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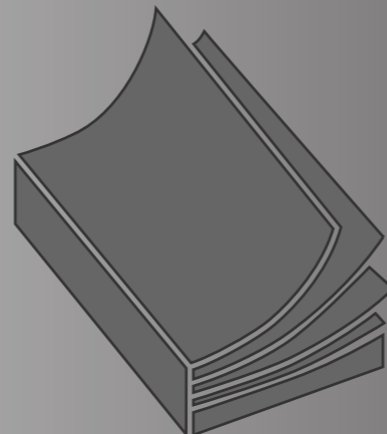
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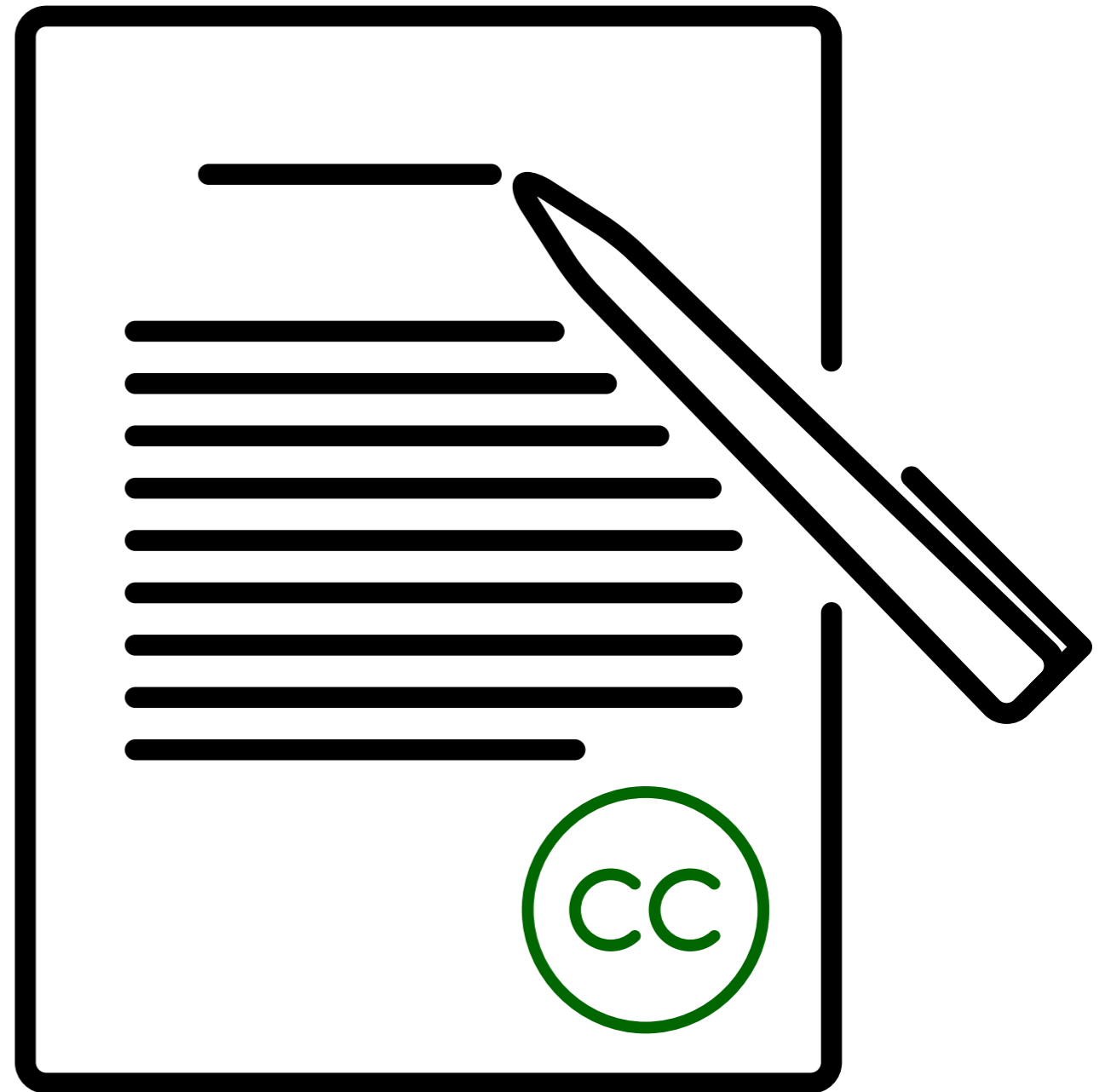
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CHAPTER I

