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Publishing Tips Season 3, Episode 5: A Tale of Two Publishing Endeavors with Zoë Sprott

Martha: This is season three of the UCSC Publishing Tips podcast. I am your host, Martha Stuit, she/her pronouns, the scholarly communication librarian here at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This third season is a little different from the previous two seasons. Instead of answering common questions about publishing from graduate students and candidates, this season offers interviews of graduate students and postdocs themselves, including master's students and PhD students or candidates and postdoctoral researchers, and we talk about their publishing experiences.

These interviews were conducted in the spring of 2026. The aim is to share stories so that graduate authors may learn about publishing from each other. These interviews span eight departments at UCSC, so there is a range of disciplines included. Keep in mind that even if an author interview is not about your area of study, there is still something to learn about the publishing process and the effort and feelings that go along with it from these peer stories.

For this episode, I'm here with Zoë Sprott, pronouns they/them, who is in the literature department at UCSC as a fourth-year PhD student. We talk about two distinct publishing experiences that Zoë went through, one successful publication and one harsh rejection by a journal. I asked Zoë to start by telling us about their area of study.

Zoë: Right now I am working primarily in anime and manga studies, but generally I do a lot of work in queer theory and trans theory and popular culture, 21st century literature in general.

Martha: That sounds really interesting. How did you get into that area?

Zoë: Honestly, um, as an undergrad I had six different majors before I got to English.

Uh, a big part of it is that I have ADHD, and so my interests have kind of always over the course of my life been really varied, and literature and English studies gave me an opportunity to look at everything. I also grew up with, uh, my parents were very interested in my pop culture education, uh, so music and movies were a constant part of my childhood, and talking critically about them, uh, really got me into the field eventually when I was in college.

Martha: It's always so interesting to hear how people decide to study what they're studying. So we're here today to talk more about your publishing experiences. I would like to ask, what tales from your publishing journey would you like to share with us?

Zoë: I think there are two in particular that are really helpful, um, in terms of learning from.

One is a really positive publishing story, and then another is a, a more negative one, one that I definitely am, am still kind of learning from. The first is when I was doing my master's degree, I took a class on popular culture and popular media, and I wrote a paper for that class on real person fan fiction.

I was really interested in the BuzzFeed Unsolved series at that time, which does some true crime as well as some ghost hunting. I ended up looking into what fan fiction existed, because I've always been really interested in fan fiction as well, both personally and as a scholar, and I found that there was a really rich archive of real person fan fiction about the hosts of the show, who at least on paper go by their own identities, uh, Shane Madej and Ryan Bergara.

But I was really fascinated by the way that they constructed these kinds of alternate identities together throughout the creation of the show. So the paper came from the idea of wanting to look at ethics in real-person fan fiction. Um, ethics in general in real-person fan fiction is a kind of small area of study.

For the most part, the comments on the ethics of writing fiction about real people tends to be a gray area, and there's not really a, a ton more scholarship that expands on that. And so I really wanted to look at what that gray area was and how to approach it. From there, uh, I wrote the paper for the class, and I felt really proud of it, but I didn't necessarily feel too much more proud of it than I did most other papers I wrote.

On an off chance, I decided to submit it to the Journal of Popular Culture, and I received a revise and resubmit for that, uh, which was really lucky. I was really not expecting to receive much more than a desk reject. And so I was really excited to receive that comment. The revision portion that I really needed to do was more focused on bringing in more sources to talk about ethics, uh, both in terms of real-person fan fiction and just kind of ethics of identity in general, which was really helpful.

So I, I spent a summer just doing a lot of research about that area. I incorporated the feedback, did some revisions, submitted it, and it seems like the same reviewer did the review for the second time around and said that it was looking much better, and it was an accept after that. So I, I, I felt very proud of that, really lucky.

Um-

Martha: Congratulations.

Zoë: Thank you. Yeah. In terms of the second experience, uh, the second experience was not quite as easy as that one. My master's degree I spread out over three years. Originally, I was going to do a two years master's degree, but COVID hit, and I wanted to spend a little bit more time. And so I, I spent three years kind of from the get-go working on my master's thesis.

