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# McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

## Book Acquisitions: An Interview with Claire Reinburg, Director NSTA Press

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Over the last 10 to 15 years, there has been so much emphasis on technology in book publishing that it is sometimes forgotten that new books come from somewhere. That somewhere is "acquisitions" and the art that involves process and, most importantly, productive relationships with authors, editors, designers, reviewers—in short the army of people not reporting to the acquisitions editor, but who must work together to produce a book. Therefore, book acquisitions is a craft based on the acquisitions editor's ability to relate to the author and the many others who support the book publishing process.

Association acquisitions editors have an advantage of access to a pool of members who are professionals and experts in their field, and typically the editorial focus of the association's press. The real challenge is to convince them to be loyal to the association and think of the association's publications first. To acquire books from expert members is one of the association acquisitions editor's most important responsibilities

In association publishing, add to the cast of characters the member volunteers and board members and the complexities increase. One theme in all my work is that publishing in the association world is different than in commercial book publishing. In this interview, some of the differences between association publishing and commercial publishing will be examined in addition to successful book acquisitions techniques and processes.

In order to learn more about successful book acquisitions techniques, I will interview Claire Reinburg, my client and Director of NSTA Press. (For more about Claire, go to "About Claire Reinburg" at the end of our interview.

**Q** Describe the NSTA book line. How many staff members do you have? What types of books do you publish? How many books do you publish each year? How many NSTA books make up your backlist? What are NSTA's annual sales?

**A** We publish resource books for science teachers in kindergarten through college. Our books are "supplemental texts," so we don't publish the big science textbooks that you see on school shelves. In NSTA Press, we have six staff members: the Director, Managing Editor, Book Acquisitions Coordinator, two Senior Editors, and an Associate Editor. We publish 20 new books per year. Our backlist now includes 325 books and e-books. NSTA's annual book sales are \$3 million, \$2 million of which are from NSTA Press books. We also sell other publishers' books through our catalog, and we have a nice line of NSTA gear—shirts, hats, and

cool science stuff like beaker mugs that show NSTA's logo below the chemical formula for caffeine.

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**Q** How many acquisition editors do you have on staff?

**A** I'm the sole acquisitions editor. I'm really pleased that we recently hired a Book Acquisitions Coordinator who works with me on new-book acquisitions and managing the peer review process.

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**Q** How do you scout for new authors?

**A** We have the good fortune to work with a wonderful group of authors who refer their colleagues and friends to us, so they often serve as talent scouts. I attend NSTA conferences and prospect for sessions and presentations that might make good book topics. In addition to scanning several research journals in science

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education, I also have four strong journals published by NSTA where I read articles that can spark ideas for books.

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**Q** What is most important in your relationship with NSTA's authors?

**A** The collegial relationship we have is most important, where each party brings particular expertise to the professional collaboration. The author is the expert on her or his content, and I hope I am the expert on how best to present that content to our audience for an affordable price.

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**Q** What are the benefits for an author who publishes a book with NSTA Press? For example, do you offer royalties?

**A** We do pay royalties and combine that with an honorarium that is not charged against royalties like an advance would be. We've been working to bring our terms in line with commercial publishers in our field, and I believe we're competitive. With the growth in our book program over the past five years, we offer authors a community and a collection where they can connect with other authors in their field and be assured we'll present their books well to teachers. A prospective author said to me recently that he felt like his book would be in good company if he published with NSTA Press, and I can think of no higher praise for our book authors and our efforts.

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**Q** What should an acquisitions editor know about book contracts?

**A** The publishing landscape is changing so much these days, that you might consider doing what I do: seek legal counsel's periodic review of your basic letter of agreement. This can be an opportunity to clarify lan-

guage and add or delete specific provisions. After negotiating agreements for so many years, I can cover most issues that come up, but I do seek professional advice on new items raised by authors. The chances are if one author raises an issue, there will be others who will be concerned somewhere down the road, too.

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**Q** What aspects of NSTA's contracts are most frequently questioned by author prospects?

**A** We have a clause that indicates authors cannot publish a work on the same subject with another publisher while their book is with us. If you write books on teaching high school biology, you might be concerned about that. I've worked out a few ways to make the language specific enough that authors are reassured that we're not trying to shut them down on their professional publications. We just don't want exactly the same book shopped to other publishers, where it will compete with our book. Of course, the ideal is that your authors never want to publish with anyone else!

