deseret Books. Ingram and Baker + Taylor represent about a third to half of all sales for major publishers. There is a list of wholesalers in the

back of my book, *A People's Guide to Publishing*. These companies make it easy for stores and libraries to find a way to order your books and demonstrate that you are a “real publisher.” To supply Barnes & Noble or Amazon, you’ll need to create an account with them as well.

8. **Meaningful Ways to Market Your Books to**

Readers. The biggest mistake that most publishers make is that they get fantastic distribution, build fantastic relationships with retailers, and...fail to let the public know about their books. Think about the influencers in your space and how you learn about new books that you purchase. Historically, publishers created sales through reviews and publicity, but during the pandemic this value chain fell apart. Rachel Noorda and Kathi Inman Berens studied what causes people to buy and found that readers don’t even trust bookstore employees, magazines, or online reviews, leaning more towards more intimate relationships with influencers, family, friends, and piracy.² Microcosm has always overcome this hurdle by focusing on what we call “consumer events,” where our fans go to learn about and purchase new books—everything from RollerCon to Peerpocalypse to Portland Indie Book and Art Fair. Events like this don’t just sell books that day—they spread buzz to local retailers for years to come. Whether or not you have a distributor, *do not skip this step*. This is the difference between the industry average returns rate of 20% and Microcosm’s returns of 1.4%.

² pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_fac/86/

9. Methods to Get Paid for Invoices. Stores want to buy your books on credit and pay after 30-90 days, so you'll need to generate invoices and remind them when they are overdue. When the checks arrive, you'll need a workflow to deposit them into your bank account. When you ship an order you need a way to turn that into a check in a month or two. We built this system into WorkingLit, where all of this is automated for publishers, from billing to reminders to collections. The British book trade also created a company called Batch, which automates payments for self-distributed publishers to get paid by bookstores in weekly deposits. This simplifies the largest hurdle for bookstores adding a new account because it incorporates it into an existing workflow. So we built Batch into WorkingLit as well!

10. Bonus: *Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) compatibility.* Once a publisher does a certain amount of business, companies like Barnes & Noble, Baker & Taylor, and Ingram will no longer be willing to manually enter invoices and return credits. EDI offers a way to automate purchase orders into invoices and then shipments and returns into credits between systems. This sounded excessive to me until I came to understand that these companies will routinely order twelve copies of a title to one warehouse, return two from another, and then reorder more copies of the same book to a third warehouse the next day. Consider that many books have multiple formats and

editions and the result is that it's very difficult to remain organized using manual systems. These companies will often charge a fee if you are doing several hundreds of thousands of dollars in business annually and not able to accept EDI feeds. EDI is currently being incorporated into WorkingLit, and it's an entirely different kind of headache from ONIX.

Once you have these nine steps in place, you have distribution. While most publishers refer to signing a contract with a trade distributor as “having distribution,” that attitude is born of obfuscation and imposter syndrome. We were shocked (and a little bit horrified) to see how quickly we could grow our sales by handling our own distribution by performing these steps in house. Why? Due to capacity issues, a trade distributor cannot put adequate time and resources into your books like you can, to manipulate all of the levers and keep sales activity moving as books age gracefully. We often found that, with a distributor, sales of each title would dry up after a year. However, when we began self-distributing in 2019 and built in reorder incentives and sales follow-ups, we could maintain the sales of each title in relative perpetuity. Based on incentives we had seen from Workman Publishing, we created a discount structure to make stores dig through our older titles. They got a better discount. We sold more books. So after a year, it wasn't our new books that were selling better—it was books from previous seasons!

To reach an audience:

- You need to be clever—more clever than the other people who are doing what you do.
- You need to spell out exactly what the book is.
- You need to have an online presence that appeals to your reader base.
- You need to work hard to promote your book through traditional media as well as more creative channels.
- You need to find ways to interact with your readers and keep them invested in your output and success.

You don't need a trade distributor to do any of these things—good distributors that are a good match for your work will do them, but not as well as you can and not in a way that replaces your own efforts. A trade distributor can expand your reach, but if you haven't yet built up a way to connect with your audience, that expanded reach may not stick or be sustainable.

