



What Do Women (Publishers) Want?

By Bethanne Patrick |
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The only time I think about my gender is when I'm forced to," says Sara Gran, author of the popular Clare DeWitt mystery novels and, as of 2020, founder and owner of Dreamland Books. "People like to say that publishing is female dominated, and it is, at the lower levels. But the people who own the companies are still male, still almost 100% white. Don't be telling me it's a female-dominated industry."

Gran, whose company has thus far published only one title, her own *The Book of the Most Precious Substance*, might be a newcomer when it comes to the business side of women in publishing—most of the women owners and publishers featured in this piece have robust lists, not to mention robust bottom lines—but her words would probably resonate with all of her colleagues. Almost all of the women-owned publishing companies exist because their founders wanted to do things that large, corporate, white-male-dominated companies weren't interested in trying.

That's the case for Dominique Raccah, who founded Sourcebooks 35 years ago. Asked about the relevance of writing an article now about women-owned publishers, Raccah says, "In a way it's never been more relevant. We had no financing back in 1987. Nobody was going to fund a woman."

Raccah, like other women publishers, believes that women-owned publishing companies today have the kind of outsider status that companies owned by gender-fluid individuals and teams may have soon: "The scope of opportunities for those looking for expression today is exactly the kind of future we've been trying to work toward and create," she says. "This has never been more important, at least from my point of view. I think we still hear from too many old, white, male voices and have too much of a white-centric point of view on the world—not just in publishing, but in all aspects of our lives."

Raccah started Sourcebooks quite literally from her kitchen table. With \$17,000 and a vision about how to publish books more efficiently, she began her own attempt to decentralize publishing from its Manhattan base. "I remember meeting with Linda Bubon, who with her partner Ann Christopherson owned the bookstore Women and Children First in Chicago," she says. "And I remember at one point we were having drinks somewhere and she turned to me and said, 'Dom, you know everything that I do in terms of politics is in my work.' I think that's true of me as well. You can look at our publishing program and you can see what we believe. We're not hiding it in any way."

Raccah, who sold a 45% stake in Sourcebooks to Penguin Random House in 2019, says that while industry sales are slowing, Sourcebooks' sales are accelerating. "One of the things I think is really interesting and important to that fact is being in the center of the country at a time when you can hire almost anyone from anywhere," she notes. "We welcome people from anywhere, which is allowing us a sort of enormous talent acquisitions gain."

The Sourcebooks team is “interested in what’s next and what’s new and what’s going on for our customers, as well as what’s going on for our readers and authors,” Raccah says. “Those efforts are funneling new, exciting ideas to us, which is part of why you’re seeing the kind of growth that we’re seeing.”

Raccah and her colleagues—including Liz Kelsch, director of marketing for nonfiction, and Heather Moore, senior director of marketing for Sourcebooks Kids—point to the Bloom imprint that publishes contemporary romance novels as an example of a different kind of approach to publishing that Sourcebooks takes. “I don’t want to make it as simple as male versus female,” Raccah notes. “I think our view as a community helps us hear the voices that are out there and propel them to their audiences.”

Like Raccah, Nancy Traversy of Barefoot Books began things at her kitchen table, with her longtime business partner Tessa Strickland. Traversy, who is Canadian, was living in England and had worked as a financial analyst at Price Waterhouse, but in 1992 she was at home with four children under five. “We were working from home and wanted to introduce our children to the wonderful diverse world that we live in, but we couldn’t find the sort of books we wanted,” says Traversy, who now lives and works in Concord, Mass. “We wanted them to learn about stories and artwork and music from countries and cultures and religions from all around the world. I hadn’t come from a publishing background, so I had a slightly maverick approach to the endeavor.”

In a Zoom interview, Traversy speaks from her colorful, book-filled office, which remains a space where her now-30-year-old company does things “a little bit differently. “We’ve always been a women-owned and women-led company,” she says. “I do think that women approach things differently than men. I feel there’s maybe more empathy, compassion, and flexibility here at Barefoot. Many of us are mothers, and we’ve watched some of our colleagues grow up here—those who have worked here for 15 years or more. I think the culture and creative energy in our company is very different from some.”

