

5E

Five Editors, Five Perspectives

We're a focused brain trust of independent editors that brings extensive, wide-ranging experience and topflight professional contacts to the rapidly shifting landscape of publishing. The book business is more competitive and complicated than ever, and 5E aims to be at the center of the conversation, providing a source for informed discussions while helping authors, agents and publishers create their best work.



Marjorie Braman



Judy Sternlight



Jane Rosenman



Patricia Mulcahy



Joan Hilty



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Value Added: A Freelance Editor's Contribution

Jane Rosenman

My colleagues and I in 5E—all of whom spent years in-house reading submission from terrific agents—are now struck by how many of these same agents are reaching out to us in our new roles. We're delighted, of course, to be able to put our finely honed skills to effective use. And at our monthly dinners we've speculated: Is this practice increasing as the marketplace gets tougher and tougher?

So I posited that question to several agents. And indeed, more agents are urging their clients to reap the benefits of another set of eyes on their manuscripts. According to Rob McQuilken of Lippincott Massie McQuilkin, "What we're seeing is that it's harder and harder to sell. Commitments have become more conservative. So I can't afford to go out with a reasonably polished manuscript. If the client has the money to hire an outside person—and money is something we're very sensitive about—I feel it's foolish not to avail ourselves of the extra help."

Three agents I spoke to all used the same phrase, "The bar has never been higher." Wendy Sherman of Wendy Sherman Associates has increasingly urged authors to work with outside editors. In Wendy's words, "In-house editors used to say to me that they loved a certain book and could do the work to get the manuscript up to speed. Clearly those editors no longer have that luxury. If they feel the book is not going to work in its present incarnation—or close to it—they just can't take it on."

Today, agents are increasingly motivated by how many strong, former in-house editors are now freelancing. As agent Joelle Delbourgo put it, "This talented group really understands what goes on in those editorial meetings and marketing meetings. And they have their ears to the ground."

Agents are using editors before submitting manuscripts and sometimes after a limited submission has not yielded a sale. Particularly in fiction, if editors love certain key aspects of the writing but feel the plotting is weak, agents are now more inclined to bring in an outside editor to beef up the storytelling.

Obviously the decision to bring in a collaborative editor is a big one for a conscientious agent. One stellar agent told me his agency asks the following questions: 1) Is the project big enough to sustain the cost? 2) Will the quality of the project likely improve? 3) Is there a collaborative editor we know who would be truly excellent for that particular project? 4) Does the author have the resources to cover the cost?

We at 5E are gratified to report that books we have worked on have been sold to or already published by numerous publishers including Berkley, Chronicle Books, Ecco, The Free Press, HarperCollins, Holt, Open Road, Pantheon, Penguin, Random House, Simon and Schuster, Skyhorse, Sourcebooks, and St. Martin's. We're proud that our work behind the scenes continues to be a large "value-added" for authors and agents.

Jane Rosenman has been an Executive Editor at Houghton Mifflin, Scribner Publishing, and St. Martin's Press. Prior to that, Jane worked as Editorial Director of Washington Square Press as well as a Senior Editor at Pocket Books. From 2008 through 2009, she worked part-time acquiring titles for Algonquin Books while also starting to work as an independent editor for literary agents and individual writers. For more information, visit www.linkedin.com/pub/jane-rosenman/40/591/a2b



Picture the Possibilities

Joan Hilty

Platform: It's the publishing buzzword of the day as everyone seeks to expand theirs. The digital era is redefining the way we promote and present books. Which fresh ideas work best as e-books? Which backlist books can find new life digitally? What "enhanced content" might make a bigger sell or a better read?

Here's another question: why not create or reinvent that project as a graphic novel? And yes, this has plenty to do with the digital scene.

Previously, when prose authors moved into comics and graphic novels, they had to play in established worlds. Even Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore, comics' best-known contemporary writers, got their big breaks via existing characters: an obscure horror character named Swamp Thing, a World War II pulp-fiction hero called the Sandman.

That was then; this is now. As comics companies concentrate on superhero-movie-franchise content, they're leaving the field wide open for creators who know that a graphic novel can tackle any genre. Bestsellers Audrey Niffenegger and Diana Gabaldon recently chose the format because it fit the stories they wanted to tell. "You can turn on a dime with regard to point of view in a comic," Gabaldon told Publishers' Weekly about *The Exiles*, a graphic novel retelling *Echo in the Bone* through a secondary character's POV. Niffenegger (who originally envisioned *Time Traveller's Wife* as an illustrated novel) adapted a short story into *The Night Bookmobile*, noting: "The pictures could take over and the words could be removed, and the balance could shift back and forth."

