Bells and Whistles

Judy Sternlight

It's a whole new world out there, as authors and publishers use tech enhancements to complement the words on the digital page. When I recently downloaded Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* from Open Road, I was able to click on an engaging biographical video embedded in the front. This reminded me of my work with Kwei Quartey (author of the Darko Dawson detective series with Random House and Soho Press) who recently self-published an e-novella, *Death at the Voyager Hotel.* Kwei's novella includes links to original content about Ghana, where his stories are set. I love how digital novels can incorporate bells and whistles to enhance the reading experience, but I'm also glad that these multimedia thingamajigs are optional—that readers can click on the links, or ignore them for a more traditional reading experience.

Visual enhancements to novels have been around a long time, if you consider illustrations in general, as well as creative uses of textual layout. There was the famous black page in *Tristram Shandy* (1760s), and the mouse's "long and sad tale" in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), which appears in the shape of a skinny tail with an increasingly tiny font size.

Current books that stray from traditional prose include Maria Semple's delightful *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* with emails, FBI reports, and an emergency room bill; and Marisha Pessell's *Night Film,* peppered with invented news reports and screenshots of a dark and mysterious website.

I have a deep appreciation for the writers and their creative partners who experiment with eye-catching elements. This includes fun innovations like Nick Bantock's Griffin and Sabine books that contained real letters and postcards that you could pull out and examine, but also simple visual choices like the three symbols used to distinguish between the three narrators in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry.*

When the underlying work is solid, the bells and whistles enhance what is already a strong story. But style doesn't work without substance. I've told more than one writer that you can't rely on gimmicks to hide a weakness in the narrative. And if you employ an unusual form of storytelling, it still has to ring true.

When it works, veering from the traditional form can be breathtaking. At the end of Peter Matthiessen's *Shadow Country,* he scatters the final words of his epic novel across the page, evoking ripples of water—or a man losing consciousness—in a way that grabs me by the throat and makes my eyes fill with tears. Now that's good writing.

Judy Sternlight, a former editor at Random House, Ballantine, and The Modern Library, edited the forthcoming anthology The Brown Reader: 50 Writers Remember College Hill, featuring original essays by Jeffrey Eugenides, Marilynne Robinson, and Meg Wolitzer. She has worked with Marie-Helene Bertino, Rita Mae Brown, Gwen Florio, Bret Anthony Johnston, Peter Matthiessen, and Daniel Menaker. 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. For more information, visit www.JudySternlightLit.com.

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Side by Side
Patricia Mulcahy

Recently I was invited to lead a workshop on collaborative writing at a literary festival. Not long ago, I wouldn't have known even how to describe that line of work.

In political terms, a "collaborator" is someone who consorts with the enemy. But in the book world, he or she who collaborates has to blend narrative flair with the skills valued in psychoanalysis: listening, observing, exercising what novelist Colum McCann calls "radical empathy," the art of putting yourself in the other person's shoes.

I fell into the role by accident. A writer I'd hired to work with a well-known music-world figure on his autobiography fell out with the celebrity halfway through the book. The new in-house advocate at my former publishing house suggested I help finish the book I'd signed up.

"But I've never done anything like that," I stammered.

"All parties involved trust you. Just bring a tape recorder."

Well, it was a little more than that. But what I learned is that trust is indeed the key. Yes, you have to conduct a decent interview, craft a compelling sentence, and negotiate narrative hills and valleys. Most importantly, according to a highly entertaining *New Yorker* interview with Sarah Palin's collaborator Lynn Vincent, you have to provide the reader with a PEE — Powerful Emotional Experience.

How do you get to the elusive PEE? The client — often a public figure or a successful person with a "platform" from which to promote the book — has to trust that your only goal is to get to the heart of the tale and shape it in a way that will make both the publisher and the client happy.

Not that this is a cakewalk. In that same New Yorker piece, Harper publisher Jonathan Burnham notes that in nearly forty percent of these literary arranged marriages, "there's a massive falling out. The subject doesn't like what he or she sees reflected in the mirror, and blames the writer."

Or you try and deliver for the client, and wind up in the soup. Did I really spend an entire week with an actress who agonized over every detail of a failed relationship with her daughter — only to discover that the in-house editor hated the results? In memoirs especially, what's left out is as important as what's left in, so that Life doesn't strangle Art.

My next collaboration was with a 106-year old African American woman whose television interview at the first Obama inauguration impressed a publisher. I felt honored to be entrusted with the details of her inspiring story.

Trust has to go both ways for a successful tango on the page.

Patricia Mulcahy formed the editorial consulting service Brooklyn Books in 1999 after over twenty years in book publishing. She started as a temp at Farrar Straus and Giroux and left as Editor in Chief at Doubleday. 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), and of Making Masterpiece: Twenty-Five Years Behind the Scenes at Masterpiece and Mystery! on PBS by Rebecca Eaton (Viking, fall 2013). See www.brooklynbooks.com for more information.

