

September Week_ Production with Emma Leask

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SPEAKERS

Tom Barker, Emma Leask, Speaker 1, Speaker 2



Tom Barker 00:15

Hi, I'm Tom, a co-chair with SYP North. Today's episode features a conversation with Emma Leask. Emma is a former chair of SYP North and is currently a production editor in Bloomsbury's academic department. In this episode, we will be talking about demystifying production, as well as her career journey and her role as an SYP mentor. I hope you enjoy. So, Emma, thank you so much for joining us. Would you be able to just give us a quick snapshot of what your career background has been like in publishing.



Emma Leask 00:45

Yeah, of course. Yeah, so I've been working in Bloomsbury's academic production department for three years now. I started off as a production assistant in August 2023, and it



Emma Leask 00:57

was my first publishing job. And I worked as an assistant for about eight or nine months, I think it was, and then got the promotion to my current role of production editor, which is where I started working on front list titles. So as an assistant, it was more reprints, handling those, and then now I work on titles that are upcoming for publication. I started off with the theology studies and the music and sound studies lists, and now I have politics, international development, and anthropology. So lots of variation, really interesting titles to work on. Before that, I did a law degree at Newcastle University, and then decided I definitely didn't want to work in the law, so I did a master's in publishing at York St John. During that time, I was the chair for SYP North, so it was a nice full circle moment to be interviewed on the podcast.

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Tom Barker 01:54

Yeah, it must feel very surreal to be a former chair and then coming on as a guest, which which is exciting in many ways, and so obviously there you've talked about your varied list: theology, politics, and and various bits and bobs. Obviously, as someone in production, you're working on all these different titles. How would you describe it to someone who has not heard of production before as a department in publishing. What would happen in your day to date, for instance?

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Speaker 1 02:24

It's a bit of a mysterious department, I think, when you're not quite familiar with it, because it sits at a sort of mid point in the publishing process. But basically, I always describe the production person as a project manager for a title, so you're sort of overseeing the whole production cycle and bringing the unedited manuscript into its typeset form. So it comes into the publishing process once editorial have acquired the manuscript and they've got it in their Word document format, and they send it over to Production, and we then are coordinating with the copy editor typesetter to get the text in its proper final press ready format. And we tend to work with a lot of the other departments to coordinate things like the final cover design, and also later on down the line with operations to make them aware of when stock is going to come in. So in terms of the day to day, it's a lot of a lot of organization, lots of spreadsheets involved, keeping track of things and making sure that we're sending things off to whoever's involved with the production on time according to our schedules. And part of that as well in my role as a production editor, this editorial aspect where I'm checking the proofs as well. So once they've been typeset by the typesetter, then I'm checking through those proofs and making sure there's no mistakes and that everything's been correct, formatted. And then eventually, once that's all sorted, we will send the files to the printer, and then in theory, it should all be done. But there's always some fun along the way that makes it interesting. But yeah, so basically, a lot of organization and sticking to deadlines.

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Tom Barker 04:12

I think all of what you've said would be really interesting to anybody who likes spreadsheets. But even if you don't, if you're an organized person and like getting your hands on a project. It sounds like the kind of role that would suit would suit them. I mean, you've sort of touched on it there in terms of working with all these different departments to coordinate the manuscript and working on things like the cover, which is a bit more creative. And what personally excites you the most about production?

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Speaker 2 04:41

I think mainly for me, because you see the entire production process. You see the book taken from its raw manuscript form all the way to getting ready to send to the printer. The satisfaction of seeing it come to that final final stage, you know, going from something that is nowhere near ready for public. To then being completely ready and seeing how the author has been working on that along the way, and myself as a production editor making any suggestions that I can do, and then also having some insight into the cover design as well. I mean, as a production editor, I don't really get a lot of say on what the cover looks like, which is just as well because I'm not very creative. But it's seeing that from a distance and seeing how that comes to its final format as well. But because of the titles that I work on, like with the music list, it's seeing really interesting titles in production before they're available for a wider audience. I find that really exciting. You know, having like that first exclusive insight. So for the music list, I've worked on our 33 third series, which is like these little academic studies of albums. So, I've worked on one about Mazzy Star, about Gorillaz album, like some of my favorite albums. I've worked on these exciting books, and one of the first titles I worked on as a production editor after I got that promotion was about the band Queen. It was like in a whole academic study about them, I just found that really interesting as well. And yeah, just the knowledge that I've been one of the first people to read, then it's always very satisfying. So yeah, I think you do get a lot of a lot of exclusive access as a production of a sort of production controller.

