



# Creativity, Editing, and the Business of Publishing

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## This month's issue includes:

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S P R I N G / S U M M E R 2 0 1 7

## Bridging the Divide Jane Rosenman



It's become a constant soundtrack to our lives circa 2017---the argument that we Americans all live in our own cocoons, communing only with those who share our political, religious, and aesthetic ideologies. This "divided nation" argument is repeated so often that I'd just accepted it as a truism without considering how it affected my personal and professional life.

But a recent experience made me realize just how much "truth" lies in that truism. Several years ago, I worked on a memoir with author Jennifer Fulwiler called *Something Other than God*. It's the story of her conversion from confirmed atheist to highly observant Catholic in the process of meeting and then marrying her husband. Published by Ignatius Press in 2015, the book, along with Jennifer's daily Sirius XM Radio Show and her popular blog, have made her a star in the Catholic world.

Jennifer recently contacted me about editing her next book entitled *One Beautiful Dream: The Rollicking Tale of Family Chaos, Personal Passions, and Saying Yes to Them Both*. It was acquired by Zondervan in a heated auction among five competing religious imprints and is scheduled to be published in early 2018.

*One Beautiful Dream* chronicles the eight-year span during which the Fulwilers produced six children. The book humorously and honestly describes people's charged reactions to the Fulwiler method of contraception (aka Natural Family Planning.) Complicating an already chaotic situation, Jennifer developed a potentially life-threatening blood clotting disorder that required daily injections during these pregnancies. This memoir also pays homage to the author's determination to achieve her lifelong ambition to write a book; we celebrate along with her when she secures her first book contract after a writing process that might be described as the opposite of having a room of one's own in which to work.

It was a pleasure to edit Jennifer's prose again; she's a natural writer with superb storytelling instincts. This past March she was in New York and so we had the luxury to meet in person to go over my edits. Our conversation was terrific. We talked about good writing, matters of faith, motherhood, and humor. As we worked together, I realize that I was registering one key difference from conversations I have with people in my usual social circles. I was not reflexively assuming that Jennifer

and I shared the same opinions when it came to hot button issues of abortion or of national politics in general. Toward the end of our meeting, Jennifer asked me about how much my two children identify with temple and with the Jewish faith. I explained that when our son—who'd been an obedient bar mitzvah boy—started high school, he actively pushed back against joining his family in temple. I said that he'd begun with great fervor to read Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Then I paused to take a breath. Jennifer piped up and said, "The third author, I wager to guess, was Christopher Hitchens." She had guessed right.

*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 to 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 <https://www.linkedin.com/in/janerosenman>.*

As I walked away from our lunch, I felt energized, rejuvenated. Books, in the end, will never lose their power to bridge divides. Jennifer has recently informed me that her social circles tilt "center to right." When it comes to politics, most of her friends are proud gun owners, do not use contraception, and attend Mass every Sunday. None of these labels apply to my social or professional circles. But Jennifer's evocation of her "unpredictable, messy life being more filled with love and joy than anything I could have imagined for myself" in *One Beautiful Dream* has touched me a great deal. And I look forward to the book's publication.

## Keepin' it Real Joan Hilty



The Oscars of comics are the Eisner Awards held annually at San Diego Comic-Con, and in 2007 Alison Bechdel won one, for *Fun Home*, in the category of "Best Reality-Based Work." She couldn't resist having a little fun with it. "Is that as opposed to faith-based?" she asked the audience. "Well, I'm proud to be part of the reality-based community."

The category is indeed a weird one. It's rooted in the longstanding binary perception of comics as either genre fiction or illustrated textbook history. Until recently, it fell to underground comics to nurture nonfiction with a point of view, particularly memoir. And now memoir is the non-superhero category best known to mass audiences—*Maus* (which emerged from the underground scene), *Persepolis*, *Fun Home* and now *March*—making that Eisner category look stranger every year. I've

been thinking, though, that we must be keeping it around for a reason.

Comics is a visual form, but it is journalistic rather than documentary. Its pictures don't reproduce reality; they interpret it. That frees its text to do the same, creating an undefinable space between straight history and historical fiction. As E.L. Doctorow, having radicalized the latter by writing *Ragtime*, said: "There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction; there is only narrative."

