

A Call to YA Librarians:

SUPPORT A DAVID AMONG THE GOLIATHS OF YA PUBLISHERS

Jonathon Scott Fuqua, the outstanding young adult novelist whom **VOYA** interviewed in its June 2005 issue, told me something shocking at lunch about a year ago. “My publishers know pretty well from the time of acquisition that they’ll sell at least ten thousand copies of my books, mostly to schools and libraries.”

In April 1999, my small independent house, Bancroft Press, published its first YA novel since its 1992 founding, which was also the first of Fuqua’s YA novels, **The Reappearance of Sam Webber**. For



Sam, as we came affectionately to call it, there was extensive advertising, a raft of favorable reviews, considerable publicity, a sizeable buy by a national book club, and numerous awards, including the Alex Award and the New York Public Library’s 2000 Books for the Teen Age list. The American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE) even called it one of two novels in print (adult or YA) to best deal with the issue of violence and youth. Despite all that as well as the sale of paperback rights, I still have sold a mere 4,200 copies of **Sam**, and have lost well over \$9,000.

The book would have done far worse, and made my loss far greater, had it not been for Deborah Taylor, a nationally renowned YA librarian at the Enoch Pratt Free Library here in Baltimore, who quietly championed **Sam** among her colleagues.

But the book would never have been published at all had I not loved it and—over numerous objections—insisted on publishing it. When it finally reached me, it had been rejected by all the big publishers—thirty-some imprints. On March 20, 1998, more than a year before **Sam** came out, I recorded my impressions of **Sam**, then called **In the Fading Light of Baltimore**:

- “A young adult book with resonance for older readers as well.
- Has a didactic dimension.
- Moral of the story is ‘Don’t give up hope, press on, you can make it.’
- Deals with big issues like depression, kids bullying other kids, the child-parent relationship, and the parent who feels his family would be better off if he simply skipped out.
- You get to see the protagonist suffer terrible blows, but have victories that lead to an upbeat ending.”

Fuqua himself put it this way in his **VOYA** interview: “I’ve always wanted my books to have meaning, to help people affected by the issues I write about, and to strike emotional chords with my readers. I’ve always worked toward social justice, community activism, and pushed the notion that hope can exist in the darkest of places.” What he sought to do in his books, I wanted my first YA novel to achieve.

Not too many people know that had I not published **Sam**, Fuqua

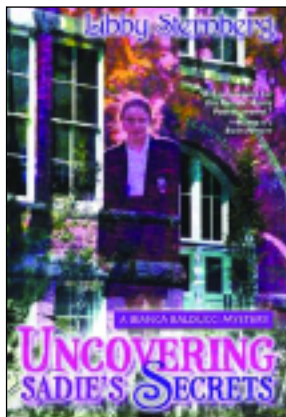
himself was preparing to burn all his manuscripts. What a catastrophe that would have been! His ideas and his writing would have been lost to the world. And needless to say, he never would have found his YA writing career (long may it wave) had I not published **Sam**, and stayed strongly behind it for years, until finally, the big publishers began to see the brilliance of a young writer whom they had shunted aside, some none too gently.

My next YA book, although represented by a top-of-the-line New York literary agent, came to me as a reject of all the big houses. **Finn**, by Matthew Olshan, is a modern retelling of Twain’s **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, but with two young women as the protagonists. Again Deborah Taylor, YA librarian extraordinaire, publicly stood behind the book from the outset. **Finn** went on to earn a **Booklist** starred review, favorable reviews almost everywhere, and even an award from the Los Angeles Unified School District. I managed to get the author on C-Span, twice, despite the network’s decided preference for works of nonfiction. The C-Span rationale was that the book deserved attention because it said a great deal about Twain almost one hundred years after his death.



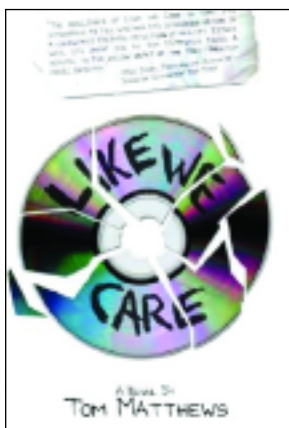
But **Finn** hasn’t sold 10,000 copies either, despite the recommendation of Dr. Janet Allen, an esteemed educational consultant, that all ninth grade English teachers in South Carolina—and presumably all other states—should consider teaching **Finn**, either alone or as a **Huck Finn** companion.

