

A Serendipitous Friendship

Kat Setzer



Kat Setzer (left) and Liz Bury with the Haserot Angel at Lake View Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio.

If I were to look back at my career path to my current role as editorial associate for the Acoustical Society of America's (ASA's) Publications Office, I would say that it started serendipitously a little over 20 years ago during my freshman year of college at the University of Central Florida, Orlando. I chose to dual major in digital media and creative writing, despite coming from a family of mathematicians (actuary mother, college professor father, and two brothers who dual majored in computer science and math). I should note the issue wasn't so much that I disliked science and mathematics, just that I greatly preferred words.

Like many first-year college students, I basked in my new freedom, dyeing my hair purple and buying multiple pairs of JNCO jeans, which I wore with cartoon T-shirts from the kids' section at Target. (This is relevant.) These fashion choices seemed like the appropriate representation of my absolutely, undeniably artistic personality.

When I needed to take a science credit for my degree, though, I decided to take "Physics for Scientists and Engineers" because I'd excelled at my calculus classes in high school and wanted to prove to myself that I could do

it. Behind me sat Bill, an aerospace engineering student with a mohawk and a penchant for surfing in the Atlantic (which was a short drive away). We bonded in the way two vaguely counterculture teenagers do, eating breakfast together after our early-morning class and occasionally going to on-campus events.

Bill introduced me to a few more folks along the way, including another first year from the neighboring dorm, a girl who intimidated me with her enviable style: knee-high purple-and-black striped socks, corduroy shorts, and an Invader Zim shirt. (Invader Zim, for those unfamiliar, was a short-lived cartoon about an adorable alien's inept attempts to conquer Earth.) I complimented her on her shirt, she on mine. As happens with serendipity, we ran into each other every so often that first year, but I didn't think much about her, assuming we were passing through each others' lives on the way to our final destinations.

I would go on to ditch my digital media major and devote myself solely to my creative writing degree, certain I would sell my first novel before I hit 25. My friendship with Bill, the aerospace engineer, only lasted that first year as our class schedules no longer aligned.

However, I kept running into the girl with the Invader Zim shirt: at parties of mutual friends, in various honors seminars, interning for the school's literary magazine, and tutoring students at the university's writing center.



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A SERENDIPITOUS FRIENDSHIP

By our senior year, we still only hung out in the company of mutual friends, friendly acquaintances more than friends. During a shift at the writing center, we began discussing our plans for grad school. We both were applying to grad programs straight out of college. We both thought we wanted to teach creative writing one day — she poetry, I fiction. We compared the lists of schools we'd applied to and found we had one program in common: Emerson College's Master's of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing in Boston, Massachusetts.

"We should room together if we both get in!" she declared.

I agreed, although I didn't think there was a chance that we'd both end up there; MFA programs were notorious for small classes of only five or six students and, thus, never took more than one student from the same undergrad program in the same year.

As it turned out, perhaps serendipitously, I was wrong. We both got accepted to Emerson, and a few months later, we loaded all our belongings into a rental truck, which she would drive with her mother from Orlando to Boston. (I, never a confident driver, flew up to meet them and help unload.)

Thus, I became roommates with Liz Bury, the person who would eventually become senior managing editor of ASA Publications (read more about her at doi.org/10.1121/AT.2020.16.3.75).

After our first year of grad school, we both realized we didn't want to teach, that we were, in fact, better suited for the publishing world. I landed an assistantship at the school's literary journal and fantasized about a career as an editor ferrying the novels that I loved from rough draft to published masterpiece. (I suppose getting this assistantship was a bit serendipitous as well. Despite there being students with far better CVs applying for the position, my future boss told me he hired me in part because I'd brought a copy of the magazine to read while I waited for my interview. I didn't tell him I'd never read it before I applied for the job and was essentially doing some last-minute cramming.)

Liz, meanwhile, met her own moment of serendipity. A friend was leaving an internship at an ophthalmology

journal. Would Liz want to apply? Ever pragmatic, Liz did, and so began her career in scholarly publishing.

In 2009, we graduated from Emerson. I only note the date because the United States was in the midst of a recession, which hit the publishing world especially hard. I spent my last few months of school under the impression a new role would be created for me at the literary magazine, only to find out a few weeks from graduation that the funding had fallen through. (Liz had better luck, thankfully, and found a role at another medical journal, this time focusing on kidney disease, which she started a few months before graduation.)

