

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



All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go

Marjorie Braman

The Fall season, traditionally the time for publishers to get out their “big” books, is this year chock-o-block with blockbusters, from Zadie Smith to J.K. Rowling. But highlighting the downside is this, from the fiction editor of the Washington Post, Ron Charles: “You can only read so much...It’s difficult for places like us that just run one review a day.” If it’s difficult to get Michael Chabon reviewed in all the major outlets, just think about the many first—and harder still—second novels that will go unheralded by the reviewers. Add to that the self-published books, which for better or worse—depending on whether you’re Jeff Bezos or a consumer—have no intermediary between the desire to write and the ability to publish. Whether you call them gatekeepers, curators, reviewers or friends, most readers want help in choosing what to read.

Goodreads.com just announced in August that their website has more than 10 million members. That’s 10 million readers. Some join in order to crow about the books they love, some join in order to get suggestions from other readers. Many do both. But what’s clear is that sites like Goodreads are trying to create the very thing that publishers have always lusted for, a commodity that can’t be bought—word of mouth.

The erosion of review outlets has been the quiet killer of traditional publishing, among so many louder killers. As the outlets for reviews has contracted, thanks to the ease of self-publishing, the number of books published has expanded. But the fact that 10 million people seem to want to hear suggestions from other readers, share their passions, join others in talking about books, is a clear indication that readers want help deciding what to read. The trick for publishers now is to tap into this hunger for guidance. The paid-for or anonymous review on various book-buying websites, besides striking an uncomfortable false note, is too transparent for most smart readers to be fooled by. Every publisher, of course, has a website, but that assumes readers know Random House from Simon and Schuster, which is unlikely, and those websites aren’t intended to be impartial.

But there are also sources that strike a note somewhere between readers talking to each other and established book reviews. Books stores like Politics and Prose and McNally Jackson have terrific websites with staff picks and short reviews, and readers can follow them on Twitter, as well. While we may mourn the demise of the authoritative, experienced print reviewer, the staff in independent bookstores is more knowledgeable about books and the consumer and can be trusted to be impartial about the books they fall in love with. And if readers have the inclination and time, there are hundreds more websites in addition to Goodreads. (Googling “what should I read” results in thousands of suggested websites.) It’s good to know there’s an audience of readers who are eager for direction and who will trust the right source.

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>.



Hybrid Publishing Careers

Judy Sternlight

When I first arrived at Random House, I discovered that many accomplished writers supplemented their advances with other sources of income: teaching, translating, public speaking, other full-time jobs, grants. I knew it must be hard to juggle so many balls, but I saw how some authors thrived on it. Academic teaching, for example, can provide creative inspiration, as well as a steady paycheck and (ideally) health benefits.

This hybrid work-style is a great model for today's freelance editors. Given recent developments in the publishing world—downsizing at traditional houses, the e-book explosion, innovations in technology and communication—the idea of branching out is very appealing. It's a great way to keep learning and growing, and doing business.

I have a steady flow of editorial clients but it's been fun to write again (something I did before I became a book editor). In addition to doing some collaborative writing behind the scenes, I contributed a piece to *The Business of Writing: Professional Advice on Proposals, Publishers, Contracts, and More for the Aspiring Writer*, edited by Jennifer Lyons and introduced by Oscar Hijuelos (Allworth Press, October, 2012). The roster of experts in this anthology is impressive—and a great reminder of how many different publishing jobs there are. I'm also masterminding a literary anthology for Brown University, which will publish in time to celebrate Brown's 250th anniversary.

The rest of 5E has also been branching out in exciting ways: Marjorie Braman did a recent stint at Open Road Integrated Media, first as interim Editorial Director and then as Strategic Advisor; Joan Hilty is a book packager, cartoonist, and adjunct professor; Jane Rosenman and Pat Mulcahy have also taught publishing-related courses, and Pat is a seasoned collaborative writer as well as book editor.

Indie editors aren't the only ones branching out. As Joan points out in her latest essay, pioneering agents like Liza Dawson are finding new ways to expand, even forming their own e-book publishing divisions. These hybrid approaches still rely on the basics of publishing—writing, editing, marketing and publicity—creating all kinds of opportunities for those of us with the right experience and expertise.

Judy Sternlight, a former editor at Random House, Ballantine, and Modern Library, has worked with numerous acclaimed and bestselling writers and translators including Rita Mae Brown, Sandra Gilbert, Edith Grossman, Bret Anthony Johnston, Mark Kurlansky, Meera Nair, Peter Matthiessen, Joyce Carol Oates, and Kwei Quartey. 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.



Pitch Perfect

Jane Rosenman

To paraphrase Jane Austen, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a writer in possession of an unpublished manuscript must be in want of a winning query letter.” Editors and agents can all attest to the fact that we get asked for advice on this issue all the time—and for good reason. Making your pitch stand out amidst the flood of queries that pour into agents’ offices is not a job for the faint of heart.