The **Bianca Balducci Mystery** series, written by Libby Sternberg, came next in Bancroft’s YA output. It didn’t arrive at my post office box reject-ridden, but only because I had commissioned the series from a talented, unpublished writer who, eons before, served as my assistant at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland. The series’ first installment, **Uncovering Sadie’s Secrets**, won innumerable accolades and awards, including favorable reviews from what I term the YA Big Four: **VOYA**, **Kirkus**, **School Library Journal**, and **Booklist**. (I omit **Horn Book** only because it has never reviewed any of my books.) **Sadie** even became an Edgar Award finalist, the sole small-press book to achieve the honor. Yet **Sadie** has sold just 2,500 copies. By keeping my costs way, way down, I managed a small profit on the book. But the book’s



sequel, **Finding the Forger**, rather than building on **Sadie's** minor success, has been quite a disappointment. It has achieved less than one-third of **Sadie's** numbers, despite better reviews and print advertising. Bancroft's loss on **Forger** more than wipes out its small profit from **Sadie**.

As their editor and publisher, I believe that Bancroft's YA novels are discernibly different from and better than many books put out by the big publishers. Idealist that I am, I take risks in my acquisitions, ignoring the tried and true because books have something important to say, especially to young people. Take one of my latest, Tom Matthews's **Like We Care**. It's a satirical look at the way in which Corporate America exploits teenagers. It, too, came to me after countless New York editors turned thumbs down on its Hollywood agent's submission. Like all the earlier-mentioned YA novels, it was by a first-time novelist. I thought it was edgy and right-on-the-money, in more ways than one. Many others did, too. **VOYA** gave it a great send-off, as did **Booklist** and **School Library Journal**. The author, through my efforts, even landed an interview early in January 2005 on NPR's *Weekend Edition Sunday*. Despite all that, plus print advertising in some of the aforementioned YA publications, **Like We Care** has sold only about 2,500 copies, which is a far, far cry from the 10,000 figure that Fuqua confidently predicted for his books when published by the large houses.



What also sets Bancroft apart from the larger publishers is my company's business structure. Although I have topnotch readers and advisors, I make all the acquisition decisions myself. I alone decide what books are important and good enough to be published. I don't have to go up the line to my sales people, where marketing considerations often shoot down good but daring books at the large houses.

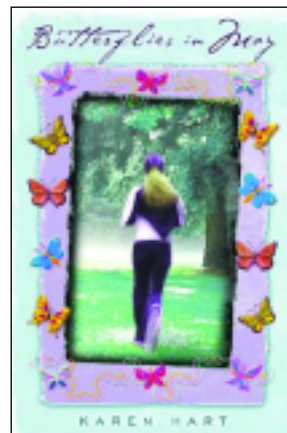
From a marketing standpoint, though, I'm not all that different. To sell my YA novels, I've done just about everything I (and others) could think of—e-mails to librarians, print ads in the trades, galley mailings, catalog mailings, continuous Web site presence, convention exhibiting, consistently excellent reviews—you name it. Yet **Finn** is my only true profit-maker, a fluke that I largely attribute to Dr. Allen.

As far as I'm concerned, then, the question shouldn't be what do I do as a YA book publisher, but what do I do to *continue*? My conclusion? Appeal directly to the librarian buyers out there. Ask that you make a conscious decision to seek out and conspicuously reward small, high-quality YA publishers like Bancroft.

Invite our authors to library events. Booktalk our titles in schools and promote them on the library floor so that teens themselves will start talking about them. Decide that during the next few years, you'll discover and help solidify some great but small YA publishers like Bancroft, available via Ingram and more than twenty wholesalers.

