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This month's issue includes:

Identifying Your Audience • Why Join a Writer's Group? • New York Comic-Con 2017 • Projects in the News • The Art of Editorial Diplomacy

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Identifying Your Audience Leslie Wells



If the person reading your book is sitting in a restaurant, does he or she relate most to the perky waitress, the suave maître d', the bartender sporting a full sleeve tattoo, the owner who's just opened a sister place in Vegas, or the patron on her cell in the corner table? Identifying your ideal reader can be extremely helpful in any kind of writing. With fiction in particular, it's good to be able to pinpoint the type of reader you're writing for.

Obviously, if you are composing a genre novel (mystery, thriller, fantasy, science fiction, or romance), you probably have a good idea who your audience is. If you're writing in a subset within those genres (cozy, hardboiled, steampunk, dystopian), one would assume that you have read quite a few books in that category and know what its readership expects. It may be that you're writing for the specific audience of authors in that genre whom you admire. But if you are writing a novel that's general fiction, how do you identify who your readers are? Is your work literary, mainstream, women's commercial fiction, for readers in their twenties—or for "everyone"?

Often, authors feel that they are writing for themselves, and that if the book is strong enough, a readership will follow. But there can be a gap

between artistic vision and marketplace reality.

This tack may work for veteran authors who have published a number of novels already, and want to step out of their normal groove or establish a new audience. However, for first-time novelists (and second- or third-time authors as well), it's usually best to have a very good sense of who you're writing for.

Here are a few tips for identifying your audience:

1. It's helpful to come up with comparison titles, and think about who reads those books. Be sure to know on which specific shelf in the bookstore your novel belongs, and which authors it would sit alongside (and I don't mean alphabetically, between "Barthelme" and "Bronte").
2. What is your audience's age, gender, marital status, geographic location, educational status, aspirations in life? What books would they typically read? Some authors may balk at trying to pinpoint these specifics, but being able to picture exactly who your reader is can help in shaping your story and the choices you make as you're writing. Let's say you envision your reader as men between the ages of 20-45. They see themselves as a bit aloof, cynical, world-weary—

which matches your protagonist's persona to a "T". So should you decide to introduce a subplot midway through, about a baker with a big heart who suddenly makes a fortune selling her amaretto-laced biscotti, and donates it all to the local SPCA? Perhaps best to save that concept for book two.

3. What is truly different about your novel? If it's about a very special cat... then actually that isn't truly different. If it's about a cat that was smuggled aboard a sailing vessel in 1778, and wound up inhabiting Francisco Goya's studio as he painted—that's different. Think about the ways in which your book is unlike any other, and use that to envision who would want to read about those particular unique elements.
4. YA or adult? Often authors struggle to determine if their novel is for a young adult or adult audience. ("Both" is probably not the correct answer.) For the most part, if all of the main characters are still in high school, your novel is

most likely YA. (Middle school or younger, and it's a children's book.) "But what about *The Fault in Our Stars*?" someone protests. Novels like John Green's start out as YA, and then when their popularity spreads, parents get word that it's a great book and decide to read it along with their kids. Then it becomes a book for "everyone"—but it began life as a YA novel.

5. What reactions do you want to evoke in your reader? Why are they reading your novel, and what do you want them to get out of it? Do you want to stimulate their intellect, make them happy or sad, provoke them, inform them about a little-known historical figure, or make them think about something they've never considered before? Picture someone in a coffee shop reading your novel. Who is that person; how would they describe your novel and how it made them feel?

In the end, knowing your audience is almost always better than simply winging it.

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>.



Why Join a Writer's Group? Judy Sternlight

Over the years, I've come to appreciate what a good writers' group can provide: a creative oasis; practical feedback and advice; a place to hone your critical thinking; and firm deadlines to produce new material.

So how do writing groups form?

"I found my first writers' group on Craigslist when I moved to NYC 14 years ago," says the novelist and short story writer Marie-Helene Bertino. "We met in public atriums all over the city, and they were the people who taught me how to write fiction." Writers

seeking mutual support can sometimes find each other by posting signs at local bookstores or libraries.

Zeeva Bukai, winner of the 2017 Curt Johnson Prose Award for fiction, joined a group that was an offshoot of a One Story workshop in Brooklyn. "For more than a year this group worked well, but then I began to feel that there were too many conflicting voices, and too many rules about who could speak when and for how long... I noticed that I listened to three participants the most, and so I suggested we branch off." In Bukai's more intimate group of four, "two people

present each month, which means we have time to write and don't have to wait too long to present."

After Bertino received an MFA from Brooklyn College, she joined a writers' group with people from her program. "We all have different writing styles; I learn from theirs greatly, and what I like most about it is that they call me on all of my lazy tricks. They have become like family."