A distributor doesn't always have congruent goals with a publisher due to their economy of scale. It's a physical impossibility to show every book to every buyer or even to put every book in every catalog. It's impossible to answer every email, and, in the end, corners must be cut and decisions must be made. Again, a distributor's goal is not always your goal. Your distributor can make money through storing your books, shipping and processing returns of your books, and the various aspects of managing data and inventory that goes into publishing—without ever actually selling any books. You have to evaluate when your goals are in sync and

when they are not. Maybe you'll find that you prefer (or have a better bottom line) being smaller and getting more personal mail and doing fulfillment for some stores selectively. Some publishers sign with a distributor and never leave, 30 years later. What's right for one is not always a best practice for the next press.

ANALYTICAL TOOLS CHANGE EVERYTHING

For many publishers, it's actually their bestsellers that put them out of business. You will always have too many or too few copies. It's one or the other, and it's just a matter of time before the winds change. So you need tools for understanding and managing this.

In 2007, we had just opened a new office and warehouse and doubled our staff. We went from publishing eight books per year to fifteen. We watched the sales figures climb accordingly. We had significantly cut costs by placing our warehouse within 100 miles of our printer—where real estate was significantly more economical. It felt like we were on a triumphant streak.

Then the stock market crashed and the economy slogged. It was scary. Our sales dropped 24%. But just then, our newest book, *Make Your Place*, became a huge recession hit! I woke up one day to direct sales of over 200 copies on our website. And they were still coming in every few minutes. We reprinted it within a few weeks. And then 10,000 copies every month thereafter, for years afterwards.

With WorkingLit, I can now tell you how many copies we sell of that book during the average month

of the book's lifetime, how many we sold per month during the previous quarter, and how many extra copies we should have on hand due to the size of the average order. You see, it's not enough to know that we sell 3,627 per month if we have customers who order 5,241 copies at a time. That means that some customers order less than once per month but heavily enough that it's going to impact our averages. We need to have enough copies on hand so those customers don't wait or cancel their order.

Make Your Place was our first book that sold over 100,000 copies (and then 150,000 copies, and so on). Managing inventory levels on a book like that dramatically sharpens your skill levels—or puts you out of business. We have also learned the lesson that not every book that sells 5,000 copies before publication will sell another 10,000 copies, even in the book's entire lifetime.

This is a major reason that you want to start small and grow incrementally. Having tools is a bonus, but it cannot save you from your own mistakes. Tread slowly, carefully, and lightly. For this reason we built these tools to show you the overall report of your health on the front page as well as what is trending. We needed to know what is happening without digging deep into reports.

When we had a distributor, the topsheet reports told us that our most popular titles were our bestsellers as well as any new titles that shipped that week. This was not useful information, because nothing about it was actionable. So we took a different approach when building our own reports. What titles are trending, perhaps for the first time? In what types of retailers

are these titles trending? It may not be notable to sell 27 copies of a title but it is if it usually sells two per month! That's a major shift and likely one worth investigating and utilizing to put it into more retailers. It's compelling to point out that sales have increased over 1250% this month!

We add features because of our own needs and experience. Then we playtest these features, evaluate how useful they are in practice, and then refine them based on this. When we realized that we needed to know our top 50 biggest customers and how they compared to last year, it was easy to create the report. When we needed to know if plant nurseries were ripe for growth, the data was there. We could figure out which stores were due to place a new order and which titles were good fits for them, based on their history. We could figure out which types of stores would benefit the most from more sales leads and who was saturated.

The value in organized data is that you can always develop a plan for what to do next, no matter what you are dealing with.

Royalties reporting

How did we do this pre-database? Jeff in customer service had to spend a few days manually pulling accounting reports for each sales month for each book. This information was then copied and pasted into hundreds of emails. When someone wrote back with questions we'd often have to look it all up again to double-check our work and explain the story told by the numbers. We had an eighth as many titles as we have now but the process took ten times as long.

After watching how many processes Nate had automated over ten years, Joe developed a vision. The database could build, compile, and send the royalty reports. Then it could update the balances in our system and create payment records to send to the authors and a digest for us to actually plan financially and send those payments.

In the original version of the software, we cut a few corners. If an author had multiple titles or formats, one royalty would be negative while another for the same author was positive, zeroing out the total. This, understandably, confused some authors. If we introduced an error in the total or ran the same period report multiple times, that error would fester into the next quarter. And making mistakes with other people's money is awkward.

