DISCOVERING MODERN NATIVE FEASTS: A CASE STUDY IN ACQUISITIONS PRACTICES AT ARSENAL PULP PRESS

by

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This report analyzes the acquisitions strategy at Arsenal Pulp Press, a Canadian independent publisher in Vancouver, British Columbia. The first section of this report describes Arsenal’s brand and mission, and how their mandate has changed over the years. The second section consists of a case study of Arsenal’s acquisition strategy in relation to their brand and mission: the acquisition of a cookbook produced during the summer of 2013, entitled *Modern Native Feasts: Healthy, Innovative, Sustainable Cuisine*. This section outlines how and why Arsenal decided to publish the manuscript, and how acquiring the work proved to be more problematic than expected for the company. The final section of this report considers why Arsenal made the decision to publish this manuscript in spite of the serious challenges that arose, describes how acquiring the work fit into the company’s overall acquisitions strategy and mandate, and explains why the project was deemed financially viable although so many unexpected hurdles had arisen.
To my parents,

for their unwavering support, guidance,

and combined sense of humour.
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>Approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii</td>
<td>Partial Copyright Licence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>Dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi</td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1 A Case Study in Complex Acquisitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2. Acquisitions at Arsenal Pulp Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.1 A Brief History of the Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.2 Acquisitions Variety Hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3. Case Study: <em>Modern Native Feasts</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.1 Signing the Manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.2 The Editorial Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.3 Financial Considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.1 <em>Modern Native Feasts</em> and Arsenal’s Acquisitions Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.2 Maintaining a Healthy Balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

A CASE STUDY IN COMPLEX ACQUISITIONS

How editors choose books to publish remains the most mysterious question for people outside publishing and, indeed, for those inside who never get a proper glimpse of the process.

– Gill Davies, Book Commissioning and Acquisition (2004, 13)

The acquisitions process at any publishing house, be it large or small, is, to put it mildly, complex. While there are a number of reasons publishers decide to publish a book, many editors and publishers ultimately make their decision based on the financial viability of a title—they have to remain in business, after all. In trade publishing, a book’s ability to be successful may make the decision to publish it easier, but there is always a team behind the book that believes it can not only be successful, but aid in the growth and development of the company. Even then, the publisher’s decision to publish a book, whether for financial reasons or otherwise, does not guarantee a book will end up being the success the team hopes for.

This report gives insight into the publisher’s acquisitions process at Arsenal Pulp Press, an independent Canadian publisher in Vancouver, British Columbia. In presenting the case study of a cookbook scheduled to be published in the fall of 2013, this report will demonstrate how the acquisitions process can vary depending on the work, and how acquisitions ultimately affects the editorial, production, and marketing processes that follow.

Arsenal uses a number of acquisitions strategies to build a list of titles that they believe in and think will be successful: advice from agents, other authors, trusted sources, and occasional acceptance of an unsolicited manuscript. In every case, the publishers at Arsenal are taking a risk with the author and the book concept, hoping that readers will discover it and like it as much as they do. And, as a small publisher, Arsenal is always aware that what they acquire affects not only their financial bottom line, but their mission and brand as a publisher.

Their overall acquisitions strategy led to the decision to publish Andrew George’s Modern Native Feasts: Healthy, Innovative, Sustainable Cuisine, on the basis of an idea. The next section of this report gives an overview of how and why Arsenal agreed to publish this particular book and what its projected financial benefit was, despite the fact that the manuscript required a considerable amount of work by the
editor, Susan Safyan, to meet Arsenal’s standards. Not only did the manuscript come in late, but it arrived in small pieces, which meant it required a great deal of sorting and reorganizing as well as editing.

Modern Native Feasts was an unusual acquisition from the beginning, having been acquired without the publishers first seeing a proposal or a manuscript. This report describes and assesses the reasons why the publishers decided to continue with the production of the book despite a cascade of challenges, and how it fit into their current and upcoming list of titles. The final section of this report discusses how Modern Native Feasts reflects Arsenal’s overall acquisitions strategy, and its brand as a company. It also shows why, although the book was demanding throughout its movement through the publishing process and posed many unfamiliar difficulties, it was still financially viable for Arsenal.

As the quote from Gill Davies above implies, the books that publishing houses choose to publish, and why they are chosen, is a mystery (2004, 13). There are a number of factors a publisher considers in deciding to publish a certain book: the author’s credibility and experience, the timeliness of the idea, and the money the book could make, but the final decision is as intuitive as it is scientific, and it rests solely with the publisher (Davies 2004, 16).
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRESS

No matter what the genre, no matter who the author, [our books] speak loudly and confidently and with great aplomb, asserting their rightful place in the world. We think they matter, and hope you do too.
– Arsenal Pulp Press, “A Brief History”

Arsenal Pulp Press began as Pulp Press Book Publishers in 1971, founded by a group of university students and associates (Arsenal Pulp Press, A Brief History). According to their own “brief history” on their website, “Pulp’s fiction, poetry, and drama titles tended toward gritty urban literature typical of the Vancouver literary scene at the time, such as Class Warfare by D.M. Fraser and Crossings by Betty Lambert.” The desire to publish “gritty urban literature” has not wavered since, and has laid the foundation for the successful branding Arsenal Pulp Press has been able to accomplish as a publisher over the years.

By 1982, Pulp Press, renamed Arsenal Pulp Press after surviving the bankruptcy of its distributor, decided to branch out from its literary press beginnings to publish non-fiction that focused on “cultural, gender, and multicultural studies” (Arsenal Pulp Press, A Brief History). In the mid-1980s, Arsenal became involved with an imprint of Theytus Books, one of two First Nations owned and operated publishing houses in Canada (Twigg 2010). The imprint, Tillicum Library, focused on publishing stories about BC First Nations people (Twigg 2010). Among these titles was Resistance and Renewal, an award-winning book by Celia Haig-Brown about the Kamloops Indian Residential School (Twigg 2010). By the late eighties, the imprint had stopped publishing. Arsenal Pulp purchased the Tillicum Library list, allowing them to continue to publish important non-fiction multicultural works, including Stoney Creek Woman by Bridget Moran, a biography about a pioneering Carrier elder in central BC named Mary John (2013 interview between author and Robert Ballantyne and Brian Lam).

