

## IBPA Interviews Mary Jo Smith-Obolensky and Ivan Obolensky of Smith-Obolensky Media

[\[Original interview on the IBPA website\]](#)

Independent publishers have long had difficulty getting bookstores to carry their books, so it's all the more impressive that IBPA member [Smith-Obolensky Media](#) not only accomplished that feat but that they were able to get their book, *Eye of the Moon*, carried in the largest bookstore chain in Colombia, [Librería Nacional](#).

IBPA spoke to Founder/CEO Mary Jo Smith-Obolensky about how this deal came to be, tips for how other indie publishers might get their books carried in bookstores, and more!

**IBPA:** How were you able to get the Latin American Spanish literary translation of your book, *Eye of the Moon* (translated as *El ojo de la luna*), carried in Colombia's largest bookstore chain?

**Mary Jo Smith-Obolensky:** It was most fortuitous: a childhood friend introduced me to a well-known Colombian novelist, María Cristina Restrepo, who became a major fan of *El ojo de la luna* (her detailed review is on the back cover of the book). María Cristina introduced the translated novel to the head bookseller of Librería Nacional, [Mr. Felipe Ossa](#). I spoke at length with him, and he was very generous with his 60+ years of experience in the book market worldwide. He then told me the number of books that he wanted. He felt it would make an excellent gift for the upcoming holidays. Colombians buy a lot of books at the end of the year, and often gift them. We had zero prelaunch promotion, and the marketing since has been all on social media, especially [Instagram](#). Word-of-mouth has mostly been responsible for sales.

A thousand copies of *El ojo de la luna* were ordered on consignment for the day of the launch, October 16, 2020. As of the December statements, 250 have been sold. This is unexpected for an independent publisher, an unknown author in the country, a translated debut novel, and especially, in the middle of this pandemic.

**IBPA:** How did you react when you found out Librería Nacional had agreed to carry your books?

**Mary Jo:** It was the wonderful feeling that life as you love it still exists: printing actual books that will be available in stores, featured on displays, books given as holiday gifts, books being enjoyed while on vacation, books read furtively when you can, and being hooked on a good book. I was born and raised in Colombia, and it was a wonderful circle of life to reconnect with so many people from my youth and country, to experience how much Colombians of all ages and backgrounds are enjoying this tale! As a person in the translation business for 25 years, a

native Colombian, and the editor and wife of the author, this project has been remarkably close to my heart. Did I mention I was thrilled?

**Ivan Obolensky (author and Smith-Obolensky Media Vice President):** I was thrilled to get the book out and in a major bookstore chain. Writing a book is one thing, getting into readers' hands is another. What I, as an author, want to find out is what avenues will get the work out and into the hands of the public in sufficient numbers to be viable? When all avenues appear blocked, the best one can do is to try everything and anything, like pouring water on a floor. It will find the cracks, and once found, the opportunity must be capitalized on. It requires flexibility, out-of-the-box thinking, and a great deal of communication. One must be willing to be surprised, because often how a book finds its way into the world is surprising.

**IBPA:** In addition to landing distribution for *Eye of the Moon* at Librería Nacional bookstores, you received a review and recommendation of the novel by their head bookseller Felipe Ossa, and it was also prominently displayed in the stores nationwide. Can you share a link to the review?

**Mary Jo:** The [original review](#) is in Spanish, the translation is:

An impeccable story, masterfully narrated in style and plot, combining the right mix of intrigue, suspense and romance, in a perfect psychological and philosophical background.

A subtly crafted novel, written with elegance and irony. Very well-developed characters and a very good description of the environment where the story takes place, displaying the thoroughness of the great novel writers of the 19th century. Reading it captivates us from the first page and takes us through the labyrinth of suspense, secrecy, and adventure, to a surprising ending that finishes off a devilishly well-written work with a flourish. Rivaling the great suspense novels of all time...

**IBPA:** The pandemic has created a lot of obstacles for the publishing industry, especially for bookstores. How has the pandemic affected the launch of *Eye of the Moon* at Librería Nacional?