That extends to the company’s celebration style, too. “We have all kinds of events,” Traversy says. “We call them ‘tipples’ as a nod to our British beginnings, where the wine comes out in the afternoon, but we also have breakfasts and wedding showers, and all of it is fun. I think that’s much more likely to come from a woman-run business, because we want to nurture people and have them feel like this is a great place to work.”

In Dallas in 1990, an entrepreneur named Milli Brown had begun a venture that would lead her into book publishing. Brown, who had a background in marketing, discovered that she both enjoyed and could earn money interviewing people to capture their stories and that combination led her to form Personal Profiles. The business grew until Brown realized how many of her clients were asking how to get their recorded stories made into books.

“So I got into publishing because, after I did some work with custom-bound books for Neiman Marcus, I started getting calls from people who would ask me to help them get a memoir published,” Brown says. “That’s not what I’d been doing, but I also didn’t say no—I started calling New York publishers because there was no information online then.”

Things took a turn, Brown says, when she saw a traditional publishing contract and realized that authors don’t operate like businesspeople. “A businessperson knows that intellectual property is king,” she

explains. “Authors give it all up and have no control. I wanted to give authors a choice instead of hearing ‘This is publishing, this is how it’s always done.’”

Brown says her big takeaway was that authors do not need to personally have physical books in hand but that they really do need publishers for distribution and sales. That realization led her to trademark the phrase “A New Era in Publishing” in 1994, and thus Brown Books was born. “If an author really believes in her book, they will invest in my services,” she says. “By the time a book goes to the printing plant, there are no surprises for my authors. They can participate as much or as little as they like along the way.”

Sometimes traditionally published authors didn’t understand what Brown was trying to do, like the time she attended the Romance Writers of America conference and found that novelists there didn’t want to speak with someone who expected them to pay up-front for her company’s services. What they overlooked, Brown says, is that with Brown Books, “the author’s in charge; we work for them.”

New entrants

In the late 1990s, Crystal Patriarche, an avid reader with a background in high-tech engineering, began SparkPoint PR, which, like Brown Books, contributed to changes in the publishing status quo. “What helped me launch my company and disrupt a traditional industry is that I knew I didn’t know anything about book PR or publishing,” Patriarche says. “We started hearing ‘We’ve never seen this in book PR before,’ and we knew we were onto something outside the normal ‘book reviews in newspapers’ model.”

Patriarche says that with the move toward digital content, publishers started to ask questions like “Who has a good digital strategy?” and “Who has a good influencer network?” SparkPoint had both, with Patriarche combining her contacts in the tech world with her nose for great readers to create SparkPoint Studio, which includes She Writes Press, SparkPress, and BookSparks. But as she built her brand, she realized a couple of things that made her keep her woman-owned business primarily woman-led, too.

“I feel women thrive in women-centric spaces,” Patriarche says. “I’ve seen that in our SheWrites Press retreats, for example. There is just an amplifying of each other’s voices that you don’t see among male authors. Our authors feel more comfortable sharing their stories and vulnerabilities with each other — not just as it involves their books, but also as it involves best practices in the publishing process.”

Patriarche acquired the hybrid publisher She Writes Press in 2016, bringing its founder, Brooke Warner, into her company as well. “Hybrid publishing is largely misunderstood, and I like to remind people that first and foremost we act as author advocates who combine the best of traditional publishing and the best of indie publishing,” Patriarche says. “Authors who work with hybrid publishers share more of the up-front costs, which means they may not get big advances, but they get a bigger percentage of royalties. They’re more involved in the communal decision-making process, and that is part of our women-centered business model.”

Forest Avenue Press is celebrating its 10th anniversary this fall, following a model developed by owner Laura Stanfill of releasing just two titles each year. “I have contractors, but I’m the sole employee,” says Stanfill, who lives in Oregon. “But I like to remind myself and others that I couldn’t have gotten here

without the many strong women who have given me business advice. Some of them are on my advisory committee, so it's a little bit of a collective."

Stanfill came up with the idea of her own press after spending years in a writing group, where she heard from others how frustrating the publishing process could be. "At the time I had a colicky baby," she says. "I needed to do something for my mental health that used my skill set, and opening a small press seemed to be the answer." She also wanted to support her local writing and reading communities.

