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Wesley R. Bishop
Jacksonville State University

Elysia Smith

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Interview with Poet and Business Owner, Elysia Smith

Wesley R. Bishop and Elysia Smith

Part of *The North Meridian Review's* mission is to create a space where both academic and nonacademic writers, activists, and artists can read, share, and engage one another's work. Currently, *NMR* is housed in northern Indianapolis, and to launch its first annual issue the journal's managing editor, Wesley Bishop, met with Indianapolis poet and business owner Elysia Smith at her book and vinyl store in July 2019. Smith is currently the owner and manager of *Irvington Vinyl & Books*, and discussed with *NMR* the history of the store, its relationship to the Irvington neighborhood, and the issues of gentrification in Indianapolis.

Bishop: Could you tell us a little bit about yourself, your business, how it came to be, and what you want to accomplish with *Irvington Vinyl & Books*?

Elysia: Well, I never expected to do anything like this. I have a really hard time with rules, and was never a good employee myself. So being in this position is a different perspective. I expected to teach college, and had a lectureship at UMass but got pink-slipped when they suddenly reduced their faculty right before school was supposed to start in 2016. And I got pink-slipped before [the term] began, which was tedious, and I ended up moving to Michigan, and then moved to waitressing for a year, because that's what you do with a poetry MFA. And then moved here, because all my friends were here, and I already had connections here. And then I worked for a marketing firm, and in that time, it was a really conducive environment for me to learn because they hired exclusively creative writers, so they understood our schedules could be different and sometimes needed to be different to be effective. I also learned a lot about the marketing industry, which has become helpful. And I learned a lot about how different businesses are structured because I was writing business-to-business content, so things from marketing software, to accounting services, to payroll, to whatever I had to write about. So, I gleaned a lot of information that made this more possible. The shop started, I was brought here on a date, and loved this place. I had just kind of started getting into collecting records again, which I did a lot in college and grew up doing with my dad. So, we came here, and I was completely mesmerized and then went to gossip with one of my friends Kelsey, who now works here, and found out that [the store] was closing because she knew the owner. And she

dared me to find out why it was closing. And so, I showed up here, a hound for gossip, per usual with two cups of coffee, and was like, “What’s the scoop?” And [I] got to know the owner pretty quickly, Rick Wilkerson, and became really good friends with him immediately. And through that rapport, [we] brainstormed a lot. I’d been itching to have a project, and I had been trying to turn the empty room—there was a big empty room behind my marketing office that I turned into an art and poetry venue.

Bishop: Nice.

Elysia: So, I was already kind of doing this stuff, minus managing the business part of it. And I’ve been running large-scale events anywhere up to 5,000 attendees since I was nineteen. So, I could manage this on a small scale. And then I wrote a business plan, because... I kept telling people, “I know it seems impossible, but I feel that there’s a... possibility here, and if anyone can find a way to climb into that, I can.” So, I just did all the research and wrote everything out and made sure... [to have a business plan]. When you write it out first, you can ensure that what you’re saying is consistent to everyone who might want to invest, or might be able to connect you, or might be able to do whatever. So, I made sure that I knew that business plan forwards and backwards so that I never said something that was contrary to a person. And I just started talking to people as much as I could. I found a couple of local investors, and each one seemed like they were going to be the done deal, and I would get excited, and then they would back out. The last investor that I found before I left for AWP was the guy who used to own the coffee shop across the street. And that really seemed [to be promising], we had four meetings about it, we looked over contracts, I was going to manage it and have a partial stake of ownership, and he was going to own it more fully. And I was going to be allowed to do whatever I wanted with the space. And then, and I know this is silly, but I believe in it, Mercury retrograde hit. I’m not even kidding you. And he ghosted me for two and a half weeks, ghosted me, and it was leading right up to the date that this place was supposed to close. They were doing their clearance, 40-percent- off sales, lines out the door. And I was getting more and more stressed, because I thought that there wouldn’t be anything left, and I wouldn’t know what to do to fill [the store]... I started researching how to buy books online and all this different stuff because I’d never done any of that. And then the day that it was supposed to be closed... Rick was going to just sell it off in pieces to his different record collecting buddies. Kathleen, who used to own the bookstore part, actually cornered the coffee shop owner in the street, and yelled at him until she got some information. Then Rick called me, I wept for fifteen minutes and then I sat up and I was like, “Who do you know? Who do you know? Who do you know?” ... So I did the whole family phone tree, [found a very distant relative], got his number, lit a cigarette, called him and he’d given me \$70,000 by the end of my cigarette. And it was because I knew that business plan forward and backward, I recited to him everything I was going to do on my own, and I had edited it to reflect sole proprietorship of myself.