In the 1990s, Arsenal focused even more on its cultural and urban literature mission, publishing books by Daniel Francis such as The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture and National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History (Arsenal Pulp Press, A Brief History). They also expanded their mission, and began publishing gay and lesbian works. In 1993, they published the first book of gay male prose in Canada, Queeries (Arsenal Pulp Press, A Brief...
History). Since then, they have become internationally known for their gay and lesbian publishing program, and have produced a number of award-winning works of both fiction and non-fiction in the genre (Arsenal Pulp Press, A Brief History). They have also continued publishing works by and about First Nations culture with success, largely due to increased academic interest in the titles. One such work, The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book by Gord Hill, published in 2010, was very successful academically, paving the way for Arsenal’s eventual decision to publish Andrew George’s cookbook, Modern Native Feasts (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013).

Since then, Arsenal has expanded its mandate and attempted to create an identity that is “outside the mainstream” and situate itself as an independent Canadian press. The publishers feel this identity is important to maintain so they do not get classified simply as a “small” press, or a “mini-large press,” and, consequently, get compared to larger publishing houses in Toronto (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). Their goal has also been to balance the commercial with the cultural. They want to create the strongest list possible by finding books that work well with one another (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). In order to get their publishing house recognized throughout North America, Arsenal uses a couple of innovative strategies. The first is to brand their name, which they accomplished, in Brian Lam’s own words, by “talking up our books in such a way that people—the media, the booksellers, as well as the reading public—get a sense of who we are as a publisher, and the kinds of books we publish; what sets us apart and what keeps us engaged” (2004). Lam, the publisher at Arsenal Pulp Press, felt this was an important step to take because “you must have a personality in the marketplace, and a willingness to look at yourself in the same way others do. If you don’t know who you are, why should you expect others to?” (2004). Since Arsenal is a Vancouver-based publisher, they had to put extra effort into extending their brand toward the east, so that the industry in Toronto took notice of the books they were publishing and recognized the company as a player in the industry.

Despite being separated from the industry in Toronto by three provinces, Arsenal has more than compensated by extending their marketing efforts south, into the United States. To do so, they adopted what Lam cites as the “Oprah approach”: learning to be a successful publisher by accepting their own brand and personality, instead of pretending to be something else (2004). For Lam, that meant “publishing the books we felt personally connected to rather than the books we thought would sell but didn’t feel particularly proud of” (2004), which was something Arsenal has strived for since their inception in the seventies.
The strategies Arsenal adopted enabled them to address niche markets that were not necessarily being addressed at the time and publish books for these markets: among them, vegan cookbooks, urban gay and lesbian literature, literary erotica, alternative city guidebooks, and visual-arts books (Lam 2004). In order to reach these niche markets, Arsenal also adopted non-traditional marketing techniques, targeting Internet groups, alternative weeklies, and academic lists to ensure their books reached the right people (Lam 2004). Arsenal's unconventional strategies worked, especially in regard to their growth in the United States. Arsenal's net US sales grew from 20% of the company's business in 1999 to just over 50% in 2004 (Lam 2004). Now, almost ten years later, Arsenal continues to maintain US sales at over 50% of the total (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). Having such high numbers across the border makes Arsenal mindful of US book buyers as a large market that must be considered when Lam and his associate publisher, Robert Ballantyne, choose which titles to publish.

According to Mike Shatzkin, noted author, blogger, and founder of The Idea Logical Company, “overall trade sales today, outside of special outlets, catalogs, and what remains of book clubs divide into three big chunks: one is printed books sold in stores, one is printed books sold online, and one is e-books” (2013). Arsenal chooses to focus on sales of their printed books in-store and online, as they have not yet seen much revenue from e-books. Their non-traditional marketing techniques both on and offline for specific niche markets work, as is evidenced by their success: the majority of customers go to Amazon to find and purchase their books; as a result, sales from Amazon account for 65 to 70% of Arsenal's total sales from the United States (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013).

Lam and Ballantyne have developed an acquisitions strategy for Arsenal that not only results in the publication of good authors and titles, but reflects, and builds on, their overall brand and mission as a company. Their acquisitions strategy is to publish at least two to three commercial titles a season and sell their books through as many different channels as they can in order to reach the widest possible audience (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). This means not only forging strong relationships with buyers at Chapters/Indigo, the largest book retailer in Canada, but also establishing relationships with large-volume customers such as Costco, and bookstores in the United States such as Barnes & Noble. They also find other markets where their books may be appealing, such as academic markets; Arsenal Pulp produces an academic catalogue with both fiction and non-fiction titles that are suitable for classroom study.
Regardless of the genre, Arsenal strives to stay true to their mandate of publishing works that are “outside the mainstream,” and attempts to hone their personality in order to carve out and maintain their unique identity in the publishing world. They define their fiction titles as “atypical narratives that often challenge the very definition of what constitutes a story,” and have now expanded their non-fiction to include works of visual art—generally in conjunction with art galleries—as well as cookbooks (Arsenal Pulp Press, A Brief History). They apply their “atypical narrative” definition of fiction titles in choosing non-fiction titles, and in building a strong, complementary list that reaches the intended audience and fits their brand and mission.
ACQUISITIONS VARIETY HOUR

In publishing, one hesitates to tell people what one does because it invariably results in someone saying “I’ve written a book about X, do you know anyone who might want to publish it?” Other than at cocktail parties, where else might you find manuscripts?

– Thomas Woll, Publishing for Profit (2010, 114)

The typical medium to large publishing house has one or more acquiring editors responsible for finding books for the press to publish. They act as the gatekeepers and connect with the rest of the company, working as a liaison between the publisher, other editors, the agent, and the author. They may also follow the books’ progress from beginning to end, working with authors along the way. At Arsenal, a smaller independent press, acquisitions work resides in the offices of Brian Lam and Robert Ballantyne, who are constantly in search of the next author to publish. Like their larger publishing house colleagues, they use a number of different methods to find the next author and the next work.

