

Humboldt State University

## Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University

---

Author Resources

Humboldt State University Press

---

2-2020

### The Adventures of Song of Six Rivers: How I Navigated the Labyrinth of the Publishing World

Zev Levinson  
zevlevinson@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/authorresources>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Levinson, Zev, "The Adventures of Song of Six Rivers: How I Navigated the Labyrinth of the Publishing World" (2020). *Author Resources*. 1.  
<https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/authorresources/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Humboldt State University Press at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Author Resources by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact [kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu](mailto:kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu).

## The Adventures of *Song of Six Rivers*: How I Navigated the Labyrinth of the Publishing World

I'm dismayed, appalled, and embarrassed by how few people are showing up to my first book launch at Humboldt State University Library, home of HSU Press. Where are all those friends and acquaintances who had indicated on social media that they'd be there? Some fantastical part of my imagination had foreseen scores, even hundreds of people ascending the stairs until the Fishbowl Room (its first wall being made of glass) overflowed and everyone would be directed to the larger open gathering space on the third floor. Who would manage this rearrangement, and how would latecomers find us when they arrived at the empty Fishbowl?

I should have known better: it's a weeknight, and also parking isn't free on campus. I am over-prepared, as usual. I've carted in three large boxes of copies of my book. In case they sell out, I've printed sheets of paper on which people can write their information to receive orders. Kyle Morgan, the head of HSU Press, has arranged catering. It's a beautiful spread, and it will turn out to be far too much for the forty-odd attendees. That's not a bad showing for a poetry reading, but I had been mentally gearing myself up for a grand occasion.

It's a good event, though, and I give a pretty dynamic performance, pacing back and forth while reciting my 528-line poem. In the following months, friends and family will send me articles by other writers who relate similarly disappointing experiences at bookstores, libraries, and cafés. And I hear that, especially on social media, people often signal they're going to attend events when they don't really know if they can make it.

We all have big dreams for our babies, high expectations. I think it's good for a writer to imagine a work-in-progress as irresistible to future readers. How else keep the momentum going, unless it's the rare writer so delighted with the solitary process of creation? I hope that in

sharing the story of my book's journey into the world—particularly regarding its multifaceted means of availability—fellow writers will be better girded for what lies ahead as they begin to publish.

In the next few months I give a few more local readings at bookstores, a museum of art, a restaurant. Within four months of publication, the first batch of three hundred paperbacks is gone, along with most of the one hundred hardcovers, printed in a limited, signed edition. This initial catapulting took more work than I thought possible, but it is good work. Perhaps another hundred copies have been ordered online by individuals and bookstores. Of those first paperbacks, fifty-five were gifts or copies sent to reviewers; eight hardcovers were gifts. Half a year after publication, Kyle wrote to me, “That’s an impressive haul. I was reading that academic presses consider it a blockbuster if a work gets over 3,000 sales. And those are national presses. You sold the work near 500 times in what I’m guessing is this region alone. Wow!”

I begin phoning five to ten bookstores a day, asking for the book buyer. Often this is the person who answers the phone. I quickly say that *Song of Six Rivers* was recently published by HSU Press and is available through Ingram, the largest book distributor in the United States. I add that I can send an email explaining more and containing a link to view the whole book. This is usually the extent of the conversation, as the person on the other end is occupied with work. But sometimes it becomes a delightful discussion, and maybe even my interlocutor has a personal connection with Humboldt County. One bookstore owner's daughter had attended HSU, for instance. Those who know about Humboldt generally like to talk about Humboldt, for a variety of reasons. We represent a way of living that's different from most everywhere else: progressive, rural, tight-knit communities, together with indigenous tribes, dwell behind the

redwood curtain, blended with right-wing folk of farming, logging, and fishing stock. Usually each bookstore orders a copy from Ingram. It's a small and seemingly worthwhile gamble, since my book is returnable: if it doesn't sell, the store can send it back and I'll lose a little money in the process.