Customer enters the store.

Elysia: Hey!

Customer: Hey, how are you?

Elysia: I’m good. Just let me know when you’re ready to check out, okay? I’m doing an interview.

Customer *jokingly*: I'm ready to check out!

Elysia *laughing*: Shut up, brat!

Customer heads to the vinyl section of the store.

Elysia: Let's see. Oh yeah, that's what I mean, that's why it worked. And then I called Rick, and Rick cried, and then I called Kelsey and screamed into her voicemail, and then I had to hit the ground running because I wanted to reopen as close as possible to Rick's opening date, just for some continuity. So I had given myself—

Bishop: Rick, as in the previous owner, correct?

Elysia: Yeah, the previous owner. So he opened this store on June first. And so I was trying really hard to go for June 1st, but by then I only... had a month. And it was insane in here. Kathleen claimed Rick was a hoarder. Rick claimed Kathleen was a hoarder, in reality both were hoarders. It was a disaster. So, I ended up taking two months to do the build out, which is half of what's in here now... And then I researched software, and I like to do info sessions, and I recommend this to other people who are trying to start things. If you need to learn how to do QuickBooks, ask a friend who runs a business if you can take them to lunch and pick their brain. Ask an accountant friend to walk you through things. Which all goes back to: be as nice as you can to everyone who could help you, because you never know when you might need their help. Because I had worked for over two years to build up relationships in Indianapolis I didn't [necessarily] know what I was going to do, but I knew I was going to do something at some point. So, I wanted to make sure I socked away all of those contacts that I had...

Bishop: Great advice. Just to clarify, are you from Indianapolis originally?

Elysia. I was born in Southern California. I moved to Indiana when I was thirteen, and I lived in Oak Park County in Nappanee until I was seventeen, and then I went to Ball State.

Elysia pauses to think.

Elysia: And then I went to [the] University of Massachusetts Boston, and then Michigan, and then I came back.

Bishop: So, this may be an obvious question, but the previous business was a book and vinyl store, run by two different people.

Elysia: Yes, Rick Wilkerson owned the vinyl shop, and Kathleen Angelone owned the book store portion.

Bishop: But why continue the books and vinyl? I understand that it grew out of these two different people, but why not get rid of the vinyl or get rid of the books and just focus on one?

Elysia: I mean, in my darkest, most desperate nights, I wish I never would have kept the vinyl, because it was so much to learn, and it is so much to learn constantly. [Its also hard] because

[customers can] come in... [and not appreciate]... The act of uncovering that which is buried, and [not] appreciat[e] and enjoy... something in a quiet, simple way. I hate it when someone comes in and is like, "I have the 13 pressings of this one album, but I missing this 14th pressing. And you can tell which one it is because of the way the cover is." Or whatever. And they ask me if I have that, and I'm like, there's fucking ten thousand records in there. Maybe I have it, but I'm not going to go in there and look for it, because part of the reason you're coming here is to look through shit. It is an experience. I'm not a *Barnes & Noble* with a computer system where I can just be like, "Oh, yeah, we have that" and that annoys that fuck out of me.

Customer *returns holding old vinyl record:* This is real artistic talent!

Customer holds up the vinyl record in pride.

Elysia *nodding approvingly:* Thank you!