In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi recounts how her father refuted the popular canard that Reza Shah, the first modern Shah of Iran, was chosen by God. Her father explains to young Marjane that Reza was in fact a rebellious low-ranking officer whose 1921 *coup d'état* was aided surreptitiously by the British

to protect their own interests. As he speaks, the scene changes from Satrapi's home to a meeting between two well-dressed British power brokers, one of whom, puffing a pipe, proposes to recruit Reza: "We should go meet him." And then there he is on the battlefield, dressed the same, smoking the same pipe, wooing the soldier shining his own boots: "When you are emperor, your secretary of state will shine them for you." Satrapi's distinctively geometric artwork enhances the scene's surreality—and its historical reality. *Persepolis* is required reading at the John F. Kennedy School of Government.

In *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War*, which I worked on for Hill and Wang, Bancroft Prize-winning historian Ari Kelman and illustrator Jonathan Fetter-Vorm chose a stricter route. The book is a series of fictional short stories organized around actual Civil War figures and events, like *Ragtime*, but serving history rather than fiction. As an academic, Kelman didn't want to invent dialog for real people; he and Fetter-Vorm agreed that Frederick Douglass and the like would only speak in their own words. This proved trickiest when recounting how photographer Alexander Gardner moved and posed dead bodies at Gettysburg; Gardner's decision and direction to do so are of course unrecorded by history. So the dialog went to Gardner's unnamed assistants, who sense

from his mood that they need to find and stage a corpse; one remarks, hauntingly, "This is a helluva lot easier when they're dead."

I was so blown away by the concept of *Becoming Andy Warhol* that I actually lobbied to edit it. It's a graphic novel that loosely chronicles just three years of Warhol's remarkable life—1962-1964, when he swerved from a successful but predictable illustration career to become a superstar. Fascinated by how a short time period proved so transformative for Warhol, writer Nick Bertozzi researched a treasure trove of small details—a controversial 1964 World's Fair mural, a fateful encounter with filmmaker Jack Smith, snubs by the closeted Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—and found a dramatic narrative for this transformation. Warhol resisted biographical analysis constantly, but Bertozzi's imagining of scenes based on history does one of my very favorite things: it finds the big theme in the little details.

In the introduction, Bertozzi noted that "I followed the historical record as best I could," but that his ultimate goal was to "create a story that would serve as an engaging and thoughtful guide to the experiences that became his art." Comics, working as both speculative fiction and investigative journalism, becomes a basis for understanding reality. Now that's award-worthy.

*Joan Hilty is an editor specializing in graphic novels, illustrated books and transmedia; her clients include Farrar Straus & Giroux, Abrams, Nickelodeon, Marvel, Blue Man Group, and many comics and prose authors. Previously, she was a senior editor at DC Comics and syndicated cartoonist. She is a member of Powderkeg Writers and teaches at the School of Visual Arts in NYC. For more information, visit [www.joanhilty.net](http://www.joanhilty.net).*

## Saving the Scraps Judy Sternlight



For years, teachers, editors and agents have told writers to “kill your darlings.”

I love the idea of ruthlessly cutting extraneous material. But wouldn't it be great if writers could find new homes for some of their darlings, rather than tossing those precious scraps overboard?

When Elizabeth Strout wrote *My Name is Lucy Barton*, a novel about a writer whose estranged mother visits her in the hospital for five intense days, the author kept track of some minor characters who took on a life of their own. According to a letter Strout wrote to her fans on Goodreads, “I would—literally—move to a different part of the table I work on, and I would scribble some scenes about the Pretty Nicely Girls, or about Mississippi Mary. Then when I was finished with *My Name is Lucy Barton*, I realized I had another book that could, when I finished it, stand on its own...” That subsequent book is *Anything is Possible*, and it's an exciting companion to the previous novel.

When I read novels-in-progress, I often pinpoint material that doesn't belong in the book. Maybe the writer needed a long, running start to arrive at the real, dramatic opening of the story—and now that we've found that perfect opening, the writing that came before it is no longer needed.

Maybe there's an extra subplot with marvelous characters and descriptions that threaten to overshadow the central storyline. Or perhaps there's an extended side trip, which is a gorgeous standalone piece, but it's pulling the book out

of focus, slowing the pace and killing the narrative tension.

Some writers find it hard to let go of scenes or characters or paragraphs that feel precious and hard-won. This could mean historically authentic scenes that required a lot of research, or beautifully crafted sentences that draw attention to the writing style, rather than the story itself.

When I tell a writer that a beautiful passage, scene, or storyline should go, I often suggest that the writer preserve these scraps, keep them in a separate folder, because some of these currently-extraneous gems could inspire or enrich another project. Cast-off material can become a springboard for the next book, or even an early draft of a standalone short story or essay. It can also be repurposed as original content for the author's website, or promotional material.