So when we rebuilt the code in WorkingLit, we interviewed dozens of publishers about how they report royalties. Then we separated these payments out and created background math to account for dozens of different contract and royalty scenarios. We rebuilt the systems to be ironclad and versatile. You can pay 7% of the cover price for the paperback sold domestically, 50% of the net for the Dutch-language rights advance, and 25% of the true profit for a series that the author created—all to the same creator. And WorkingLit manages separate balances for each.

We approached the problem to give the publisher maximum agency, to review each report before it's sent, and to decide how you want to handle decisions on the go.

Sales reporting

We used to have two types of reporting. One was called “Charts” and it was basically a year-over year line chart showing our income every month, superimposed over our income for the same period of the previous year. We still have this, but now it’s broken down by customer classes.

Then we had “Report,” which literally showed every bit of activity during the specified time period. You would set date parameters and ten minutes later, a massive page would finally load with totals in quantities, dollars, net profit, profit and loss figures, inventory, and where we printed each one.

First there was a list of sales and expenses broken down by vendor, then there were a series of pie charts showing the company’s income and expenses, and then there was our product totals report, which essentially showed sales for that time period plus an all-time profit and loss statement for every single product in our database. This report was always a little unwieldy, but as we grew our wholesale arm and started adding thousands of titles, and as sales of those titles increased, the report grew more and more unstable. By mid-2021, calling it up would bring our entire system to a halt, so that nobody could shop our web store or get any work done in the app until Nate restarted the server. The valuable data we could use every day was effectively locked away.

We broke those 3 reports into separate pieces and, giddy with our newfound transparency into our inner workings, added many more, much to Nate’s grumbling. At one point I asked for a report combining cus-

tomer data with product data in a way he'd already told me would add significant server load, and he snapped, "How do you expect me to do that?" "While slouched over your computer, waving a magic wand and swearing?" I suggested. He said, "That's shockingly accurate," and figured out how to not just make that report work with relatively elegant UI, but speed up other functionality as well.

Bolstered by our newfound success, we began brainstorming more reporting that would help us succeed. We had learned the lesson (usually the hard way) that any new piece of data science first needs a problem that it will solve and a question that it can answer clearly and expediently, rather than just a "wouldn't it be cool if..." idea.

My best friend's little sister is literally a data scientist, while I simply maintain a fascinated interest in the work. So when I want to know the right way of doing something, I can simply ask her to explain it to me, get an entertaining earful about how most of her employers misunderstand the usefulness of data analysis, and that we need to abandon conclusions that we are trying to prove, instead approaching each query with curious open-mindedness.

Accounting

Since WorkingLit was created way back in 2001, we never used Quickbooks. We just built all of our own accounting software into the same database. We run reports with total sales and expenses, broken down by tax codes. So at the end of the year, if all of the data is correct, we just need to send the report to the tax preparer.

But accounting is more than that. We use it on a monthly basis to adjust budgets in real time, based on what is happening as we spend more or less in certain areas. Do we actually sell more when we sit on more inventory? Are we saving money with larger print runs? Or is this just coming out of employee profit sharing? The more that we have learned to test and examine our data and budgets, the more that we can become more streamlined every day.

Order and fulfillment management

Before WorkingLit, we used to walk the “warehouse” (read: basement) with the customer’s order form (read: piece of paper we received in the mail) and pull everything to be packaged up and taken to the post office. As web orders began to eclipse paper mail orders, someone would write each order down in chicken scratch (read: sometimes run back and forth between the computer screen and the shelves) to pull the order. Each “order” would wind up on a piece of paper in a milkcrate and at the end of the month, everything would be typed up and entered into a spreadsheet for royalties, accounting, to assess company health, and taxes.

When Nate built WorkingLit, most of this was suddenly automated. The software generated a completed order form with their items and address that they could print and mail in. Website orders were printed in narrow columns in 8-point type for the puller to manually charge each credit card and then pull and ship the orders.

Over the years, the federal government began regulating how credit cards can be stored (read: today, not really at all) and we had to tighten security on our

checkout cart system accordingly. This was annoying at first, but ultimately really good because we continued to automate more and more. Today, orders don't show up until the customer has completed their payment or credit terms and we ship the order from WorkingLit, on the same page where we access the invoice. The invoice is provided to the customer and WorkingLit sends reminders if they are late to pay. These systems felt excessive at first, until we had thousands of customers. Now I'm not sure what we'd do without them.