At DC's Vertigo imprint, I acquired a graphic novel from a comics writer that began as a prose thriller about a military contractor, but sat unfinished for years when its primary inspiration, the author's brother-in-law, died on the job in Iraq. Finally, he realized that he could handle telling this painfully personal story in a comfortably familiar format, especially with the additional perspective of his talented co-writer and illustrator.

And comics' reach finally extends into the ethernet. With the newest advances in e-reader technology, digital graphic novels can now recreate the immersive experience of reading comics—moving smoothly within rows of art and text with the tap of a screen.

In any format, the graphic novel is one of the most exciting growth areas in publishing; it's pulling in both a wider talent pool, and a wider audience that loves to engage with stories in the digital world.

Joan Hilty has 15 years' experience at DC Comics editing top-selling periodicals, and acquiring and editing Eisner – and Harvey Award-winning graphic novels. As a Senior Editor there, she worked with comic writers, novelists, journalists and screenwriters. She is currently an editor and packager specializing in graphic novels and illustrated books; her clients include Farrar Straus and Giroux, Viacom, A&E Networks and Forbes. For more information, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgtturn.com.



The Gentle Art of Dissuasion

Marjorie Braman

One of the trickiest parts of being an editor is knowing when to tell an author an idea isn't working. The creative force is a necessary component of the author's skills, but it can sometimes force a writer into believing too much in their own ideas. It takes a lot of courage for a writer to let go of a plan that feels inspired. The gift of empathy—that delicate balance between being supportive but straightforward—is one of an editor's most valuable tools. The art of gentle dissuasion takes a light touch and a strong conviction.

I once stumbled across the work of an author whose writing I fell in love with, but not the genre in which she wrote. It wasn't hard to convince her to try her hand at a novel aimed at the general audience, but she had trouble settling on the right story. She and I went through three lengthy proposals before I felt she hit the mark. Our work together paid off: the book became a New York Times bestseller. The early input not only guided her in the right direction it saved her from writing a novel that was irrevocably headed in the wrong direction.

Early input is more common with non-fiction but when a novelist shares fiction in pieces, I can point out elements—story lines, characters, plot twists—that should be re-thought early rather than written and then re-written later.

I recently worked with an author under contract, who thought he had a fabulous idea for his novel. I encouraged him to share material early, I was gently doubtful in each conversation we had about the book, I was honest in editing the manuscript, but it wasn't until I'd edited the 2nd revision that he accepted the fact that the book wasn't going to work and he put it aside. The author of several previous novels, he just wasn't conditioned to share material in embryonic form. But that experience helped build up a trust that has helped turn our work together into a partnership.

You can't have a partnership with an author unless she knows you fundamentally respect the work. The author's respect, for an editor's insights, experience and knowledge of the marketplace, is what her trust is built upon. This partnership, based on mutual respect, often means that the editor can step in early and steer the writer in a different, better, direction.

After a 26-year career in publishing, most recently as Editor-in-Chief of Henry Holt, Marjorie Braman now works independently with writers, agents and publishers. Some of the authors she's worked with include Michael Crichton, Elmore Leonard and Sena Jeter Naslund. She also works as a strategic advisor at Open Road Integrated Media. For more information, visit <http://www.marjoriebraman.com>.



Live & Onstage – Literature!

Judy Sternlight

Virtual literary communities are crucial in this digital age, helping authors to generate fans and book sales. But should they replace live author events? I don't think so. In the right venue, personal appearances do still sell books. The extra value lies not only in author signings and special offers, but also in local press coverage and meaningful connections between authors and book-lovers that lead to good buzz and online traction.

With a combination of strategy and specialization, literary organizations that cultivate live audiences are still creating a palpable enthusiasm for literature. And those of us who are savvy editors, agents and publishers should encourage our authors to work with these stand-out groups.

Last November, at the Center for Fiction on E47th Street, when Executive Director Noreen Tomassi interviewed Peter Matthiessen, one of my favorite authors from my Random House days, the whole audience leaned in. People tumbled over each other to ask questions, and I saw stacks of books being sold. Matthiessen is remarkably charismatic and talented, but that's not the only reason the audience was so engaged. The Center has built a vibrant literary community with popular events, prestigious prizes, an impressive library and bookstore, book discussion groups, and writing classes. Last year, I worked with one of the talented writers in their Emerging Writers Fellowship Program, and I plan to do it again.