Forest Avenue received a great lift in 2014 when Stanfill secured distribution through PGW. "Suddenly I had to figure out how to create national demand and reach," she says. "Making the right decisions became more important, because I was no longer delivering books out of the back of my minivan." Forest Avenue operates as a traditional publisher, with authors receiving "pretty small" advances, but getting traditional royalties and audio rights.

Stanfill also takes time with each author to determine what kind of events will work best for them, be it dozens of talks with small groups or one big library occasion. "It builds your writer brain to see what's getting published, to learn from who is doing work in your community," says Stanfill, whose own debut novel, *Singing Lessons for the Stylish Canary*, came out in April from Lanternfish Press. "I got to be the keynote speaker this year at Willamette Writers, and I could talk not just as an author, but as someone who understands the publishing process, too."

Pivots

The new Spiegel & Grau is a lot like the old Spiegel & Grau—except that this one is independent and women owned as well as women led. Shut down as a Random House Publishing imprint in January 2019, Spiegel & Grau relaunched in January 2021 with Cindy Spiegel and Julie Grau at the helm and in control of their new company's finances and future.

Both women knew that in order for them to take ownership, they had to keep their names up front, too. "We wanted to commit to the idea of the company," Grau says, "although it was all very organic in a sense, and we knew there were no guarantees. We raised our capital during the pandemic, after all. There was a lot of hope, but no guarantees."

The one thing the team could guarantee was their partnership. "During the many years that we've worked together, we've always had the same titles as copublishers," Spiegel says. "People have tried to separate us and give us separate titles because they found it confusing, in a corporate setting, that we consider ourselves equals. We don't feel we're replicating the job; we're more efficient because one of us works on one thing while the other works on something different."

Spiegel says she feels strongly about the kinds of books she and Grau want to publish. "For me and Julie, publishing is a form of activism. It's a chance to change the cultural conversation."

For the new Spiegel & Grau, that means acquiring and publishing books that people connect with as the heart of their business, but it also allows them to "think in a more holistic way about the content and not be rigid about format," Grau says. "We just want to help people tell stories in whatever form is best suited to the message."

Another company founded on strong publishing experience is the Collective Book Studio, owned and led by Angela Engel. Engel began her publishing career in marketing, including stints at Ten Speed Press and Chronicle Books, where she says she learned to “think entrepreneurial” by promoting titles to nontraditional outlets, including Costco. “Disruption can be positive and progressive,” she says. “I was able to do things like figuring out where to sell Moleskine products while I was at Chronicle.”

Engel’s belief in the power of disruption includes embracing the power of no. “Hearing ‘no’ is not bad,” she says. “No opens doors, makes you smarter, is part of the experience. There is nothing to be afraid of in hearing it. Sometimes when you have to go in a different direction, you learn something new that you can bring to the table.” Engel knew that if she could figure out how to bring her skill set together, she could find a way to give more people access to the publishing world without ignoring what readers need.

“In my category, which is lifestyle and food and wine, readers want a high-quality product,” Engel says. “My problem to solve was how to figure out a way to provide that. I believe that as women, we think differently. When we see a problem, we think about how we can solve it.”

As a mom of three kids, Engel leads the way she parents, by being very transparent in problem solving, and one of the ways she solved the problem of how to walk authors through the process was by creating “partnership publishing with hybrid contracts,” she says. “Authors have to contribute now, but as they invest in their brand, I will invest in their inventory.” She looks at each project separately, deciding on what can be done depending on what matters to an author about her book. “The secret sauce is that I can react faster than the market when a book has a timely angle—but without cutting production corners.”

Mary Taris, founder and publisher of Strive Publishing in Minneapolis, always loved books. “I spent a lot of time in my room reading as an escape,” she says. “But I never saw myself reflected in the books I read. I wasn’t affirmed as who I am.”

Taris, who began teaching in her 40s in North Minneapolis, says being the only Black teacher in a school with mostly Black students was frustrating. “My students felt invisible when they went to the library, the way I had as a child,” she explains. She recalls that when she tried to use an arts grant to encourage students to write their own autobiographies, they said, “All we can find about Black people in the library is Beyonce or Sojourner Truth or Michael Jordan!” I thought, you guys are future somebodies. You should have books on all kinds of Black people, not just celebrities.”

