

EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS

Marc Aronson locates the emergence of the modern American editor in a single publishing event at the very end of the nineteenth century. Editor Ripley Hitchcock made significant revisions to Edward Noyes Westcott's manuscript *David Harum*, which had previously been rejected by a number of publishers. The novel subsequently became "the number one best-seller for 1899," with almost three-quarters of a million copies sold by 1904. According to Aronson, "The work Hitchcock actually did on the manuscript was not unusual—other editors had also made suggestions for radical cuts and had turned rejected manuscripts into hot sellers—but there were two crucial differences this time: the book sold at a record-breaking pace, and people found out what the editor had done" (Gross 1993, 11). The idea that an editor could be just as, if not *more* important than the author was a new one, and Hitchcock's achievement gave editing a cachet it lacked at a time when most book editors when were seen as little more than glorified proofreaders.

Aronson further traces the evolution of the editor as virtual coauthor to Max Perkins, who turned the massive, unwieldy manuscripts of Thomas Wolfe into the now-classic novels *Of Time and the River* and *You Can't Go Home Again*. Perkins, modest to a fault, ennobled the editor's role by refusing to take credit for his work, although it was clear to those on the inside that his editing was crucial to the books' commercial and artistic success. From the 1940s through the 1970s, editing became a haven for smart, driven people who faced discrimination elsewhere in the white-collar world. Young Jewish men established a number of now-prominent publishing houses, including Alfred A. Knopf, Simon & Schuster, Viking, Random House, and Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. These houses, in turn, opened their doors to women and people of color. This is not to say that, for much of America's literary history, there has not been, as Zora Neale Hurston wrote in 1947, a dismal "lack of curiosity [by Anglo-Saxons] about the internal lives and emotions" of African Americans. "The fact that there is no demand for incisive and full-dress stories around Negroes above the servant class is indicative of something of vast importance to this nation" (54). Yet the situation has gradually become less egregious, as authors have become editors and editors became authors. One of the great novelists of the century, Toni

Morrison, had her entrée into the world of New York publishing as an editor at Random House in the 1960s, when the field was full of excitement and intellectual activity.

Unfortunately, in the 1980s, “as many publishing houses were subsumed into a new group of international conglomerates, the individual editor became less and less familiar to the public” (Aronson 1993, 19). That trend has continued to this day so that, outside the industry itself, editors at large houses are now, once again, generally anonymous. Indeed, Aronson only half-jokingly foresees a time in which “[f]ully computerized editing programs could take quantified focus-group studies, mix them with marketing figures, and generate genre paperbacks from text through bound books untouched by human hands” (20).

For the time being, however, editorial positions continue to be occupied by real people. Despite earning “average salaries even though they have above-average educations and responsibilities” (Editors Association of Canada, 1991), some editors appear to have satisfying and varied careers. Elizabeth Demers, the history acquisitions editor for the University of Nebraska Press, describes her life as a book editor this way:

My job takes me from the lofty halls of academe to schmoozy fund-raising events and cocktail parties; from discussions of intellectual ideas to the very serious contemplation of the economics and market for potential books, often within a very short span of time. A typical day for me might include reading manuscripts; meeting with authors and donors, or potential ones; flying to a conference, both to acquire new titles and to give a talk; meeting with our marketing department, managing editor, or designers; finding reviewers for manuscripts; and, of course, doing the core work of editing, accepting, and rejecting projects. (2004b)

Alan Williams—an editor at both Viking and Grove Weidenfeld—maintains that book editors have three constant and specific duties: “First they must find and select the books the house is to publish. Second, they edit (yes, Virginia, they still do edit, no matter what cries you hear about bottom lines, heartless conglomerates, and the defeat of taste by commerce). And third, they perform the Janus-like function of representing the house to the author and the author to the house” (Gross 1993, 4).

As selectors, and rejecters, of manuscripts, editors exercise a great deal of influence over who and what will be read. At this point in the process, editors are gatekeepers, potential queen- and king- (and taste-) makers. Authors and/or their agents are friendly, accommodating, and on their

best behavior. A certain amount of seduction is involved, with the author/agent wheedling and persuading, promising a financially successful book, and consenting to editorial conditions that the author may later find onerous. “[H]ow well you can write your book, indeed how good a writer you are, doesn’t initially come into play. First, an editor must determine if your project is, in concept and focus, commercially viable” (Rabiner and Fortunato 2002, 39). (Of course, if an author is already a proven commercial entity, the editor and publisher will be “doing the wooing.”)