Variety is an important part of acquisitions, particularly with trade book publishers. For Arsenal, and for other publishers, utilizing variety to its utmost means ensuring it is controlled, so that, while there are a variety of titles, they are all consistent with the mandate and brand of the publishing house. It is especially important for Arsenal, not just so they can explore their options in terms of books and authors, and potentially discover works they may not have found otherwise, but also because variety is essentially what the press is about. As noted, the history of the press has always been about pushing the boundaries of conventional society and publishing works that are countercultural and urban. Variety ensures Arsenal is finding books that fit into this brand and mission and accurately represent their business plan.

One of the ways Arsenal occasionally finds authors is by reading through unsolicited manuscripts. Few large publishing houses accept or try to find new manuscripts and authors through the “slush pile,” but smaller publishing houses who are willing to take the time to go through unsolicited manuscripts can sometimes find great things (Woll 2010, 114). The policy of accepting unsolicited manuscripts is one of the ways Arsenal communicates to prospective authors (who are also potential readers) what the company is about. Arsenal’s submission guidelines, posted to their website, read as follows:

We are only considering manuscripts in the following subject areas:

• Cultural studies
• Political/sociological studies
• Regional non-fiction, in particular for British Columbia
• Cookbooks
• Craft books
• Gay and lesbian fiction and non-fiction
• Visual art
• Multicultural fiction and non-fiction
• Literary fiction and non-fiction (no genre fiction, such as mysteries, thrillers, or romance)
• Graphic novels
• Youth culture and young adult literature
• Health

We are not considering poetry manuscripts at this time. We do not publish books for pre-adolescent children. (Arsenal Pulp Press, Submission Guidelines)

This list is followed by a paragraph describing what should be included in an author’s submission, including a fifty-page excerpt of the manuscript, a synopsis of the work, a chapter-by-chapter outline for non-fiction, writing credentials, and a marketing analysis (Arsenal Pulp Press, Submission Guidelines). Since Arsenal does not yet know the author or the work, they want to make sure that the manuscript is not only well written and engaging, but that the author knows his or her work and the market that the book will be successful in.

As an independent Canadian publisher, Arsenal has an interesting perspective on the industry. They receive quite a few unsolicited manuscripts from literary writers across Canada, many of which are written by people who are already successful writers and have great credentials. Some of these manuscripts are good, but are not what Arsenal is looking to publish at the time, or do not fit into the overall brand and mission of the company. Others fit the brand, and are “outside the mainstream,” but are not well written, or are written by authors who live outside Canada. Arsenal relies on public funding to publish many of its literary titles, and arts funders subsidize only Canadian-authored content, so the publishers works mainly with Canadian literary authors (Canada Council for the Arts). For this reason, and the fact that it is time-consuming to read through unsolicited manuscripts for a small return, the slush pile is not a primary method of acquisitions for Arsenal, and some works may therefore fall through the cracks. But the slush pile is still a tool that Arsenal employs in the search for manuscripts (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013).
Another way publishers find books to publish is by creating ideas themselves, and finding authors to write them. This may occur when the publishers have an author who has written a great book and has created an idea for a follow-up series or come up with an idea by attending an event (Woll 2010, 115). Sometimes an idea comes out of a casual conversation, or a business meeting on some other subject. Lam and Ballantyne are always looking for great ideas, as is any good publisher, and it is their job to be alert to new ideas, assess their potential as successful publications, and find the right author to do the job.

One of the most productive ways to get strong manuscripts is to work with literary agents, a method both small and large publishers now use to find the majority of the manuscripts they publish. Although an agent’s loyalty and responsibility must be to the client, the author, an agent is in the business of getting manuscripts published, which means they are also important for publishers (Woll 2010, 115). In the current, ever-changing industry, larger publishers are more selective and fiscally conservative about what they agree to publish, so agents are looking to smaller publishers who have solid reputations and successful business models to publish their clients’ books (Woll 2010, 116). As agents work more often with smaller publishers, it is becoming increasingly viable for publishing houses like Arsenal to acquire authors and manuscripts they may not have been able to afford a few years ago, and to form lasting relationships with authors and agents in the industry.

Personal relationships are an important part of maintaining a successful publishing company; having these relationships not only within North America, but the international community, can be an asset. Publishers who regularly attend trade fairs, such as the Frankfurt Book Fair every October, seek to buy and sell rights to successful foreign publications. It is in forging new relationships with international publishers, and maintaining existing ones, that publishers can compete in obtaining the rights they desire. People do business with people they know, and with whom they have done good business before. The publisher who has established these successful personal relationships is more likely to buy or sell a property they want. It is especially important for smaller publishing houses to maintain these relationships, because friendship and trust are important factors in competing with larger houses for contracts. Lam and Ballantyne are no strangers to this aspect of publishing, and believe a lot of their success stems from the personal relationships they have built with buyers in North America (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013).
Because Arsenal’s goal is to publish “outside the mainstream,” their list of titles is often eclectic, reflecting the numerous ways one can appeal to buyers and other readers outside the mainstream and still maintain a strong voice in the industry. Arsenal relies on every method described above: reading unsolicited manuscripts, generating ideas, working with agents, and maintaining connections with international publishers in order to acquire manuscripts to build their list and ensure they are developing the best possible works for each season. Once the possibilities have been gathered, Arsenal must decide which titles to publish, and what combination of titles to publish in a given season.

Arsenal’s overall acquisitions strategy is similar to that of publishing houses across the industry, and speaks to the importance of variety. The manuscripts Arsenal agrees to publish come from a number of places, including agents. Other titles are recommended to them by someone they trust, or new ideas by existing Arsenal authors, or properties acquired through international relationships, or ideas that Lam and Ballantyne have thought up, and a few come in over the transom.

In an interview in August 2013, Brian Lam and Robert Ballantyne described how they decide which books to publish each season. They used their fall 2013 list of titles as an example of how their acquisitions strategy works on a practical level, outlining how each title was first acquired, and proving that they do indeed rely on variety to succeed. Following is a list of fall 2013 titles, and the way in which each was acquired.