Barbara Lynn Davis's book, *Casanova's Secret Wife*, was originally conceived as an epistolary novel. But as we worked together, the letters evolved into full scenes and the original missives were set aside. This lush debut novel about an impulsive girl's tumultuous relationship with Casanova is due out in July, and Barbara's publishing team at Kensington plans to use excerpts from those invented letters in their publicity and promotional campaign.

Here's my advice: Go ahead and kill your darlings, but store them in a good freezer; they may be destined to come back to life in a new form.

**Judy Sternlight** is the founder of *Judy Sternlight Literary Services*. Prior to her freelance-editing career, she taught improvisational theater and was an editor at Random House, Ballantine, and The Modern Library. She has worked with acclaimed writers including Elliot Ackerman, Marie-Helene Bertino, Bret Anthony Johnston, Peter Matthiessen, Daniel Menaker, Dinitia Smith, and Melodie Winawer. She also edited *The Brown Reader*, featuring Jeffrey Eugenides, Rick Moody, Meg Wolitzer, and many more. She occasionally teaches at The Center for Fiction, using theatrical techniques to help writers hone their craft.

## The Art of Writing Historical Fiction Leslie Wells



I worked with Laurie Lico Albanese, author of the highly acclaimed *Stolen Beauty*, before her novel was acquired by Atria. More recently, we spoke about the hard work of writing complex historical fiction—the research, the revision, and even the title selection.

**LW:** *Stolen Beauty* is a novel set in two different eras—*fin de siècle* and 1938 Vienna—about a portrait by Gustav Klimt that changed the lives of two generations of strong women. How did you come up with the dual-timeframe storyline, as opposed to something chronological or retrospective? And what were the chief windfalls and challenges of writing a novel from two perspectives? Reviewers have indicated your success in weaving together these various threads.

**LLA:** Writing Adele Bloch-Bauer in turn of the century Vienna, and her niece Maria Altmann in 1938 Vienna, helped me to understand their stories as a woven or quilted continuum. It may seem counter-intuitive, but working in two different timeframes, from two different first person points of view, made the novel easier for me manage. I find it confining to tell a story from only one perspective. As a modern person, with a modern view of identity and story, I don't see any narrative in isolation. What came before – it shapes us; what's happening in the political and social spheres in which we live determines, in part, who we are and how our lives unfold.

My editor at Atria, Sarah Cantin, told me from the beginning that the city of Vienna emerges as a character in the novel. Like the two female protagonists, the city has a story arc of its own: it blossoms, struggles, and is nearly destroyed. Vienna meets her challenges, and emerges transformed. The dual time periods help to make this depiction of the city as a living, breathing thing possible.

**LW:** How did you research the character of Gustav Klimt? The artist is so convincing on the page.

**LLA:** Gustav Klimt is an enigma. He left behind no journals, interviews or letters. He famously told a journalist, "Anyone who wants to know anything about me as an artist—and this is the only thing that matters—should look attentively at my pictures and try to discern from them who I am and what I want."

I took this as invitation to flesh out the man and his creative process based on hundreds of erotic sketches and groundbreaking modern murals and paintings, which I juxtaposed against the fact that Klimt lived with his mother and sisters in his childhood home for his entire life. Klimt never married, but fathered at least four illegitimate children, all of whom he helped to support financially. He was the most popular portraitist of his day in Vienna, likely because he was a charismatic artist who depicted almost every woman as more beautiful and alluring than any surviving photographs suggest.

I like on-the-ground research for context and texture. I travelled to Austria three times, twice with the art historian Laura Morowitz, who helped me to understand the setting, time period, and artistic developments in Europe.

I read a lot of books about Klimt, including the catalog from the eponymous 2012 retrospective at the Leopold Museum which I saw in Vienna, *Klimt: Up Close and Personal*, as well as *Klimt and the Women of Vienna's Golden Age 1900-1908*, which corresponds to a 2016 show still on view at the Neue Gallerie in NYC.

In *fin de siècle* Vienna, there was a vacuum-powered tubular postcard system that allowed people to send messages across town in a matter of hours. Some of Klimt's postcards survive as a sort of early 20th century Twitter or text message equivalent. The messages reveal that he often complained about not feeling well, and begged off many social invitations. He hated going to French lessons and

never did learn to speak the language favored by the Viennese elite.