Performance Studies, Mass Culture, and the Jewish Problem

AT 8:00 P.M. ON the evening of Thursday, 14 May 1998, the Jewish Museum in New York City hosted a panel discussion entitled "Young Jewish Writers" featuring novelists Allegra Goodman (*The Family Markowitz*), Marcie Hershman (*Tales of the Master Race*), Thane Rosenbaum (*The Golems of Gotham*), and Aryeh Lev Stollman (*The Illuminated Soul*). The conversation, moderated by Ellen Pall (*Among the Ginzburgs*), focused in part on how the writers' perceptions of their own Jewish identity did or did not affect their professional craft. As part of the museum's inaugural "Live at the JM" series, the event was specifically intended to attract a younger, "hipper," Jewish audience than the institution's typical public programs. Although the discussion was lively, the hall was sparsely filled. Many spectators left early. The real interrogation of contemporary Jewish American identity was taking place elsewhere.

At 9:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on that very same evening, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) broadcast the final episode of its top-rated comedy *Seinfeld* (1989–98). The self-billed "show about nothing" features comedian Jerry Seinfeld as a comedian named . . . Jerry Seinfeld. The character of Jerry is explicitly identified as Jewish in selected episodes, and this identification is reinforced through a variety of visual and linguistic performance codes: Jerry has dark hair, dark eyes, and a stereotypically Semitic profile. His accent (especially in the early episodes) betrays his real life upbringing in Queens and Long Island. He resides on Manhattan's Upper West Side, a largely Jewish neighborhood. His last name, Seinfeld, is unmistakably "different" from the Anglo-Saxon norm and is recognizable to a Jewish audience as German-Jewish in origin.

Yet, while Jewish critics and viewers alike identify Jerry Seinfeld as unambiguously Jewish, his religious and ethnic background is essential to the narrative in only a handful of episodes scattered over the show's nine-year run on NBC. The vast majority of episodes contain no

2 *Acting Jewish*

explicit reference to Jews or Jewishness. The episodes that do acknowledge his Jewishness tend to downplay its importance. For example, in one episode Jerry suspects that his dentist has converted to Judaism so that he can tell Jewish jokes without being labeled a bigot. When a priest asks Jerry, "This offends you as a Jewish person?" he replies, "No it offends me as a comedian."¹

Other elements of the show, such as Jerry's relationship with his family, that might be read as Jewish are not explicitly connected to religion or ethnicity; the viewer is thus free to miss or ignore any implied Jewish message. Yet Mary Kay Schilling and Mike Flaherty of the mainstream magazine *Entertainment Weekly* labeled *Seinfeld* "quintessentially Jewish."² And within the Jewish community, as film and television critic Vincent Brook reports, there is an ongoing conversation about the Jewishness of the series and its characters that has spanned and outlined the series' original nine-year run in prime time.³ Indeed, *Seinfeld*'s relentless exegesis of quotidian reality can itself be seen as a humorous and self-deprecating indicator of Jewishness. As Jon Stratton, who devotes an entire chapter to *Seinfeld* in his recent book *Coming Out Jewish*, writes:

The underlying narrative issue of *Seinfeld* is, I will argue, intrinsically Yiddish, though ultimately a function of many other migrant groups and their descendants in the United States. This issue is usually addressed by describing *Seinfeld* as "a show about nothing."⁴