My program at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa was really interested in specifically making master's thesis programs more plausible for publication, so our goal, instead of writing a 50 or 60-page thesis, was to write an article-length publication to get it really strong and to make it something that could be submitted for publication.

So I spent three years doing that. My goal, uh, from the get-go, I, I came in talking with my advisor about working on Edgar Cantero's Meddling Kids.

Martha: Is that a book or-

Zoë: Yes ... a show

Martha: or? Okay.

Zoë: Yeah. So Edgar Quintero's Meddling Kids is a book. It's a novel. Um, Edgar Quintero is an author from Barcelona. Uh, but he decided to start writing in English, and I was really interested in that approach because his version of English, I think, pulled in a lot more, not so much slang, but his own kinds of invented terms that were very much drawing from pop culture.

I knew I wanted to write my thesis about this, and so what I decided was I wanted to take my, my background in queer theory, and I wanted to try to blend it with genre theory. So I began the very complicated task of trying to come up with a kind of queer theory of genre, which is a bit like putting a chaos theory with an order theory.

Doesn't work super easily. This is a, a study in progress still, uh, one that I don't feel is completed, and I don't know, I don't know if it ever will be really. In terms of the thesis that I, I wrote, it spanned three years. I worked really deeply with several professors, getting to know genre theory inside out, getting to know queer theory and trans theory inside out, and I felt really confident about this thesis by the end of it.

It's what I used for my PhD applications, which thankfully worked. Unfortunately, it didn't work out so well when it came to publication, uh, which was the big thing that I had hoped for. So the first journal that I submitted to was GLQ, which is a very important journal in queer theory and queer studies.

I received a desk reject from this journal, and I understand it now because GLQ is a lot more focused on historicizing literature and media rather than presenting these more theoretical approaches to them.

Martha: It's really interesting because I encountered that journal before and heard of people who study history or people in the social sciences talking about that journal too, so it's interesting how it is spanning fields.

Zoë: Yeah, absolutely, and part of why I was really interested in GLQ is because it's so interdisciplinary. Now I understand a bit better that it just wasn't really the right venue for that kind of work, um, that I was doing in genre studies and really particularly looking at kind of a close reading of this text.

Instead, it would have been better for maybe analyzing it as a kind of pop culture nostalgia-esque kind of piece, really bringing together the kinds of references that it does. I think if I had focused more on that, it would be more applicable to GLQ. Um, this is why I eventually decided to submit it to Genre, well, um, a publication on its own.

Um, and I figured that that would be a better gen- a better genre. I figured that that would be a better venue for publication. Um- Is

Martha: that a journal as well?

Zoë: Yes. Yeah. Okay. Another academic journal. And unfortunately, I received a pretty brutal rejection from Genre.

Martha: Oh, no. Yeah. Ouch.

Zoë: Ouch. Really, ouch. Um, I just went through to reread it last night too, just to have it in mind again.

And it's funny because I remember-

Martha: I'm sorry. I hope that didn't- No ... re-traumatize you.

Zoë: No. If anything, I, I think I actually feel a lot better about it now than I did in the moment. When I first got the rejection, it felt really brutal, and it felt a lot like someone was looking at my like three years of hard work and saying, "This is just bad."

And that really hurt. I- Mm-hmm ... I emailed my previous advisor, um, at this point I was already at UC Santa Cruz, and I, I told him the feedback. I told him, "This is really hitting me hard. I don't really know how to take this, what to do about it." And it was really helpful because he was able to put it in perspective a bit, and at the moment, I think I was still not really in a place to be putting it in perspective.

Mm-hmm. I just kind of needed to be sad about it for a minute. Um, but now that I look back on it, I understand it a lot better. A lot of the feedback that I received was specifically that I was overreaching in a lot of my claims, and I think this is accurate now that I look back. Although I, I can feel a past version of me saying, "No, it's not accurate."

But no, I, I think a lot of the paper was really trying to do a lot more than it was capable of doing at that point. Ultimately, I was looking at a smaller text that is a bit more indie. You

know, it works off of popular culture, but it's not necessarily one that has a super wide following, uh, like something like Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings.

And so in trying to make these wider claims about it, I ultimately was kind of overreaching by saying that it was doing much more than it really was. At the same time, the professor that I, I talked to about it also helped to put in perspective that some of the feedback was just kind of bad faith feedback too.

