



Creativity, Editing, and the Business of Publishing

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This month's issue includes:

Litmus Test • The Business of Craft? • Vocation and Voice in Memoir
Teaching and Editing in 2018 • The Man in the Sweater

S U M M E R 2 0 1 8



Litmus Test Joan Hilty

"We don't have a litmus test for background," I said, confidently. I was sure I was right. I wasn't.

My colleagues and I were looking at the parameters of a diversity in comics award. We knew the eligible works should always depict underrepresented ethnicity, race, gender, and/or orientation with originality and power. In terms of quality, the finalists had all been neck and neck. It came down to which one best represented the spirit of the award. But sometimes it had gone to white creators, sometimes to people of color; sometimes to first-time creators, sometimes to established ones. Was that casting too wide a net?

I quoted Gene Yang's 2014 National Book Festival speech, like I always do. (Heck, I've done it in [this newsletter](#).) In it, Yang spoke of how the African-American writer and publisher Dwayne McDuffie had been inspired as a boy by the superhero Black Panther, even though the character, created by two white men in the 1970s, was originally a bit of a stereotype. Yang went on to say that you shouldn't let fear keep you from writing the "other," as long as you do your homework and accept criticism. To me, this meant we shouldn't look at the background of the authors, just at their intent and results.

One Filipino-American juror pointed me to the actual context in which Yang mentioned Black

Panther: by today's standards, what those writers had accomplished *would not be enough*. By the same standards, she didn't want to give an award simply for creating a character who was a person of color. Weigh each work with the author's own identity, she said; examine how many risks and barriers they'd dealt with to create it. "I've never been color-blind," she said. "I've never had that privilege."

I realized I'd been mentally skating over that point in the speech for a long time. I'd been focused only on the part that reassured me as a white person, not the part that challenged me as an editor.

Ideals might be color-blind, but real life isn't. It's a distinction to remember as we take the next steps forward to make the book world genuinely inclusive. Not just diverse, but inclusive, which means making it diverse and figuring out how to keep it that way.

The last few years have seen much ink spilled over diversity in publishing: Lee & Low's [baseline study](#) of our workforce demographics and diversity-focused internship programs springing up to counter hiring bias, just to name a couple. But we can't rely solely on the big gestures. At the end of the day it's less about the big mea culpas, and splashy public promises, than the thousands of small, individual decisions we make in our daily

work; the little steps outside our comfort zones that can yield big results.

“What rooms are you in? What conversations? Who are the people in your social media feeds? When you go home, is your family all white? When you go to a party, are your friends all white? When you look down your bookshelf, are all your books by white authors?” asked the novelist Alexander Chee at a PEN America [roundtable discussion](#). Taking that one step further isn’t hard if I then apply [basic principles of diversity-minded business management](#) to my professional life: Who am I inviting, awarding, acquiring? Who has my support and who doesn’t? Who is not being included in my decisions? Whose opinions have I sought and whose have I left out? Am I building relationships with people who are different from me?

Growing up gay and female, I yearned to see my identity reflected back at me in my own society, advocated for more, and today have gotten more or less what I yearned for — books, movies,

leading figures who actually depict and share my experience. I wouldn’t have settled for the [largely male-authored world of lesbian pulps](#) any more than Asian-American writers should settle for being masqueraded in [poetry and comics](#). Getting my assumptions shaken up might be hard, but it’s easy to think of it as applying the same treatment I expect to my own treatment of others. “In publishing, we hire one person at a time,” an anonymous HR executive said regarding the 2015 diversity baseline study, offering up a weak defense of slow change. That “one at a time” apologia can become a mantra for change: each publishing pro, one by one, making one decision, every single day, makes a difference.

Black Panther became a cultural phenomenon this year by showing black experience as universal with originality and power, while not coincidentally being written, directed and acted almost entirely by black creative pros. The creative chemistry created by real inclusivity is undeniable. And a real litmus test, after all, is entirely about chemistry.

