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### A Novel Approach

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Jemc stopped by the English House on a recent campus visit. In her senior year she began her novel *My Only Wife* (right) with guidance from English faculty. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Jac Jemc '05 developed her award-winning first novel as an IWU student. With a new book set for release by a major publisher, she reflects on setbacks and successes in a famously tough business.

By KIM HILL

Although print book sales were up slightly last year, there are still plenty of naysayers regarding the state of book publishing. After all, the only remaining national retail chain continues to struggle, ebook sales were down in 2016, and some pundits say there will ultimately be more people who want to write books than there will be people who want to read them.

Chicago-based writer Jac Jemc '05 is far more optimistic about the industry, perhaps because the young author is already enjoying success. Jemc recently returned to campus to read from her third

book, *The Grip of It*, coming later this year from Farrar, Straus and Giroux; express her hopeful outlook on the publishing industry; and dish on her senior project and how it became her first novel, the award-winning *My Only Wife*.

**Your first novel, *My Only Wife*, was developed here as part of an independent study. How did that come about?**

Jennifer Hancock was a visiting professor when I was here. [Hancock is now an assistant professor of English at Colorado Mesa University.] I took her “Short Story” class, which was terrific. I asked her if she would do an independent study with me. During my senior year, I was also applying to grad school for an MFA in fiction. It just seemed impossible for me to imagine how a student could go to grad school and somehow write and revise a novel in two years. Part of the reason I wanted to do the independent study was to have a draft of the novel I could take to grad school and focus on revision while there.

**What was the process in developing the novel?**

When I started the independent study, I wrote 60 pages of a different thing — a story about a nanny and this precocious kid she was watching. And I hated working on it. Jennifer and I were reading several novels together — books that were recent best literary fiction sellers at that time — but at the same time, she would tell me about writers that were some of her favorites. These were more experimental, voice-driven novels for us to talk about in my independent study. I had also read a poem that had this kind of litany that kept repeating, “my wife, my wife, my wife did this, my wife did that.” And I loved the voice in that poem. So I asked Jen if I could make this voice a novel-length work instead, and she said, “Of course.”

*My Only Wife* is really built from the voice more than from an experience in my own life or a story I’d heard somewhere else. I had no idea what it was about until I got about 60 pages in and realized the heart of the book is that this man’s wife is gone, he doesn’t know what’s happened to her, and he’s so frozen with grief that he doesn’t try to find her. He retells their stories and tries to determine if she was different, maybe, than he thought she was when they were together.

## How did you find a publisher?

After receiving my degree [an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago], a couple of agents reached out to me and expressed interest based on short stories I had published and asked if I had a full book, which I showed them. Nobody wanted it, which was fine. Normally when people are submitting books, they might try 100 agents before they find one that's a good fit. I got "no" from two agents and I thought, "That's all right."

I submitted the book to three small presses, Dzanc being one, and they accepted it.

## What happened next?

After *My Only Wife* came out, I asked Dzanc if they would be willing to take a look at the story collection. Even though I'd had a moderately successful book for a small press, *My Only Wife* was a novel, and novels sell better than story collections, and so collections are a lot harder to publish. They said yes, even though there were a lot of experiments in those 42 stories. *A Different Bed Every Time* came out in late 2014. It actually

ended up selling more copies than *My Only Wife*. I think the little blurb in *Oprah Magazine* made a difference.

But in July 2013 I learned I was a finalist for the PEN/Bingham Prize [for debut fiction honoring an exceptionally talented fiction writer], and that made a big difference in my career. At that point, several other agents reached out to me to ask if I had another book ready to go. I had been working on some things since 2011. I wasn't convinced any of those agents were the right fit for me. So I submitted that manuscript to several agents I had handpicked myself and ultimately found the agent I've been working with [Claudia Ballard at William Morris Endeavor, who sold *The Grip of It* to Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG)].

## What are the differences in working with a small press and the behemoth that is FSG?

There are benefits on both sides. Dzanc is scrappy, they're willing to think creatively about how you can support a book, they still believe in that word-of-mouth appeal, and they were willing to give me a travel budget so I could go on a book tour, even though I set it all up myself. I hate the word "networking" — I think of meeting people and talking about your book as a way to build community, and Dzanc still believes in that as well. I'm so glad my first two books were with a small press because I learned a lot of the things related to putting out a book that maybe I wouldn't have learned working with a big press immediately.

Now, working with FSG, there are just so many more steps in the process, including so many rounds of edits, which are very comprehensive. And now having the design, it's thrilling. Advance copies are going out now. Having a book with FSG is so much more than I ever thought I was capable of, so even if it bombs, even if *The New York Times* writes a bad review, that would be thrilling to be included there.