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**Q** Does the Press accept unsolicited book proposals from members? How are proposals reviewed? Is there an editorial review committee to which the acquisitions editor presents publication proposals? If so, are committee members paid an honorarium or do they serve on a volunteer basis?

**A** We often review unsolicited book proposals from members and nonmembers. We use the Scholar One manuscript review system for submissions and peer review, which is a terrific tool. We conduct an initial review in-house and then send proposals out to reviewers for suggestions and comments, which we share with authors. At that point, a proposal will be rejected, sent back to the author for revisions, or accepted. We pay our proposal reviewers what we like to call "a modest

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honorarium.” We don’t have a formal editorial board. I proposed establishing an editorial advisory committee when I first joined the association, but unfortunately I wasn’t able to obtain funding to do that. I have a core group of reviewers and informal advisors who basically serve that function for NSTA Press now. Actually, one of those advisors once told me it was far better to give input and guidance this way than to have to come to meetings and “be a committee person.” In our current model, I take on a lot more of the risk in the decision-making than I would in the editorial-board model. Because of the size of our program and these wonderfully generous advisors and reviewers who help and support us, the model works well for our niche. I’ve always sought out a lot of reviews for new ideas. I consider our process an adaptation of peer-review models in the scientific, technical, and medical (STM) field, where my previous experience centered.

**Q** Sometimes the lines blur between book acquisitions and book development. Does NSTA Press have a separate book development team? How do you draw a distinction between the two and how does acquisitions and development work together at NSTA Press?

**A** Because we have a small department, we don’t have a separate book development team. I work with our Book Acquisitions Coordinator to evaluate all book proposals with the help of peer reviewers. We ask authors for revisions to the overall plan for the book, while it’s early enough to add or delete chapters without too much trauma. When the full manuscript arrives, our Managing Editor assigns an Associate/ Senior Editor to take it from there and send the full version out to peer reviewers. The Associate/Senior Editor then coordinates final revisions with the authors. So, we do have that blurred line between acquisitions and development

that you mentioned. I’m always available to come back in on discussions with the author after the editor takes over. The editors are great about keeping me in the loop on the reviews so I can stay involved (but not too involved, they might say).

**Q** Does NSTA Press have a peer review process? How do you recruit subject matter experts for reviewing book manuscripts? What motivational or selection techniques would you recommend for recruiting new committee members to work with NSTA Press?

**A** We have a peer review process that emulates the process of many STM publishers. Because we cover both the science content and the pedagogy of how to teach science, we recruit science experts and science education experts to review proposals and manuscripts. One of my pleasant surprises when I arrived at NSTA was the enthusiastic responses from reviewers I invited, who really come through in providing rigorous reviews and feedback. Because our books cover many areas of science, we select reviewers based on the specific book, and we don’t have a fixed-membership committee providing critiques.

**Q** How does acquisitions develop a strong working relationship with your association marketing department? What role does acquisitions play in the book promotion process?

**A** Our Marketing team manages promotion and marketing for all of NSTA’s products and services, from conferences to membership to publications to professional-development offerings. So, they’re busy! The challenge we have is one that will be familiar to other association publications professionals: we compete for marketing time and resources with our colleagues in other departments. There are times of the year when the

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Marketing group is focused almost exclusively on the four conferences we hold annually. We've set up monthly meetings with our Marketing colleagues to touch base and discuss book marketing. We keep in mind that they're not exclusively working to promote our department's products, and we try to pitch in and provide as much information, input, and support as we can.

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**Q** How do you ensure that authors have a good experience and deliver a publishable, final manuscript?

**A** The absolute key ingredients are talented staff members who share the goal of publishing books that we and the authors can be proud of. Lucky me that I have those staff members, and they're a pleasure to work with every day. I see the publication process as a collaborative venture where author, acquisitions editor, and manuscript editor refine an idea and shape a book's final outline and content. It's important to consider the author's point of view at every step, particularly when you are working through reviewer comments and suggestions about a manuscript. Every book idea and every manuscript can benefit from shaping and polishing. If you look at the publication process as a building project with different craft experts applying their talents, I've seen the result is most often a positive outcome.

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**Q** What is your experience in producing multi-author books?