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Tom Barker 06:15

I suppose fundamentally, without you, there is no book. So

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Speaker 2 06:19

Exactly, it's all because of us.

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Tom Barker 06:21

It is really, and you know, some of the books you mentioned, like I have a few for 33 and a third books. I love them. So you know, I bet if you're in Waterstones or an independent bookshop and you're seeing you know a book and you happen to go past and go, oh, I've I've worked on that book. It must be a nice feeling to feel like you've shepherded the book to its to the shelf, really. I mean, just just on a separate question, what's the most unexpected part of your role? So, I think I suppose you could be talking about the cover or illustrations and having a site input into that. Talking to the typeset about the design briefs, but absolutely anything you can think of that's unexpected and that people might not know about.

S**Speaker 1 07:03**

Yeah, I think as a production editor, the sort of editorial part of it, although it's obviously in the job title, it was I wasn't really expecting how much I would be involved with the actual text itself and the development side of that. So I think for production controllers in trade publishing. I'm not sure how much they are involved with the text, if they are as involved with the copy editing and proofreading as we are. But in my role, I didn't expect that I'd have such an influence in the proof checks and going through these, making sure that the text design's been properly applied. Also, checking things like there's no rogue spelling mistakes and grammar issues, and checking things like the index and the references are all formatted correctly. I think because of that, because obviously the author is doing those proof checks at the same time, I didn't realize how involved we would be with the authors. So I think initially I thought production was a bit more removed from the actual text itself and how much the author is working on that. I thought that was mainly just editorial, which it might be in in other companies and in in the trade world. But yeah, in academic, we do tend to be quite involved with the authors, which I do really enjoy because obviously they've created the work and it's it's great to work with them more directly. And yeah, I've really found myself enjoying the editorial part of my job. I think that is an advantage to working in academic production as well. And as well, it's just how much we are able to control where the book is up to. And I mean, it feels like a big responsibility, but it's kind of up to us when proof checks are done, when cover design is being chased, and when it's being sent to press. Like if we, if I forgot to send a title to press and then it's late, then that's my fault. We might have to move the publication date. Unfortunately, that's not happened yet. But there's still time. But yeah, I think the amount of responsibility I have is-it's an interesting part, but unexpected.

T**Tom Barker 09:01**

I think with great power comes great responsibility. But I'm sure you know when you're connected to so many departments, it's a lot of responsibility. And we'll get onto this as a separate question, just about skills. You work in a Bloomsbury, which is sort of it has a academic publishing focus, but also does some trade books. How would you say that your specific role and your lists and your general place in the company differs to something in trade publishing? So, what what sort of drew you to this particular niche and part of publishing that you're in?

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Speaker 1 09:37

I think from what I've seen from having friends that work in the trade world and production, main difference is the pace of the workload. I think we tend to have quite a big workload in terms of the amount of titles that we work on, but in trade, it might be that you have less titles to work on, but there's a lot. More urgency with them, just because things like print runs will be bigger, demand will be higher. In academic publishing, it's obviously a lot more of a niche group of people who'll be wanting to read the books, and you'll be selling them to places like universities and libraries and things like that, rather than places like Waterstones and Black Belts and other bookshops went in the stock, and it means that the pace is different at different points of the year as well. So obviously, in trade, a lot of titles will be coming out in October and November ahead of the Christmas gift buying period. So I think in the lead up to that is when my trade colleagues might be the busiest, whereas in academic, it tends to be that we publish a lot in February and in September at the start of the school year and the academic year. So it means that ours is slightly at a different time, and we're the busiest trying to finalize all of our titles. In terms of why I wanted to work in academic, I've always really enjoyed academia, and I, I mean, I did a master's, so you know, I had to like it to some extent. And I enjoyed the reading elements of both my degrees that I did. I find the books really interesting, and because I'm a very detail-oriented person, which you definitely have to be in any production role, I found it really interesting the fact that working in production, it's a lot about making sure these high-quality academic texts are being made to the highest possible standard. You know, things I have to check very specific things like the index that while the numbers are correlating to the right pages, that the references are formatted in their correct house style. You know, Chicago, Harvard, whatever's been chosen. So I think that side of it is why I was interested in academic. But also, I found that in comparison to trade, the format and the specifications of the books that we work on, from a production perspective, differs slightly too. And we've got a bit more variety in terms of we might have a hard back title with a plate section with a load of images, like the Queen book I mentioned has had a load of pictures of Queen in it. Whereas if I was working in a trade publisher, well, not to dis these books, but you know they're B form up, paperbacks, black and white. You know they're interesting to work on, and there'd be a massive print run for them, but I think if you're wanting to learn about production and a variation of different production specifications, then academics are good one to work for because there's things like textbooks and loads of images and text box and graphs and tables. So it just is a bit more varied, I guess, compared to what you might get in trade.