Arsenal uses their strong personal relationships across the industry to their advantage, relying strongly on agents and other trusted sources to recommend manuscripts they think are appropriate for Arsenal. A collection of short stories and a novel, *The Other Side of Youth* and *Anatomy of a Girl Gang* respectively, both came to the press through agents, and were signed by Lam and Ballantyne. *Blue is the Warmest Color*, a French graphic novel, also came through an agent, who had translated it before presenting it to Arsenal Pulp. Lam and Ballantyne agreed to publish the translated English version.

One of the few books to make it through the unsolicited manuscript process, *Laboratory of Love*, will also be published by Arsenal in fall 2013. The book had an advantage in the process because the publishers had prior knowledge of the author and his work, so the manuscript was a priority in the slush pile, and they could arrange a quicker turnaround time and decision on the manuscript.
The third fiction title on the list, Kuessipan, was recommended by the translator David Homel, who has worked with Arsenal Pulp on a number of books, and is a trusted source. He went on to translate the book for Arsenal.

Lam and Ballantyne also find and create some book ideas themselves, then find authors to write them. For one of their non-fiction titles, Vancouver Was Awesome, Lam and Ballantyne approached Lani Russwurm, a well-known blogger and writer in Vancouver, and asked him to write a book about pre-gentrification Vancouver.

Lam and Ballantyne also had new manuscripts from existing Arsenal authors, edited and ready to publish, so two non-fiction titles, Universal Hunks and Blood, Marriage, Wine & Glitter were slated for fall release as well.1

In addition to these titles, Arsenal publishes at least two cookbooks every fall. One of the cookbooks slated for fall 2013 release is The SimplyRaw Kitchen, a vegan cookbook. Arsenal has been very successful in publishing books of interest to vegans. But Arsenal also looks for, and publishes, other cookbooks with unique, non-mainstream authors and recipes. This is where Modern Native Feasts comes in, and where the case study in the next section begins.

Arsenal acquires manuscripts in a number of different ways, but all of the titles they acquire reflect their mission and brand. Although at first a list of titles may appear miscellaneous, each work of fiction and non-fiction reflects the company’s specific mandate, and that is the key to Arsenal’s varied but successful acquisition strategy.

1 The information in the above list was gathered from the author’s interview with Lam and Ballantyne.
CASE STUDY: MODERN NATIVE FEASTS

SIGNING THE MANUSCRIPT

The most successful editors do not just sit at their desks passively waiting for manuscripts to arrive “over the transom” but actively go in search of them. In the hunt for new books, editors sometimes end up providing the stimulus for their creation.

– Sanford G. Thatcher, “The ‘Value Added’ in Editorial Acquisitions” (1999, 63)

Modern Native Feasts: Healthy, Innovative, Sustainable Cuisine is a cookbook that embodies the word “complex,” especially when it comes to how Arsenal finally acquired it. Most book ideas Arsenal agrees to publish come to the press as either a proposal or a manuscript, but this cookbook was signed on the basis of the idea behind it, with neither a proposal nor written manuscript. The fact that this is an anomaly for Arsenal makes it an interesting case that not only provides insight into the acquisitions process, but also demonstrates the adaptable and flexible nature of successful publishers.

Modern Native Feasts is the second cookbook from chef Andrew George. His first cookbook, Feast!: Canadian Native Cuisine for All Seasons, co-authored by Robert Gaines, was published by Doubleday in 1997. Prior to the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the Georgia Straight published an article featuring George, entitled “Aboriginal Cuisine Heats Up.” At the time, George was helping organize the food for the Aboriginal Pavilion at the Olympic Games. When Brian Lam and Robert Ballantyne read the article on George, they were intrigued by his work for the Olympics and as a chef in general, and set up a meeting with him to discuss the possibility of publishing his work.

Arsenal Pulp has always had a strong interest in publishing books on First Nations people and culture, as the history of the press demonstrates, so it seemed natural for Lam and Ballantyne to expand into publishing First Nations cookbooks. In fact, they had published one such title in 2007, Where People Feast: An Indigenous People’s Cookbook. The authors, Dolly and Annie Watts, were the owners of Liliget Feast House in Vancouver, a First Nations fine dining restaurant. It has since closed, but

2 The article can be found online on the Georgia Straight’s web page at http://www.straight.com/food/aboriginal-cuisine-heats.
in its heyday it was the only one of its kind, and focused on traditional First Nations dishes with a modern twist (Collins 2009). The cookbook was successful for Arsenal, selling between eight and nine thousand copies, but the recipes were not as healthy as Arsenal, who had already established a reputation for their successful vegan cookbooks, had hoped (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013).

As 2010 approached, Lam and Ballantyne hoped to publish another First Nations cookbook, one that called for healthy ingredients and was timely. They met with Andrew George to discuss the possibility of reprinting his first cookbook (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). In that conversation they discovered he had accumulated quite a number of new recipes since his first cookbook, as he had continued to travel, cook, and teach since its publication.

And so, an agreement was reached. Arsenal would reprint George's first cookbook, with the understanding that they would publish any new work from him after that. In 2010, Arsenal Pulp Press reprinted George's first cookbook under a new title, *A Feast for All Seasons: Traditional First Nations' Cuisine*, and it proved to be successful for them. They looked forward to the next book they would get to publish by Andrew George.

As a rule, Arsenal publishes two cookbooks a season. When it came to finalizing the list for fall 2013, Lam and Ballantyne discussed the idea of publishing George's second cookbook in order to fill an open slot they had for a cookbook that season. That book, George's second with Arsenal, was merely an idea when Lam and Ballantyne met and made an agreement with him. No agreement was made as to when a manuscript would be delivered. Arsenal did not even have a proposal for the book, which would have given them a better idea of the recipes George planned to include in the cookbook, and his vision for the work itself. But as an idea, the work already fit within Arsenal’s mandate and list: it was the promise of a book that would offer the reader modern takes on traditional First Nations recipes, with healthy ingredients and options to update those in the traditional recipes.