I've made lists of bookstores in California, county by county, as one of the ways to begin getting the book out in the world. Online searches kept steering me to Yelp, the ever-changing website that lists businesses and allows people to leave reviews. While not entirely reliable, often including establishments now defunct, Yelp has been the most consistently comprehensive resource for finding bookstores by county. Oregon is the only other state I've made forays into because of personal and professional associations there. Often my everyday work and other commitments hinder this daunting outreach process. I'm a busy freelancer, and the book has become another job, albeit one I'm extremely proud of. I also moved to a new home the same year the book was published, putting the bookstore pursuit on hold for several months.

Within eight months of the release, eight books have been returned, causing me to halt this marketing strategy altogether. Sure, the book might get picked up and taken to the register in faraway bookstores where no one has yet heard of it. Isn't that part of the charm, and the point, of bookstores, the random purchase? But I've heard that some places have a one-year return policy; they have only so much room, and thus certain books have brief shelf lives. So I don't finish pitching to southern California, at some remove from redwood country, and I stop thinking about calling around the globe.

Meanwhile, I've been selling the book at craft fairs, markets, and festivals, usually sharing a booth with my partner Jennifer Rand, a ceramicist (she's also a writer, musician, techie, and so on, which helps me keep my narrow world in perspective). I discovered that

sometimes my mere presence as the author, and definitely the sales pitch, makes the difference. Largely because of the visual nature of the book, with historical photos on nearly every page, it sells pretty well. The long poem is an ode to the Six Rivers region of northern California. Besides being carried by all the local bookstores (quite a few in this artistic community), it has also found its way into visitor centers, museums, pharmacies, and grocery stores. I occasionally sell it myself in these locations to move the copies off the shelves. Like a merchant offering samples of a product, I sit at a pretty, petite table, vending my wares. The management appreciates this, and I bring home a little money too, reaping from sixty to seventy percent. I never imagined the book would sell in this way, but it's been the most successful method by far.

I also never thought that the poem would be produced with so much visual emphasis. When Kyle first mentioned using accompanying images, I wasn't even sure it was the best idea. Now I know that it was. The photos add layers of context and somehow relay an almost parallel narrative. I wouldn't mind future books evolving in this fashion. I'm meeting *a lot* of people through my sales. Some of them tell me more about the history of the photos and related historical information. I'm connecting even more intensely with the region.

Eighteen months after publication, I've sold another 234 paperbacks that I've had printed, and another 32 hardcovers. Online sales are slow, but I'm starting to see positive reviews in such places as Save the Redwoods League's magazine, and I've given both audio and text interviews which are online. I have also finally begun to give readings in other counties. My scattered freelance lifestyle has made me lax in this regard.

And I've fallen short in the digital realm, neither creating an electronic version that people can buy, nor pushing it very hard on social media. I have no idea how many more sales I could have made through these channels. Each digital copy would have sold for perhaps a

dollar. Could I have gotten a significant number of buyers? This *is* poetry, after all. Much comes down to how far an author is willing to go. The author Jerry Martien has grown disillusioned and frustrated with the sales game. I asked him for a blurb to include in my book. He wrote back: “You’ve found somebody to publish your book, so I don’t feel as bad about declining your offer. Sufficiently bad, but not as.

“I’ve been preparing a collection of my own with Bug Press, really turned off to the poetry biz and tired of pushing the rat buttons that don’t deliver rat food. I decided not to put blurbs on the back, not only saving Jim [Dodge] and other friends from the task, but allowing space to say something about what’s inside. Radical, I know.”

It hardly occurred to me to hire marketing experts. There are plenty of people willing to take your money in the attempt to tell the world about your product. But, figuring this was an epic-length poem about a specific area, I wasn’t quite envisioning a mass market, even if I had harbored grand designs at the very outset. With the help of such platforms as Instagram, an author can sometimes reach a wide audience. But at some point, one needs to think about time versus money. It didn’t seem logical to exhaust myself over such an iffy outcome.