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Tom Barker 12:45

Absolutely, I think a lot of people will be very grateful that the index, for instance, is is pristine. I think that level of detail is important in any book, obviously, but with academic publishing too, you know, this will hopefully form part of someone's scholarly work onwards. So you're contributing to the scholarly record. So attention to detail is obviously really important. A lot of people take away from that your comment on the pace of the workload and the different sort of sensitivity to publishing schedules. I think is really interesting, and and is a good sort of underexplored point. I think in terms of how schedules might differ, how people's workloads differ, and if you're working in academic publishing in general, you know how how sensitive you are to the reference of academics as well, who obviously will be teaching compared to something in trade, which obviously you have the big book fairs and so on, and so that's a really interesting point. Obviously, you've been in your role for for a while, and you you obviously did your masters, and then have sort of worked your way up. For those who are already in production, maybe they've just got their entry level position in a publishing house, academic or trade. What piece of advice would you give them, for instance, that you would have wanted when you were just starting out?

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Speaker 2 13:59

I think something this probably applies to every single publishing role, but it's just how to manage all the emails that you get because it's a lot of emails. It's definitely something that you learn on the job and whatever works best for you. But I think especially in production, and I can imagine in editorial as well, because there'll be a lot of authors emailing you. But in production, because you're the main point of contact for a particular title or a list. Then there will be a lot of queries being sent over a lot of the time. And once you've put a title into production, there'll be the coordination with the copy editors and the typesetters. There might be all of the queries that are coming in, and then later on, sending to the printer. You know if they've got any queries for you, so I think, especially when I moved from assistant to production editor, I found the email side of things quite overwhelming. So it's just a case of finding out how to best organize them the way that you work. So for me, I've got. Various different folders for each title, so I can sort of store my emails according to which title they relate to, and I'll have set times of the day where I go through all my email queries when I'm mentally prepared is the best time day to be doing that. But yeah, I think I think that's the same for any publishing role though, and if you're moving from an assistant position into the more front list type of work, or in any in any role in any department. I think it's important to show that you can get on top of your emails and manage them to the best of your ability. I think another thing is making sure that you're communicating well with all of your colleagues and the various people in different departments that you work with, so as an assistant, you'll probably learn to do that quite quickly because, say, an urgent reprint has come in. You need to be communicating with your operations team to let them know when the stock is likely going to come in, and you'll be communicating with the printer to see the quickest turnaround time possible, and then equally with editorial, who might have requested the reprint. So I think as a production person at any stage, it's important that you're communicating the production side of things as clearly as possible and within enough time, so that whoever is relying on your work can act accordingly and get their side of the workflow done. But again, that that kind of links to the emails part that it's just figuring out when is best for you to do that and how you're able to manage that alongside all your other workload. But yeah, I think there's a degree of responsibility on production to communicate well because it's it's only really us that know at what stage the title's up to, because we'll be the ones in charge of overseeing when the authors do their proof checks, and we'll have the clearest idea as to when we'll be sending it to the printer and when the stock will be coming in. So yeah, I think it's just important to make sure that you're a good communicator to then move up.