They also knew that Andrew George, as a well-known and respected First Nations chef (he attended the 1992 World Culinary Olympics in Germany), had a large following, not just in British Columbia but across Canada, and his book was likely to be successful and garner a lot of media attention for the author, the work, and Arsenal. Like other high-profile people, George leads an incredibly busy life, making public appearances, teaching children and teens how to cook traditional First Nations dishes, and other activities. Lam and Ballantyne decided to work with him, and to publish *Modern Native Feasts*. 
THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

Since George had indicated he had accumulated a number of recipes throughout his years of teaching and cooking at catering events, Lam and Ballantyne did not expect *Modern Native Feasts* to be problematic on the content side. Problems always crop up, but they thought they would be able to handle them on their own and fix them in-house. That is ultimately how the project ended up being finished, but it required a lot of hard work by the dedicated staff at Arsenal to get the cookbook into production in time for fall 2013 release.

As the recipes had not been compiled or even completely composed when the decision to publish was made, Lam and Ballantyne asked George to submit the manuscript in early 2013, which they estimated would give the staff at Arsenal enough time to edit the work and send it to the printer in time for an October publication date.

George submitted a proposal to the press in which he outlined his desire for the book to include recipes for traditional First Nations dishes that had a modern, healthy twist to them. The ideas in the proposal were great, but the actual writing in the proposal indicated that quite a bit of editing would have to be done. Lam and Ballantyne were ready for this, as George had written the first cookbook with the help of a ghostwriter. But they thought that since it was a cookbook, there would not be many large chunks of text to edit, so they decided that any editing and rewriting that needed to be done would be done in-house. This decision, of course, came with conditions. As with any rewriting that has to be done on manuscripts, the publishers at Arsenal had to ensure not only that this writing would be consistent with the tone and voice of the author, but also that editorial changes would be accepted by George; in a work that required a great deal of rewriting, it was crucial for Arsenal to include this information in their contract:

> The Publisher shall not make any changes to the manuscript of the Work without the consent of the Author, provided that the Author’s consent shall not be unreasonably withheld where the Publisher desires to make changes to ensure the Work does not violate laws relating to libel, obscenity or invasion of privacy or to make the manuscript of the Work conform to standard usage of punctuation, spelling and capitalization. (Arsenal Pulp Press, sample contract)

If George rejected the changes the editors made, even more work would have to be
put into the manuscript. By agreeing to do all of the editing and rewriting in-house instead of hiring a ghostwriter, Lam and Ballantyne increased the risk of a higher overhead expense in the form of additional staff time being spent on the manuscript.

Still, the decision to edit and rewrite in-house could have been accommodated without compromising the schedule or budget for the book—were it not for the additional problems that appeared as the editorial process continued. A major problem was that the staff were still waiting for a completed manuscript at the beginning of May. Only a few individual recipes had been submitted, and the editor, Susan Safyan, had only recently received them. Her task was to compare these recipes to the complete list of recipes that would make up the finished cookbook, and then send George an email listing the recipes that had yet to be received. Meanwhile, the recipes that were available had to be placed into one document, and formatted so that they were ready for editing. From there, they would have to be printed and edited on paper (all initial work on manuscripts is done on paper, partly because Arsenal’s archive, housed at the University of British Columbia, requires it). The revisions would then have to be input to the word processing document and checked for accuracy. Once all of the recipes had gone through a first edit, Safyan went over what had been done so far and made notes in the margins for George to respond to when the manuscript was sent to him.

Only after these initial edits, on work that had been received some four months after it was expected, did work really begin on the cookbook. Every measurement had to be checked, the order of the ingredients had to match the order in which they appeared in the directions, the directions (method) had to be easy to follow and understand, and the cookbook style guide had to be followed carefully in order to ensure every ingredient and kitchen tool was referred to correctly and consistently throughout the document. Recipe names had to be checked, especially the ones that had traditional First Nations names and ingredients, and had to be added to a style sheet so the editors, proofreaders, and production staff following Safyan would know what the standard was and what had been checked. Introductions to recipes had to be written for those that did not yet have them. Those that were written already varied in length and tone, and needed substantial editing to reach Arsenal’s standards. Even the recipe directions needed editing, since they were not all formatted the same way.

None of these problems could have been predicted when Arsenal had acquired the title—or the idea of the title. It was only when recipes started to come in that Lam and Ballantyne realized the amount of work the manuscript was going to need. On
top of all of the editing and rewriting that had to be done, some recipes needed new ingredients altogether, as the original ingredients were not healthy or contemporary. A few of the recipes had appeared in George's first cookbook, and others did not call for First Nations ingredients. Despite the fact that the cookbook was being marketed as contemporary, healthy, First Nations cuisine, the majority of the recipes required background knowledge of French cooking, which is how George was trained and what he uses in his teaching (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). This French style and method appeared in almost every recipe, an approach that Lam and Ballantyne were not expecting, and the editors had to do a good deal of rewriting so Arsenal's original vision for the cookbook could be achieved.

It was not until the end of May that all of the recipes finally came in, and the cookbook could be edited and organized for publication. At this point there was constant back-and-forth between the staff and George, as more detailed questions arose. George came to the Arsenal office in late summer to take one final look through the manuscript and confirm that all of the recipes were correct. The edited manuscript was then passed on to Lam, who added a few notes and sent it on to production.

Earlier in the year, as the manuscript deadline came and went, and more weeks passed, Lam and Ballantyne had to decide whether to proceed with the manuscript. If they did not publish it, they would lose a financially viable fall title—cookbooks generate 70% of Arsenal's revenue (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). If they did publish it, it would be later than they had planned; therefore, they would likely lose media coverage, and the book would not be ready in time to be promoted in the US market. Most of the marketing for the cookbook required proofs, or a clean PDF, at least four to five months in advance. If there was no book to show by June or July, crucial lead time would be reduced—even eliminated altogether—and there would not be time to generate word-of-mouth for healthy fall sales. Arsenal would also have to face the possibility of spending five to ten thousand dollars over budget to get the cookbook printed in Canada. The plan had been to print overseas, but the press did not have the necessary two to three extra months required to print in Asia (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013).

Looking back, Lam and Ballantyne expressed regrets about their decision to publish the manuscript in fall 2013, and agreed that it could have been pushed back to spring 2014 or even fall 2014. However, all of the problems that arose in the early weeks seemed manageable (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). It was only as the months went on, and problems continued to build and crop up, that the decision to press on can be seen, in hindsight, to be possibly a mistaken one. From the
beginning, *Modern Native Feasts* was unique: it began, and was ultimately signed, as an idea. From there, the proposal came in, and the condition of the work that followed was not what the publishers expected, either in editorial quality or in timeliness. Modifications to the publishing plan had to be made from the acquisition of the manuscript until the completion of editorial work to ensure that the manuscript made it to production, marketing, and out of the door as a finished cookbook.