**LW:** We worked together on two major revisions on the novel. What would you say were some of the most difficult aspects of each draft?

**LLA:** Our work together turned this novel into something I am so proud of.

In life, Adele was exacting, independent and self-determined. She spoke her mind. In other words, she was a “Nasty Woman” in 1901, long before Hillary or Roxanne Gay. It was a huge challenge for me to make her a likable character, which I think says a lot about how all of us relate to very strong women. In the first round of revisions, you specifically tagged dialogue and internal thoughts that made Adele less than sympathetic. As the revisions went on, I realized two important things about Adele. The first is that a difficult person rarely thinks of herself in those terms, and often feels misunderstood. The second is that women—then, and now—may be seen as arrogant and unlikable simply because they refuse to accept the status of a second sex. I think this was true for Adele, and certainly I embraced that innate injustice in the way strong women are often seen, in order to understand and articulate her character arc.

Adding more backstory for Adele, which we did in both drafts, also allowed me to develop deeper empathy for her myself. Exploring the resistance that her intelligence and curiosity were met with during her childhood helped make her insistence on autonomy a deeper and more grounded experience for the reader. By the time she’s a young woman, we as readers are fed up with the margins society wants to push her into, and we’re ready for that self-determination to win the day.

The second revision focused on making 1938 Maria’s story as important as Adele’s, and Adele’s

1900 story as compelling as Maria’s. Weaving the two stories together so that the parallels are clear without being simplistic required long sheets of paper and a lot of timelines made with post-it notes and magic marker. At first it was a challenge to build in scenes with Maria as a girl and Adele as an older woman, but once Adele was more sympathetic to the reader, I was able to also make her more sympathetic in Maria’s eyes. Her aunt was a source of strength to everyone who knew her, and allowing Maria to draw upon that strength when faced with the Nazis’ cruelty became something I enjoyed writing and imagining.

**LW:** How did the title evolve from your working title to *Stolen Beauty*?

**LLA:** This title was a huge struggle. Every other book I’ve published has gone out on submission with the final title. The title we used for submissions was *Saving Adele*. When the S&S sales team asked for a more compelling title, five hundred potential titles followed. I’ll pare it down to the final winnowing process for you. (Notes in parentheses are my editor’s, my agent’s or some combination of the two).

*In the Palace of Stolen Beauty* (TOO LONG, BUT THERE’S SOMETHING IN IT I LIKE)

*The Palace of Stolen Beauty* (TOO VAGUE)

*Palace of Stolen Beauty* (NO)

*Mistress of Stolen Beauty* (NO, NO!)

Well, how about just *Stolen Beauty*? YES.

This process took about five weeks, on top of the five years’ worth of titles I’d already accumulated.

Laurie Lico Albanese’s *Stolen Beauty* illustrates an important point about historical fiction—to create a story with a truly epic sweep, you have to paint a big picture, while also ensuring that every small detail is in focus.

*Leslie Wells spent two decades at Hyperion as an Executive Editor; prior to that, she was a Senior Editor at Pocket Books and E. P. Dutton. She is now an independent editor who works with publishers, literary agents, and individuals on both fiction and nonfiction. She has worked with such authors as Mitch Albom, Candace Bushnell, Rebecca Wells, Julie Andrews, and Michael J. Fox. For more information and author testimonials, see <http://www.lesliewellseditorial.com>.*

## A Conversation with Elisabeth Schmitz Liz Van Hoose



Elisabeth Schmitz, longtime vice president and editorial director of the prestigious independent press Grove Atlantic, has mastered that tricky combination of the business: publishing quality, award-winning fiction with commercial viability. *Cold Mountain*, *Euphoria*, and *His for Hawk* are but a few of her critically acclaimed bestsellers. She is known for her unstinting editorial attention to the page, matched in power by her warm, encouraging personal relationships with her writers. Having long considered her the finest exemplar of great

editing and publishing, I recently had the chance to interview Elisabeth and many of her authors and colleagues for the nation's longest-running literary quarterly, *The Sewanee Review*. Together they offer a thorough portrait of everything editorial—from the role of an editor in publishing, to the author-editor relationship, to the life of a writer's work from story idea to bookstore shelf. Visit <https://thesewaneeereview.com/elisabeth-schmitz-interview/>.