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Tom Barker 17:00

Yeah, from what you've just mentioned, really, it is about building relationships and also being able to communicate clearly and keep on top of all the various projects and books and whatnot that you're working on. So, just from that, if someone is listening and they like the sound of what you've said and they want to move into production, what advice and skills would you give and recommend that they have? Maybe if they've had a previous job or internship or experience, or maybe nothing at all in publishing. What would you say to them?

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Speaker 1 17:32

I think one of the main other skills, other than being a good communicator, is problem solving and Time management, because as the production person, you are overseeing the title as its own project, and there might be issues that come up that you don't expect and that could derail the production schedule, like an author just disappearing for months on end, or just not deciding to do their copy editing and proofreading, which has happened before, so it's just showing that you're able to, you know, work calmly under pressure and deal with issues as they arise, and can sort of think outside the box to see how best to manage the situation to be able to get the title back on track, because there might be times where it's gone completely off course and it's no longer on its original production schedule, and you have to figure out can it still meet the original publication date or will this have to move on what's realistically possible for the title and when will the stock come in if it does have a print one. So I think for any job that you're moving from, if you've got skills that show that, regardless of what it's in, you know, if it's working in a shop or anything, any other admin job, then I think that's a really good one to highlight. But if you're moving from a different publishing department into production, I think having experience in a different department alone is a really good skill to have, because in production you do need to have an awareness of what the other departments do, and you need to know things like when they have their deadlines or what they need from you as the production person when that's needed by, so that the title can stay on track. So I think linked to that is like sticking to deadlines, and you know, if there's department-wide key dates that need to be met, I think if you're able to show that you're able to stick to them, then it'll be it'll serve you well in production because we're all about the schedules and we're all about the key dates. Even if you worked in the marketing department, which I personally I think is very different to production, you know. You'll have things like marketing campaigns that you'll have to complete by a certain deadline or by the book's publication date. So I think showing things like that is a really important skill to show for moving into any production role, even if that's moving into an assistant position as well. But yeah, it's just. But I think any. Any other department in publishing, you can easily move into production because it just gives you that advantage to be a slightly more well-rounded production person because you've already had that lived experience of the other departments. I

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Tom Barker 20:13

think all of what you said there is really interesting, especially just at the end. I know you mentioned the lived experience of other departments, but also even if you're coming, you know, into publishing from a background, you know, with no publishing experience or no connections or anything, I think you'll be able to bring a lot of soft and hard skills from from your background and your experiences, you know, multitasking and whatnot. As a sort of a segue, I know that obviously you were the SYP North co-chair a few years ago and had some experience with the SYP. Obviously, the volunteering will have will have helped. What would you say to people who are looking to get that experience? And would you recommend doing something like the SYP? I know that that's a bit of a biased question on the SYP podcast, but I'll throw it in anyway. Yeah,

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Speaker 1 21:00

no, I absolutely think if anyone can volunteer for the SYP that really are passionate about getting into publishing, then they should absolutely do it. Because obviously, I'm sure whoever's looking for a job in publishing for the first time, you'll see that you need to show a genuine interest in publishing, and unfortunately, it does have to be more than you like reading and you like books. So I think showing that you've dedicated your free time to a really amazing organization. Obviously, I'm very biased as well because I have volunteered before. But I think showing that you've given up your time to do that and you care enough about helping other people to get into publishing and making the industry more accessible is really good experience to have. And with the roles themselves, they do lend themselves really well to any assistant position in publishing. Obviously, I went into production, but I think any entry-level role you can get a great range of skills to get into those positions. So obviously, there's the social media roles that be great for marketing, and there's the communications roles as well, and even like especially the chair roles as well. I think those are those give you some really good skills. Because I found that for my interview for Bloomsbury for the production assistant position, I did speak a lot about my role as the chair because it sort of mapped onto the project management role of a production person. Because I'm sure you know, as the co-chair, it's overseeing and making sure everyone's doing their bit on time, sort of delegating work and getting things done according to your schedules. So I think if anyone specifically wants to go into production, I think that would be a really good role to have. But also, I mean, I know we're probably going to talk about the mentorship scheme, but I think that's another really good experience to have because again, it just shows like a genuine interest, and you're not just thinking, oh yeah, like working publishing because it's fun and I get free books. But yeah, it shows more a genuine passion for it.

