Professors Get Advice on Breaking Into Print

By JENNIFER HOWARD

Maurice Jackson knew he had a winning subject for his first book, a biography of the 18th-century abolitionist Anthony Benezet. He also knew that, with a full teaching-and-service load as an assistant professor of history at Georgetown University, he could use a hand getting it ready for print.

Mr. Jackson found that help in a cozy, 19th-century townhouse in Washington, a block from Georgetown's campus. That's where Carole Fungaroli Sargent directs the university's Office of Scholarly and Literary Publications. Informally known as Booklab, the office helps Georgetown-based authors navigate the difficulties of writing and publishing and, in the process, cultivate their careers.

In Mr. Jackson's case, that meant offering some structural advice on his manuscript, helping him line up an indexer and copy editor, and getting permissions to use illustrations.

The result, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism,* is coming out from the University of Pennsylvania Press — just in time for Mr. Jackson's departmental tenure vote this year.

Booklab represents a growing recognition that universities make a smart investment when they help faculty members handle "the overwhelming burden of publishing," as Ms. Sargent calls it.

The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, for instance, is a year into a pilot author-publisher-liaison program run by Rebecca Sestili, a former university-press editor. In that year, she has seen 40 faculty members from 22 departments, who have come to her in search of advice on how proposals, editors, and contracts work. And Emory University established a Manuscript Development Program in 2002. Run by Amy Benson Brown, a writer and writing coach, it offers one-on-one consultations with about 30 faculty members a year.

'It Isn't Just Kindness'

At Georgetown, Ms. Sargent set up Booklab almost three years ago in collaboration with James J. O'Donnell, provost and an established author himself. He is keenly aware of how difficult it can be to get published and promoted. Too often, he says, it is treated as an adversarial process: "We'll drop you from the helicopter naked with a Bowie knife in the middle of the wilderness, and if you come back within seven years wearing animal skins and dragging an elk behind you, you get tenure."

Of Booklab he says, "It isn't just charity, it isn't just kindness, it isn't just employee support. It's institutional support. It's making sure these people have the career and have the opportunity that we want them to have, that it is in our interest for them to have."
Ms. Sargent has the knack, he says, of "getting people to book and getting book to best place."

That knack comes, in part, from her own experience. Ms. Sargent, whose Ph.D. is in 18th-century literature, has taught in Georgetown's English department, has published two books, is at work on another, and understands what it is like to be a scholar trying to juggle book writing with all the other demands on a professor's time.

For tenure-line faculty members, Booklab's services are free. The money to sustain the operation comes through Mr. O'Donnell's office. Since Booklab opened, in January 2006, Ms. Sargent has consulted with roughly half of Georgetown University's 400 or so tenured or tenure-track faculty members, she estimates.

She works with faculty members in any department, except the law and medical schools, which draw on separate budgets. She consults with authors at any level — assistant, associate, or full professor — and at any stage of the writing process.

An 'Intellectual Partner'

There are some things that Ms. Sargent will not do. She will not rewrite a manuscript for an author; she is not a ghostwriter or a book doctor, she says. Nor will she hand out tenure advice. Almost anything else to do with writing and publishing, however, is fair game for Booklab consultation.

Ms. Sargent sees herself as an "intellectual partner" for scholars, helping them think creatively not just about individual books but also about their careers and how their work contributes to their disciplines, the university, and the public sphere. She is comfortable with niche scholarship but loves the idea of "a university-press best seller."

Creativity doesn't exclude practicality. Ms. Sargent will confer on how to pitch an idea to a publisher, talk through how a manuscript is organized, or help decipher a contract. She and her assistants will connect authors with proofreaders and other editorial-support types, make introductions to agents as needed, and strategize about marketing and publicity. She mostly handles nonfiction but will work with fiction writers, too.

She is not a lawyer but knows her way around a publishing contract. Writers don't often know that they can get better terms than a boilerplate contract offers. For instance, Ms. Sargent urges her authors to keep their copyrights rather than sign them over, as is standard at many university presses, she says. (At trade publishers, authors traditionally retain the copyright.) "You really have to watch it," she says. "I see flaming naïveté everywhere." She often turns to the Authors Guild, an advocacy group for writers, and its legal staff to suggest author-friendly contract revisions.

David S. Painter, an associate professor with a joint appointment in the history department and the School of Foreign Service, turned to Ms. Sargent when he wanted to get back the rights to a book he published in 1986. He also got her help in sorting out the details of two other contracts, with Routledge and Oxford University Press.
"My job is to research and write the books, not to know the ins and outs of publishing," Mr. Painter says. "It's nice to have someone in your corner."

**Rambles and Rewards**

Part of Ms. Sargent's aim is to help the author-editor relationship function as smoothly as possible. She visits university presses and talks with editors about how they work and what they are looking for.

One consistent message she gives authors: Think ambitiously about how your book will live in the real world, and think practically about how well it fits with other books on an editor's list. As the economy worsens, publishers are likely to be extra careful about what they sign. Now more than ever, "it needs to work as a book," Ms. Sargent says. "No editor feels right now that their job is secure."

To help clients see their work in the context of the marketplace of ideas, Ms. Sargent likes to take them on a "ramble" through a nearby bookstore, which happens to be a Barnes & Noble. A trade-oriented megastore seems an unlikely setting for specialized works of scholarship, but she sees it as a terrific place for authors to think about where their books really fit. Is a particular project regional history, anthropology, or foreign policy? What's the competition? Who, Ms. Sargent asks, are its ideal shelf-mates?

Going through that exercise can help a writer convince an editor that a book is worth doing. It may also result in a better, more focused proposal and book. Ms. Sargent likes to remind her authors that every book is an act of communication, and that the scholarly and popular worlds aren't always separate spheres.

**A Manuscript Reborn**

That message resonates with John Glavin, a professor of English at Georgetown. Several years ago, he wrote a memoir, "Death at the Edges," which he describes as "the anti-*Under the Tuscan Sun*," based on a semester he and his wife spent in Italy.

He got a polite "no, thanks" when he sent the book out. "Everybody said something like, 'This is a very interesting book for a very small audience.'" Discouraged by publishers' lack of interest, Mr. Glavin set the memoir aside.

When Ms. Sargent opened Booklab, however, he dug out the manuscript and asked her to read it. "She said, 'Here's how you can make this a book that people would want to read, without changing anything that's important to you.'"

He took her advice, rewrote the manuscript, and found an agent, who is now circulating it to publishers.
Without Ms. Sargent's intervention, he says, "there would be no book. I was convinced by the initial reception that it had no future and that I should put it aside and go back to being an academic writer. It's a story of Lazarus coming out of the tomb."