Curated Writing Groups

Some writers thrive in groups without a clear leader. Together, they decide on goals and guidelines. But having an experienced mentor can be beneficial. Alexandra Shelley, independent editor and veteran writing teacher, has led the Jane Street Livingroom Workshop in New York City for almost twenty years. Meeting for weekly

workshop sessions, participants also attend literary events; they go on retreats to a former nunnery in Litchfield, and even stage public readings.

The group has 10-12 members. Most of them have worked together for years, but Shelley also welcomes new voices. "As an independent editor I sometimes recommend that an author I'm working with join the workshop to get input on new material as they're writing. One of the novels which germinated in this way was Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Kathryn once brought in a chapter that caused me to weep. I don't usually do that. But she'd responded to an off-hand suggestion I made to include a dinner party in which her character Skeeter meets her fiance's family and brought to workshop a scene so fantastic that all anyone had to say about it was to list the ways in which it was beautiful. That doesn't happen too often."

Molly Moylan Brown, Director of Community Outreach for the American Women's Club of Berlin, leads a popular creative writing workshop called Moving Pen. She describes the participants as "professional and recreational writers, all ages and nationalities." Brown draws on her background in improvisational theater to provide spontaneous writing prompts with varying time limits. Some prompts are simple, as in, "Write a letter to your six-year-old self" or "Write about a goodbye, or a first meeting," and some are multi-layered, to build or deepen a story. For example, a guided meditation on "a room from childhood" leads to a written description of the room, which leads to creating a scene that's set in that room.

According to Brown, "The main focus of Moving Pen is to develop both story *writing* and story*telling* muscles. Reading aloud and listening to others encourages everyone to take bigger risks, to delve deeper, to step out of our safe zones, to work past our resistance, and write from our most authentic voice."

And what makes a writing group good?

Both Shelley and Brown are adept at keeping their classes on track, avoiding lengthy digressions and what Brown calls "shallow, destructive opinion



New York Comic-Con 2017, L to R: Calista Brill (First Second), Sarah Gaydos (IDW Publishing), Carol Burrell (Workman), and Joan Hilty.

Female editors in the comics and graphic novel industry are a tight-knit bunch; unlike the rest of publishing, there aren't many of us. So when we socialize and talk shop, it doesn't matter that we often work with radically different houses and genres. Sarah edits multiple all-ages superhero and licensed comics at IDW; Carol is at Workman Children's; Calista edits adult and middle-grade literary graphic novels at First Second. But we all love discovering new talent, sharing favorite reads, and kibitzing over a good glass of red wine in Hell's Kitchen after the show closes.

—Joan Hilty

masked as literary criticism.” From Shelley’s perspective, “a good workshop is accepting enough that writers feel comfortable bringing in that ‘shitty first draft,’ but demanding enough that the second draft will be better.”

When these writers and teachers talk about their groups, what stands out to me is the powerful sense of community. Shelley calls it “a profound kind of encouragement because it comes from fellow writers who have watched you struggle to write and revise your piece. They know your whole ‘oeuvre,’ and what you’re capable of, and what you’re aiming for. They know when you’ve nailed it.”

“A good writing group leaves egos outside the door,” says Bukai. “We are there to help each other succeed and take pride when any one of us has a victory.”

When writers come to me for an editorial consultation, we have an intensive engagement over a short period of time. After that, we often stay in touch and I may do another round or two of editing. But this sporadic attention doesn’t match the benefits of a writing group, which offers frequent meetings, incremental deadlines and a steady source of feedback and support. For writers who spend a lot of time in isolation, joining a writers’ group is an excellent idea.

*Before founding **Judy Sternlight Literary Services**, Judy performed and taught improvisational theater, and was an editor at Random House, Ballantine, and The Modern Library. She has worked with Elliot Ackerman, Bret Anthony Johnston, Lisa Ko, Peter Matthiessen, Daniel Menaker, Melodie Winawer, and others. She occasionally teaches at The Center for Fiction, using theatrical techniques to help writers hone their craft.*



Projects in the News Jane Rosenman

I’m particularly pleased by the publication in November 2017 by *Monthly Review Press* of Stephanie J. Urdang’s *Mapping My Way Home: Activism, Nostalgia, and the Downfall of Apartheid South Africa*. This is a beautifully told, extremely informative memoir by an anti-apartheid activist, feminist, and journalist. In these pages we get the full story behind Stephanie’s leaving of her homeland and then returning in 1991—after a long exile and after the release of Nelson Mandela. The author exclaims, “How could I have imagined for one instant that I could return to South Africa’s beauty and not its pain?” The memoir has received early kudos from Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Finnegan, Adam Hochschild, and Louise DeSalvo.