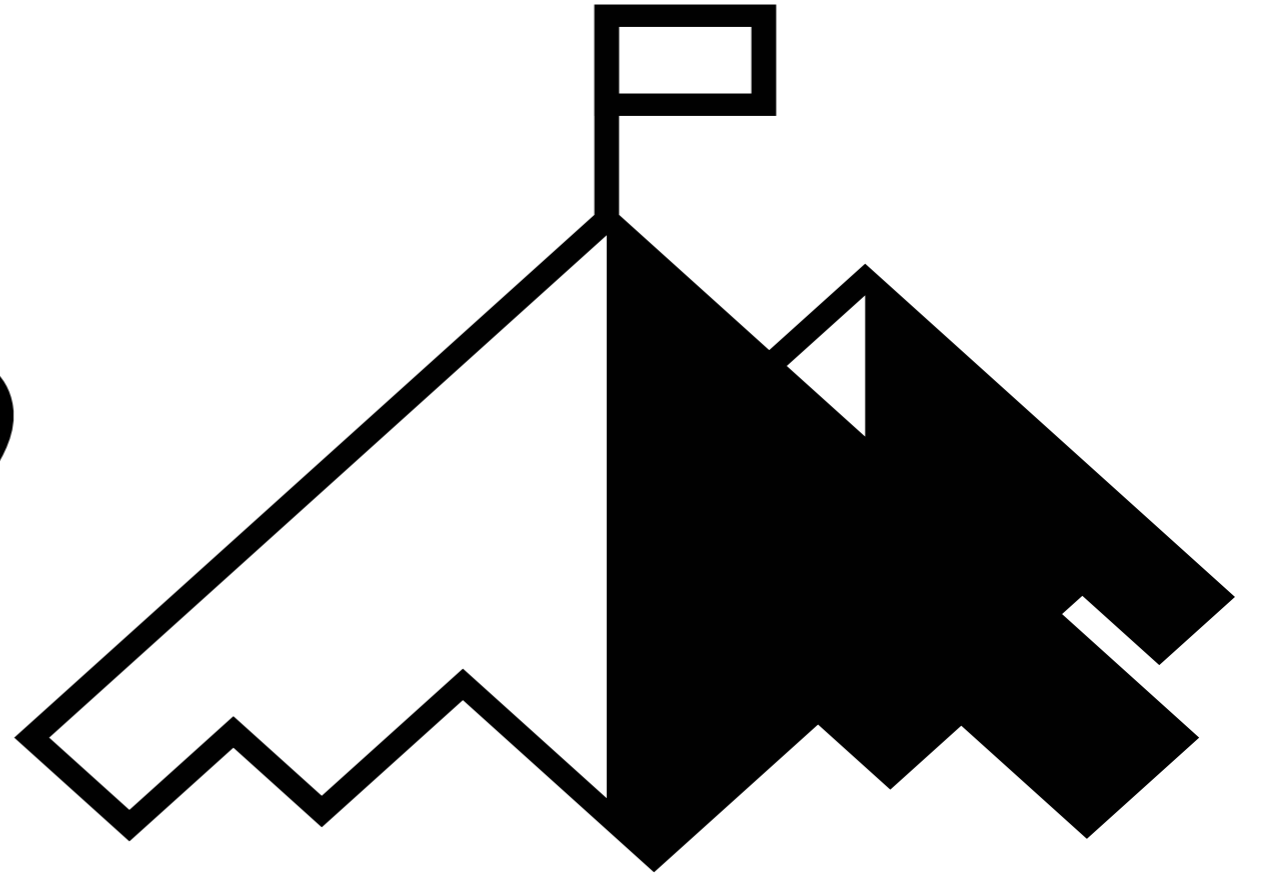
As Stratton implies, the description of *Seinfeld* as a show about nothing is as provocative as it is misleading. It suggests that *Seinfeld* resists interpretation, that any meaning the audience ascribes to Jerry's Jewishness, or any other element of the series, is purely unintentional. But, as the title of Stratton's volume suggests, the nothing that *Seinfeld* is about is really something: something ambiguous, closeted, hidden—something Jewish.

This book analyzes the work of Jewish American writers, directors, and actors in theater, film, and television in the United States from 1947 to the present. Performances created by Jews for consumption by a mass audience are prime sites for analyzing what I call *acting Jewish*, a critical formulation of Jewish American identity in the latter half of the twentieth century. I use the term *acting Jewish* to indicate the liminal, fluid, and multi-real nature of this formulation, as well as to emphasize the importance of the performer-spectator interaction in generating it.

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**Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen, Henry Bial
University of Michigan Press, 2005**