The major advantage of having all of your orders natively in one place is that you can slice the data. How long does it take you to ship orders? You can look at individual orders rather than just aggregate data. This helps you to show which titles are trending and who is ordering. This helps you to manage staffing hours in your fulfillment department.

Customer response management

Nate brought customer management tools into the earliest version of WorkingLit without us even asking. It hadn't yet occurred to the rest of us how useful this would be. He simply needed a way to store who had ordered what, how many times, and when. In the early days we would enjoy watching familiar customers order on the website, as opposed to sending us a letter with a check, sending a fax, or calling us on the phone.

Quickly, we realized how time-saving this was. We could receive and pack numerous orders while someone else was figuring out what they wanted to get. It was awe-inspiring to see some customers make a single order for a planner, never to reappear for years or decades, while others ordered new books every month. We were

small enough that we knew all of our titles and all of our customers, more or less, and could maintain personal relationships. Within a few years, we just couldn't keep up anymore. Stores would go out of business, nobody would tell us, and we were too busy to notice. When we needed to bolster sales, we didn't have a way to figure out who was the lowest-hanging fruit. Who would our time be best spent contacting to wrangle some orders into our cash flow?

Before long, we realized all of the various stories that the existing data was already telling. Each customer had a regular interval between orders. They had an average order. We knew what they were ordering and what they weren't ordering. Nate and I had figured out early on that the best thing to do was to research what relational data the much-more-funded companies were utilizing after they spent millions researching and developing. The outcomes are usually obvious in hindsight, such as "stores that bought this title also bought these other titles."

Gradually, we knew which stores were due for a reorder, how large the reorder should be, and what titles they should be reordering. You can't tell them this information, verbatim, of course. That feels weirdly invasive. But you can show them the titles that they haven't ordered yet, and get in touch at the appropriate time. Again, most effective solutions are obvious in hindsight.

Trending titles

We touched on this one a bit earlier, but many of our features were inspired after being forced to use inferior database systems. It's very useful to see which titles

have the largest % sales increase over their average quarter rather than for your database to reiterate which titles are your bestsellers every month. Changes in sales are useful, because they always *mean* something. What caused the change? Usually it's a shift in trends, public discourse or interest, or what's happening in the news. When we published *How to Get Your Period* in 2023, the sales were dismal. Retailers didn't understand the need for the book. When abortion was repeatedly challenged in the courts and by conservative politicians, sales of the book spiked. It wasn't a mystery as to why.

However, when *If Animals Could Talk* began seeing sales spikes after the 2024 election, there was not a clear reason to point to. Someone with a popular blog had simply reposted a story about a grandmother mistakenly buying a book full of swear words for her grandchildren, and then getting upset. The ten-year-old controversy surrounding the book was driving thousands of sales.

Trends like this are very useful because you can leverage them to retailers who haven't ordered (or re-ordered) the book to suggest that based on the information of trending titles for similar retailers, you have a list of ten books that would likely be well-received in their store. So we built methods for running reports by retailer type and trending titles within that retailer, so it was easy to suggest new titles for amenable buyers. Through leveraging this feature, we can both increase sales on trending titles and introduce newer titles to retailers that need more that would work in their store.

Catalog Schedule Optimizing

When I started writing *A People's Guide to Publishing*, I really believed there was a “correct” and “best” approach to publishing. But as I got deeper into researching the book, it became abundantly clear that the best approach was highly variable for each press.

25 years ago, we published books as the author sent us the final manuscript and cover. We'd do a quick proofread and get a quote from the printer. If the cover didn't work, we'd workshop it with them over the phone. Then we'd list it on our website and begin to solicit orders. Over time, as we came to work with a distributor, they were confused that we didn't know what we were publishing three months in the future. So we adjusted a little, year by year, and eventually began publishing according to industry timelines.

At times, this was a better approach. We could pull together a few thousand orders before the book went to print, with a clearer picture of demand. At other times, we'd do the work to announce the book over a year in advance and receive the same number of orders as if we had announced it the day before to our fans on our website.

Sometimes a book with a larger audience didn't have a lot to show for advance sales. We began to investigate why this might be. A lot of this seemed to have to do with seasonality. If you publish new books when stores have a harder time incorporating them into displays or when people just aren't thinking about those topics, it's harder to see a lot of response to your initial push. There's a lot of conventional wisdom in publishing seasonality; depressing topics in the Winter; avoid-

ing debut fiction during an election; books with the biggest sales expectations publishing in November for the holidays.

