

5E

Five Editors,
Five Perspectives



Marjorie Braman



Judy Sternlight



Jane Rosenman



Patricia Mulcahy



Joan Hilty

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.



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IN THIS ISSUE:

- BOOK DOCTORING
- GRAPHIC NOVEL SUBMISSIONS
- GETTING THE BEST EDITING FOR YOUR BUCK...AND MORE!



So Many Books, So Little Time

— Marjorie Braman

I hear authors complain that “no one edits anymore” and I always wonder who they’re talking about. Every in-house editor I ever worked with edits like crazy. And indeed, being an editor can sometimes drive you crazy. So many weekends, so many evenings, so many mornings before work, are devoted to the book—editing, yes, and reading submissions, too, which now occupies far more of an editor’s time. Let’s face it, what’s more exhilarating than finding that great project that can bring excitement and profits to the publishing company? But all too often, the thrill of discovery gives way to the agony of being overloaded.

After 26 years of giving up too many weekends, I finally realized that the job of an in-house editor requires 3 hands, a 36-hour day with an 8-day week, to squeeze in all that work. Every editor I know got in the business precisely because they love books and want to help them see the light of day. But if it’s true that there are some editors who don’t edit—or editors who don’t edit some of their books—who can blame them?

The editors, and the writers, deserve better. Smart writers, publishers, book reviewers and readers all know that a good editor can make a huge difference, but no matter how promising the project, how rich the marketing budget, how inspired the publicist, if the book doesn’t deliver, the chances of it breaking out diminish.

More than ever, the role of the independent editor can be an important part of traditional publishing. Economically advantageous for the publisher, editorially beneficial for the book, and a boon to the overworked in-house editor, the independent editor can take on a crash book, an orphaned project, or any troubled manuscript that calls for a week of uninterrupted editorial attention.

I often work directly for the writer, but for many of my editing jobs, I’ve been hired by the publisher. On some projects, I’m the sole editor, on some I work with an in-house editor, and on a few, I’ve been entirely incognito. In every case, my commitment is to the best interests of the author and the subsequent success of the book—but I am also aware that there’s someone out there with the title of “Editor” who I’ve freed up to give more of herself to the rest of her job.

After a 26-year career in publishing, Marjorie Braman now works independently with writers, agents and publishers. She began her career as an editorial assistant at Random House and worked her way up through the ranks to V. P. & Editor in Chief at Henry Holt. Some of the authors she’s worked with include Michael Crichton, Elmore Leonard and Sena Jeter Naslund. She has edited many New York Times and national bestsellers, award-winners and notable debuts. Her current clients include Hyperion Books, amazon.com, Open Road Integrated Media and Henry Holt & Company. For more information, visit www.marjoriebraman.com.



Developmental Editing: Priceless – Judy Sternlight

If I'm polishing or co-writing a book-proposal, it makes sense to charge a flat project fee. But most often, I edit fiction and I charge a standard hourly rate. Rather than guessing how many hours an entire project may take, I break it into phases. Phase one involves reading an author's full manuscript and creating an editorial letter that spells out what's already working, and what still needs work. This "editorial analysis" is less comprehensive, and cheaper, than a full round of editing. And it helps ensure that the author and I (and often, the agent) are on the same page before a bigger investment is made.

The first phase covers plotting, structure, pacing, character development, and the ultimate impact of the story. After the author has incorporated my feedback, a second phase—whether it's another analysis or a detailed line edit—moves quickly and efficiently because we're now closer to a finished product. In other words, I'm not wasting time by line-editing sections that should, in fact, be cut. And with "phase one" already under our belts, it's easier to estimate what subsequent editorial rounds will cost.

Thanks to my training in improvisational theater, I enjoy tailoring my approach to each author's personality, manuscript, and budget. One creative solution I devised was a partial edit, giving the author a concrete methodology to apply to the whole book. Another was to invite an author to show me a synopsis of his revised plot. Addressing potential problems in a synopsis (rather than a full manuscript) can save the author a good deal of time and money.

Doing this editorial work before a book's submission to publishing houses or agents has become fairly common, thanks to the economic pressures and high standards of today's marketplace. And I love entering the process earlier than I did as an acquisitions editor at Random House. Developmental editing—helping to bring out the best in a manuscript—is what drew me to publishing in the first place.

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 Save and the Sell

— Jane Rosenman

Since becoming a full-time independent editor ten months ago—after working in-house for my entire career—I'm often asked which role I prefer.

In truth, I like both roles very much. But the thing I'm struck by (and happily so) is the range of material I'm working on. I was worried that I would miss the numerous hats I wore as an acquisition editor: buying books, negotiating advances, serving as liaison between writer and publishing house—not to mention, the joy of acquiring and shaping a bestseller. But I'm fast discovering that I still wear many hats—albeit in some different shapes and colors.