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Tom Barker 23:02

Absolutely, I know. As I say, I know we're a bit biased because we're on the SYP podcast, but we would encourage anyone listening towards the end of the year, whenever you're listening to this, to just have a look at your your sort of local branch and and see what's available. And you know, we we we're both volunteers, but we can say positively, you know, it does have a massive impact, and it does expose you to all sorts of corners of publishing that you might not otherwise know about. So, yeah, I'm glad we're I'm glad we both agreed on that. I suppose this is slightly out of left field question, but obviously, you're in publishing, you work with lots of different departments. If somebody listening to this is in another department, but regularly works with production. What what best practices should people in other departments be following to make your life easier?

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Speaker 1 23:48

It's a bit of a tricky one because everyone has their busy work loads. But I don't want to be mean and say please answer emails on time, but also don't take too long to answer emails. But I think something that I found in my role is having an awareness of other departments' workflows and their key dates, if that applies to the publishing house that you work in. I think, especially because in production there might be an unawareness of how long things take and what's realistic for us to achieve when editor are asking for stock to be in by a certain date or for a production cycle to take a certain amount of time and how long copy editing will take. And I'm not saying that someone needs to be an expert on how production works, but I think it helps to provide better management of expectations if there's a bit of awareness of how long things take in production, and the fact that in my department anyway we have very specific dates. By which things like the text should be finalized, and by which we should be sending it to press for it to meet that particular publication month, so that will have a knock on effect to how late we can take on a manuscript when it's being handed over to us. So, for example, if I was taking on titles that are meant to be published in March next year, which is around the time that we're getting them now. The key date was yesterday, and someone didn't hand it over until a week or two's time. That makes it quite difficult for me to ensure that it could publish in March because it's obviously cutting into the production time. Because you know you need to make sure there's enough time for copy editing, for proofreading, and as you mentioned before, working with academics who have particularly busy times of the year when they're marking assessments and you know start the school year and everything like that. So yeah, I think I've found it's helped me to have a bit more awareness of what goes on in the other departments. So I've looked at what editorial do and I know what their key dates are. Similarly, with operations, I know I had a rough idea of when they really need stock in by, and if there's any issues with that, then I'll go to them and say, is it still possible to keep this title in this month, despite the fact that the stock might be a week late? Yeah, I think it just makes for a more cohesive workflow if everyone's got a bit of a broad understanding of how each department works, but obviously everyone's very busy all the time. So it's hard to know everything, and it's hard to get to emails when inboxes are constantly busy. Yeah,

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Tom Barker 26:33

absolutely. I can very much relate to that. I think just jumping off what you've said, I think having an appreciation of other people in different departments then is really important, and you know if you're applying for a role in production or otherwise, just knowing what the different components of a publishing house do, I think, is really useful just to show that you have that bird's eye view and that you also know the different factors and things that are contributing to the book or whatever it happens to be that you're publishing. It's sort of just jumping off what you've just said. A question has just come to me. Obviously, technology is such a big part of how you work and how we work. Have you found that you're working on, say, a digital first book or a print on demand book? Like, is there a sort of difference in how those are handled, or are they, for all intents and purposes, the same.

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Speaker 1 27:21

Yeah, there is a slight difference, just because for print on demand, you don't need to get stock into a warehouse by a certain deadline. And once the file is all set up at the printer, it pretty much is ready to go, and it will only print the amount of copies that are being ordered by the customers. So it does mean that you don't need to get this massive amount of stock in by a particular deadline. So it gives you a little bit more freedom if there are any issues along the way or any delays. But the way we do digital versions at Bloomsbury is that they're also handled by our project management companies, and we'll request them to create the EPUB and the EPDF and the XML once the text file is all completely ready for sending to the printer. So we'll pretty much do that on the same day that we send to the printer, and then that'll be made available about a week or two after it's been sent to press. But because in academic open access is quite important, which is where titles are made freely available. You don't have to pay for them. They've been given some sort of subvention funding, which is a great idea, I think. But it means that we particularly have to make sure that these digital versions are ready by very strict deadlines, and we do have a digital resources team at Bloomsbury Academic that are really on top of things like that, and they'll they'll make sure to chase us if the if the digital versions aren't ready. But yeah, I found that even though those are they don't need to be physically ready, it's really important to hit the same deadlines that you would have done anyway, even if it did have a massive print one that was coming into a warehouse. And same with the print on demand files. Then, if there's copies that need to be ordered for a launch event, or you know the editors might need a copy for whatever reason, then we tend to try and make sure we're sticking to the same deadlines that we would have done anyway, but it is it is helpful when there are delays and an author is really intent on keeping their book in a particular month. Then it means that we've got a bit more flexibility. But but then I'm really pedantic. I try to not be too flexible about that.