Stephanie was referred to me by a literary agent who had found an earlier draft promising but limited in appeal due to a lot of focus on political issues in west African countries not widely known to American readers. We worked to make Stephanie’s lifelong journey a seamless mix of the personal and the political. In Adam Hochschild’s words, “Stephanie Urdang not only had a ringside seat but was often in the ring for three of the great revolutionary upheavals of our time; her story of a life deeply engaged in them is moving and absorbing.” Helping a writer such as Stephanie Urdang find a voice and editorial focus that works for a mainstream reading audience is such a rewarding process.

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>.



The Art of Editorial Diplomacy Patricia Mulcahy

In the big, noisy family in which I was raised, if you didn't speak up, you were literally drowned out. And there was no point gilding any lilies: pretentiousness and lack of clarity were mortal sins.

As an editor, I try and make my case to authors as forthrightly as I can, while also supporting the writer in any way possible. On occasion, I've been called "frank," or "no-nonsense." I often wondered what the opposite of such comments might be: "Willing to suffer bad grammar"? "A pushover for slack plotting and inauthentic dialogue"?

Who on earth would cultivate a relationship with an editor like that?

Here's what my first boss, Robert Giroux, chairman of the board of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, showed me by his example: reflexive flattery from an editor to an author is easy. Detailed criticism is a lot of work, and in its way, a sign of commitment to the manuscript.

In Ruth Franklin's biography of Shirley Jackson, she paints a charming portrait of Mr. Giroux, who had a cartoon above his desk of one dog howling at the moon, while a bigger dog prepared to pounce on him. Caption: "Authors and editors."

A consummate gentleman, Mr. Giroux never pounced: even his rejection letters were excruciatingly polite. Though I only worked for him for six months as a fill-in assistant, he gave me invaluable insights into the care and handling of writers, famous and not. I observed that a profound respect for the creative process was always Mr. Giroux's major motivator; and that even well-known, prize-winning writers had their insecurities.

He was erudite, but wore his learning lightly. He encouraged, cajoled, and criticized constructively; but he was no pushover, and was devoted to honesty as the most valuable response to a text. He

never took any of the brilliant writers in his "stable" for granted: but that didn't mean coddling, or falsely encouraging, writers in a way that might come back to bite the author *and* the publisher.

When I finally moved up the ranks elsewhere, it was always my goal to take what I learned from Mr. Giroux, and help writers deliver the best possible books they could write. I tried to frame every critique within an enthusiastic context overall, hoping the writer understood implicitly that I wouldn't send extensive notes if I didn't see potential in the project. Every editorial letter began—and still does—letting the writer know that my comments are intended primarily to instigate new ideas, and stir up the stew. I tend to ask a lot of questions, just to stimulate creative conversation; I don't assume that any of them will lead to the Holy Grail, or anything close to it. And when reviewing a work of fiction, I always stress the subjective nature of the process.

As an apprentice, I learned the hard way that sometimes the art of editorial diplomacy can get complicated, even with the best of intentions; yet I also learned that my basic impulses weren't off-base.

After the merger between the Viking Press and my employer, Penguin, one of my first assignments was to work with Dame Iris Murdoch. Her longtime Viking editor had retired; and everyone knew—everyone but me, as it turned out—that the role of her editor was more as an in-house caretaker, so to speak.

As my training kicked in, I was determined to be respectful but honest with the world-class writer/philosopher and Oxford don. After reading 528 pages of Dame Iris' twenty-fourth novel, I wrote her a detailed editorial letter suggesting cuts, worded with what I regarded as exquisite diplomacy. Before sending it, I vetted the letter with my boss, another

Helene Soileau, a soulful and tough woman in a man's world, and his novels secured spots on the *New York Times* bestseller list, where they've remained ever since.

When I wasn't completely honest about a book, I usually regretted it. In the wake of publishing a very successful memoir, a journalist and broadcaster I'd worked with decided to try his hand at fiction. I read it with great anxiety, because I knew I couldn't fix the "all-knowing" voice of the narrator, who couldn't let his characters carry the story. No amount of line or structural editing was going to solve the problem.

Strong-armed by an influential agent, I published the novel with little success. In not acting with the courage of my convictions, I didn't do this writer any favors; the very talented journalist has yet to write another book, in any genre.

At the end of the *Atlantic* piece, editor Scott Moyers points out to Thomas Ricks: "The first draft is for the writer. The second draft is for the editor. The last draft is for the reader."

It's respect for the eventual reader that motivates the process, all along the way.

*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 for more information.*