We do fewer multi-author volumes than authored books. Our experience has been positive overall. We have several essay collections that sell remarkably well and are solid backlist books for us. The volume editor is always the key to a successful multi-author volume, don't you think?

**Q** What is the most rewarding aspect about working with authors? Assuming none of your authors is reading this, what is your biggest frustration?

Science teachers are so enthusiastic and hard working, and they have wonderful ideas for books! I love that energy and dedication. I admire authors who teach all day and then fit in time to write their books after school and on the weekends. Most of my frustrations are about the challenges of wearing so many hats as an association publisher. I often feel I'm not moving quickly enough on acquisitions steps, especially if there are business functions like budget cycles or twice-yearly royalty statements that come due and need immediate attention. Other sources of frustration are fairly minor, such as authors who ask us to "fill in the details" for them or take on authoring duties that become time consuming. Think of someone writing into a technical manuscript "insert schematic of the Hadron collider here," and you might understand what I'm getting at. We're not miracle workers, though we do try! So, please, send in your illustrations and permissions? Thank you!

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**Q** Describe your "perfect" book author.

I'm not sure there's one perfect type of author, but I appreciate authors who take care from the first step to provide detailed information and send a well written proposal. I can tell quite a lot from the proposal package. Are all the elements here? Does the author clearly present a strong case for why the book should be published and how it fits with NSTA Press's program? I've found that this type of care and attention to detail at the earliest steps generally suggests the author approaches his or her work this way throughout the publication process. It becomes a real partnership where we each contribute our skills and specialties to the finished book

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**Q** Do you measure the cycle time from when a book is signed to publication date? What is that metric for books published by NSTA Press?

**A** Our cycle averages about one and one-half years from contract signing to published book. We're fortunate to have some very successful series where the author and the Associate or Senior Editor have things down to a science, so to speak, and this shortens our cycle time on selected books.

**Q** Do you do page layout and design in-house? If not, do you meet with local designers, or do you use email to communicate design specifications?

**A** NSTA has a great team in the Production and Art & Design groups. Nearly all NSTA Press books are designed and typeset in-house, which is unusual these days in publishing, and we feel fortunate to have their skills and talents available down the hall from us. As with the Marketing team, this group handles the multitude of design and production jobs throughout NSTA's many departments and initiatives, so they're very busy. I like to think they prefer to work on our books, but I suspect that's my way of dealing with the ego-deflating reality that they do work on lots of other projects—all worthy and important!

**Q** How do you track production progress of a book? What actions do you take when you see a publication date slip?

**A** Our Managing Editor carefully tracks each stage of production for a book, and she chairs a weekly department meeting where we check in on projects and schedules. We also meet twice monthly with the Art & Design and Production Departments to discuss schedules and troubleshoot any issues that come up. Occasionally, the Managing Editor might juggle projects

or ask everyone to pitch in on a book that has slipped in schedule or could benefit from more editorial and proofreading support. The regularly scheduled meetings really help with keeping everyone informed and involved in each book project.

**Q** How do you use the experience and knowledge of NSTA volunteer members?

**A** We rely on reviewers from among the NSTA volunteer members. Although we pay reviewers that modest honorarium I mentioned, we know that they're essentially giving their time to help us evaluate and develop a book idea or manuscript. NSTA has an active group of current and former board members and officers who receive comp copies of new books, and they're reliable partners in spreading the word about new books to their circles and groups they speak with.

**Q** Have you ever had excessive volunteer interference in your editorial decision-making in the acquisition of new title? How have you dealt with it?

**A** Irrational exuberance pops up occasionally. Sometimes people think each new book is a formal policy statement by the association. Or someone might disagree with the directions we are taking in the book program. I remind them that we're vigilant about peer review and editing to ensure content is carefully scrutinized. I'm open to feedback and guidance from association volunteers, so I also tend to use the suggestions that are valuable and finesse it on areas that cross the line toward interference.

**Q** How do you maximize the return on time you spend at NSTA conventions?

**A** I review the program in advance to map out a plan to attend sessions on topics I'm targeting. It's tough

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when there are thousands of sessions at a national conference, but what a nice “problem” to have. I sometimes contact authors in advance of the conference to see if I might meet with them or talk after their sessions. I also like to help out at our conference bookstore, where I hear from teachers about the books they’re not finding. That type of intelligence gathered at a conference with thousands of teachers is priceless.