Twenty-twenty hindsight aside, the question arises: why did the publishers continue with the publishing process? The next section of this report considers why the publishers decided to go ahead and publish the book at the original date despite all of the complications that arose, and why it was in their best financial interest to do so.
Financial Considerations

Assessing a title's profit and loss potential is one of the most crucial aspects of publishing. The P&L statement reflects the financial viability of a title, and is used by publishers to determine whether or not to accept a book for publication, or what publication specifications to assign. When the P&L is drawn up before a book is published, the publisher inserts numbers (revenue such as sales and private funding; expenses such as design and printing) that are realistic for a book of that type. If the numbers are not realistic, or they predict that the book will not make money, it is not likely to get published. If the numbers are promising, the publisher is more likely to decide to go ahead and sign the author and the manuscript. These numbers are necessarily theoretical, based on past sales of comparable books and potential audience, so how the book will actually perform remains a mystery, and the publisher is taking a risk even with the most informed and conservative numbers.

The P&L also shows the bottom line for getting a book published, a number that requires money to be paid up front. The book has to be successful enough to recoup its production costs, and if it does not, the book and even the company may not be profitable. In Canada, because of the size of the market and the lower prices of titles coming in from the US, it is hard for publishers to make a profit on every single book they publish. Thanks to the writers, publishers, and dedicated community across Canada who have fought for it, there is funding in place to help book publishers at both the provincial and federal level. Canada Council funding is one example of this, and is provided to publishers, such as Arsenal, who publish books that enhance the literary arts in Canada. While funding is available at both levels to publishers of both fiction and non-fiction books, it is not available for some books, such as cookbooks, that have large enough domestic markets to support them. This makes publishing these works a risk, not just for Arsenal, but also for Canadian publishers in general. According to the Canada Council website:

Because the Canada Council’s mandate includes supporting production in the literary arts, and the study of literature and the arts, only titles in the following categories are eligible:

• fiction
• poetry
• drama
• graphic novel (minimum 48 pages)
• publications for children and young adults, except those
in ineligible categories
• literary non-fiction. (Canada Council for the Arts)

This means that anything that does not fit into these categories is not eligible for funding and, consequently, the publisher assumes the risk of publishing the work. As far as risk goes, however, cookbooks are safer than other genres, especially for a company like Arsenal, which has substantial experience publishing offbeat, unique (often vegan) cookbooks, and already has a strong audience for these books. Although there is Canada Council and BC Arts Council funding in place to support Arsenal’s literary titles, which have a naturally smaller audience, many of these books still end up as financial deficits for the company. These books make up only about 30-40% of the marketing and production costs incurred, which means quite a few copies still need to be sold in order to turn a profit, something that rarely happens (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). As a result, Arsenal sells its literary titles into the academic market. Their academic sales make up 18% of their revenue in Canada alone, and 10% outside of Canada (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). Arsenal’s academic numbers represent the strength of this market in the Canadian book publishing industry. Statistics Canada claims that bookstores only represent 38.6% of the total book-buying market, while educational institutions represent 22.6% and the general public represents 9.5% (Statistics Canada 2012). If Arsenal were not utilizing the academic market, they would have to rely on their sales from Chapters/Indigo and other similar bookstores to earn a profit. But these channels are not necessarily the best ones if a publisher wants to make money, as selling solely to bookstores and grocery stores is more likely to result in high returns. As a result, a publisher such as Arsenal does not sell many titles at places like Costco, and has to rely on other methods, such as strong academic sales. Without course adoptions and other academic sales, a fiction title might disappear after a season. It is Lam and Ballantyne's goal to get their literary works into the academic market so that sales continue past a book's first season (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013).

Arsenal’s most recent sales figures for Canada Council-eligible titles from 2011 show how many copies of a book were initially printed, any reprints that occurred, how much these reprints, if any, cost, and how many copies of the book have been sold to date. Of the sixteen eligible titles, the average number of copies sold was 757, though this is in large part due to one successful title, Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme, which has sold over 3,000 copies to date (Arsenal Pulp Press, internal document). Although e-books are also included in the sales report, they do not add a significant amount to Arsenal’s revenue; 15 of the 16 titles have e-book counterparts, but the total number of e-books sold amounts to only about 1,000 copies.
These sales numbers do not reflect the success Arsenal has had as a publisher for over forty years. If they were to rely on titles that were eligible for arts funding, they would not remain afloat for very long. The titles that turn a profit are, in fact, their cookbooks. Since cookbooks account for 70% of Arsenal’s revenue, almost every one they publish guarantees them revenue, unlike the literary fiction and non-fiction. This is partly because cookbooks can be sold across every season, and do not need to rely on being timely and relevant, or picked up by media at the right time, in order to be successful and sell. They are also easier to sell to a wider audience. As cookbooks make up so much of Arsenal’s revenue, having a minimum of two cookbooks every fall ensures the company is able to continue publishing literary fiction and non-fiction that is suitable and relevant to their brand and mission, while still earning them enough revenue to be financially successful and viable from season to season.

However, Arsenal does not publish every cookbook proposal or manuscript that comes their way. They maintain the acquisitions strategy and standards, discussed earlier, in order to make decisions about what cookbooks to publish. Without the addition of Modern Native Feasts in the fall line-up, Arsenal would not just have missed out on a great fall title, but may have run a deficit for the season and had to struggle to come back and earn a profit next year. Arsenal chooses to publish the books they like and want to see published, but at the same time must constantly balance the titles in such a way that any given list makes enough money to keep their operations running and pay their authors. For Arsenal, as for any publisher, the question is one of cash flow as well as overall profitability, and it has to be answered at the acquisition level.