I've also seen electrified audiences at Live from the NYPL, The PEN World Voices Festival, the New Yorker Festival, the National Book Foundation, and the translated-literature-focused Bridge Series. Symphony Space is magical—their short story programs induce collective gasps from the audience, and it's fun to watch longtime subscribers greeting each other before the show.

This tradition isn't limited to New York City. Outstanding groups across America, like the National Writers Series in Northern Michigan (recently profiled in *Publishing Perspectives*), are building energized communities of book lovers. My authors have also participated in raucous storytelling at The Moth, which stages performances around the country. Several of these groups share recordings of live events online and on the radio.

At the end of the day, virtual reporting of live literary activism benefits everyone. And when authors and publishers are competing with so many sources of entertainment, we need these innovative literary organizations more than ever.

Judy Sternlight founded Judy Sternlight Literary Services in 2009. As a former editor at Random House, Ballantine, and Modern Library (2000-2009), Judy has worked with numerous acclaimed and bestselling writers and translators including Rita Mae Brown, Ana Castillo, Edith Grossman, Mark Kurlansky, Peter Matthiessen, Joyce Carol Oates, and Matthew Pearl. Specializing in literary fiction, her books have won the National Book Award, the Commonwealth Prize, the Sophie Brody Award for Excellence in Jewish Literature, the PEN Beyond Margins Award, and other accolades. She also edits commercial fiction (including mysteries and thrillers) and narrative non-fiction. For more information, visit www.JudySternlightLit.com.



The Chemistry of Editing

Patricia Mulcahy

One of the most frequent – and urgently asked -- questions at a writer’s conference or any other gathering of would-be authors is: “How will I know which editor/agent/publisher is right for my project? Can I avoid wasting time with people who just don’t ‘get it?’”

If you’re a baseball fanatic, or a chemical warfare expert, or the king/queen of buttermilk biscuit production, which acquiring editor might share that obsession? It’s the agent’s job to find out; knowledge of editors’ backgrounds, interests and key successes helps the author’s representative decide where to submit—or not submit—a particular project. The editor for a book like *The Help* might not necessarily rouse sales and marketing people on behalf of a military thriller, for example, because he or she lacks credibility publishing that kind of material, and may have little knowledge of its readership.

As editor-in-chief at Doubleday, I initiated the production of a little booklet highlighting each editor’s profile for agents—no Facebook then. I stole the idea from my father, an ad and marketing man at Campbell’s Soup. My Doubleday entry read in part: “As the oldest of six children in an Irish Catholic family, I will always be interested in books about death, loss, faith or the lack of it, redemption, the overcoming of obstacles, and of course comedy, without which none of the rest of it would be worth much.”

You can see why I went on to acquire *The Complete History of Mad Magazine* and also publish ace Irish American crime writers James Lee Burke and Michael Connelly. This doesn’t mean I lack interest in writers with whom I share no ethnic or personal bonds; it does mean that some of my biggest commercial breaks came with writers whose worldview I understand. I sent their books out into a crowded, competitive marketplace with real confidence.

As a freelancer I work best when fully engaged with both the author and his/her subject matter. Given the level of commitment required to cut a 900-pager in half, or collaborate with someone intensively on a book doctoring or writing gig, I only take on those projects that truly rope me in.

Chemistry: it’s elusive, but essential. Sometimes it is highly personal. Finding the right freelance editor involves a bit of research, some intuition, and that extra bit of serendipity—by hanging out with fellow lovers of the word in reading groups, writing workshops, and online book discussion forums, and then by asking the right questions. That’s when you, as an author, will stumble upon the editor whose chemistry meshes with yours.

*Patricia Mulcahy formed Brooklyn Books in 1999 after over 20 years in book publishing. She started as a temp at Farrar, Straus & Giroux and left as Editor in Chief at Doubleday. Her clients include musician Quincy Jones; former White House advisor Karen Hughes; television journalist Andrea Mitchell; and Acumen Fund founder and CEO Jacqueline Novogratz. She is the co-author of *It Is Well with My Soul: The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year-Old Woman*, by Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson (Penguin, 2010). Her most recent editorial project is *Creating Room to Read: A Story of Hope in the Battle for Global Literacy* by John Wood (Viking, January 2013). For more information, visit www.brooklynbooks.com.*