That there were portions of it that were really just nitpicking to an extreme. That absolutely it wasn't ready for publication at that point in time, but at the same time, some of the things that this reviewer was really going into were really at least being phrased very brutally. And so this was an important moment for me I think because I, I had come off of, of being very lucky with my Journal of Popular Culture publication that ultimately I, I didn't put, you know, three years of, of work into.

I put a semester and I put a couple extra months for the revisions, um, ultimately less than a year of time spent on it. Whereas with my thesis, it was three whole years, and it was meant to be something that was publishable by the end, that I could just submit and it would be done. Unfortunately, it, it turned out to be kind of the opposite, where the, the thing I put a little bit less work into, though of course quality work, still ended up being the thing that worked better for that journal at that time.

It made a lot more manageable claims I think is part of why the earlier publication that I had worked better. Whereas the later with the thesis trying to publish that, it was a bit of, of trying to go beyond what was really possible to argue in the span of 20 pages. This would've been something that maybe if I had an entire book project, maybe if I had spread it out a-across a couple of different texts, then it would've worked.

But at that point it wasn't quite ready for publication.

Martha: Hindsight is 20/20.

Zoë: Hindsight is 20/20, absolutely. Yeah, and so when I was looking at the feedback again last night, it's funny because I remember feeling so crushed by it, and so crushed that I kind of avoided genre studies for, like, a year in the PhD.

Martha: Mm.

Zoë: Was like, "I don't wanna do that anymore."

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: "This is just not my thing."

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: And a big part of that was in the review, they were very specifically talking about, you know, "This article is talking about genre studies, but doesn't seem to have a firm grasp of it," which felt really rough after I had spent a long time really trying to get a firm grasp of it.

Ultimately, though, I did go back to genre studies because I did end up really enjoying it still, and I, I'm still kind of working on that, that project of thinking of queerness and genre together and thinking of them in really complicated and complex ways. And it's something that now when I went and read the feedback last night, that I could actually laugh over because I can see now the points that are being nitpicky that- are, are just a little bit too extreme.

But I can also see absolutely that some of the feedback in there makes a lot of sense, and as much as I didn't wanna see it in that moment, that I, I just wanted to be like, "I spent three years of time on this. That should be enough. It should be published," at the same time, that wasn't really how it worked out.

It wasn't really ready for publication. And it's something that I haven't really looked back at, at revising it since then mostly now out of time and, and doing a bunch of other projects. But I am definitely more interested in going back to revise it knowing what I know, or at the very least, to take bits and pieces of it and to work it into my own work some other way.

Martha: It's interesting because reviewer feedback can be so harsh, and for a variety of reasons, but sometimes it can be so blunt. At the same time, there's a lot to be learned from another person's perspective, and even in statements that are maybe more critical than we'd hope. You know, we'd hope for the feedback to be more constructive, but for those harsh reviews, it's still someone's perspective and there can be a kernel of truth in there.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: And it sounds like this was really a learning opportunity once you had the time to step back and once you processed your feelings and then looked back at it again. That said, it's not an experience I would wish on anyone, right?

Zoë: Yeah, absolutely. It was also, I think, an important and valuable learning experience if only just because at the very least in that moment there was this sense of, wow, I wasted three years, which looking back I don't feel like that.

I think those were three years very well spent, that I did a lot of work that was really important, and that I wouldn't be doing the work I am doing now if I hadn't gone through all of that work beforehand. And so even though it didn't get published, it still was meaningful work and work that still keeps informing my current research that I'm doing as well.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: At the time, Genre didn't have as much capability of bringing multiple reviewers in, so the way that they were doing their peer review was they would go through one reviewer, and if they got a, an accept or a revise, resubmit, then it would go to the second reviewer. Because I got a reject on the first one, I only got feedback from one person.

And so-

Martha: Oh, okay. I was going to ask you- Yeah ... was there only one reviewer? That's-

Zoë: Yeah

Martha: That's an interesting approach.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: Uh, but also economical probably for the journal because it can be so hard to find reviewers-

Zoë: Yeah ...

Martha: that it sounds like they're being pretty judicious about assigning articles to reviewers.