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Tom Barker 29:37

Thank you so much for that. I think in a world where people and especially students will be reading textbooks and academic books online as opposed to in their hands. I still think it is really interesting to know how that process works and how, for all intents and purposes, you know, the process isn't that much different. I think you mentioned it earlier, so it'd be good to go back to it. But you're very kindly joining us and to give your expertise as an SYP. North Mentor. The people who haven't heard of that, it is a scheme that runs every year where people can apply if they're wanting to get into or ahead in publishing, and they are matched with a mentor mostly from the North because we like to champion Northern Voices and Northern Publishing. Would you just like to say a bit about what you're looking forward to doing as a mentor and sort of why you decided to get involved.

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Speaker 1 30:23

Yeah, of course. Yeah, so it was my first year being a mentor last year. I really loved it. Obviously, was paired with someone in the north as well. I'm very passionate about making sure that Northern Voices are represented in publishing, and if I can contribute to that as a mentor, then I absolutely will. But yeah, I really enjoyed being able to connect with someone that wants to get into publishing and share my journey so far and what I've learned in the past three years to try and help provide a bit of guidance for someone that is going into it for the first time or maybe trying to get ahead in the industry as well. And I know I'm incredibly biased because I've only worked in production, but I do think production needs more representation as well. Because I think when I was the chair, I don't think we had a production person, unfortunately. So yeah, I really wanted to get involved to make sure that production was represented in some way, and hopefully more people would join as a production person as well in the future. But I think it's a department that definitely needs highlighting because it's not the traditional editorial or marketing that people tend to aim for when looking for their first publishing job. So I just really wanted to show off production. Yeah,

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Tom Barker 31:34

as you should, as you should. I think there's so many departments for a sort of under sun, you know, legal rights and production, especially that people might not know about. So I think it is really important, especially in places like the mentorship, to have that representation of different departments. So so for people who don't know, this is a six month program. It happens every year. So whenever you're listening to this, if you apply for next year's. You'd be more than welcome, but we're really excited to have mentors like yourself involved in the program. I think it's going to make such a difference to people who want to get into or ahead in publishing, which is really exciting. So, just before before we wrap up, is there anything in particular that you're excited about doing in your job, or any books that you're reading, or or producing even if you're allowed to talk about them or anything you have produced but you're really excited about

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Speaker 1 32:25

yeah I think um not staying on the music list for much longer but there's some very interesting 33 thirds coming out soon yeah the one I mentioned earlier about the gorillas album I'm very much looking forward to that one yeah I think academic publishing is at an interesting point because it seems to be a lot of the smaller publishers are being acquired by the big ones like Bloomsbury. Like we've had some big acquisitions recently, like Roland and Littlefield were a US academic publisher that we bought a couple of years ago. I think it's exciting to know that there's a lot of movement still happening when there's a lot of digital first platforms coming up, and you know journals and things like that. It's nice to know that there's still a market for the traditional way of studying through books. So yeah, I'm just excited about the fact that university students are still able to use our books to gain a whole range of knowledge on really interesting subjects, and that books are still providing the core form of information and content that people can use to then go on and achieve amazing things academically and into the future. And not to bring AI into it too much, but the fact that we're we're still not really affected too much by AI in academic publishing, and we're able to keep to the core of why academic publishing is so important. It's it's nice to know that as well.

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Tom Barker 33:53

A big thank you to Emma for joining us, and thank you for listening to Inside Publishing. I've been your host Tom. If you've enjoyed this episode, then please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. It really helps us reach more people. And also, feel free to let us know your thoughts on social media or send suggestions our way at podcast.syp@gmail.com. See you next time.