Bishop *laughing:* Okay, I will make sure to put that in. Okay, but why the vinyl specifically? What do you think it does to have a place to buy original vinyl records in town?

Elysia: Because it functions in the same way books do to me, which is, it forces us to take an intentional moment for ourselves to have an experience, to listen to the music, to maybe change our mood or read a book to escape for a little bit, or learn something. And you have to be within twenty feet of your record player.

Bishop: Right.

Elysia: It's more intentional to me. It's a different thing, a totally different thing that you feel, I think, when you're listening to a record as opposed to listening to your headphones on the bus. And same thing for having a hard-cover book. I hear so many people come in here and be like, "I love the smell of old books." And you miss all those details, you miss engaging the senses in that way. And that adds to and shapes your experience. It's an utterly different thing to read a mystery novel on the beach than it is to read a mystery novel at your grandmother's kitchen table. Both are experiences, both inform how you take in the texts. But when it's portable and we can take it wherever, we lose that extra layer of meaning and of intentionality, I think.

Bishop: I agree with you. My father was into vinyl when I was younger, and that was the main way he listened to music. It was back before CDs or even cassette tapes. I remember he would come home after working, right? And every once in a while, we'd get records off the shelf and he would play them, right? And it was a lot of fun as kids because we would just dance. But you couldn't jump up and down too much. So, it was like this weird thing of dancing and having a lot of fun, but you had to be really careful at the same time, because it was a... how do I want to put this...

Elysia: It's an artifact.

Bishop: Exactly!

Elysia: It's an artifact of that memory... And I think that's why vinyl is coming back. I think people are not as trusting of things they can't touch. And especially in this super digital age where we might

not even be able to touch money anymore. Having something like this that connects you to your father, to your future, because you might pass them down.

Group of customers walk into the store.

Elysia: Hey friends!

Group says bello.

Elysia: Give me a minute. I'm doing a little interview right now.

One of the group looking at Bishop, who thinks it is an interview for a job: Great! Kill it.

Elysia: Thanks.

One of the other people in the group to Bishop: Do good work!

Bishop *laughing:* Thank you.

Group begins looking throughout the store. Bishop turning back to Elysia: Yeah... so... where were we... Do you remember when vinyl started to really come back in? Because I was working at a bookstore a few years ago, when I remember we started carrying it again, and my manager, who was an older guy, he was amazed by this. He thought vinyl had died and gone out. But all of a sudden it was like coming back with a vengeance.

Elysia: I think it was 2013, but you'll have to double check the statistic. But Rick kept repeating this to me, 2013 was the best year for vinyl since 1991. I mean I loved experiencing Christmas last year, because afterwards we'd have an influx of new customers who'd gotten record players for Christmas, and nine times out of ten it was someone under the age of thirty-five. Lots of kids, lots of teenagers. I have a whole gaggle of teenagers. All the boys come in and kneel to the Jimmy Hendrix poster, and they'll dig through the records and listen to them together and then pick one that they want. I'll hold it for them, and they'll come back in a week and they'll work off whatever the record costs. So, if it's a \$20 record, they have to spend two hours filing.

Bishop: Right.

Elysia: And it's fucking great. I love it. And they're thirteen!

Bishop: Right, right.

Elysia: And they're into making out and records... it's just awesome.

Bishop: Very cool. So, does your shop do more than sell books and records? It also does quite a bit in fostering local writers.

Elysia: We do a publishing workshop, usually once a month. I'm kind of reconfiguring it right now though, because attendance has dropped, and I think it's because it's all focused on too simple stuff.

The audience that I grew got what they needed, and can do it on their own now. So why are they going to come in?

Bishop: That's good.

Elysia: So, but that was called *How to Stop Being Scared and Start Getting Published*. We do *Poets Attack*, which tries to bring writers from out of state to read alongside local writers, and I try to pair them really conscientiously so that they'll like each other. The work will resonate with each other and then they'll network. Because the goal is to help get our stuff out of the state so people stopped skipping us in favor of Chicago.

Bishop: So it's a way to put Indianapolis on the literary map?