In my previous incarnation, agents sent me submissions and I'd give them a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, while occasionally asking to see a revision. Now I deal with material at vastly different places along the continuum towards publication.

Recently, I helped to make an author's dream come true. A terrific literary agent circulated a debut novel with exquisite atmosphere and a marvelous sense of place to a handful of editors. The story, however, was underpowered. After hearing this criticism, the agent urged her client to hire me, and after the author and I had developed that aspect of the novel, the book was sold to a terrific publisher.

But I've also had the fun and challenge of getting into a manuscript far earlier in the editorial process—where the writing is inchoate but there's a compelling idea at work. All editors have a bit of both therapist and teacher in them. As a freelancer, I've gotten to use those muscles as well. To wit: I've urged a talented nonfiction writer to, before even looking for agent representation, put aside the memoir she'd begun and instead focus on publishing personal essays in magazines or literary journals. And of course I've helped fiction writers dig deeper psychologically into the lives of their characters.

After participating in countless editorial meetings, I'm in a great position to give informed, honest, and diplomatic advice to writers who want nothing more than to connect with real live readers. There are no guarantees in this business. But for a reasonable fee (particularly if the manuscript is of reasonable length!), hiring an experienced independent editor can go a long way towards helping a writer to understand and to address the challenges that lie ahead.

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



On Book Doctoring – Patricia Mulcahy

A client of mine once objected vociferously when I told her that my role in helping her get ready for publication had been that of "book doctor."

"But that sounds like my project was sick to begin with!" she protested.

I explained that it was only an industry term that implied a more in-depth involvement in the text than editing. Her book just needed a bit of mending. But to make her feel comfortable, when I plugged her book on my website (which functions as an online resume), I listed my role as "editor."

What's the difference?

A book doctor's job is not to heal a sick manuscript, but to bring out the best in one that needs specialized attention. The job goes beyond editing (cutting, pasting, asking pertinent questions along the way) and into amending, augmenting—with interviews, research, and in some cases substantial restructuring—to make a book what it needs to be to meet its target market. Some re-writing may also be in order. I see "book doctoring" as a kind of creative intervention. But it's not collaboration per se, in which the editor/writer composes the book in a back-and-forth with the author; it's a service that requires the author to trust the doctor's "treatment" of the manuscript while also trusting that his/her voice and intentions will remain intact. Subtle differences, perhaps, but significant ones.

Book doctoring can be very time-consuming and labor-intensive. Hence most of these jobs are initiated by a publisher willing to hire me to shape up a manuscript already under consideration, or in fact under contract. Rates vary according to the nature of the assignment.

*Patricia Mulcahy formed the editorial consulting service 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). For more information, visit www.brooklynbooks.com.*



Graphic Novels: Getting off the Ground Floor – Joan Hilty

The two questions I hear most often about this fascinating but imperfectly-named book category are: How do I submit them, and how do you edit them?

And yes, it's the term "graphic novel" that's responsible for much of this confusion. First of all, they aren't always novels (its best-known titles, in fact, are nonfiction memoirs). Secondly, the process of actual graphic storytelling – blending a prose narrative with a sequential-art structure where pacing is often determined by the turn of the page – has long been misunderstood as a form that only works for kids, or only for comic-book themes, when it can in fact tackle every genre imaginable.

But that misconception's dissipating fast as more authors, agents and publishers see the potential in original or adaptative graphic works, and come to me to help realize it. The most important thing to know about the submission process is that whether you've got an artist or not, you shouldn't try to put together a complete work, as you would with a fiction manuscript. There are too many moving parts in a GN – art style, lettering, coloring/toning – to ensure that a publisher will be comfortable aesthetically and financially with all of your choices. I tell clients to treat it like nonfiction: create a proposal that's a strong high concept followed by a strong chapter-by-chapter overview, character sketches and one sample chapter of dialog and art. I'll work with you on each aspect, but above all, I'll ask: Have you made the case for a graphic novel format? Can you prove that only a graphic treatment can put this story head and shoulders above its genre, and/or expand an existing platform in a new, exciting way?

At the editing stage of a graphic novel, the usual task of shaping text becomes one of choreography—managing the pace, pagination, and interplay of art and text. The usual author/editor dynamic becomes one of multiple collaboration—between two, three, even five contributors to a finished work. (And even when the graphic novelist provides everything from script to lettering, he may need an editor's help keeping his skills in sync.) I love every part of this process, from writer-artist matchmaking to guiding a publisher through a GN's complex production workflow. The reward is a great book that's part of one of the fastest-growing publishing categories out there today.

Joan is an editor and consultant specializing in graphic novels and illustrated books. She 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 top comic writers, novelists, screenwriters and artists, including Brad Meltzer, Greg Rucka and Neil Gaiman. She is also a syndicated cartoonist and packager of graphic novels. For more information, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgtturn.com.