When Lam and Ballantyne agreed to publish Modern Native Feasts based on the author and the idea, they made sure that the risk they were taking on the work, were it not to be as successful as they’d hoped, was shared by the author with their contract. Their contract stipulates that:

In the event said manuscript is not provided to the Publisher by said date, the Publisher shall exercise the option of either extending this manuscript completion date or terminating this agreement, with the provision that if the agreement is thus terminated, the

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3 Charlotte Morrison-Reed addresses this issue in her Master’s of Publishing project report, “Cost of a Culture: Publishing Practices and Financial Returns for Fiction and Nonfiction” when she states that “a nonfiction book buyer often goes to a bookstore knowing that they want a nonfiction book about a certain topic. The responsibility of the promotions team in this case is simply to make the buyer aware of the book’s existence and even let the subject matter speak for itself” (2007, 62). This makes selling non-fiction since many customers will walk into a bookstore knowing they are looking for a cookbook, but will not be sure which one they want, leaving room for marketing, content, and cover design to draw the customer in and convince them to purchase the book.
Author shall repay within 60 days of written notice of termination any money paid by the Publisher as an advance against royalties. 
(Arsenal Pulp Press, sample contract)

In the case of *Modern Native Feasts*, Lam and Ballantyne could legally have ceased production and development on the manuscript as soon as it was late coming in. However, they would have had an empty slot to fill on the fall 2013 list. Not publishing the book would have been a bigger risk for them, as they had projected fall revenue based on the publication of all books on the list, including the high-revenue cookbook by Andrew George.

So Lam and Ballantyne went ahead with *Modern Native Feasts*. Although it was a lot of work, it was ultimately in the best interests of the author and the company to release the book on time—or as close to on time as they could get. The release date was set for October, but as of October 15, the release date was more likely November. Once the manuscript had been rushed through production, and PDF pages created, marketing staff could interest some media in the book—it is written by a renowned chef, after all, and features an interesting take on traditional First Nations recipes—but the late release will prevent it from gathering momentum in the marketplace as it would have done had it gone to press on time. The printing costs also will probably be substantially higher, since the publishers have had to consider changing their printing strategy in order to get it finished and distributed sooner; they did not have the time to get the book printed overseas. Yet, despite these difficulties, work proceeded on the manuscript, because even with the delays it was considered worth the cost and trouble in the end.
MODERN NATIVE FEASTS AND ARSENAL’S ACQUISITIONS STRATEGY

As Modern Native Feasts demonstrates, the acquisitions process is a delicate balance between finding books that will work for a company financially, and finding books that fulfill a company’s mission and represent its brand. Despite the problems that arose with Modern Native Feasts, this cookbook will do both for Arsenal. It will most likely be successful both upon release and after its first season, when it becomes a backlist title and works with the rest of Arsenal’s arsenal—no pun intended—to “form an identity for the publishing company within the industry” and attract “new authors and their books to the house” (Growe 2006, 6).

None of the problems that surfaced during the company’s work on Modern Native Feasts could have been predicted when the publishers agreed to publish the manuscript. As a case study of the acquisitions process at Arsenal Pulp Press, it shows clearly that any publisher’s strategy for finding authors and manuscripts that work for their brand is varied and subtle; no matter how organized and strategic a publishing company is, there are always manuscripts or ideas that crop up and cause the publisher to depart from the preferred strategy. Having a contract does help, by giving the publisher the right and the opportunity to back out if the project gets too overwhelming or costly, but some ideas and manuscripts are worth the challenges that come up.

Modern Native Feasts is also an example of how Arsenal makes their eclectic list of titles work each season—a list that grows out of a largely successful acquisitions strategy. Arsenal is flexible, and the staff believes in the work they do. Not only are the titles they choose to publish reflective of their countercultural roots and brand, but they also work together cohesively as a unit. As a small publisher, Arsenal must have a strong mandate that sets it apart from larger companies by being microscopically representative of who they are as a publishing house. For all
of these reasons, it was crucial for *Modern Native Feasts* to be published in fall 2013. As a cookbook it will earn income for Arsenal, and as an innovative product in its category it is unequivocally unique. That is the kind of book Arsenal strives to publish.

The publishers at Arsenal have found a way not only to maintain the “outside the mainstream” brand they have created, but also to reinforce this brand in the works they publish and in the ways they market and distribute their books. The company must remain financially healthy to stay in business, but as their list shows, profitability is not the only priority in making acquisitions decisions. Titles like *Modern Native Feasts* reach a wider audience and earn more revenue, but also the staff enjoys the recipes, the cooking, and the author. Despite the difficulties they went through in publishing *Modern Native Feasts*, the hard work, agility, and dedication of all involved were worth it.

The publishers’ acquisitions style is another contributor to their success in building successful title lists. Because Lam and Ballantyne met with the author of *Modern Native Feasts* early on and established a trusting relationship with him through direct face-to-face conversations and flexibility, the goodwill they put in place was indispensable when difficulties arose later. These difficulties could have been resolved anyway, but may have caused more strain on the relationship, potentially resulting in a decision to drop or postpone the book. Although they go about acquiring manuscripts in a variety of ways, Lam and Ballantyne make a point of building a close working relationship with every author they publish, establishing an environment of trust and flexibility throughout the publishing process. This practice at the acquisitions stage may play a part in keeping authors at the press for second and subsequent books. Of course, there are other factors in a long-term association with an author—some of which, Lam and Ballantyne agree, are out of their control (Ballantyne and Lam interview 2013). But a strong foundation improves the chances of success.
MAINTAINING A HEALTHY BALANCE

No investment decisions are more fundamental and critical than the decisions necessary to acquire

Trade publishing in general is a risk, and this risk begins at the acquisitions level. Without knowing for sure how a book will perform, a publisher invests money up front and does everything possible to make the book a success. The publisher pays the author an advance and royalties based on sales of the titles, pays staff and contractors to edit and produce the book, pays the printer to print and bind the book, and pays distributors, wholesalers, and sales and marketing personnel to make the book available and to persuade the buying public, all of which costs a significant amount. Across the book publishing industry in 2010, operating expenses amounted to $1.8 billion, with operating revenue totalling $2 million (Statistics Canada 2012). Of the $1.8 billion in operating expenses, cost of goods (the amount of money the publisher spends on producing books) represented 35.2%, while salaries, wages, and benefits came to 21.1% and royalties, rights, licensing, and franchising fees came in at 7.8% (Statistics Canada 2012).