Joan Hilty is an editor specializing in graphic novels and illustrated books; she has worked with Farrar Straus & Giroux, Abrams, Simon & Schuster, and many genre fiction authors. Previously, she was a senior editor at DC Comics and syndicated cartoonist. She serves on committees for Brooklyn Book Festival and Miami Book Fair, and teaches at the School of Visual Arts in NYC. For more information, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgturn.com.

Members of 5E meet monthly, travelling from three boroughs and Long Island to talk shop and share creative energy in Manhattan.





The Business of Craft Jane Rosenman

When we founded our independent editors' group, 5E, in 2011 we invented a tagline of "Five Editors, Five Perspectives." But over time, we began to feel that the word "perspectives" did not do justice to the range of criteria with which we were evaluating manuscripts and projects. After a lot of discussion, we came up with "Creativity, Editing, and the Business of Publishing." Two years later, this tagline sounds exactly right.

On any given day, in a single conversation, I can traverse issues of creativity, editing, and certainly the business of publishing. I recently edited a memoir by a well-established writer who had several nonfiction books to her credit. Her memoir covers her childhood formative influences and ends with a dramatic account of an event she was involved in during college that has historical resonance. I was keenly interested in this event and enjoyed reading her account.

The problem? My interest spoke to a demographic that is past the midlife point. Had I worked with the author a number of years ago, I might have taken the smart, well-written memoir at face value, worked with the author on issues of craft. And only at the end of our process, would I have tentatively broached the problem of her main event seeming less than pressing to a lot of the reading public.

Instead, I cut to the chase and suggested a broader framework for a memoir that I think has far greater resonance today. The author happily agreed and

is hard at work revising. The business of publishing informed my creative approach to editing. I feel confident that a stronger memoir will emerge—stronger commercially but also aesthetically.

Recently I had a similar experience with a writer whose debut novel takes place during the last few years of a famous painter's life. The manuscript has a great number of strengths—first-rate research, a terrific evocation of landscape and of the man's paintings. But the thematic focus seemed diffuse to me. I imagined hearing an agent pitch me a novel about the last, defining year in this painter's life, a year that had huge dramatic, aesthetic significance. When I realized what an intriguing description that could be, I urged the author to think about whether a sharpened focus along these lines would be true to his vision and to the contours of the actual history of this famous painter's body of work. He happily said "yes" on both counts. He too is revising.

In both my nonfiction and fiction examples, I was motivated to be pro-active. Not to eschew careful considerations of craft; those are always front and center. But I tried hard to glean what was most galvanizing in these manuscripts. At first glance, "creativity" and "business" might not be automatically allied. We at 5E, however, have come to see over time that fine tuning the craft of writing alongside fine tuning what makes a novel or nonfiction book singular produces editing that is truly helpful.

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>.



Leslie Wells

Leslie has been editing a number of fiction and nonfiction projects this spring.

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 www.lesliewellseditorial.com.



Vocation and Voice in Memoir Liz Van Hoose

“Who are you? Who, who, who, who?”

—Peter Townshend

“Whoa! Who are you? Who are you? Who are you? Who is this kid? What’s he gonna do?”

—Lin-Manuel Miranda

A distinctive voice is perhaps the most essential and confounding aspect of first-person narrative. Masters of fiction and memoir tell us it takes hundreds of pages of raw material and rewrites to find, often via years’ worth of drafts abandoned to the drawer or thrown in the proverbial fire. The prospect of paying such steep dues can be daunting at the start of a writing career, and cruelly Sisyphean to those who put in the hundreds of pages over many years with only stymied results.

What if there were a secret ingredient, a writerly roux to enrich one’s prose from the get-go?

Some years ago, I began to notice a quality shared by a number of successful memoirs written in vastly different voices about vastly different subjects. In these books, the narrator’s vocation informs the writing from the very first page. Sometimes the nod to one’s work or expertise is explicit—as with Paul Kalanithi’s extraordinary memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*—but it is just as

often tacit—as with Tara Westover’s recent #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Educated*.

In the spirit of T.S. Eliot’s decree that “good writers borrow, great writers steal,” I’ll explore a few of my favorite examples of memoirs whose narrators allow their work expertise to inflect the story.