*Liz Van Hoose* has worked in the editorial departments of Viking Penguin and Alfred A. Knopf, where she edited a wide range of fiction and nonfiction, including works by Ron Currie, Jr., Alex Gilvarry, Garrison Keillor, Haruki Murakami, Jim Shepard, and Amor Towles. She has been a guest editor for writers' conferences at Bread Loaf, Sewanee, and Aspen Summer Words, where she served on the faculty in 2015.

## Paying the Light Bill and other Literary Quandaries Patricia Mulcahy



Early on, idealistic editorial neophytes learn a hard truth: few books—fiction or not, long or short, comical or weighty—make a dime for the company. Though the boss may raise the issue with a hint of humor (“Is this first novel going to help pay the light bill?”) the message is clear: in publishing, personal passion must be tempered by at least a measure of hard-headed realism. On profit and loss sheets prepared pre-acquisition, you can’t ignore the percentage put aside for overhead. If those light bills don’t get paid, you’ll be sitting in the dark in more ways than one.

Most publishers rely on a judicious mix of front and back list to keep the cash flowing, or at least trickling. “Classics” that sell year after year provide

one reliable source of income. The so-called “big books” lead the list, helping salespeople solicit orders for the seasonal catalogue, including that first novel about which the editor is so enthusiastic and committed. The eternal hope is that orders for John Grisham or Danielle Steele or Stephen King will lift all boats—or books.

Literary agents adopt the same heart-and-head mix when deciding which clients to take on. But what about writers wedded to a literary vision that may not find commercial acceptance?

It’s interesting to consider the career trajectory of James Lee Burke, twice named a Grandmaster of the Mystery Writers of America, one of only two

writers (the other is Dick Francis) to receive that honor. Burke started out writing atmospheric, well-wrought novels set in Louisiana and Texas that frequently incorporated elements of his family history: *Half of Paradise*, *To the Bright and Shining Sun*, *Two for Texas*, and *Lay Down My Sword and Shield*. But Burke's next book, 1986's *The Lost Get-Back Boogie*, the story of a honky-tonk guitar player who kills a man in a barroom fight, was published by Louisiana State University Press after dozens of commercial publishers turned it down. Burke's very respectable reviews but uneven sales had somehow rendered him "a regional writer."

He didn't find a way to jumpstart his career until his friend Charles Willeford, author of the Hoke Moseley detective series, suggested that Burke take his novelistic preoccupations—the legacy of slavery, the history of the South, class divisions, and organized crime, among them—and create a crime series, too.

*Neon Rain*, the first book featuring detective Dave Robicheaux, Vietnam vet, set in the French Quarter of New Orleans, was followed by *Heaven's Prisoners*, which finds Dave relocated to New Iberia, LA, Cajun country. In 1990, *Black Cherry Blues*, the first book I acquired in the series, won the Edgar Award for Best Novel. A few books later, Dave Robicheaux's star-crossed exploits popped up on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Sixteen books later, they still have a comfortable niche there, as well as a very loyal readership.

*A former publisher, Patricia Mulcahy 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) and Making Masterpiece: 25 Years Behind the Scenes at Masterpiece Theatre and Mystery! on PBS by Rebecca Eaton (Viking 2013). Her freelance editorial clients have included musician and entrepreneur Quincy Jones; NBC Foreign Affairs Correspondent Andrea Mitchell; and Acumen Fund CEO Jaqueline Novogratz. See [www.brooklynbooks.com](http://www.brooklynbooks.com) for more information.*

James Lee Burke is a marvelous writer, with both a lyrical gift and a deep and abiding sense of social justice that take his books out of "category." But tellingly, it was his ability to funnel his bone-deep familiarity with American history and landscape into plot-driven and highly suspenseful stories that enabled him to break out of the "literary ghetto."

And consider the fervent and widespread passion for the Neopolitan novels of Elena Ferrante, which combine an operatic sense of the emotional ties between women with a firm grounding in the political and economic issues that shape the worlds of her protagonists. Readers are plunged into a highly charged maelstrom that also highlights Mafia influences and national leftist politics, as the two main characters strive to carve out lives as independent women. This is "women's fiction" with a difference.

Some writers of beautiful sentences never quite master plotting, or the creation of dramatic tension. There's no one way to balance artistic aspiration with the kind of narrative verve that can help a writer cultivate a larger readership. Sure, luck and timing play a role in commercial success, as do bottomless persistence and a maniacally dedicated publicist: t'was ever thus in the literary marketplace. But in the end, it's finding the elusive balance between literary excellence and hardcore commercial realities that keeps the lights shining brightly in publishing offices.