It is in Williams’s second category that the relationship may sour: “Some writers . . . would rather see their dentist than their editor” (Editors Association of Canada, 1991). In fact, if getting and signing a book contract is in some respects like courtship, the actual editing phase may more closely resemble the student-teacher bond. Unless the author is a proven moneymaker, the editor normally continues to occupy the position of power. She tells the author what he must do to bring his work up to the level she expects. Like a teacher dealing with a recalcitrant student, she may cajole, harangue, plead with, and threaten the author to elicit a product she finds satisfactory. Though the author may—like a disgruntled student—sometimes grouse about an editor’s suggestions and demands, he knows he must please her to achieve his ultimate goal of publication.

Williams claims that the “third function—editor as Janus, or two-face—occupies most of the working editor’s office hours. . . . Unceasing reports, correspondence, phoning, meetings, business breakfasts, lunches, dinners, in- and out-of-office appointments leave active editors feeling like rapidly revolving doors as they attempt to explicate author and house to one another” (1991, 7). This constant juggling of duties is common to both trade and university press editors. Both are businesspeople engaged in hard work, much of it tedious, designed to make money for the companies that employ them.

Yet when it comes to profitability, there is a significant difference between the New York publishers and the smaller presses. While there may be more imprints than ever, the established publishing houses are now under the control of just a handful of corporations. Trade publishing is a multinational industry, mergers and acquisitions are rampant, and it takes a scorecard (and an eraser) to keep up with who owns what:

Rupert Murdoch’s Australia-based News Corporation acquired HarperCollins (formerly Harper & Row), William Morrow, and Avon, plus many other

American, Australian, and British publications as well as television and radio stations. Doubleday, along with its houses Delacorte and Dell, was bought by the German firm Bertelsmann and merged with Bantam; when Bertelsmann later (1998) acquired Random House, it became the largest U.S. trade publisher. Robert Maxwell of England bought Macmillan, the New York *Daily News*, and many other publishing enterprises. Maxwell's empire collapsed in the early 1990s, and Macmillan was eventually acquired by Viacom, which already owned Simon & Schuster. Viacom (which also owned Prentice Hall, Scribner, and other companies) later (1998) sold many of these publishing operations to the Pearson Group of England. Pearson's holdings now include Allyn & Bacon, Appleton & Lange, Macmillan, Penguin Putnam, Prentice Hall, Silver Burdett Ginn, and Simon & Schuster. ("Book Publishing" 2000)

As in the music and film industries, this concentration of power in just a few hands has resulted in a pronounced aversion to risk. Editors who once might have taken a chance on an unproven author—hoping that, over time, she would develop an audience and grow as an artist—now increasingly look only for books with best-seller potential. "[E]ditors . . . now spend more time marketing books than editing them, which results in the production of longer, sloppier . . . books" (Foer, 1997). Whether or not one would include fan favorites such as the *Harry Potter* series in this group, there is no doubt that publishers rely on blockbusters to generate a significant share of their revenue each year.

In 2002, the big five publishing houses—Random House, Penguin, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, and AOL Time Warner Group—"had estimated domestic revenue of \$4.10 billion," accounting for "approximately 45% of all sales generated in the adult, children and mass market segments." By far the largest among these in North America was Random House, with total sales of \$1.45 billion (Milliot 2003). In December 2004, that publisher's home page featured six books: three works of nonfiction (two memoirs and a cookbook) and three works of fiction, all by proven genre specialists: John Grisham (law and crime), Dean Koontz (horror), and Jonathan Kellerman (crime). While it makes sense that a publisher will want to put its prized possessions on show, it is equally obvious that the bottom line dictates what is and is not published. Look at any recent edition of *Publishers Weekly*, the industry's newsmagazine, and one notices that most news and feature articles focus far more on profitability than they do on art. Editors at the commercial houses must keep at least one—if not both—eyes on the market, on forecasts and media synergy and

growth strategies. Certainly, an editor who develops a productive working relationship with a superstar—a Stephen King or John Grisham or Sue Grafton—will be rewarded with some job stability, but most editors at large houses find themselves constantly scrambling to find the next big thing.