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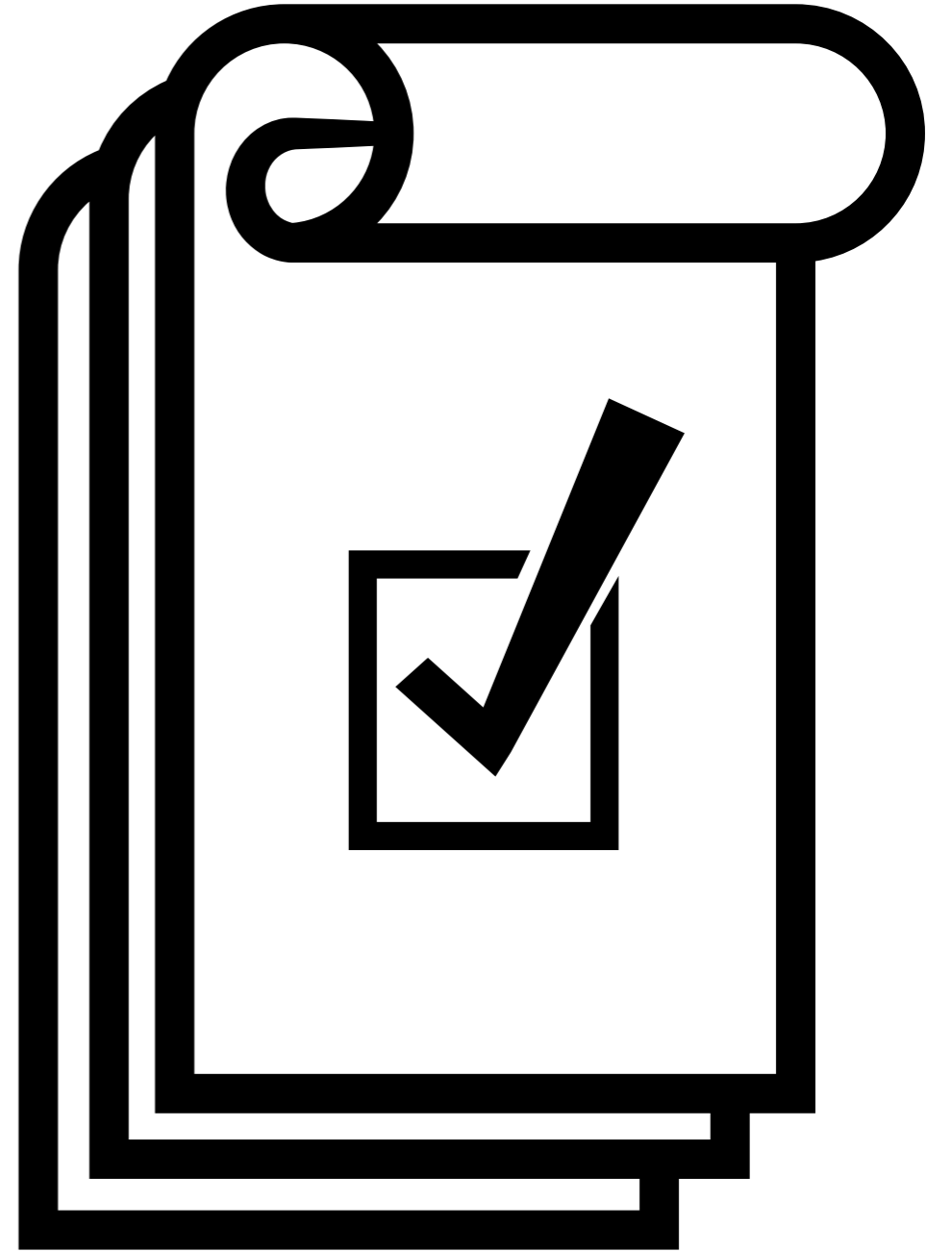
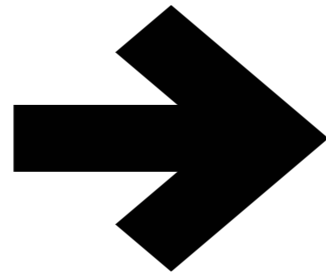
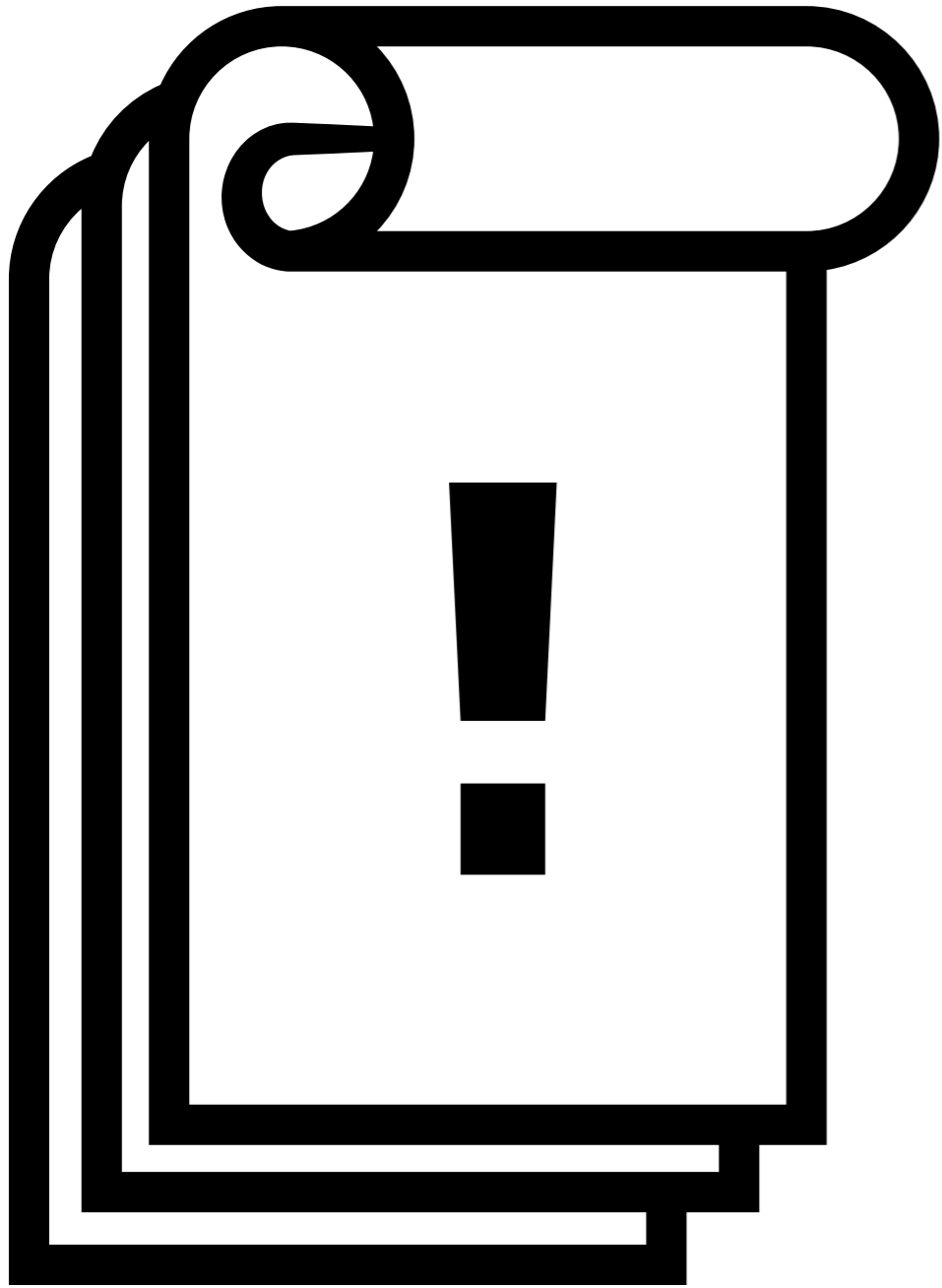
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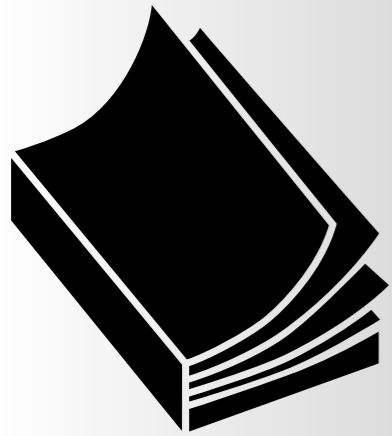
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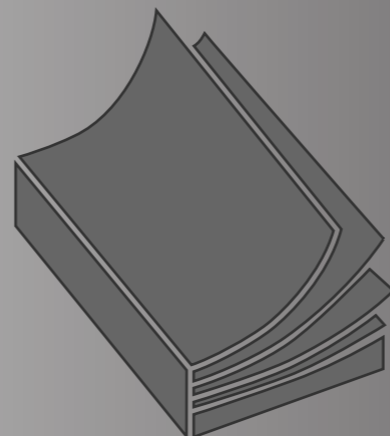
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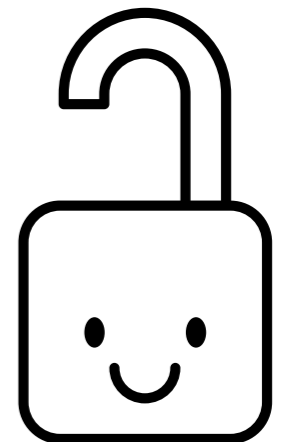
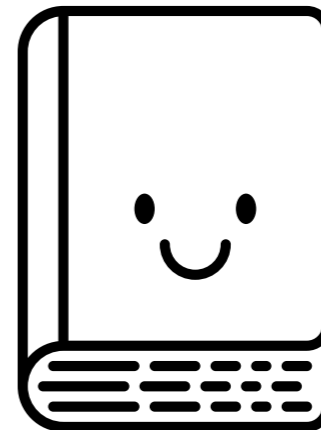
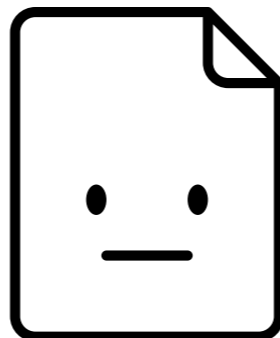