But like all things that default to “legacy wisdom,” you have to test if the advice applies to you. What is working for you? When are you seeing the best sales? Maybe your audience is off the grid in November, avoiding the holidays. We have met presses who publish all of their new books in October each year or make fans chase new releases as their marketing strategy.

It has been fascinating to see what works for each press and so we began charting sales by subject by month in order to best plan outreach. This works for two reasons:

- It’s more effective and less work to contact all stores that would buy certain subjects at the same time with a wide swath of new offerings
- You want to publish books when the impact is the greatest for those subjects

We were somewhat bewildered that autism books sell best in August, rather than before Autism Awareness Month. Our best theory is that it relates to back to school. But this is far from the only topic that was surprising. Just like we now have to begin soliciting Halloween orders in June, we find that sales windows move earlier each year. After creating a lot of complex, manual reports to assess things like this, we finally caved and created a report that evaluates sales by subject by retailer segment by month, so we can figure out the best months for our comics and cookbooks. And if it changes next year, we’ll have the reports for that new

information then, and the critical thinking to figure out why.

Reprint management / cost and scheduling

Once upon a time, Joe worked sixteen hour days—just to review the previous day’s sales to check if anything needed to be reprinted. We had so many titles in print and sold so many different titles each day that we had to evaluate which ones needed to reprint based on the previous days’ sales. Believe it or not, this was an improvement over the previous system, which involved someone having to walk into the warehouse to count remaining cartons of a title. And hope that none had been misplaced or hidden behind boxes of returns. And before that, whoever picked the last copy of a title or noticed that it was low would notate it on a dry erase board to be reordered.

Hear ye, hear ye, you are about to be exposed to some very nerdy math, but don’t worry. One benefit of having a non-technical engineering manager (that’s Elly) is that absolutely everything we develop has to be spelled out so that a non-coder (who dropped out of high school before getting to Algebra) can understand at least enough to explain to both the programmer and the end-users.

You rarely want to be out of stock of a title for too long. You’re losing sales and it cuts to the bone. This led to Joe’s proudest development—WorkingLit’s custom reprints management system. Instead of having to suck in a deep breath as the daily stock report email was delivered, wondering if processing yesterday’s sales will take minutes or hours, the database just began

handling this for us. WorkingLit compares inventory of each title after each sale to how many we sell during an average quarter and then compares that to reprint turnaround times. You now click on each vendor and it shows you which titles are due for being restocked in which warehouses. Sometimes we'll simply transfer more to Canada or the UK or Australia. Other times we need a reprint. WorkingLit considers the standard deviation of your sales multiplied by a standard supply chain management formula, which determines the likelihood of how close you want to cut it to completely running out.

WorkingLit gives us all of the information for maximum agency. Do we expect sales to slow down over the next month or do we know the printer will turn this reprint around faster than usual? Then when we order the reprint, the expense for it is added to our accounting for the purposes both of paying the printer as well as calculating profit and loss on that title. Sometimes you'll want to hesitate a reprint due to cashflow or because you suspect that the lifetime of the book's sales are running out. The calculator shows the comparison of the previous quarter to the average quarter and how many copies you are increasing or decreasing. When you are spending your very real (and often fleeting) money, we want a conservative picture rather than an optimistic one. But perhaps you like to err on the side of never running out. We can both flourish.

REPORTING PREDICTS THE FUTURE

A few years after ceasing to attend high school, Joe attempted attending business classes in community college for two quarters in the mid 90s. The entire experiment could be summarized as “how to lie with statistics to trick banks into loaning you money.” This led to much skepticism in how we built our systems for Microcosm in the early years.

We really waded slowly and carefully, since we were operating on each dollar coming in to pay our bills, with no loans available to us. By 2001, we had enough of a fan base that we could put a call out when we needed financial support for a bigger project and our audience would respond with orders.

As we became a more established company, we had many periods in our history where we were having to borrow increasing amounts of money—sufficient that we were getting nervous. Then, just as quickly, we had revenues coming in from those books sold that paid off those debts completely. We had years where our cash flow was day to day and years where we were increasing the balance in our bank account beyond all budgetary plans that we had set.