While Jemc labors long hours in her home study (above), she finds inspiration away from her desk. "I like interacting with people," she says. "Being in different environments and seeing the social dynamics feeds my fiction, in a way." (Photo by Jared Larson)



At a recent Chicago Book Expo, Jemc gives a workshop with fellow fiction writer Sharon Solwitz, who teaches creative writing at Purdue University. (Photo by Rebecca Ciprus)

**You make it sound so easy, yet it wasn't all smooth sailing, I'm sure. In fact, on your [website](#) you blog about rejection in the most irreverent way. How did that happen?**

After I'd had a few stories published, I wanted a place readers could find me online if they Googled me. This was about 2008. I had the self-deprecating idea that it would be funny if people's dedication to the blog on my website was more focused on my failures than on my successes, so I numbered my rejections and wrote about my reactions to them. This is my way of promoting myself, by countering self-promotion with rejection.

At that time, when I was just starting out, rejection was fascinating to me. Talking to other writers, everybody was always so broken down by rejection, but it's part of the process. I've tried from the beginning to be matter-of-fact about it and take the encouragement when it's present, but to try not to get discouraged when the rejections roll in. It's almost like a way of marking time in your career, that you've got to get so many rejections before an acceptance will come in. Taste is so arbitrary. You just can't take it personally.

**You've worked as an editor and as a teacher of writing. Has that changed your perspective about your own work?**

I love being able to say I edit nonfiction for *Hobart*, a literary magazine that people think of so highly. The job at *Hobart* has convinced me how important it is to make the beginning of a story strong. You can't count on your reader to stick around for five pages before you get things started. You have to find a way to bring the conflict or action to the forefront so the reader gets what's going on right away.

That's similar to teaching writing, too, whether I'm at Loyola Chicago or Lake Forest College or wherever it is. Having to verbalize how to make something stronger and better, and the act of repeatedly evaluating writing, helps me see what needs to happen for something to really click in my own work.

**Do you dream of being able to write full time?**

Up until August of 2015, I was in project management at a software company. So I got up every day and wrote from 6 to 8 a.m. and then went to my day job. I had several writer-in-residence gigs in 2016, where I was all alone in the middle of the countryside, and that was very fruitful.

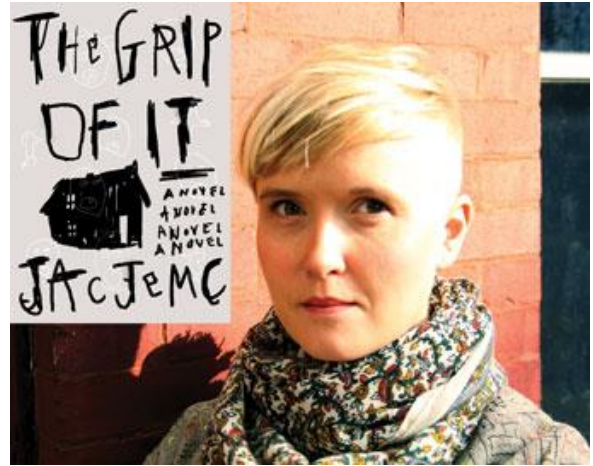
However, I like interacting with people. Working at the software company, teaching — being in different environments and seeing the social dynamics feeds my fiction, in a way. I don't know, if I were detached from regular everyday life, that I would be able to write in the same way. So I think I will always be doing some sort of work in addition to writing.

### What's your take on the future of publishing?

For big publishing in general, there's a change that's happening now. It's not uncommon for people to put out a book or two on a smaller press, and then a larger press sees a writer has gained a certain amount of attention or followers, and that larger press may buy the next book.

The big publishers are making a home for writers who are doing less traditional things. I don't know if that was the case 10 years ago. Like indie rock or art, people are looking for the cool, underground thing and then that gets co-opted into mainstream culture. I think that's happening with books right now, too.

I hear a lot of people being doom and gloom about how no one reads anymore, but I don't think it's as bleak as some people make it out to be. If you look at the catalog from the big five publishers, there are a lot of chancy things represented in fiction there. That's very exciting to me.



(Left) Jemc's new novel, *The Grip of It*, tells the eerie story of a young couple haunted by their new home. (Above) Jemc in Chicago. (Portrait photo by Jared Larson)

### What encouragement and advice do you offer young writers, both in your courses and here at IWU?

Some writers say, "I don't want to have to promote myself. I just want to sit in my room and write my stuff." I ask my writing students, "Do you really just want to produce work in a void or do you want to exchange work in a community?" You need to give to get. You need to be willing to offer something to be able to, in turn, receive.

I'm convinced that the only reason I've found any success is because I just keep showing up. There are people who are probably better writers than I am, but they're not chipping away at it every day. You have to write for yourself as much as for an audience, because if you're not enjoying it on a daily basis, then, if it doesn't work out, you'll feel like it was time wasted. You have to find success on your own terms.

[Read an excerpt from Jac Jemc's award-winning novel, \*My Only Wife\*.](#)

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