1. *When Breath Becomes Air* by neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi. Job cred is at its most literal in the prologue to this memoir, which opens with Kalanithi flipping through his own CT scans while sitting in the same hospital bed where he has visited countless patients. In this scene of a neurosurgeon taking stock of an unwelcome role reversal, we readers are given a voice that is at once authoritative (about brain science) and humble (about mortality). Kalanithi’s vocational expertise is essential to this voice, as it will inform myriad insights into the classic mind/body problem—the bounty and limits of existence—as his lung cancer runs its course.

2. *The Rules Do Not Apply* by journalist Ariel Levy. The longtime *New Yorker* staffer opens her memoir with a wanderluster’s passions for reporting on the unknown. By page two we learn that she has transmuted these passions into journalism, cultivating a yen for unexpected, unfamiliar places

and experiences: “As a journalist, I’ve spent nearly two decades putting myself in foreign surroundings as frequently as possible. There is nothing I love more than traveling to a place where I know nobody, and where everything will be a surprise, and then writing about it.” Levy’s gripping, tragic, redemptive story of unspeakable loss is carried by this swashbuckler voice whose mission is to apply her journalistic training to the vicissitudes of her own experience, leaving no stone unturned and turning up a groundswell of surprising revelations and insights along the way.

3. *Ordinary Light* by Princeton professor Tracy K. Smith. As U.S. Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner for her poetry collection *Life on Mars*, Smith is obviously best known as a poet. But she is also a teacher, and it is this professional acumen that illuminates her coming-of-age memoir about reading, religion, and race in America. From the very beginning, Smith holds up a pedagogical lens to her childhood, exploring how her child self perceived, interpreted, and put to memory the details about her middle-class American world—a world at once ordinary and full of paradox. About the domestic sphere cultivated by her mother, herself a former teacher, Smith writes in chapter one:

“No matter what the world thought it knew about blacks, no matter what it tried to teach us to believe about ourselves, the home we returned to each night assured us that, no matter who was setting the bar, we could remain certain we measured up. When our teachers came for lunch, as they all eventually did, this is what she wanted them to see.”

Teachers of one kind or another populate every chapter, starting with her parents and friends’ parents and moving on to influential high school instructors and college professors. The voice of Smith the teacher amplifies their power in her story.

4. *Educated* by historian Tara Westover. Westover’s blockbuster memoir is another coming-of-age story set in a family that is anything but ordinary. With a Ph.D. in history from Cambridge, Westover brings her expertise in historiography to bear on her Mormon fundamentalist upbringing in Idaho. (She didn’t learn about the Holocaust until her freshman year at Brigham Young.) Late in the memoir, she remarks:

“Now I needed to understand how the great gatekeepers of history had come to terms with their own ignorance and partiality. I thought if I could accept that what they had written was not absolute but was the result of a biased process of conversation and revision, maybe I could reconcile myself with the fact that the history most people agreed upon was not the history I had been taught. Dad could be wrong, and the great historians Carlyle and Macaulay and Trevelyan could be wrong, but from the ashes of their dispute I could construct a world to live in. In knowing the ground was not ground at all, I hoped I could stand on it.”

This passage took my breath away, not least because I could suddenly see, in retrospect, the historiography running through the whole book up to that point. Footnotes expressing siblings’ divergent accounts are frequent. Even the very first sentence of chapter one is shaped by the historiographer’s lathe: “My strongest memory is not a memory. It’s something I imagined, then came to remember as if it had happened.”

It’s notable that the authors’ work credentials in these masterworks are kept at low volume. Anything that smacks of the didactic—or, worse, the self-aggrandizing—would break the spell. Still, it can be heartening to know that just the right dose of narrative authority—born of years of labor in life rather than in rewriting—can create an unforgettable voice that’s all your own.

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. She joined *5E* in early 2016.



Teaching and Editing in 2018 Judy Sternlight

When you're writing a novel, how do you know which point-of-view is the right one? Should you stick with one perspective or multiple voices? And if your protagonist is a secret-keeper or a compulsive liar, which is better, first person or close-third? Past tense or present? And what makes "Little Man," Michael Cunningham's second-person account of Rumpelstiltskin, such a satisfying short story?