Elysia: On the map.

Elysia thinking.

Elysia: Yeah. And I do a lot of community work outside the shop. I'm collaborating with some really important people in the poetry scene to hopefully, fingers crossed... put on a poetry festival at Central Library where each of the different poetry events in the city will be able to do a mini event, and you can take a tour and see what it's like at *Vocab*, and see what it's like at *Iconoclast* and see what it's like at the *Room of Requirement*, and see what it's like at *Poets Attack*. And there'll be a bunch of local poets signing books... and [eventually] we would like to get a city laureate. That's on our agenda.

Bishop: That'd be awesome.

Elysia: Yea, and the people I'm collaborating with are Chantel Massey, Gabby Patterson, Mat Davis, TooBlack, and Manon Voice.

Elysia thinking some more.

Elysia: Let's see. I think that's everyone. Oh, Gizelle Fletcher! So, but check in with me about that, because we've just met for the first time to start figuring out how we're going to fund it, and who's going to do what, but everyone is incredibly excited, which is really cool. I didn't expect that. I fully expected it to be, I mean, there's a lot of big personalities in the organizing space, and so I expected it to be more like, "Well, I want to do this. I think we should do that." But it was just like, "Yes, we need to make poetry the central focus of the city for one day." And everyone came together super quickly over that idea.

Bishop: Very cool.

Elysia: And then we do 'zine workshops. We just got a huge industrial printer to start allowing monthly subscriptions for 'zinesters and artists who want to use it, or people who do shows and need to print posters, or wedding invitations, or whatever the hell they want. And it's just a hair more expensive than the library. So, it's pretty affordable, especially when you do a subscription service. Yep, and then we'll start printing chapbooks to represent Indiana writers. The press for that

is *Caliban Press*, and it's about being uncensored in Indiana and reminding people that you can be uncensored in Indiana.

Bishop: So you are starting a press too?

Elysia: Yes.

Bishop: Where are you in the process with that?

Elysia: Guinea pigging the copy machine right now, learning how to use it myself, figuring out how to publicize it... right now, DIY grassroots.

Bishop: Could you explain what a 'zine is?

Elysia: It's basically a small magazine. It's an eight and a half by eleven piece of paper folded in half, [and] you got a 'zine. And they're designed to be printed, easily distributed, low cost, handmade, DIY. Often they're traded, rather than sold. I mean a 'zine and a chapbook can be the same thing. They don't have to be, but the production of them is pretty similar. They can be only drawings, only photographs. They can be clip outs [clippings] from magazines collaged in. I've seen everything. And that's kind of the cool thing about them. Whatever you want, as long as you made it yourself and it's out of paper, it's a 'zine.

Bishop: And so how does the 'zine process work? Because they're very individualistic, right? People produce them, get to do whatever they want with them— It could be poetry, it could be art. How does that process work? How's that look for a 'zine writer?

Elysia: I mean, I don't make 'zines, so I think it's hard to answer that question. But one thing that I have witnessed is a lot of 'zinesters start with found objects. They start with textures. I had a friend come in and scan a bunch of lace and different fabric panels so that she could use those in the 'zine that she made. Kelsey tends to cut little words out of magazines and build poems out of them, and then wrap imagery around the poems. I didn't know I was making 'zines, but I used to . . . make my own chapbooks [by hand], which I think are more like a 'zine. I would illustrate them with Sharpies and then just Xerox them. And I made one every semester all throughout college of my poetry for that semester. But I think they were way more 'zines than chapbooks, although it's hard to make that distinction.

Bishop: So in your opinion, what are some of the major trends you're seeing in Indianapolis in terms of local literature?