This past summer I had the great pleasure of teaching a publishing course at the 92nd Street Y Tribeca Branch. My students—all serious writers and excellent critics—asked me about this Herculean task. Coincidentally, *Poets and Writers’* July/August issue zeroed in on this Kremlin-like part of the business. The magazine features some fly-on-the-wall views inside several literary agencies as they cull the requests that pour in. But the issue also reports on success stories of unknown writers who managed to secure representation from top-notch agents through well-conceived, well-targeted query letters. These articles are superb. If you visit the P&W website (www.pw.org/magazine), you can find these articles in the Archives.

All the agents—from young to marquee names—reiterated two crucial points.

- 1) It’s impressive when a writer has deep knowledge of that agent’s list—not just the greatest hits but perhaps a lesser-known book that has direct relevance to what this writer is attempting. The writer, in short, has come to that particular agent after careful research.
- 2) Agents look for writers who clearly and deeply understand the genre they are working in. As I was urging my students to embrace these tenets, I realized that for everyone in our business—agents, editors, and writers—these two points speak to salient issues in the overall publishing process. We all want to find manuscripts that are singular but are also grounded in a territory we intuitively understand. And the importance of targeted marketing—book by book—has never been more crucial.

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



When is Enough, Enough?

Patricia Mulcahy

Many writers dread the words, “There are a few changes you might make.” But a fair-minded and detailed critique can be a gift. After all, would you approach the podium for a major speech with your slip showing?

Every writer, no matter how talented, needs solid advice on honing his or her material. But the revision process can be frustrating. Who do you listen to? And when do you stop revising? Are four drafts enough—or sixty-five? What’s the difference between revision and obsession? Is another draft really an improvement, or a way to keep the material under your control?

When I worked for a publisher, I often goaded a writer into showing me the latest revision with: “It’s time to face the music and let it go.”

Early in my career, I became more sensitive to the other side when I dated a Russian émigré novelist and playwright whose comic novel had finally been accepted by a respectable agent. But before he found a publisher he got twelve letters of rejection. Six said: “The first half of the novel is engaging and delightful. But I’m afraid I don’t see a place for it on our list because the second half falls flat.”

The other six declared: “Your fluency with the language is amazing, but the opening of the novel just didn’t grab me.”

I explained that most editors and agents rarely read beyond the first thirty or fifty pages. Editors claiming that the ending was stronger than the opening probably didn’t read more than that. Still, given my friend’s propensity for on-the-page stand-up, it seemed entirely possible to me that he started out strong and then lost steam. I encouraged him to revisit the second half of his novel.

For every five editors who dash off something quickly to clear the desk, there’s one who’ll take the time to help the writer improve. But this doesn’t mean that he or she will offer blanket praise.

A clear and balanced editorial critique, and an engaged author response to it, can be as rewarding as the writing itself. It’s up to the writer to decide what to discard and what to keep. The goal is to keep the questions coming and the dialogue open.

*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.*



The Editors Pick

Joan Hilty

I am a process freak. I can't watch a movie without guessing how they made it rain, can't read a book without picturing the author in front of his screen worrying over whether a single mom sounds sufficiently female, or if he described the sound of a slamming wooden gate properly. Small wonder I went into editing.

Naturally, when it comes to the exploding e-book scene, I'm curious about how books are chosen for the format. Increasingly, authors and agents are publishing original and backlist works either solo or in tandem with one of the many service agencies that have sprung up. Plenty of pixels have been spilled on statistics garnered by both the wild experiments and the solid success stories, like Robyn Carr's *Chelynn*, a 1980s historical romance that became a 2012 bestselling e-book thanks to Carr's agent Liza Dawson, a leading experimenter in e-publishing who was a successful in-house editor before becoming an agent. While staying focused on agenting, Dawson's also published e-book originals like Jean Sasson's *American Chick* and Jeanne Martinet's *Etiquette for the End of the World*.

I asked Dawson how she made these choices—was it based on past performance and future potential? On the difficulty of finding out-of-print copies, or the essential nature of the work? She told me it was different every time. Different reason, different strategy, different process; I was hooked.

Dawson initially bought *Chelynn* as a young editor. Resurrecting it from out-of-print limbo meant a lot to her and the author. Carr now had a wide audience who Dawson guessed—correctly—might flock to the book, but the digital edition needed something extra. So Carr wrote a heartfelt new introduction about writing the book as a young military wife in Texas, noting that she hadn't become a bestselling author until her contemporary romances hit the NYT list in 2008. Even so, traditional publishers couldn't keep her early historical work in print; it took the digital age to bring them back to life.

Etiquette for the End of the World presented a different challenge for Dawson. Martinet has a solid seven-book nonfiction backlist as a humorist and advice writer, but her first novel, using the Mayan prophecy of December 2012 apocalypse as a comedy hook, was time-sensitive and (as editors kept telling Dawson) didn't "fit into a tidy category." Publishing it digitally allowed the book to come out on the best date and provided a low-risk transition from a nonfiction identity into fiction.

In a publishing world that requires agents and editors to wear ever more hats, I love seeing the creative thinking going on in digital publishing. Different reasons, same fundamental value: a good editorial eye for what to publish, and how to publish it.

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.