The book’s creation and availability through websites was complicated. I’ll spare you every aspect of this process because the publishing world is changing so rapidly that, by the time you read this, some of it may already be considerably different. It took weeks to figure out how Ingram works, and that platform still seems to be in flux. I have some control over my file by using what is currently called IngramSpark and Lightning Source, the latter being a printer and distributor of print-on-demand books. IngramSpark, operated by Lightning Source, is a service catering to the needs of independent publishers and authors. Companies are buying each other out and subdividing. (My friend Dante, owner of Northtown Books in Arcata, once tried to

explain to me the further intricacies regarding which subdivided company prints Ingram books, which percentages go to its parent company, and so on. It made me dizzy.) Internet protocol is still being established since it's a new worldwide phenomenon. The rules for selling through ubiquitous Amazon will keep changing. A bookstore owner in the Bay Area made a deal with me: she would order a copy if I made the book available on IndieBound and if I provided the link on my own website. I hadn't heard of this internet site. It allows a person to search for a book through independent bookstores by entering a zip code. If these stores don't already carry a copy, at least the person has found nearby bookstores and can order a copy instead of making the default Amazon purchase. It might take a few extra minutes, but it helps keep the indies afloat. This one paragraph encapsulates whole months of an ongoing learning curve.

Being listed on Ingram can be crucial if an author wants bookstores to play along. Most stores just don't have space to carry self-published books. And now that anyone can create a product right in their living room and have it printed and shipped to their address, many proprietors are understandably weary of seeing poorly designed, unedited works. It has been valuable to navigate the labyrinth into Ingram, in part for the sole gratification of seeing my creation on bookstore shelves in other counties. One can only hope for other states and, someday, other countries.

For bookstores to order through Ingram, the trade discount—percentage off retail price that one offers to the publishing trade for distributing a book—almost always needs to be set at standard or regular, fifty-five percent; otherwise, they generally won't put in the order. Of that fifty-five percent, the retailer gets forty percent and the wholesaler (Ingram) gets the remaining fifteen percent. The print cost will also be subtracted from the author's profit, leaving less than what one might hope for. Such is the industry game. This is why I make considerably more

money per book when I sell my own copies at craft fairs—assuming it’s a good day of sales—even factoring in the fee to participate. Of course, I spend a lot of *time and energy* when I work at these events.

Ingram and self-publishing companies such as Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP: see below) use large printing companies with factories to supply the vast demand, and print quality sometimes suffers because of this. An author must carefully check for flaws when copies are shipped. Even if the print proof looks good, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the next batch will be of equal grade. Fortunately, the companies seem to be aware of this and are willing to refund or reship.

I knew how to get the book onto Amazon, having gone through the process with several books of student poetry. As with those, I “built” *Song of Six Rivers* on CreateSpace. (The company was founded as BookSurge. Its registered, legal name is On-Demand Publishing.) CreateSpace was acquired by Amazon and has since transferred its media to Amazon’s Media on Demand services, merging in 2018 with KDP, originally called Digital Text Platform. After this merger, to access the books I had created on CreateSpace, I had to authorize the transfer of them to KDP, which is a new platform with its own learning curve. What will be next in this evolution?

Once a book is created on KDP, individual customers can order print-on-demand copies, the price having been determined by the creator. As the creator, I can order copies for a lesser amount, as I can also do through IngramSpark. Other companies offer self-publishing services as well, so that authors, or “creators,” can shop around for price and quality.

On the other hand, my relationship with HSU Press took very little navigation. I already knew that it was producing quality local books. It’s based in the HSU Library where I had spent

countless hours as both student and lecturer. (I still teach at the Young Writers Camp of the Redwood Writing Project on campus, and recently lived so close that I could walk Tulip the basset hound amongst the students and faculty). I was even friends with Marvin Trump, the architect of the building, having befriended his sons during my undergraduate years in Santa Cruz. To avoid cold-calling Kyle about publishing, I got a reference from another friend, Kumi Watanabe-Schock, the library media coordinator. Kyle and I had been in the same masters program at HSU some twenty-five years before we met about the book. He had moved away and returned, as had I, and we didn't really remember each other, but we shared memories about our professors. CM Phillips, the chief designer of *Song of Six Rivers*, was temporarily working with HSU Press. We were already friends and the forthcoming endeavor would greatly deepen our connection. Through SequoiaSong Publications, she is now co-publisher of hardcover editions of my book. Looking back on the book's history, with all these points of contact it seems to have been an "inside job." I attribute my good fortune to having dedicated so many years to teaching poetry in a small community, and a bit of luck.