Get into the habit of consciously bypassing the lesser fare of the long-established, big-name publishing houses. As Jonathon Scott Fuqua indicated, orders for their books are three to four times greater than mine, although surely they're not three to four times as good. In short, alter your buying habits enough to allow and even encourage new and worthy entries to crack through against their Goliath-like competitors. Regard the conspicuous support of small, worthy YA publishers as a large and worthy good for your teen patrons. Otherwise, award-winning books like **Sam**, **Finn**, **Sadie**, and **Like We Care** will continue to slip through the cracks of public consciousness and never have the chance to positively influence increasingly disinterested young people.

If I had my druthers, busy librarians would not only vary their buying habits, but order well-regarded small press books in quantities similar to those that they would normally order from the large houses . . . new books like Karen Hart's **Butterflies in May** (reviewed in this issue), which details the agonizing decision confronting an involuntarily pregnant teen-aged girl. **Mia the Meek** by Eileen Boggess deals with overcoming adolescent shyness. Slated for 2007, **Thrown a Curve** by Sara Griffiths takes on sports and self-esteem among adolescent girls. All are told in first person because I believe that such stories are almost always more compelling and intimate to readers than stories told in third person.



In your hands is the ultimate success of these books. ■

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS FROM BANCROFT PRESS

- Fuqua, Jonathon Scott. **The Reappearance of Sam Webber**. 1999. 237p. \$23.95. 1-890862-02-9. **VOYA** August 2000.
- Hart, Karen. **Butterflies in May**. 2006. 202p. \$16.95 Trade pb. 1-890862-44-4. **VOYA** June 2006.
- Hawley, Richard. **Paul & Juliana**. 2003. 192p. \$19.95. 1-890862-33-9. **VOYA** August 2004.
- Matthews, Tom. **Like We Care**. 2004. 272p. \$23.95. 1-890862-36-3. **VOYA** December 2004.
- Montgomery, Arch. **Hank: The First Novel in the Gunpowder Trilogy**. 2003. 192p. \$19.95. 1-890862-22-3. **VOYA** April 2003.
- Montgomery, Arch. **Jake: The Second Novel in the Gunpowder Trilogy**. 2004. 212p. \$19.95. 1-890862-31-2. **VOYA** August 2004.
- Olshan, Matthew. **Finn**. 2001. 243p. \$19.95. 1-890862-13-4. \$14.95 Trade pb. 1-890862-14-2. 2002. \$29.95 Audiocassette. 1-890862-20-7. **VOYA** April 2001.
- Serafin, Shan. **Seventeen**. 2005. 268p. \$22.95. 0-890862-40-1. **VOYA** October 2005.
- Sternberg, Libby. **Uncovering Sadie's Secrets: A Bianca Balducci Mystery**. 2002. 190p. \$16.95. 1-890862-23-1. **VOYA** April 2003.
- Sternberg, Libby. **Finding the Forger: A Bianca Balducci Mystery**. 2004. 192p. \$19.95. 1-890862-32-0. \$14.95 Trade pb. 1-890862-37-1. **VOYA** August 2005.

Forthcoming:

- Boggess, Eileen. **Mia the Meek**. November 2006. \$19.95. 1-890862-46-0. \$14.95 Trade pb. 1-890862-47-9.
- Griffiths, Sara. **Thrown a Curve**. March 2007. \$19.95. 1-890862-48-7. \$14.95. 1-890862-49-5.

(For more information about these titles, see <http://www.bancroftpress.com>.)

Before founding Bancroft Press in Baltimore, Maryland, Bruce Bortz, as top editor, helped build Baltimore's **The Daily Record** into one of the country's best legal and business dailies. He was a major staffer in William Donald Schaefer's successful campaign for Maryland governor in 1986. Bortz started his own newsletter on Maryland government and politics, and spun off reference books profiling legislators from Maryland to Florida. For his continuing obsession with book publishing, he blames famed writer/movie director Barry Levinson, who optioned Bancroft's very first book, **Lenny, Lefty, and the Chancellor** by C. Fraser Smith (1992). Although he has a vibrant practice as a literary lawyer, literary agent, and contract book editor, Bortz still considers book publishing his noblest profession. He can be reached at bruce@bancroftpress.com.