The financial risk taken by a publisher tends to be even greater for non-fiction titles than for fiction titles, whether the company is a smaller independent press, like Arsenal, or a large Canadian branch of a multinational press. As Amanda Growe, M Pub, explains:

> While a work of fiction may arrive at the publishing company… as a complete manuscript, non-fiction books are often not written before being proposed to a publisher… The publisher is then faced with the task of evaluating a manuscript that does not yet exist… Predicting how the author will execute the concept remains difficult. (Growe 2006, 7)

That was certainly the case for Modern Native Feasts.

The acquisitions editor working with a large publishing house has a tougher job than that of a smaller house, because of the number of people he or she must persuade to publish a manuscript. According to the website of one large publisher, HarperCollins, the company accepts only submissions presented by agents (Authonomy, n.d.). Once the acquiring editor has chosen a manuscript from these
agented submissions, he or she must convince the rest of the editorial team that the book is a good choice. The manuscript is then distributed more widely to sales, marketing, publicity, design/production, and other publishing staff (Authonomy, n.d.). At weekly acquisitions meetings, they look at the profit and loss (P&L) calculations for each manuscript under consideration, to predict how and where the book will sell and, if those numbers are promising, what advance they should offer (Authonomy, n.d.). If the agent has taken the manuscript to a number of publishing houses, HarperCollins may offer a higher advance to acquire the manuscript, depending on the level of interest from these other publishing houses.

This process, typical of the acquisitions process at large trade book publishing companies, is much more formal and complex than the one at Arsenal, but it amounts to the same thing: an editor must coolly, realistically evaluate the title’s market potential and production costs. The process at Arsenal involves fewer people, but the same scrutiny of numbers, research on the marketplace, and speculation take place. Acquisitions editors at large companies, like Lam and Ballantyne at the much smaller Arsenal Pulp Press, require authors (or their agents) to undertake substantial marketing groundwork, gathering marketing points, comparable titles, author’s qualifications and marketability, title profit and loss calculations, strengths, audience, formats and rights potential, and a synopsis of the work, as well as assessing the author’s “platform” or presence (website, social media activity, etc.) with the intended audience (Schendlinger, n.d.).

Acquisitions staff at any size or category of trade book publishing company also rely on a “gut feeling” as to whether or not a book will be successful. Careful publishers crunch numbers, research the recent performance of similar books, poll their suppliers and contractors for opinions, and gather as much other “scientific” data as they can. But companies also want titles and authors that speak to their brand and mission, titles that they can feel excited about—a significant factor in the success of a trade book. This is true whether the publisher is personally in charge of acquisitions, as is the case at Arsenal, or whether he or she hires someone else to acquire titles.

Patrick Crean’s story, published in Quill & Quire, is a perfect example of the importance, in acquisitions work, of an editor believing in the work being considered. In 2000, Crean decided to leave his position at Key Porter books to begin a new Canadian list at Thomas Allen & Son. He had worked with the writer Austin Clarke in 1977, as an editor at General Publishing, and he was determined that if the rights to publish Clarke's next book became available, he would buy the book sight unseen (Bukowski 2002; Medley 2013). These rights did become

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available, and Crean purchased *The Polished Hoe*, a book that went on to become a bestseller and to win the Trillium, Giller, and Commonwealth prizes in 2002 (Bukowski 2002). Like all publishers in trade book publishing, Crean took a risk—there was no telling whether Clarke’s next book would be a success. It turned out that the book performed better than expected. The work, like *Modern Native Feasts*, was accepted before a manuscript was presented. Numerous problems with the manuscript might have arisen, but to be a successful acquisitions editor, like Crean and the publishers at Arsenal and other presses across the country, it is necessary to take that chance. Ultimately, he decided to publish the book because he believed in it.

As Denise Bukowski, a prominent editor and literary agent in Canada, states:

> To start or expand a Canadian list requires a publisher with imagination, vision, and conviction, and an investor willing to let that publisher exercise them. Too often these qualities are lacking at Canadian publishing houses. They build their lists by responding to submissions exclusively, rather than by pursuing specific authors and developing original book ideas in-house. They put their lists together on an ad hoc basis by committee. In other words, they are reactive rather than proactive, and use a questionable and often glib decision-making process. (2002)

Although this is not the case for all publishing houses that use a committee, it does speak to the efforts of Crean and Arsenal who try to be flexible and imaginative when it comes to finding new works and authors. They stay true to their brand and mission by finding the best people for the job, who will help them succeed and grow as a company.

In his research on the scholarly acquisitions process at the University of British Columbia Press, Murray Tong, M Pub, discovered that “the personal and creative nature of acquisitions editing is undoubtedly one of the reasons it is rarely taught explicitly or singly” (2009, 8). Tong went on to assert:

> The nature of acquisitions is slow and multi-faceted. The success of an acquisitions program—and the acquisitions editors who perform its functions—can be measured in several ways: cohesiveness of manuscripts found, rejection rate, and number of desired manuscripts acquired in competition with other presses. Further in the process, author satisfaction and quickness
of turnaround can be linked to the efficacy of acquisitions processes. (Tong 2009, 8)

Although Tong’s report focuses on acquisitions in scholarly publishing, which in many ways is quite different from trade publishing, his points about the process echo the elements of acquisitions at Arsenal Pulp Press and other trade houses.

As *Modern Native Feasts* proves, even the best-laid plans go awry at any publishing company. There could be a number of problems that appear before the manuscript is published, there could be problems afterwards, or the manuscript could, despite the numbers, just not sell. Small and large houses, therefore, are always basing their decisions on whether or not to publish partly on their own hunches and an innate instinct. An editor might believe in a manuscript that numbers say will not be a bestseller, and the numbers could prove to be wrong. They could take a chance on a bestseller, only to discover that it is not a bestseller after all, and have to remainder thousands of copies of unsold books. There is no guarantee that a book will be successful, making trade publishing a constant risk. But strong acquisitions—trusting an instinct, doing the math, abiding by the mandate and mission of the press, and ensuring flexibility and trust is established early on—is the best preparation for finding successful properties, as well as for maintaining an effective and efficient publishing process.
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