It was then, in 2008, that Taris decided to found her own publishing company, which is focused on giving Black voices an outlet, especially in the area of children’s books.

Strive Bookstore came in 2022, in a space called the Sistah Co-op, next to boutiques that sell candles and gifts, clothing, and greeting cards. “People come in and they get happy—it’s beautiful,” says Taris, who adds that women-owned businesses, like her publishing company, have “more of a community, caring vibe. It feels like we’re a family learning and growing together.”

Taris has set up two short story dispenser machines, one in the Open Book Literary Center and one in the new Strive Bookstore. “I wanted to do something fun that we could bring out into the community,” she says. “That’s my goal, to change a community. Even though we’re focused on Black authors and

Black literature, we can connect across cultures. People can come in from any background and learn who we are as Black people.”

Shannon Gilligan, owner and publisher of Chooseco, has worked on the company’s signature Choose Your Own Adventure books since she graduated from college in 1981. At first Gilligan worked with Bantam, the original publisher of the CYOA line, on the software for the CYOA titles. After some corporate changes, she was “evangelized,” as she says, by Apple, and spent the 1990s largely working in the tech space.

When Gilligan realized that hardware wasn’t keeping up with new software developments, she decided to take a step back into book publishing. “Around that time, the rights to the CYOA individual copyrights had begun to revert,” she says. In 2004, Gilligan teamed with Ray Montgomery, who created the CYOA concept, to acquire the CYOA rights, and Chooseco released its first books in 2006.

As Chooseco was beginning to grow, “everybody thought it was the end of print publishing, but we had ample anecdotal evidence that jumping around in a paper book reinforced a reader’s idea that they were going somewhere,” Gilligan says. “It felt counterintuitive to turn our backs on technology, but we knew the power of the format.”

Gilligan and Montgomery were co-owners until his death in 2014, at which point Gilligan became the sole owner and publisher of Chooseco. “Women are still questioned more in corporate situations, and they’re not given as much support,” she says. “I’ve had to have faith in myself and my intelligence and experience to continue.”

Because of the situations Gilligan has faced, she says she’s mentoring a lot more—“and a bit differently,” she notes. “I think I’m very attuned to the developmental stages people go through in their careers. I try to provide a serious, challenging, and respectful environment, but I also try to give people authority as well as responsibility. I try to look at the person and not just their position, and I think that’s very female.”

New niches

Another company reaching a younger audience that has achieved success is Rebel Girls Publishing, which has expanded from a 2016 Kickstarter startup, when it was cofounded by Elena Favilli, into a brand that has sold over eight million books in 49 different languages. Michon Vanderpoel, head of book sales at Rebel Girls, says “I think women having a seat at the table in all industries is critical, but women running publishing companies is even more critical because publishing companies tell stories.”

Stories, as Vanderpoel notes, can shape entire generations and communities. “When Rebel Girls started, only 19% of children’s books included female characters with agency,” she says. “If there were more women in ownership and management at publishing companies, that wouldn’t be the case. By women leading and owning more publishing companies, there’s going to be more representation of women in storytelling.”

And that doesn’t mean representing the women throughout history who have acted in ways their eras found appropriate; after all, it’s in the name of the company. “We have a range of women in our books,

because authenticity and intentionality are core tenets of our own story, as well as our storytelling,” Vanderpoel says.

Rebel Girls has created a virtual community for its readers, as well as partnerships with companies like Nike that support its mission to focus on contemporary issues with series such as Girls of Today. “You’ll see that we’re changing focus from women of the past and moving to the promise of girls in the world,” Vanderpoel says. “These young women are doing incredible things, and we hope their stories are even more relatable because our readers are in the world with them. They can communicate with them online, or join them at a rally. We feel it’s extremely powerful. And our stories are for everyone. We include transgender characters and eventually will have nonbinary characters, too. We think all the time about who our audience is and what their stories to tell will be.”

Audience engagement grounds everything Liz Pelletier, owner and publisher of Entangled Books, does. “We tend to acquire books that we think are going to appeal to a largely female readership, and reaching that customer is just different,” she says.