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**Q** You have a scholarly journal publishing background. What are the similarities and differences between book publishing and journal publishing?

**A** I learned from journals publishing the strong role that peer review plays in a quality publication. There’s an unforgiving schedule in monthly journals that drills into you the power of having disciplined review and production procedures. Book schedules include some wiggle room compared with journal schedules, though you get into trouble quickly if you start counting on that forgiveness factor in a book schedule. Similar to a journal environment, you need to have a lot of projects in review and development in your book program to ensure a sufficient flow of quality manuscripts in the pipeline.

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**Q** What traits make for a successful acquisitions editor?

**A** Acquisitions editors need curiosity combined with a healthy skepticism. It’s important to go with the data, as well, when developing a list and considering new book ideas. You want to use the data to learn from your successes as well as your failures. It helps to be open to new ideas and willing to take the occasional gamble to push into new areas where the data aren’t there yet. Don’t forget that simple or tried-and-true book concepts also have tremendous value. Your list can become

“known” for certain types of books, which can be the base you operate from in acquiring and building your publishing program. And it comes with the job that you’ll hear both positive and negative critiques of the books you’ve signed. Just think of those as data, as well.

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**Q** How will advances in social media and technology affect book acquisitions over the next five years?

**A** Publishing is moving away from its traditional roots, and technological advances and social networking definitely are here and hold a lot of promise for publishing in the next five years. I’ve read blog posts that prompted me to write to the author to invite a submission, for example. So the way we find authors will continue to change in ways like that. In book acquisitions, we’re going to be thinking more and more in terms of content or information instead of books or journals. Technology is moving us toward delivering content in whatever format the readers want it, whether it be on an iPad or a smartphone or the printed page. When we’re developing a new book idea, we’ll be thinking ahead to how might we chunk this into smaller pieces or what formats would work well as platforms for delivering this information? I do believe the printed book and the ebook will be with us for a long time, so we’ll continue to develop both and to sell them separately and as mixed-media sets of printed book with ebook. It’s important to think in terms of both/and versus either/or at this juncture.

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**Q** What advice do you have for aspiring acquisitions editors?

**A** There’s still a bit of an apprenticeship system in publishing, so I advise aspiring acquisitions editors to seek out a job at a place where you can learn the ropes and then move into acquisitions work. Become the

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screeener of new proposals or offer to pitch in on reviewing unsolicited manuscripts. There are actually a lot of paths to acquisitions, including through editing and production. One of the most important strategies is to find a place where you really like both the work and the team you work with—things can only get better from there.

### ABOUT CLAIRE REINBURG

**Claire Reinburg** has been Director of NSTA Press, the book-publishing arm of the National Science Teachers Association, for eight years. She leads NSTA's efforts to expand its book and ebook publishing program and increase resource offerings for science teachers in grades kindergarten to college. Since 2004 she has also served as Assistant Executive Director of NSTA. Claire was previously Editorial Director of the American Psychiatric Association's publishing subsidiary for ten years, directing acquisition and development of new books. Claire's 23-year career in publishing has included editorial and management positions in journal and book programs of scientific, medical, and educational organizations. She holds a master's degree in English from Georgetown University and past President of Washington Book Publishers.

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### ABOUT JOHN B. MCHUGH

**John B. "Jack" McHugh**, a 30-year veteran of the publishing business, is a successful publishing consultant. He is the author of the McHugh Publishing Management Series—80 practical papers on all aspects of publications management. He also publishes the McHugh Expert Interview series, interviews with publishing leaders on various publishing specialties. All of these are available free at [www.johnbmchugh.com](http://www.johnbmchugh.com).

In the book publishing business, McHugh has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and

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Saint Mary's Press. McHugh is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality, a 100,000-member professional association based in Milwaukee, WI. For a two-year period, McHugh served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute, a Newtown Square, PA. based, 240,000 -member professional association.

Jack McHugh's specialties include book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and per-

missions, organizational design, and startups. McHugh has advised a variety of association publishers including: Alliance for Children and Families, ASCD, ASTM, AWHONN, Boy Scouts of America, International Employee Benefit Foundation, NSTA, Police Executive Research Foundation, SAE, SMACNA and SNAME.

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