Facing this bit of antiserendipity, I scrambled to figure out my next steps. I found a few options that appealed to my sensibilities: one as a low-level editorial assistant for a textbook publisher's English department, another as an equally low-level assistant at a publisher of niche nonfiction books for a general audience. Maddeningly, both told me I was overqualified for the positions.

At this point, I probably could have asked Liz for advice about scholarly publishing. Instead, I decided I'd do something entirely unrelated to anything I'd done thus far (always a practical choice) and got a job selling gym memberships because, besides reading and writing, I also spent a lot of time working out. I told myself that I would be much more likely to write in my off time if I wasn't sitting and staring at a computer all day.

I applied to positions at a few gyms in Boston, but only got interviews with two: the gym I visited every day and a women-only gym that a few of my friends went to. I'd never gone there myself and was immediately concerned by their lack of "quality" equipment (which, for me meant Olympic bars, bumper plates, and all my favorite powerlifting supplies). Still, when I sat down with the membership director, I told her how, truthfully, I knew that typical gyms weren't appealing to everyone, and I respected that the company managed to make a safe workout space for women who didn't feel comfortable in normal gyms, like my friends. She ended up hiring me and the other gym did not. At the time, I felt a bit miffed; now that I've worked and exercised at a number of gyms, I realize this hiring was a lucky accident as well because

I ended up preferring the community there to any other I'd encountered. I would work there for seven years.

Time passed. Liz kept working her way up the scholarly publishing ladder. In 2010, after about a year handling memberships at the gym, I realized that most of the personal trainers wanted to focus on working with young athletes, even though our clientele tended to be older and less comfortable in the gym. Seeing an opening, I went on to get certified as a personal trainer, focusing on clients over 50 and those recovering from injuries. I spent my free time reading books about kinesiology and different training modalities.

After four years, though, I felt like my role had stagnated, with little room to challenge myself intellectually, so I decided to go back to school for either physical therapy or occupational therapy. The few science courses I'd taken in college had lapsed, so I signed up for the whole roster of introductory sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics) from a local continuing education program, then proceeded to work my way through all the prerequisites for the graduate programs while still juggling a full load of clients.

In 2015, around the time I would have started applying to graduate programs, I met someone. (This meeting, too, could be called serendipity; over dinner with a friend, the friend mentioned they met "a scientist who wears plaid" they thought I'd like, and proceeded to set the two of us up on a date.) As the relationship progressed, we started talking about things like marriage and having a family (as folks do). I worried that years of schooling and an entirely new career, now possibly balanced with family obligations, meant I would have little to no time to write. Although I hadn't written my great American novel, or any novel at all really, I still penned the occasional short story or essay, and I didn't want to give that up.

So I stuck with personal training, moving to a new gym in a new state when my then-fiancé took a postdoc in Cleveland, Ohio. By then, though, I'd outgrown the long hours training required. (Trainers at large gym chains like the one where I was employed were paid on commission and were expected to develop their own client bases, which meant staying at the gym all hours to find potential customers.) I wanted a steadier job that allowed more work-life balance. Thus, in 2017, I started looking for publishing jobs, although they were still sparse, and I didn't really know what I was qualified for at that point.

Then, one week when I was in the midst of pondering this problem, Liz and her husband visited Cleveland. More serendipity. I asked Liz if she had any tips for looking for publishing jobs, and she mentioned that the society she'd just started working for that past year needed an editorial coordinator for their magazine, *Acoustics Today*. It was only part time, but it would help me get my feet wet again.

I applied, hoping maybe all those science classes I'd taken would be of some use. I got the job and thus began my career with the esteemed Arthur Popper. At first, I worked on *Acoustics Today* for a few hours a week and filled the rest of my time with freelance editing and writing. Over time, my role grew as I started helping with various tasks for the other ASA journals and created social media sites for our publications. One could say I even came into my most recent role, hosting the publications office podcast, a bit serendipitously as well; I took over the podcast after our previous host left. Because I already handled social media, it made sense for me to take the role over as well.

I've been with ASA Publications for over seven years now. I'm not sure if you told me when I was an idealistic college student that I'd end up in scholarly publishing how I would have reacted. (When talking to Liz about this article, she mentioned that there's a joke in scholarly publishing that folks rarely seek out the field but instead stumble on it.) I like to think my circuitous career path was serendipitous: how an acquaintance would go on to become one of my best friends and eventually help me discover a career path that fits my skill set. What I learned, albeit in a roundabout way, is that although I may not be as keen on *doing* science myself, I do like talking (and writing) about it, whether explaining to a training client about how a muscle or joint works or developing an interview with an acoustician about their latest findings.

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