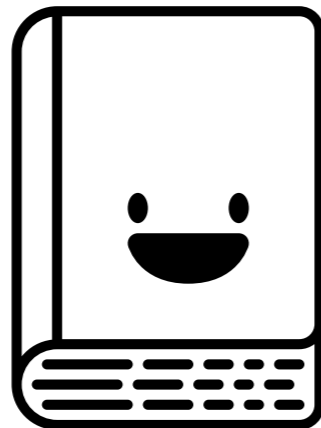
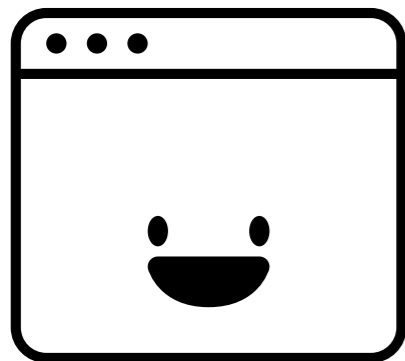
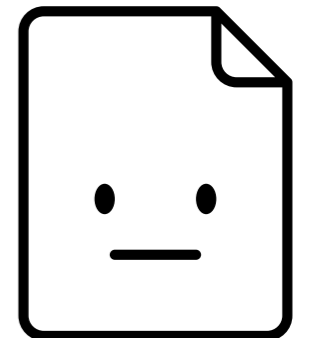
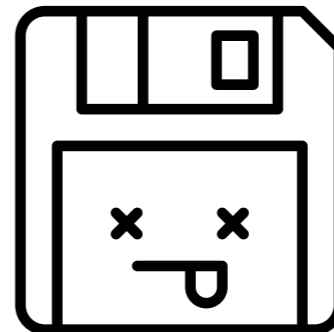
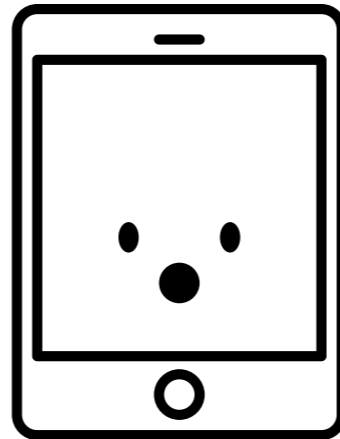
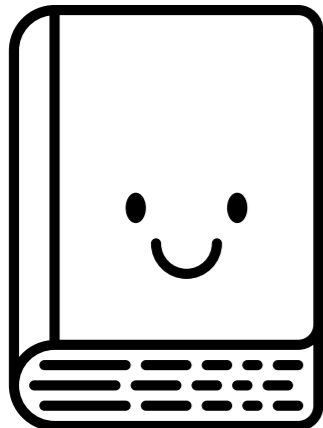
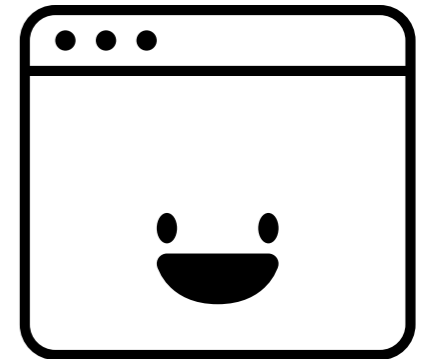
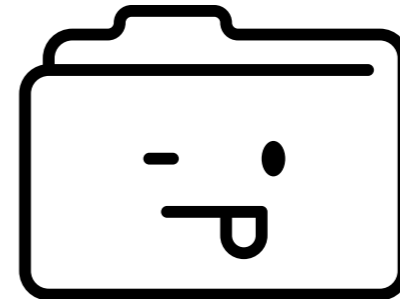
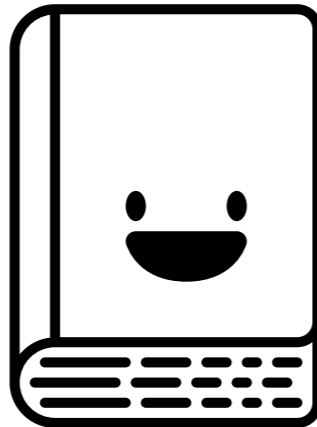
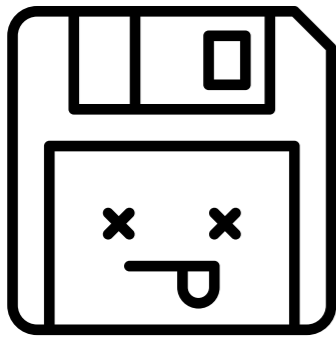
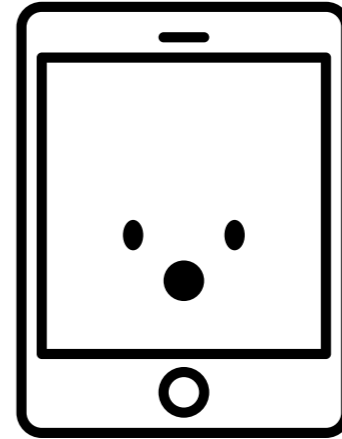
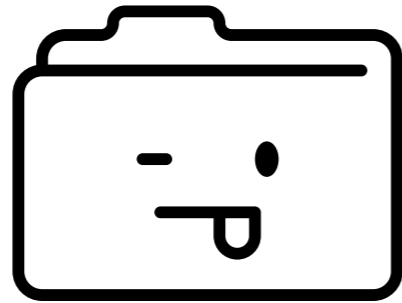
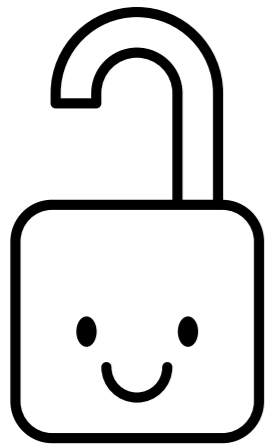