Though Pelletier’s personal experience pre-Entangled was as a software engineer, she cares most about her own identity as a reader. “When I was growing up, my library card was my best friend,” she says. “We couldn’t afford to buy books. My librarian was my gatekeeper and I read all the classics, all the Pulitzer Prize winners.” However, it wasn’t until she realized she could buy 20 romance novels at a time from a local thrift store with her \$2 allowance that Pelletier found her passion.

“Obviously, when I decided to start Entangled I did tons of research, crunched the numbers, analyzed risk,” Pelletier says. “My father was a professional blackjack player, and it’s influenced how I look at books. Sometimes you have to take a gamble. That’s business.”

Pelletier cites Entangled’s Crave series, for which the laydown for the first title was supposed to be 5,000 units: “I printed 20,000 and then another 20,000 before it was ever released,” she says. “And I was right. It was a book I couldn’t put down, and that’s a bestseller. So I think my risk was really very low.”

Pelletier says she’s a “voracious” consumer of news and trends, which helps her determine how and when something like Crave will hit. “Although many women wanted to claim agency and power in the wake of the #MeToo movement, actual teens often feel they have no agency,” she says. “They have almost too many opportunities. They have fewer answers than ever before because there are more questions than ever before. So I decided to publish a vampire novel set at a school. It was a huge gamble, but it paid off and it came from a lot of gambles that wound up as mistakes. You use what you’ve learned to make predictions.”

The nonprofits

Women have founded and run two of the country’s best-known nonprofit publishers. Sarabande Books, founded in 1994 by Sarah Gorham in Louisville, Ky., will undergo a change in leadership at the start of the new year when Kristen Renee Miller takes over for the retiring Gorham as executive director and editor-in-chief. Being a nonprofit, Sarabande has no owner, but it is certainly woman led. “I am not the owner, and while I might technically be called the publisher, I see my role as more of a steward of the Sarabande legacy,” Miller says.

What Sarabande has is “unique and quite special, but it’s not the end of the story,” Miller notes. “It’s a well-known statistic that white women dominate many levels of the publishing industry, and we definitely want to leave room and make space for more diversity at Sarabande.”

Since its founding, Sarabande has focused on poetry and short fiction, “genres that were being left out of the mainstream publishing sphere at the time,” Miller says. “We believed that the market isn’t always a great marker of what’s important. Which voices were being left out? Over time it’s become clear that it’s more than just writers of poetry and short fiction. Our mission and vision have shifted to try and make room for as broad an understanding as possible of who’s not being represented, who’s not being seen. We believe those voices are creating some of the most interesting and exciting work out there.”

Miller says Sarabande has always been a press grounded in friendship. “My hope is to maintain that in a much different way,” she explains. “The literary world is much different now. We’re no longer one small press of a few. We’re one of hundreds of small presses. But we are still trying to create a place that feels like a core group is in this together.”

Like Sarabande in being a nonprofit founded by a woman, Blair of North Carolina combines traditional publishing with indie press persistence. Publisher Lynn York and senior editor and associate publisher Robin Miura have taken the tiny Carolina Wren Press that Judy Hogan established in 1976 and, over the past five years, developed a strong list of poetry and fiction to mix in with local-interest and history titles.

“Our mission is exactly the same as it was in 1976: to publish emerging and historically neglected voices,” York says. Like with Sarabande, being a nonprofit means Blair is not women owned, but it continues to be women led. York and Miura also consciously choose to work with contractors who are from underrepresented groups as they transform “this wonderful backlist” from John F. Blair Publishing into a company that expands on diverse voices from the South.

Even before the pandemic, Blair operated remotely. “We set our hours according to what works in our lives, and that’s really important to us,” York says.

Blair is, in its leaders’ own words, a “progressive press” centered on lifting up poetry and prose that might not have been heard before. “To be honest, we had to rebrand from Carolina Wren because we’re women from the South, and we don’t want to be seen as sweet little hobbyists,” York says. “There’s a perception in publishing that all the cool kids are in New York, and while there are plenty of cool people there, some of us are in places outside New York, as well.”

