ForeWord Reviews Announces IndieFab Awards

Interview with
• Victoria Champagne Sutherland
  • Howard Lovy
  • Matthew Sutherland

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KENNEALLY: Like parenting, independent publishing isn’t something you do for the recognition and the rewards. And just like moms and dads anywhere, indie publishers will forego dividends for their own hard work so long as their progeny get along in the world. Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

At the recently concluded American Library Association annual conference in Las Vegas, independent and university presses celebrated wins for their 2013 titles in the Indie Fair Book of the Year Awards. From over 1,500 entries in 60 categories, judges chose the best titles in fiction as well as nonfiction, and named a publisher of the year. Foreword Reviews Magazine, the only national trade review journal devoted exclusively to independent presses created the IndieFab Awards, and the magazine’s editorial team joins me from Traverse City Michigan to share the inside story on what makes an indie book IndieFab.

Victoria Champagne Sutherland is publisher and founder of Foreword Reviews. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Victoria.

V. SUTHERLAND: Thanks, Christopher, I’m happy to be here.

KENNEALLY: And veteran journalist Howard Lovy is executive editor. He directs news coverage and analysis on Foreword’s Website, as well as Foreword’s Clarion Book review service. Hello, Howard.

LOVY: Hello, Chris, thank you.

KENNEALLY: And, finally, Matt Sutherland is managing editor at Foreword Reviews. He oversees the book selection process leading to feature articles and reviews appearing in the magazine. Good day, Matt Sutherland.

M. SUTHERLAND: Hi, Chris, thanks for the invitation.
KENNEALLY: Looking forward to chatting with you. We’ll tell people briefly about the background for the *Foreword*. Founded in 1998, *Foreword*, as in the preface or introduction to a book, is a quarterly print journal distributed to 10,000 librarians and booksellers and available in Barnes and Noble stores across the country. The magazine is online at forewordreviews.com. It’s headquarters in Traverse City, Michigan is a landmark building that was formerly a cigar box factory.

Victoria Sutherland, I want to start with you because we’re here to celebrate the books of the year, the IndieFab Awards that were just given out in the Las Vegas at the ALA annual conference. Tell us about the process. First of all, who are the judges for IndieFab?

V. SUTHERLAND: Well, we have, Chris, a two-pronged process that first involves the editors on staff at the magazine. We cull, out of the entries, 15 to 20 of the top books based on our experience reviewing and seeing these books come in on a daily basis at the office. After about 60 days of culling those books in-house, we send one copy to a librarian and one copy to a bookseller. We really think that that’s what sets our awards program apart from others, because you’re getting feedback from actual buyers of books, and people who are interacting with clients and patrons at libraries.

KENNEALLY: This year the awards went to a real range of independent publishers, some of them names people will recognize – Harvard Business Review, the Museum of Fine Arts here in Boston, the Georgia Museum of Art, and to authors among them, including Garrison Keillor and Barry Lopez, but I assume that there are a number of names that we wouldn’t immediately recognize, but what really what this is all about is a promotion of the best of the best here.

V. SUTHERLAND: That’s what really makes this an exciting time in independent publishing. When we started the magazine 16 years ago, self-publishers and indie authors who weren’t working with established houses were sort of frowned upon in the industry, and boy hasn’t the world changed a lot since then. Now, almost a million titles are being self-published a year, and the established independent presses are able to get big names like Garrison Keillor and others to their stable. So we feel really blessed that we have the ability to include in our ranks somebody who’s only written on book and plans to only write one book, but it’s a doozy, all the way up to the university presses who put out several dozen or a couple of hundred titles a year, and that’s what makes this competition really fun.

KENNEALLY: And what’s important about it – you mentioned the numbers of titles published each year now – is helping readers and those particular buyers you mentioned, the booksellers and the librarians, know what really is out there that’s really worth grabbing and holding onto. One of the ways you do that is to
V. SUTHERLAND: Well, that’s another one of the things that I particularly enjoy about this competition because it’s based on in-house editors’ particular interests or reading habits, and not necessarily what’s a best-seller. So this year I am the one who chose the literary fiction prize in short stories. I always ask for the list of finalists to be delivered to me in e-book form, so I don’t really look at the cover or the packaging, and I based the award strictly on the writing. What a wonderful surprise to find out that this is a debut novel and a very first book from an independent publisher in Texas.

KENNEALLY: So Matt Sutherland, you were involved in the choice for the nonfiction Editors’ Choice prize. It’s a book that I’m familiar with, at least by the exhibit for the Museum of Fine Arts that it is the companion for. It’s called *She Who Tells a Story*. Tell us about that.

M. SUTHERLAND: It’s an unbelievable project, and it’s nonfiction of course. There’s so many genres involved, it’s very often a difficult choice to make, but this is a project that – once you get your hands on it, once you understand what they’re trying to do and the quality of the photographs – It’s about the Arab world, it’s about woman. There’s just really a dozen fantastic topical things going on in this book. When you have a museum, anything they do, of course, and especially when they’re in your town, it’s hard to describe in words, it’s just such a beautiful touching project.

KENNEALLY: I think, Matt, what it really speaks to is the book as objet d’art, as they might say in Paris, that really a book in the printed form – of course, e-books are important and increasingly so – but to have a print book, to have that object there for you to look at, at leisure, that’s really critical to publishing, even today in 2014.

M. SUTHERLAND: Absolutely, and I think we can venture to say that that may never change. I certainly hope it doesn’t change because you simply can’t realize the quality of this book, digitally. I don’t think you can replace having this thing, flipping pages, seeing these photographs and reading these essays, digitally. And of course there are certain people that will fall in love with this book, digitally, but boy the experience of having it in your hands is not to be missed.