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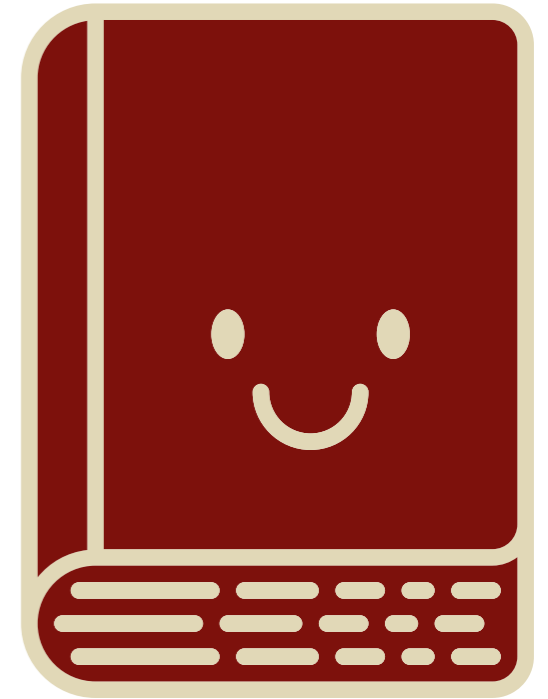
A Study of Direct Author Subvention for Publishing Humanities Books at IU-Bloomington & U-M