In contrast, editors at university presses more closely resemble the “old school” editors from the thirties and forties. With their presses funded by institutional budget lines, the commodity they trade in is prestige rather than profit. These editors can concentrate on developing authors whose work they admire and on tackling intellectual and social issues they think are important. On the downside, university presses editors will probably be paid even less than their New York colleagues. They also typically receive lower starting salaries than beginning teaching faculty, although they “don’t have the same kind of flexibility as faculty members in their schedules,” working a full day, five days a week, with only a few weeks of vacation each year—rather than three or four months (Demers 2004b).

Editors for nonprofit literary publishers have even more control than university press editors over what they do and don’t publish. Scott Walker, founder and editorial director of Graywolf Press, writes: “Most small-press editors not only acquire books but serve as line editor, managing editor (coordinating scheduling and the work of copy editors and proofreaders), legal department, receptionist, and administrative assistant—i.e., as the entire editor half of the old-fashioned author-editor relationship. The small-press editor’s acquisition won’t get shot down in an editorial or marketing committee meeting” (1993, 264).

Although Walker refers to himself as a “small-press” editor, publishers like Graywolf, Coffee House, Copper Canyon, Milkweed, Sarabande, and Story Line should more properly be called nonprofit presses. Milkweed, the second-largest nonprofit literary press (after Graywolf), is fairly typical in its goals: “Regardless of the genre, our books and programs are driven by a single-minded mission: to present the public with literary works that have the power to illuminate, challenge, and change” (n.d.). Nonprofits take advantage of—and are confined by—tax codes. While they may earn more money than they spend, they are prevented from “distributing their net earnings to individuals who control the organizations” (Tenenbaum 2002). Nevertheless, nonprofits do still need to make money in order to survive.

To this end, Thomas Woll contends that all publishers who eventually want to make a profit must be committed to the following goals:

- funding the enterprise yourself or through loans
- developing your editorial concept and niche
- producing quality products your target audience wants at a price it can afford
- marketing your product and getting the word out about it (2002, 3–4)

For university and nonprofit press editors and publishers of creative writing, this clearly means lots of hard work. Poetry, especially, is a notorious money loser, so publishers must rely on grants and wealthy contributors to keep the money flowing. And while most university and nonprofit presses know what sort of literature they want to publish, the trick is finding a niche that is not already occupied by a dozen other publishers. Granted, desktop publishing has made a huge difference in small publishers' ability to produce quality products; however, with chain bookstores closing down the independents, distribution is a major problem. Add to this the fact that "nonbookstores (department stores, grocery stores, discount outlets, etc.) sell 53 percent" of all books (Foer, 1997), and it is easy to see why an adventurous first novel is unlikely to receive much exposure. Moreover, because contemporary literature continues to be published in quantity (even while relatively little of it is actually sold), "getting the word out" requires plenty of research, strategic advertising, a significant amount of trial and error, and a very large dollop of luck.

On the very bottom rung of the commercial publishing ladder are small-press editors and publishers (often they are the same person). These generous and idealistic people know they aren't going to sell enough books to fund their operations, so they typically bankroll their presses out of their own pockets. True small presses—or "micropresses," as they are sometimes called—operate simply because the person in charge loves literature. Editor/publishers of small presses may engage in self-publishing or publication of the editor's friends, but their ultimate goal—getting work they love in the hands of people who will appreciate it—differs markedly from the profit-driven objectives of vanity presses (q.v.). Using desktop publishing (anyone with a computer and a printer can make a chapbook), micropresses print editions as small as fifty copies, and they often only "print on demand," that is, when there are sufficient customers to justify a print run. While this can be a tedious process, print-on-demand books don't take up warehouse space and they are never remaindered since they exist chiefly as code on the editor/publisher's computer.