Elysia: Well, I will say one thing for sure. Our poetry scene here is queer, and it is black. And that doesn't get said enough, and it doesn't get lifted up enough. There are academic poets here as well, but they're kind of the old guard. There's a major slam scene. Slam is one of the biggest things in Indianapolis, which is another thing that doesn't get recognized enough. Just that slam is poetry. And granted, one thing that all those poets I'm working with and I have come to agree on, because I'm stringently academic. My poems are transgressive, but I come from an academic background. I'm not going to memorize them, I'm not going to go on stage and recite them. We've come to this

agreement that slam poetry needs to perform on the page as effectively as it performs on the stage. And—

Bishop: My apologies, but who is “we”?

Elysia: The poets that I’m working with for the poetry festival. They are primarily slam poets.

Bishop: Gotcha.

Elysia: I’m the only academic poet that’s in that group.

Bishop: Right. So, you were saying that it needs to be performed on stage as well as on page—

Elysia: And that’s what we’re trying to bring back. Right now, Indianapolis has a lot of open mics. It doesn’t have a lot of featured readings. There’s Butler series and there’s *Poets Attack*. And outside of that it’s [mostly] open mics... And at an open mic, a skilled poet who’s been writing for a long time and publishing... it doesn’t feel like they’re going to grow when they get up on stage. So they don’t demonstrate their talents. So we see a lot of new people who are awesome and amazing, definitely. But we also see a lot of people who are still learning and still growing. So the scene has been, I think, it’s been hard for people who reach a certain understanding of their work, and of collaboration and of success, and they don’t feel like there’s any flint and steel. They don’t feel like they can rub up against any part of the scene and get better. And that’s one of the things that we’re trying to change, and one of the things that I’m talking with those other poets about. We want to bring back featured readings. We want to make poetry hip again. We want people to choose to go to a poetry reading on a Friday night rather than a dance party or a bar. Because it would be cool to be there. And in Indianapolis, if you ask any of the old heads from the slam scene in the [19]90s and the early 2000s, that’s what people did. Poetry was a huge part of this city. And that’s kind of what the goal of the poetry festival is, and part of why I’m collaborating so much, because I don’t know the history of this city. I’m new to it. So, anything I do can’t just be something I made up in my head that I think the city needs. It actually has to be something the city needs...

Elysia thinks for a moment.

Elysia: Which means listening, as much as possible. So that’s... yeah... I don’t know if that answers your question.

Bishop: No, it really does. Thank you. What kind of themes do you see many of these poets working with?

Elysia: It’s so political. It’s largely political poetry, largely confessional poetry, very imagistic. I see a lot of nature imagery in the poetry scene right now, and longer poems.

Bishop: Do you think that’s markedly different than, say, Chicago?

Elysia: Yes, absolutely. I used to be a part of the poetry scene in Boston, and poetry there was highly academic. If you weren’t using thirty pounds of white space on the page, are you even a poet? Super avant-garde. I didn’t feel like I fit in there. I feel more like I fit in here, because my poems are,

like I said, transgressive. So they fit into the kind of the vulnerability that the Indianapolis scene has. Someone will get up on stage and tell you a poem about how they're losing their housing. I get up on stage and tell your poem about a bad sexual experience. If I did that in Boston, it wouldn't go over super well, unless I was in the right basement.

Bishop: Last set of questions, as a business owner, what concerns do you have in the city and state?

Elysia: I want to see— it's my business model to do this— to provide education and resources to the community. In my mind that means that we help them grow and learn and improve their livelihoods maybe. And then they come back and spend with me. So, I think about the lifetime of the consumer. I want someone who's going to choose my shop over and over and over again whenever they do have money. And the more people that I can connect with in that way, the more consistent business will be over time. And that's because I'm providing them a service, not just a book, not just a record.

Bishop: Right. I know there are a lot of questions and concerns right now, especially in Marion County and Indianapolis. Especially with the changes to downtown real estate.

Elysia: Yep.

Bishop: Specifically, with gentrification, but also the high density of corporations in downtown proper.

Elysia: Oh, yes.

Bishop: So, as a small-business owner, how do you see yourself interacting in that business landscape.

Elysia: So, I actually have been thinking about this, and went ahead after a couple of months in business and took over the Earnings in Business Association as their president, because within five to eight years, the Blue Line is going to be making its way down Washington Street, which means—

Bishop: Can you explain what the Blue Line is?