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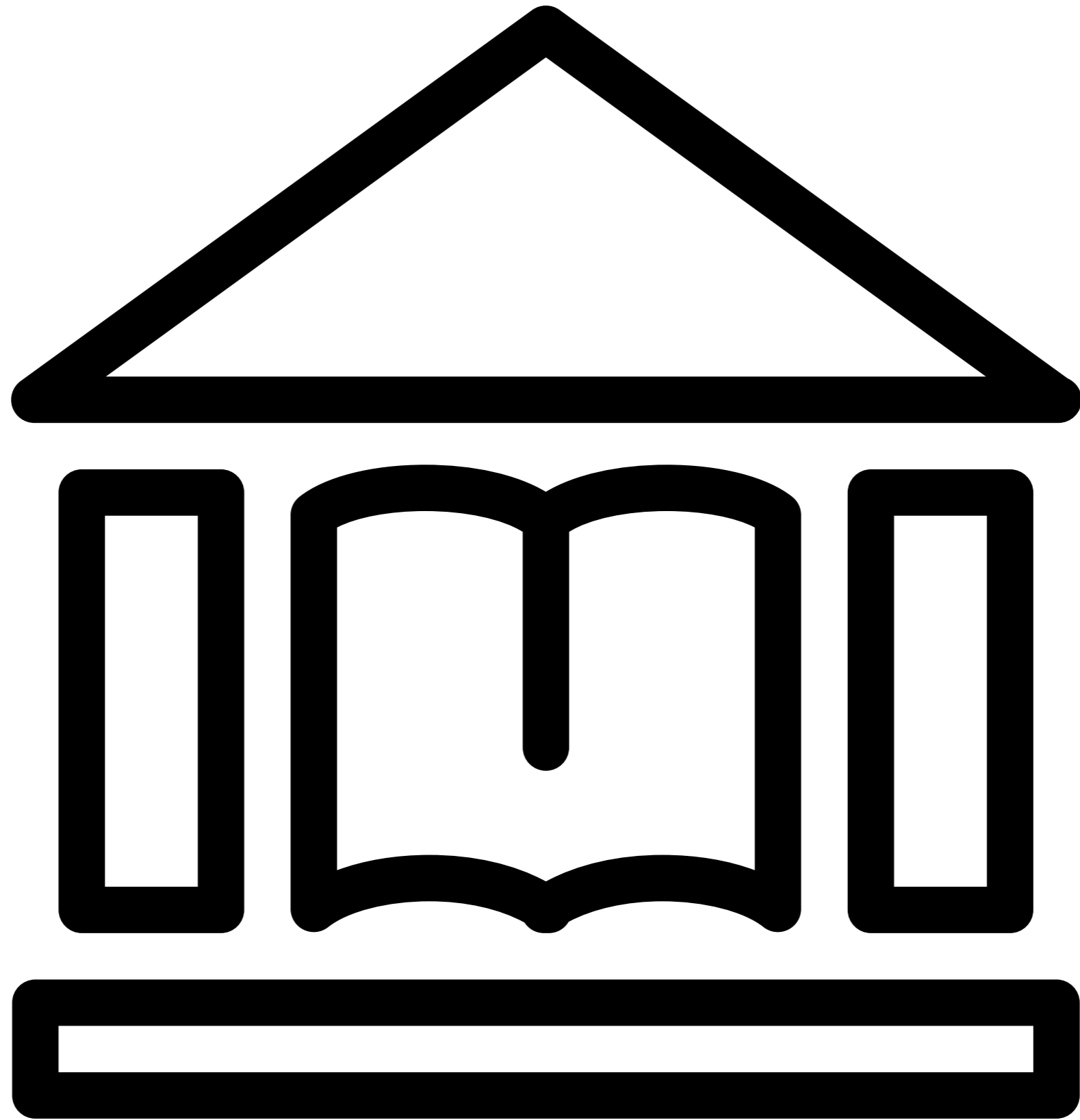
Through what processes could a university solicit, evaluate, allocate, & award funding to sponsor publication at all levels of the professoriate? Under what terms would funds be made available?