Zoë: Yeah, absolutely. And so, you know, the nice thing when I submitted for Journal of Pop Culture, I did have two different reviewers and one had said accept off the bat. The other had said revise and resubmit. I think it's always tough to receive feedback and criticism, even on something that you don't spend as much time on as, like, three years.

And so even on the revise and resubmit comments, I was still having a little bit of trouble going with them. But at least I had the other comments from the person that had said accept to kind of balance that feeling out, where I got to see, you know, at least one person says definitely this was great as is, and another person, even if it was a revise and resubmit, they still saw potential in it.

It wasn't a, a full-out reject. And so there was this sense of a silver lining to that. Whereas with the reject one, it was just a single review, a single reject. If anything, it was pretty nice because the, the editors, uh, when they had sent the feedback, had mentioned that it would be very challenging, and so I think that even they saw that it was a bit harsh.

But at the same time, I think it was important feedback to get, um, at least parts of it. And if anything, it, it also helps me to develop a bit of a thicker skin too. It is really hard receiving feedback on your own work, especially really critical feedback, and especially when you spend so much time on something and feel really, really proud of it.

And so I think if I had received that same kind of comment for the earlier article, I might have understood it a bit better because, you know, I had submitted it kind of on a whim after finishing the class. This one, it felt more like I had been working towards this for so long, shouldn't I get this thing?

And so-

Martha: You were more invested in it.

Zoë: Yeah. The more I invested, the, the harder it was to receive that feedback. But also important feedback too. It, it really is a kind of give and take, a, a balancing-

Martha: Mm-hmm

Zoë: ... act of-

Martha: Mm-hmm

Zoë: ... frustrations with it, but also seeing that there are some important things to learn from it too.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: Definitely. Yeah. I wonder, too, if there is something to be learned about if or when you provide your own peer review.

Zoë: Yeah, absolutely. I haven't done that yet, but I do provide feedback to students pretty often, and it was really helpful to feel the, the hit of getting that kind of comment. You know, we talk about in teaching a lot the, the compliment sandwich, that you put the criticism in the middle, and it can feel a bit performative at times, but it also ends up being really important, too, especially in feeling that and getting that kind of criticism for something I had worked so hard on.

It does help to understand what it feels like on the other side of that, too, that definitely in the future when I'm giving reviews like that, I will definitely be less nitpicky than that. Um, and at the same time, I think, yeah, providing criticism in a way that is constructive and

helpful and doesn't necessarily tear someone down as much as it does provide ways of growing.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: Mm-hmm. Some of the words that you use to describe publishing are surprising and unpredictable. As new authors, that's a really scary place to be in. Where do you go from there? How does that inform how you approach publishing in the future?

Zoë: Yeah. I think for a while that that negative comment kind of put me off for, for a good bit.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Um, and it's only really recently that I've started looking more at getting publications, and part of that is I'm in my fourth year, I'm, I'm getting towards the end of the PhD, and suddenly I'm realizing, oh, wow, I have that Journal of Pop Culture one, and then I kind of paused for a long time.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Um, I would like to get more out there. I realized recently that I have so many papers that I've written that I just never really went back to or did anything with that really are important, and I think are really publishable, honestly. And so I've started getting more into really thinking about what I'm sending out for publication, how I'm doing it.

It's helpful, at least in our literature program, we have a critical writing practicum that is just focused on revision, and so I've done that twice now. One for my, my qualifying exam materials, but I just did it again this winter and revised a paper for publication, which I'm hoping to send out soon, I think over the summer.

I'm also really excited, I submitted a proposal based on that for Anime Expo, which is one of the big anime conventions, that they have an academic conference as well, and I got accepted for that, and so I'm really excited.

Martha: Yeah, congratulations.

Zoë: That'll be this summer. Yay.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: And so I think part of it is, to paddle back a little bit, as an undergrad, my degree was mostly focused on creative writing rather than critical writing, and I moved more into the critical.

And I learned in creative writing from lots of our teachers that you just kind of need to send a bunch of things out and forget about them until you get the feedback. And it's a little bit harder to do that with critical papers because so much investment is required to get them to a state of being publishable or submittable.