These are some of the questions we debated in a class I recently directed on point-of-view at Pen + Brush, an organization that supports female artists and writers. They have a beautiful gallery space at 29 East 22nd Street; 5E gave a talk there last year, and we were all impressed by their vibrant literary community.



Photo Credit: Lisbeth Redfield, Pen + Brush

In other news... One of my favorite clients has a new book coming out. Several years ago, I worked with Gwen Florio, currently the city editor of the *Missoulian* in Montana, on her award-winning "Lola Wicks" mystery series. Gwen also consulted me on her stand-alone novel, *Silent Hearts*, which Atria is publishing in July 2018. Set in Afghanistan, this

is a compelling story about an American foreign correspondent and her local interpreter. Jamie Ford, author of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, called it "a rich, haunting, immersive story of cultures at the crossroads—deeply moving. A heart-smashingly good read, the kind of novel you'll want to share with your book club."

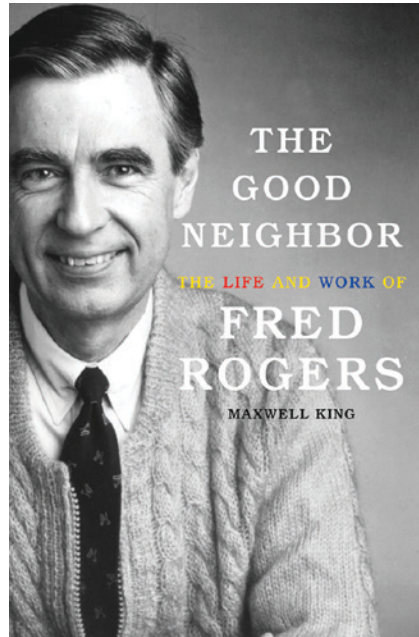
Before founding Judy Sternlight Literary Services, Judy performed and taught improvisational theater, and was an editor at Random House, Ballantine, and The Modern Library. She has worked with Elliot Ackerman, Bret Anthony Johnston, Lisa Ko, Peter Matthiessen, Daniel Menaker, Melodie Winawer, and others. She occasionally teaches at The Center for Fiction and other arts organizations, blending theatrical and literary techniques to help writers hone their craft. She'll be teaching "How to Focus Your Story" at the Slice Literary Conference in September 2018.



The Man in the Sweater Patricia Mulcahy

For the past eighteen months, I've helped Maxwell King, former head of the Fred Rogers Center outside Pittsburgh, with his authorized biography of the beloved children's television host. *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers*, will be published by Abrams Press in September 2018. Yes, the man onscreen was essentially the same man behind it; but Rogers proved to be a much more complex and fascinating character than I imagined when I started work on the project. Watching hours and hours of old *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* episodes was an ideal way to spend the first year of the Trump presidency!

The summer 2018 release of a documentary film about Rogers (from Morgan Neville, maker of the Oscar-winning *Twenty Feet from Stardom*) will help build visibility for the book's fall release. A biopic starring Tom Hanks, about an encounter between Fred Rogers and *Esquire* journalist Tom Junod, due out in 2019, is already getting



extensive press. There is even a U.S. Postal Service stamp honoring the 50th anniversary of the first airing of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in 1968. The man in the famous cardigan knitted by his mother is truly experiencing a surge of re-appreciation. I also salute client Cynthia Swanson on the release of her top-notch psychological thriller *The Glass Forest* (February 2018) from Touchstone/Simon and Schuster. In a starred review, *Library Journal* called it "[A] triumph. Swanson is a name

to be considered among the likes of Gillian Flynn, Chris Pavone, and Laura Lippman."

To top off a great start to 2018, Center for Fiction Fellow Melissa Rivero sold her novel about an undocumented Peruvian immigrant struggling in New York City, to Ecco/Harper Collins. I so enjoyed working with Melissa to sharpen the moving and topical *The Affair of the Falcons*.

Formerly editor in chief at Doubleday, 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). See www.brooklynbooks.com for more information and author commentary.