Like nonprofit and small-press editors, editors of literary journals normally come to their work through a love of literature rather than a desire to make money. In fact, literary magazines tend to be money pits, and most long-standing journals have a university sponsor (the *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, the *Southern Review*) or some other source of outside funding (*Grand Street*, the *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*). Without this funding, the vast majority of literary magazines simply fold up after a few issues—the editor/publisher’s initial enthusiasm nearly always meeting with deafening apathy from the magazine-buying public. Not surprisingly, because of the forbidding cost of printing a high-quality, flat-spined color magazine, many new editors have begun turning to e-zine publishing instead (see “Electronic Literature”).

Whatever the drawbacks, editing a journal can still be a joy. Whether the magazine is online or in print, when editors are in the thick of putting together what they know will be an inspiring collection of stories and essays and poems, they, like their small-press counterparts, may well feel that the lack of financial remuneration is counterbalanced by the excitement of being part of—and helping to create—a literary scene. Joyce Carol Oates, longtime editor of the *Ontario Review*, describes the buzz this way: “[O]ne picks up a magazine, weighs it in the hand, it appears to be a *thing*, but in fact it isn’t a *thing* at all. It’s a symposium. A gathering. A party” (1980, 145). This festive atmosphere energizes editors—the sense that when readers “step into” a literary journal they never know whom they’ll meet or what the guests will have to say. David St. John, former poetry editor for the *Antioch Review*, writes: “Certainly it takes no great courage to publish a poet who’s already been well-received and acknowledged. The real delight is in discovering the work of a new or relatively unknown writer, and in being able to bring this work to the attention of a larger audience” (1990, 3). Robert Stewart, an editor at *New Letters*, echoes this notion that moving beyond the bounds of the ordinary is one of the great pleasures of editing a literary magazine: “In choosing poetry for publication, an editor needs both discipline and freedom. A little craziness, in fact, keeps him from bottoming out on poems that fit a predisposition, whatever kind” (1990, 58).

Before the boom in creative writing teaching jobs in the 1960s and 1970s, many writers made their living as editors. With the current dearth of teaching jobs, writers are once again turning to editing as a career. While hardly anyone will be able to make a living editing a literary

magazine or small-press publication, earning a living wage editing for a trade house or university press is feasible. Writers who wish to pursue this path must be persistent and willing to gain experience however they can, even if that means working for a while as an unpaid intern. While recent graduates of creative writing programs may have to work extra hard, as they will likely be perceived as less studious and diligent than their peers who have studied literary theory or rhetoric and composition, “many of the skills acquired in graduate school are useful in publishing” (Demers 2004a). Moreover, “Editors are encouraged to read voraciously and think critically, whether they edit in the humanities or in more technical fields. They never stop learning” (Editors Association of Canada, 1991). Dedicated creative writers *are* voracious readers and learners; consequently, they have the potential to thrive outside their area of specialization. And of course university-trained creative writers will inevitably have an especially clear sense of how and why a novel or a collection of stories or poems does or doesn’t work well.

The authors of this book have been on both sides of the editor-author relationship, in both scholarly and creative projects. We’ve learned that there are several guidelines editors and authors should follow if they are to have a congenial and fruitful working association. Good communication is essential: the more clearly all expectations are initially articulated, the less frustration there will be later on in a project. Authors need to feel free to ask potentially dumb questions, and editors need to know that it’s all right not to be able to answer every query immediately. Editors and authors should be respectful of one another; they should be diligent and follow through in a timely way on the promises they make. Most importantly, though, both sides must be patient. Authors need to realize that editors are almost certainly juggling a number of projects. Likewise, editors should understand that authors have lives outside their manuscripts that can interfere with its completion. In an “open letter” to prospective editors, M. Lincoln Schuster advises: “Learn patience—sympathetic patience—so that you will not be dismayed when you ask an author how his new book is coming along, and he tells you: ‘It’s finished—all I have to do now is write it’” (1962, 24).

Fortunately, many editors are, or have been, writers, so they are familiar with the problems authors face. In an ideal relationship, the editor acts as the author’s conscience. He forces her to buckle down and do the work when she would rather be at the beach; he pushes her to double-check that arcane fact she’s not quite sure of (and he does it himself when she

forgets to do so); he elicits better work from her than she ever thought she was capable of producing. And, when the process is over, and the editor and the author hold the new book or magazine in their hands, they can take great pride in knowing their collaboration was a successful one.