Who would be eligible to participate? And what challenges and opportunities would implementation present?

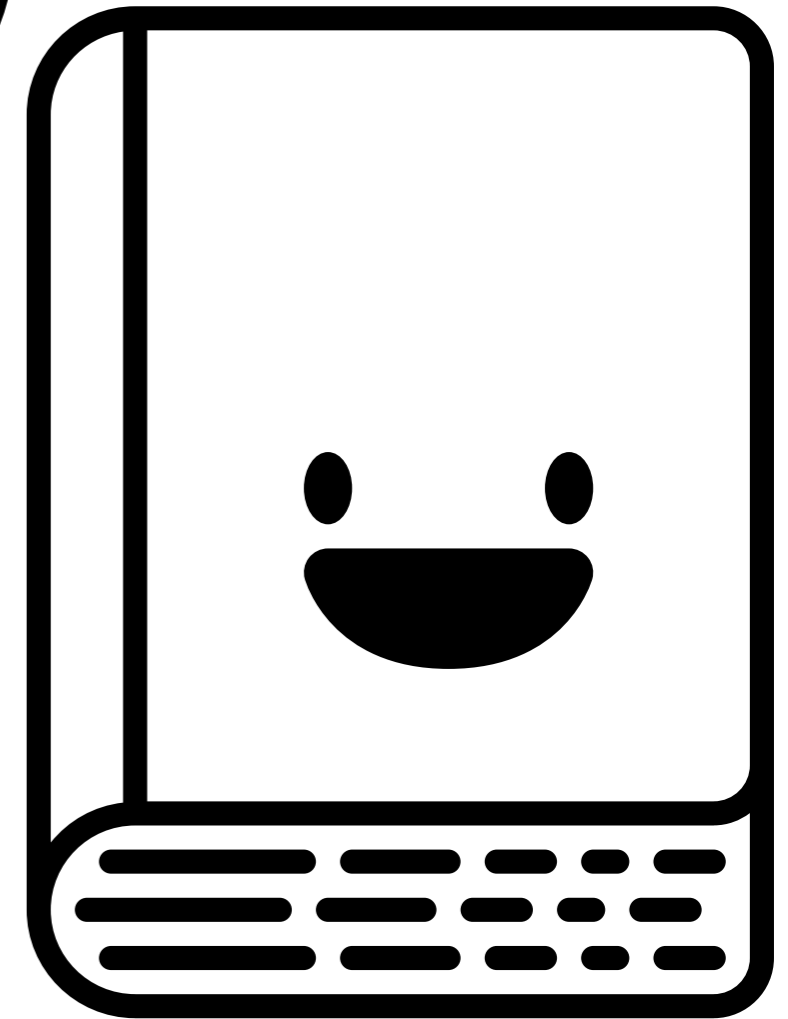
Through what sources of existing university funds might this model be funded? What is the magnitude of such funding? And what are potential consequences of redeployment?



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