Elysia: The Blue Line is our new high-speed bus system. It's the first kind of rapid transit that Indianapolis will see. The Red Line's already been built and that connects Broad Ripple to Fountain Square, essentially. But when that Blue Line comes here, we're going to be getting more tourists, because Irvington has such an interesting catchy legacy. And it's also just going to be more accessible for people who work downtown and live in Irvington and vice versa. So, as that change starts happening, it looks more delicious for developers. And so I wanted to get in with the businesses here, work to create a unified voice so that we can speak up for ourselves when major development comes here. I would really like to put a question on the 2020 ballot, but I don't know if that's going to happen. I came up with this thing called Neighbor Engaged Ethical Development, which essentially would mean that, a banded-together business association or community council for whatever neighborhood. Whenever developers come in and are going to spend over a million dollars in your neighborhood, they need to have a mediated conversation mediated by a lawyer with the development association, or the business association or whatever the major decision-making body is and community body of the neighborhood is. And they have to subsidize 30 percent of their

investment to meet those needs, and then they receive a tax credit. So that's something that I've been fumbling around with, with some people on Mayor Hogsett's campaign.

Bishop: Do you think it's doable?

Elysia: Well, I don't know anything about politics outside of the basics and where I'd be able to vote responsibly. So, this is a new world. Writing legislation or inciting legislation, maybe, is something I wanted to do for a long time.

Bishop: Right.

Elysia: So, I would like to figure it out.

Bishop: So, I'm assuming that you wanting a ballot question, then would basically mean using the popular referendum? That way as developers move into Irvington they have to deal with local ordinances and a community that is already engaged. Correct?

Elysia: Yes.

Bishop: I think you would get support for that in the community. It's a big concern I'm hearing around town. And also, I think it would actually impact the community, right? Force some of the larger corporations down to the table in the community so they have to deal with small businesses and the residents of the city. But what's the temperature that you're getting from activists? From city council and from the mayor's office?

Elysia: Well I mean, so I've been talking to someone in Mayor Hogsett's campaign, a couple of people. And I mean, it's been positive, but I haven't officially written anything and done any research. I have been bringing this up to the IBA, the Irvington Business Association, since the get-go. So they would know me for the communist that I am.

Bishop: That's good.

Elysia: I want to be transparent. I also was very transparent about the fact that the Far East side is primarily people of color, and then you look at Irvington and it's a little white bubble of prosperity. And there's a reason why that happened, and it's because the [Ku Klux] Klan was here. And so now, we receive all of these perks, and it is our responsibility to try to bring some equity back to the East side. To elevate our neighbors, to make sure that our neighbors aren't being booted out of homes they've lived in for years. So that someone can come in and turn it into a fucking \$2,000 apartment. And that's what's going to happen.

Bishop: Well, I think you are right. I mean look at North Meridian Street, right? It's already seen that. My spouse and I lived on North Meridian, and we moved in, and it was already kind of going through gentrification. It was right across from the Children's Museum. But once they put the Red Line in, the property owners, they basically made a very calculated decision. Since the Red Line was going to disrupt traffic so much they shut down the building for a year, renovated it, kicked everybody out, and then jacked up the rent prices. And they're like, "If you want to come back in over a year, that's great." But the rent's going to be higher. And that's because literally you could

walk out onto North Meridian, jump on the Red Line, and you're connected to the entire city. So this public transportation is great, but without protections for communities in the city...

Elysia: Yep. And I mean, we have time. We have the luxury of that on the East Side to actually talk to each other and to start building these connections, and using what we've seen in the city to help the other communities.

Elysia Lucinda Smith is an Indianapolis poet, community organizer, and owner of Irvington Vinyl & Books. The store serves as both a business and a space for writers to meet and perform their work. Smith's work has appeared in Pank, The Indianapolis Review, Calamity Mag, and Voicemail Poems. Her first book of poetry was published in 2017 by Blaze Vox Books.