**Mary Jo:** Most stores are open, though they restrict entry by the even or odd numbers of their IDs, and the stores in the airports are harder to access due to the way travelers are routed to and from the gates. However, the website handles all deliveries anywhere in the country. We also have the book in [Librería Grammata](#), a well-respected indie bookstore in my hometown of Medellín. We are reaching out to more indie bookstores in order to increase our availability and accessibility to the readers in that country.

**IBPA:** You set up [Dynamic Doingness, Inc.](#) (a language translations company) 25 years ago, and in 2014 launched Smith-Obolensky Media (as a DBA). What inspired you to launch Smith-Obolensky Media, and how is it beneficial for a publisher to be under the umbrella of a language translations company?

**Mary Jo:** Dynamic Doingness, Inc. (DDi) was set up to be a full-service translations boutique. Smith-Obolensky Media (SOM) was originally launched as an arm to provide better services to our existing clients, translating their audiovisual material. We also created [multimedia videos](#) of adaptations of Ivan Obolensky's articles on the social sciences, written for DDi. In 2018, SOM launched its first book publication: *Eye of the Moon*.

Being under the umbrella of DDi made it easier for us to secure the best quality translation for the Latin American Spanish market. Having the author directly involved was also invaluable to make the necessary language adjustments to fit the new market.

**IBPA:** Tell us about publishing in another country while having a U.S. business and being an independent publisher. How does that happen?

**Mary Jo:** I am a native Colombian and have kept my documentation in order and remain in touch with many of my childhood contacts. I am doing business as an individual, representing my company. I established myself through a lawyer and an accountant and got all the necessary documentation and licenses to operate. Everything was coordinated and overseen remotely from the U.S. and Uruguay to make sure all the legal and fiscal issues were addressed correctly. It has been a huge learning curve.

**IBPA:** Can you share tips for other independent publishers about how they can land distribution to bookstores internationally?

**Mary Jo:** It is very hard to offer tips in this constantly shifting industry as each situation is unique. I can give tips in general terms, such as being persistent, gather the right team on the ground when publishing abroad, and ensure that you have the best representation. One has to be very flexible and patient—know when to wait and when to move. Dealing with other countries and their sets of rules and procedures to do business can be very taxing. It is not easy and there is no manual. Ivan always wanted to have his novel in Spanish to reach that public, as he has a lot of affinity for Colombia and its people. It took our combined passion with a lot of help and luck to pull this off.

**IBPA:** A major issue facing independent publishers right now is the impact of COVID-19 on their businesses. Now that we are a year into this crisis (with no clear end in sight), can you share advice for other independent publishers about how they can weather the impact of the health crisis on their businesses?

**Mary Jo:** We recently celebrated 25 years in business in Dynamic Doingness, Inc. In those years, there have been many cycles. One learns to go with the flow and keep very productive and creative during times when income is not coming in as usual. All kinds of projects have been developed during the "lean times". It is especially important to utilize those periods to the max and not fall into a frozen state of fear. These are wonderful periods for innovation and creativity. We deal with what we can control, and do not fret over what we cannot.

In specific terms, we reduce our expenses, cut out anything nonessential, reconsider our publishing strategies—such as going print-on-demand at the outset for the launch of *El ojo de la luna* in other countries via Amazon, the eBook via Kindle, and Ingram’s ePUB distribution, and only publishing offset when we had a contract in hand—and making all our expenses count, such as bringing on invaluable members to the team. This process creates new models that continue to be useful during the busy and income-producing times.

**IBPA:** How has it been beneficial to be a member of Independent Book Publishers Association?

**Mary Jo:** We have been a member of the IBPA since the launch of *Eye of the Moon*. It is the only membership we continued to renew, even in the face of reconsidering all our expenses during this difficult time. For the variety and consistency of the [benefits](#), and the support from every member of IBPA we have connected with, it is an indispensable membership.

The benefits we made use of differed with our various launches, prepublication and post, including the [Ingram](#), [The Hot Sheet eNewsletter](#), [Foreword Reviews’ Clarion reviews](#) discounts, sharing news through the Member News and social media, learning from [Member Roundtable discussions and other educational programs](#), etc.

**IBPA:** Thank you, Mary Jo, for sharing your expertise with the IBPA community!

[Click here to learn more about Smith-Obolensky Media here.](#)