New paths

A relatively new hybrid publisher, End Game Press, is owned and led by Victoria Duerstock from her home in Memphis. But End Game is also publishing traditionally—and offering consulting services. How does Duerstock do all of this? “Such a good question,” she says. “I’m an only child, so part of my DNA has always been wanting to be in charge. And not everyone wants to be in charge!”

Duerstock, who started out as an author, wanted to see the data and understand the marketing process. “I love looking at spreadsheets and distilling information.” Based on that, she also knew that, as people

presented ideas to her, she might not always be the best person to write the books. Putting together a team of working writers who could also work with other writers was the answer.

“Having all of us on staff be authors is our secret sauce,” Duerstock says. “We recognize how hard our authors work and what kind of support they need. So we’ve put together training about platform development, marketing and other things that new authors ask about as they navigate the publishing process.”

Duerstock notes that End Game’s different imprints serve different purposes, and the authors for each can also choose different training packages. “Our true hybrid imprint is Fusion, which is for people who already have an audience and are looking for that book they can sell at events. Whereas our Legacy imprint involves a coach who works with authors to help shape the stories they don’t quite know how to tell. Maybe they just want to have a memoir out as an e-book.”

This fall, End Game Press will also have 19 traditionally published books on its list, with 26 more coming in 2023 and 45 scheduled for 2024. Duerstock says her ambitious goals drew some skepticism. “At the start, a few people gave me that ‘nice puppy’ kind of attitude”—which is a mistake. “At the end of the day when people kind of underestimate me for whatever reason, that is kind of my fuel.”

Sara Gran’s Dreamland Books will build on people underestimating an entire population of women. “It is not a big deal, if you go to any working-class neighborhood, to see women as business owners,” Gran says. “No one thinks it’s a big deal if a woman owns a beauty salon or a grocery store. I’ve reached the upper echelons of media where they talk a good game about being cool with women and business ownership, but the reality is entirely different.”

One of the reasons the reality doesn’t change, she believes, is because “we’re trained not to talk to each other,” meaning creatives of all kinds. “I can’t think of any other working experience where it’s okay for someone to just stop taking your calls, but it happens routinely for writers.” Gran decided, since she does have her own money from her day job as a screenwriter, to pass up the prospect of a publisher’s advance and do things on her own and in her own way.

Eventually, Gran says, that will include reprinting older books and “some art and photography books, as well as other people’s prose,” but she knows that creating a new contract from scratch will take time. “It is about doing whatever the fuck I want whenever the fuck I want—you can absolutely quote me on that,” she explains. “The damage was done when Penguin and Random House combined. There’s a drive to conformity, and they’re not doing the cool interesting stuff. That just means more great books on the table for the rest of us to publish.”

Joining the ranks of women-owned publishers most recently is Zibby Owens, whose Zibby Books will release its first titles in 2023. Owens, who began her *Moms Don’t Have Time to Read Books* podcast in March 2018, diversified into a Moms Don’t Have Time To brand and released an anthology—only to hear every time she asked a question or had an idea that “that’s not the way it works in publishing.”

“I kept asking, why?” Owens says. “Why, why, why, why, why? I didn’t think any of the answers I received were that compelling. Why can’t I talk to a sales rep, for example? So that was part of it. But another huge part of it was talking to the authors on my podcast and hearing so much from them about what dissatisfied or mystified them in their own journeys, what they wished would change.”

Owens likens the traditional publishing process to “a giant truck trying to make a tight turn in an alleyway,” she says. “Sometimes you just don’t fit and you can’t go that way. I took all the information I received from authors and started brainstorming.”

It was in 2021 when Owens approached author and colleague Leigh Newman, who was then at Catapult, that Zibby Books took shape. Soon Carolyn Murnick joined up and the company began to work with two women memoirists and two novels on its first list.

“The trick to starting any business is surrounding yourself with smart people who have experience and can fill in the gaps for you, but the principle our company stands on is being open and authentic and connected,” Owens says. “We’re launching important conversations, but we don’t take ourselves too seriously. I talk about my own struggles as an author and as a podcaster. I ask questions of our audience, and it opens up discussions. I am reading. I am writing. I am in it with everybody else.”

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