And as CM points out, this would not have been such a successful endeavor without team effort. At HSU Press, we had at least five minds hard at work on the project. CM, assisted by Ashley Schumann, was in charge of interior design, layout, and editing. Together they combed through more than twelve thousand historic photos from the library's Special Collections, eventually narrowing down the search to the forty-three that appear in the book. CM had my partner Jen's help with designing the cover. Kyle and CM fathomed the legalities of using both archival and contemporary photos, since a few images from current photographers Martin Swett and Thomas B. Dunklin also grace the pages.

Among my proudest moments in life, I count the convivial, celebratory dinner to which I treated the team. In contrast, I once watched a friend go through half a year of anguish as her book crawled toward completion. The editor of the publishing house that accepted her book was forever at odds with my friend's intentions, from the overall message of her book all the way down to syntax, and then, not surprisingly, the cover design. Their phone conversations and email exchanges often were contentious. I encourage new authors to find people who are a pleasure to work with. CM refers to the thoughtful disagreements we had as arm wrestling, played out in good humor and with positive results. While I wanted the text to always stand alone on a page, with imagery only appearing on the facing page, she favored blending the two. We met in the middle. We each had favorite photos, but some were necessarily left out, just not fitting perfectly with the text, or even being incongruous with either of our notions of what should represent a song of the Six Rivers region. Brainstorms rescued some images from the proverbial cutting room floor, finding alternative placement on the pages instead.

To help expand SequioaSong Publications, CM asked Kyle and me if future hardcover versions could be co-published with HSU Press. All of us were happy to collaborate in this manner, and now the hardcover bears two imprints. One advantage for me is that CM continues to help me find companies that print high quality books at reasonable rates. For instance, one can't even create hardcovers through KDP, at least not yet. And IngramSpark doesn't offer interior glossy pages. This is important to me because the black-and-white photos simply look much better on glossy paper than plain. The navigating continues.

Rather than having felt discouraged by the monumental task of creating the book and puzzling how to make it available, I'm grateful that it has various ways to be found and ordered. Any author might long for the old days when a publishing company picked up one's book,

marketed it, and arranged a book tour. One must now usually do all the legwork on one's own. There is probably no going back to how it was. Anyway, precious few poets reaped serious benefits from the old system. I'm ready to see what happens with my next literary project.

Zev Levinson can be reached at [zevlevinson@hotmail.com](mailto:zevlevinson@hotmail.com). For more information, see [zevlev.com](http://zevlev.com).

### ZevLev's Checklist for Publishing Your First Book

- Imagine your work as irresistible while composing it. Confidence is key.
- *Before publication*, research where and when to send copies to reviewers: some places review accepted manuscripts only before they are officially in print. Search online for “book reviewers directory” and “book review outlets.” Check out the good list at Poets & Writers.
- Be open to a visually creative production of your book, not limited to only text inside. Other possibilities also exist, such as making available an oral recording.
- Consider submitting it for a first-book prize, keeping deadlines in mind. Some places accept submissions for a limited time after publication.
- Carefully check your ordered copies for flaws, including faint vertical lines and anomalies on the pages. Sometimes not all the pages are even glued in. When you find errors, talk to the printing (or publishing) company about sending you replacements.
- Give several readings. Advertise like crazy for these, but keep expectations low for large turnouts.
- Set up interviews, both as written word and oral. Advertise them to help spread the news.

- Learn ahead of time how to make your book available in bookstores and other places, as well as online. And learn about pricing percentages. Look up authors' and publishers' articles on these topics.
- Consider selling your book in person, at craft fairs and markets. People love to meet authors.
- If the process of designing your book feels wrong—frustrating and/or entirely against your vision—consider another team, even if this means another publisher. Have a great time with the team that is building your book.