KENNEALLY: A particular digital experience that has changed and been updated is, of course, *Foreword Reviews*’ Website. Howard Lovy, executive editor there, you’re in charge of all of that. Tell us about some of the things that are new on the Website and some of the things that have been changed.
LOVY: Well, it’s really exciting. The other publications that cover books and independent books, they kind of do self-published books as more of an anomaly, a quirky kind of story. What we’re going to do is—this is normal now, this is a continuation of the revolution that’s been going on in the way people are reading and writing. I recently lived through it in the news industry when people stopped reading newspapers and started going online. This is really a continuation of that revolution, so you’ll see us launch new blogs on indie science, religion, romance, children’s books, the craft of writing and how you promote your work online. So I’m very excited about it.

KENNEALLY: And indeed, altogether the Foreword Reviews’ Website is a celebration of what you’ve called the indie spirit. In a recent blog post yourself, you talked about that indie spirit and your approach at Foreword Reviews as a way to catch what others might be missing.

LOVY: When you have only now five major gatekeepers, there are going to be a lot of people who are left on the margins. Just because, like I said in my blog, a few gatekeepers, the five largest publishers in the world, decide that you’re marketable doesn’t necessarily mean that you have the best material available.

KENNEALLY: You’re looking for something that really goes beyond the obvious, I guess, is one way to put it.

LOVY: Yeah, we’re giving some of these marginalized authors a seat at the table, whereas before they didn’t have a voice at all.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. Matt Sutherland, you’re in charge of overseeing the selection process that leads to reviews in Foreword Reviews. That must be a seven days a week job.

M. SUTHERLAND: Yes, I love my job but it does get very difficult at times. We’re quarterly. In each issue I’m probably taking a stack of 1200, 1500 books down to about 150, and I’m trying to cover as many different genres as I possibly can. In a perfect world, we’d be reviewing a whole lot more books. Our magazine would be coming out more often just so we could cover all of these fantastic books. But each issue we try to choose books from 150 new publishers just because we want to spotlight—there’s so many great things happening right now in the independent publishing industry. Oxford and Princeton and California—these guys are putting out lots and lots of beautiful books. There’s certain review publications that might concentrate too much on those guys. So it takes a level of digging, something we love here. We see a lot of books, and it’s very exciting to stumble across a new publishing house from Nowheresville, Iowa, and see that they are doing things the exact right way, that they’ve done their homework, that they’ve found a project or
they’ve created a project that is really necessary, really important. That’s why *Foreword Reviews* is on the face of the earth. That is our job to find those guys.

KENNEALLY: Right, and the kind of distribution you’ve got to the 10,000 or so librarians and booksellers and Barnes and Nobles, you must get a lot of feedback from those particular readers, who I imagine would really appreciate that digging you do so they don’t have to.

M. SUTHERLAND: It’s an awful lot of fun to go to trade shows, Book Expo America, the American Library Association, and have librarians and booksellers walk up to us and tell us that exact thing. It really makes us – actually it’s a little bit anxiety-causing because we are that important to them. We take our job deadly serious here, and that feedback from librarians is crucial. When they’re encouraging us to pick out quirky titles and stuff that does not get covered anywhere else because it doesn’t fit nice, tightly on the bookshelf and in a store. So yes, that’s a great point.

KENNEALLY: And Victoria Sutherland, publisher and founder for *Foreword Reviews*, finally a few thoughts about the way that the business has changed in the years since you began the magazine in 1998. Obviously we’re well into the digital age at this point, but I noticed that this year’s publisher of the year of the IndieFab Awards is a company that’s been around for quite some time, so even though the upstarts are getting a lot of the attention, some of the established players, even in the independent publishing world are still going strong.

V. SUTHERLAND: Well, Chris, I’ll to your independent publisher of the year comment first. We chose Cleis Press and Viva Editions because while they have been around for a long time, they are really sparking or revitalizing and keeping their name at the forefront of independent publishing by taking advantage of the technologies, by developing new imprints in response to audience demands, and by continuing to put great books out in spite of their longevity, which in the independent press community could be just 20 years.

When we started *Foreword Reviews* 16 years ago, there really wasn’t anybody covering the independent press sector, and I thought that they deserved a place that they could affordably advertise and market themselves to bookstores and libraries as well as get covered editorially.

In the intervening years, of course, things have changed quite dramatically, and that is what started with 50,000 books being published independently when we first started is now close to a million, as I mentioned earlier. The indie press community is the new black, so to speak. Everybody wants to cover them because long-term authors that have been working with larger houses are going out on their own, and audiences are finding books and finding out about books outside of libraries and their local booksellers. We’re also changing our format a little bit, and as you
mentioned, available on the newsstand and for subscriptions for readers who are interested in finding out about these special books is where we’re spending the next five years developing.

KENNEALLY: Well you certainly have found yourself at the right place at the right time, and you’ve been building up to it, but 2014 seems to be, as you say, the year of independent publishing, and we wish you well at Foreword Reviews and congratulations to all of the winners in this year’s IndiFab Book of the Year Awards.

We’ve been chatting today with Victoria Champagne Sutherland, the publisher and founder of Foreword Reviews Magazine. Victoria, thanks for joining us on Beyond the Book.

V. SUTHERLAND: Thank you, Christopher, great to be here.

KENNEALLY: Also on the line, we’ve had executive editor of Foreword Reviews, Howard Lovy. Howard, thank you.

LOVY: Thanks, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And Matt Sutherland, the managing editor there at Foreword Reviews Magazine, as well. Matt, thanks for joining us.

M. SUTHERLAND: Thanks very much, Chris.

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