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Interview with Children’s and Young Adult Experts Hannah DeCamp and Will Walton on Small Presses Independent Publishers

Hannah DeCamp, Will Walton, and Stacia L. Long

For our spotlight this month, we learned about the value of small presses and independent publishers for readers, writers, and the publishing industry from Hannah DeCamp and Will Walton. As we were looking for wonderful small presses to solicit for review copies, we naturally turned to Hannah and Will for their expert suggestions on who is publishing the best books. Both work at the local independent bookshop Avid, are aficionados of children’s and young adult literature, and are masters of helping young readers get their hands on books that are just right.



Hannah DeCampo works with educators as the Avid’s school engagement specialist, curates the children’s book section, and is “a librarian at heart (and in training).”



Will Walton is a young adult novelist. His first book is *Anything Could Happen*, which was published by PUSH in 2015.

JoLLE(J): What is the first book you remember loving? What about it captured your heart?

Hannah DeCamp (HD): The first book I remember loving (and by loving, I mean I made my mom read it to me over and over and over again) was *Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina. I loved the musicality of the repetition--one of the keys to building reading skills!

Will Walton (WW): *Justin Morgan Had a Horse* by Marguerite Henry. It was my aunt's favorite book as a kid, so I felt a kinship with her while I read it -- that was special. Also, I grew up on farmland, so the book's setting (though it's set in Vermont) felt familiar to me and affirmed for me how magic the outdoors are. I also loved the protagonist: this young, hard-working kid who had all this agency and emotion.

J: What is your favorite Children's or Young Adult book at the moment?

HD: This is SO HARD, so I'm going to pick two! The first is *My Valley* by Claude Ponti, a gorgeous, immersive, oversized picture book that is almost like a whimsical anthropological journey into the wonderful world of creatures called Twims. The second is *Professional Crocodile* by Giovanna Zoboli and illustrated by Mariachiara Di Giorgio, a beautiful wordless picture book that upends expectations in the most delightful ways.

WW: Since I write young adult fiction, I tend not to read too much of it -- I'm too cautious about stealing voice. My favorite middle grade of the moment is *Alfred and Guinevere* by James Schuyler, an old book that the New York Review of Books re-released fairly recently!

J: How would you describe what a small press is? What does it do for authors? What does it do for readers?

WW: In short, a small press is a press that isn't mainstream -- "mainstream," in this instance, relating to larger publishing houses like Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Scholastic, et al. That said, a lot of smaller presses are distributed by larger houses: Penguin Random House distributes the small press, Pushkin Press, for instance. Small presses afford more freedom for its authors: the edits tend to be lighter, commercial success is of littler concern, the author's vision is at the foreground. Small presses open doors for readers, in my opinion -- at least, they do so for me. They are more radical in nature, less concerned with holding my hand, and so I end up having a much more intense, personal, exploratory reading experience as a result.

HD: I love, loved Will's answer to this question, so I'm not going to add much more than say that small presses highlight books for readers that otherwise they might never encounter--so many of the children's small presses I love are re-issuing amazing classics and translating books that would otherwise either only be available as very worn copies in a library or would never reach American/English readers.

J: What are some differences between big publishing houses and smaller publishing houses?

WW: If a book is not "commercially viable" it will not get accepted a major publishing house, unless the author is famous. Smaller publishing houses, by contrast, tend to welcome experimentation and works that "go against the grain."

HD: Again, Will answered this question perfectly. I think money is the biggest difference, which allows small presses to take bigger risks.

J: How did you come to be interested in small presses?

HD: I was actually an international affairs major in college, mainly because I loved learning languages and wanted to understand the world better. When I went hunting for international children's books, I came across a number of small presses that were translating books from around the world into English.

WW: By way of indie film, which I always identified with as a kid: It is outsider art.

J: What small presses would you recommend?

HD: Enchanted Lion, Elsewhere Editions (children's imprint of Archipelago Press), Gecko Press

WW: The Feminist Press

J: Where do you go to find out about new things to read?

WW: Usually when I read non-fiction by or about artists I admire, I learn about the art *they* find or found inspirational, and that inspires me to dig a little deeper. I never would have read James Schuyler, had I not read Maggie Nelson's work first. She led me straight to him.

HD: I'm a rabbit-hole type of gal--I find a type of book or an author I like, then I seek out everything I can on that topic or from that author or genre that I can. For example, reading Tove Jansson's *Moomin* books set off an obsession with all things Scandinavian and with everything written by

Tove Jansson (seriously, her *The Summer Book* is my all-time favorite adult novel).

J: How do you help young readers find new books that they will love? Do you have any advice for them?

HD: I have found that the least effective way to find a book for a young reader is to focus either on age, gender, or "reading level." These metrics tell you nothing about the important stuff: what's inside, what makes the kid tick, what they are really interested in. This will tell me whether the kid wants a book that will make them laugh until milk spurts out their nose or whether they want a book that will list every single dinosaur that's ever been discovered. My main advice to young readers is to not worry about what you're "supposed" to read-- find that book that takes you to the world you never want to leave, real or imagined.

WW: I ask them what movies or music they like. If they're clearly into "outsider art" like I was, I tend to know where to point them. It only occurred to me recently, but what I was really after as a young reader was lyricism. Such an oddball! But our uniquenesses make us valuable, so my advice is always to honor that.