If you had told me in those years that there are actual tools for predicting your income, I would have guffawed in response. While it doesn't often feel that way, it's true. So we are starting to build those tools into WorkingLit too. The system already knows how much money you are spending and what you are sell-

ing. It knows what happened at this time last year and when new books are pubbing. It knows when those orders will be paid for. It knows how markets are trending, at least in your microcosm. With all of this data, it can effectively know what income to expect when, when you might run into problems, and when you'll be sitting on your own small bounty. The further that you can see these patterns ahead in the future, the better that you can set your own budgets and plan. So we are currently building these financial planning tools into the software.

THE FUTURE OF PUBLISHING

Everywhere that you look, there is conjecture out there about where publishing is going. Some of it will prove correct. Most of it will be wrong. We've had a shockingly accurate track record of predicting new directions and trends. But you know what? It doesn't matter.

Why? Because while knowing the future is great, what you need to succeed is a pile of books in print, data to evaluate what is happening with your press, and the willingness to change based on this information. The minute that you get attached to a certain way of doing things, it will stop working. So instead, build it into your workflow to observe, evaluate, and adapt.

I stopped doing consulting for other publishers because they refused to change. They repeatedly asked me to make them successful without changing. When I explained that this was impossible and what would solve their problems, they responded that they didn't want to change. I have plenty of work to do, so in-

stead of banging my head against the wall, I realized that building this solution is both significantly cheaper for everyone involved and would reach the people who were willing to change in order to succeed.

That has always been my dream. And now it's a reality. It's also why we made WorkingLit free for publishers with fewer than ten titles. So that you have a chance to grow and everyone can afford it.

WHO WE ARE (CURRENT & PAST COLLABORATORS)

Joe Biel – CEO, co-founder. Joe founded Microcosm Publishing in 1996, and led the company to be an early adopter of technology solutions, including 90s ecommerce and, starting in 2002, custom software to run all of Microcosm's systems, which led to the development of WorkingLit. Joe provides the product direction and publishing know-how that fuels WorkingLit to this day. Contact Joe about funding and strategic partnerships.

Elly Blue – COO, co-founder. Elly joined Microcosm in 2015, taking over management of marketing and sales, editorial... and software development. She started laying out the blueprint for WorkingLit in 2019 before being derailed for a few years by the pandemic. When she isn't scheming to take back publishing from the dinosaurs, she's running day-to-day operations at Microcosm. Contact Elly about publicity, events, and marketing.

Ben Parzybok – CTO. Coming from a successful exit from his last software-as-a-service company, Ben brings SaaS startup experience and technical expertise to the project. And as a published novelist, publishing is dear to his heart. Contact Ben about the product roadmap, feature requests, and integrations.

Sara Balabanlilar – Sales & Marketing Manager. Sara has spent almost ten years working in the book world, including bookselling, event organizing, design, marketing, sales, and indie publishing. She is an adamant systems person, and believes that creative people can have a healthy relationship with the numbers side of the book industry. Contact Sara about sales, marketing, and support questions.

We are standing on the shoulders of smart developers, whose combined understanding of books and coding built a solid foundation for WorkingLit. Nate Beaty built and maintains Microcosm's legacy database software, which started it all. Ru Mehendale painstakingly created the original design and the systems that make WorkingLit work behind the scenes. Nellie McKesson laid out the infrastructure and got us started.



**FOR BOOK
PUBLISHERS
TO MANAGE
DATA,
ROYALTIES,
INVOICES,
FINANCIALS,
AGENCY,
GROWTH
PLANS, AND
MORE!**

DOING THE MATH FOR BOOK PUBLISHING SINCE 2001



**•SENDEASYROYALTY
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WorkingLit.com is the only title management software entirely owned and operated by publishers, for publishers. It is created by  Microcosm Publishing, a self-distributed, Publishers Weekly fastest growing publisher for several years.

“Microcosm Publishing prefers to keep operations in-house. [Biel] touted Microcosm’s cloud-based WorkingLit software—which tracks subscribers’ fulfillment, inventory, title data, and royalties—and talked about being a non-conformist in an industry that often perceives a correct path to success. “You never want to take the ‘right way’ to get there, because that street is clogged and you’re going to have to fight every inch of the way,” [Biel] said. “For us, it was not about disruption. We looked at what we paid Amazon and [asked], ‘Why are we paying them to sell our books?’ By putting that same effort everywhere else, we doubled our sales within the year and quintupled our sales within four years. I don’t think of that as a moral stance,” [Biel] added, but as a rational business decision.” —*Publishers Weekly*

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