But at the same time, I think I'm learning to go back to some of those methods a bit too, of getting articles, uh, or papers into at least somewhat publishable stages and submitting those as much as I can. And so it's been this practice of, I guess, not being too... Uh, my advisor used this word of not being too precious about my papers.

Martha: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Um, my thesis was my baby. Yeah. I... It was, it was so important to me. It was, like, the thing I thought about for three years only. And that's not bad. It's not a bad thing to do. But at the same time, it is kind of helpful to have an end point to a project, or at least a pause point on a project, to submit it off, and then to think about something else for a while.

And then when you get that feedback, and if it happens to be a rejection, then it's just something to learn from. And you've got all of these other, you know, projects cooking up too that you can think about, rather than it being your one thing that you were really planning on getting published. Instead, it becomes one of several things that could have been published.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Um, yeah.

Martha: Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: Yeah. You mentioned that you have a creative writing background. Yeah. And with creative writing, you're trying to put your work out there-

Zoë: Mm-hmm ...

Martha: as much as you can.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: And not only that, but with creative writing, you may submit to multiple journals at once- Mm-hmm ... with the same piece.

Zoë: Mm-hmm.

Martha: But I imagine that academic publishing might have been or seemed like quite a contrast to you-

Zoë: Yeah

Martha: ... in that you may only submit to one journal at a time with an article. Was that a surprise to you?

Zoë: Yeah, it was. I, I remember making the jump towards working on critical publications, and in the first ones I was looking at, I had seen notes about no simultaneous submissions, just submitting to one journal at a time, and I had thought that was a journal-specific practice.

Um, and it wasn't until I had looked at more that I realized, "Oh, this is actually just how these journals work." And that was absolutely a, a huge difference. Yeah. Like I mentioned, you know, with creative writing, it was this idea of getting as much as you can out, and so frequently I would have weekends where I would just sit down, find a few publications that I wanted to submit to, and work on submitting the same piece kind of across those different publications.

Martha: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Zoë: That, of course, does not work for critical publications. And so I think one of the things that I had to learn a lot very quickly, and I think you can sort of tell from the story of submitting initially to GLQ, was I had to learn to be more specific about what journals I was submitting to and making sure they were actually a good fit because it wasn't really as much about just sending a bunch out and hoping that someone bites.

Instead, it was, "Well, this is gonna be out for a while. I should really try to hope that this is, uh, one of the journals that will hopefully publish it. And so I should aim to find a journal that this works more with." So that was definitely a different approach to finding publications. Instead of just kind of prestige or, or a name, it was really focusing on what else have they been publishing, which definitely exists in creative writing, but maybe to a lesser extent than I've noticed in critical.

Martha: And it sounds like you focused on the journals that are big in your fields.

Zoë: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And, and that was part of why I say that the Journal of Popular Culture submission being published was such a surprise is because in the field of popular culture, that is one of the kind of top journals.

And so I had figured I'll aim super high, I'll get the rejection, I'll get the feedback from the rejection, and then maybe I'll aim a little bit lower. That didn't happen. Um, thankfully, I'm, I'm okay with that not happening. It's the, the classic aim for the moon, you'll land among the stars. I've always been the type to do that, and I've found that that ends up being a surprisingly effective way of approaching things.

Martha: Well, I really appreciate you sharing your publishing journey with me. Is there anything we didn't talk about that you're thinking about?

Zoë: I think seeing those kind of two poles has helped me to understand a bit more of the middle ground between them, of the really reach publication, go for the stars or the moon, whichever one.

Um, and, uh, on the flip side, the really kind of harsher rejection. Now that I'm moving more towards thinking of publication, I, I've kind of figured out a good middle way, hopefully.

Martha: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: Yeah. That is... It's a good experience to go through-

Zoë: Yeah

Martha: ... and have that experience under your belt-

Zoë: Yeah

Martha: ... now going, going forward with publishing.

Zoë: Mm-hmm.

Martha: Well, thank you, Zoe.

Zoë: Yeah.

Martha: Thanks for listening. This season of Publishing Tips was produced by Daniel Story and me, Martha Stuit, with additional editing support from Isaiah Brazel and Jennessy Barba. Daniel, Isaiah, and Jennessy are all part of the University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, and we thank them for their support of this podcast.

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Thank you!