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The Road to Recognition

Joan Hilty

One of this fall's most talked-about bestsellers is *March,* a memoir by Congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis. Its gripping subject matter and endorsement by Bill Clinton were attention-getting enough, as was its release on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Lewis was the youngest speaker and is now the last living one. But it got special notice for being a graphic novel; Lewis collaborated on it with the artist Nate Powell, inspired by a 1958 comic book called *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story.*

March will doubtless clean up at the comics industry awards — the Eisners and the Harveys. But how should it compete? And will other major book awards notice?

It's been 35 years since Will Eisner coined the term "graphic novel" with *A Contract with God;* 26 years since the nuclear-age thriller *Watchmen* was published; and 21 years since the Holocaust epic *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize. The latter two are almost universally known as major English-language literature. And yet, there is still no universal understanding of what a "graphic novel" is. I've seen the term applied to magazines, webcomics, and art exhibits. Even when used properly, the phrase doesn't quite capture the possibilities of a book that might be fiction or nonfiction, adult or for kids, wordless or dense with text. *March* at one point sat on the New York Times bestseller list next to Marvel's latest collection of the *Young Avengers* superhero series.

Those of us who create and consume comics know that we truly made this bed we're lying in. *Watchmen* was originally a twelve-issue series; it had to find its audience as a serial first. Chased off newsstands by the anti-juvenile-delinquency Senate hearings of the 1950s, comics barricaded themselves into a loyal (nonreturnable) market of specialty retail stores that favored superhero serials and serial storylines collected into book form. It took the 1960s underground comics scene and 1970s-80s experimentation by mainstream publishers to expand the audience and topical range of comics and graphic novels. But the confusion remains.

This is a problem well worth solving; every successful new publishing category results in more publishing — more creators, more readers, more ideas. The graphic novel is "new" both as a publishing format and as a vehicle for many different genres, which makes it tricky to formally recognize. But establishing and growing that recognition is crucial. The Hugo Awards and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize began acknowledging graphic novels in 2009; this year, the Lambda Literary Awards joined them. All good news, but we need to keep going. It's time for major book awards to both embrace and ultimately expand the category; even the industry awards should fine-tune their definitions, which currently don't distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. Ultimately, when judged as an original work, *March* shouldn't have to compete with the adventures of Hawkeye any more than *Lean In* should compete with *Gone Girl.* They are all great stories worth telling. They all need full recognition for what they are.

Joan Hilty has 15 years' experience at DC Comics editing and acquiring and editing Eisner- and Harvey Award-winning comics and 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 Global Publishing, Forbes, and authors published by Hachette, Tor and First Second. For more information, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgturn.com.

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From the Ashes of Rejection...

Jane Rosenman

In my former life as an in-house editor, assessing projects was a painstaking but relatively straightforward process. I read agent submissions carefully and then either wrote a thoughtful rejection letter explaining the why of my rejection—or moved forward to make an offer on the project in question. The author was at a safe remove, well regarded by his or her agent but faceless to me as I sat in my office with the power of the publishing company behind me.

As an independent editor, the whole issue of rejection has become a much larger part of my job. With the vulnerable writer at my side, I dive into the weeds of what is not working. How do we together assess letters of rejection? Can we take the feedback from those letters and my own editorial ideas and together fix the problems? Or is it time to move on to the next project despite the merits of the current manuscript? In short, reading the tea leaves from editors, agents, and the zeitgeist has never been more crucial.

In the best of all worlds, the problems are straightforward. I've been called in on a novel which had been rejected by publishers despite gorgeous writing and atmosphere because of a paucity of story. The author and I worked on punching up the plot. The book was sold and has now been published to excellent reviews. Recently I worked with a debut novelist whose agent received the oxymoronic phenomenon of "extremely impressive rejection letters". It's a story with two timelines: one set decades ago and one set close to the present. Editors loved the earlier narrative and struggled with the later one. The author made the courageous decision—and I believe the right one—to jettison the parallel story and re-imagine the narrative wholly in that earlier era. No matter what happens in the future with this novel, I know that this writer has a very bright future not just because of her undeniable talent, but also because of her tough-minded determination to fight through what the writer Doris Grumbach once called "the odious process of revision," to learn from smart criticism.

I recently read a memoir that was extremely well-written. Yet I felt strongly that the author—who has not yet looked for representation—had not found that prism, that lens through which to tell her deeply personal story and make it universal. I urged this talented writer to re-imagine the material for a different form—perhaps a few personal essays in on-line publications. I am not quick to deliver prophesies or ultimatums in any way: no one has a crystal ball.

But anyone who has worked in creative fields knows that out of the ashes of rejection often comes the project that is just 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 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/in/janerosenman.

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Gone Today, Here Tomorrow

Marjorie Braman

The success of a book—especially a first novel—used to be about returns. If a book sold 2,500 copies out of 5,000 shipped, that was a hurdle a publisher might overcome when selling in the next book. If the same 2,500 copies sold out of 10,000 shipped, the publisher, but most frighteningly, the author, had a big problem. If Barnes & Noble or Borders sold only 500 copies of the 4,000 copies that were their share of that initial print run, they wouldn't even take 500 copies of the next book: a case of diminishing returns based on…returns. It was all about percentages.

In the old days, a sales rep could walk into a big chain store and convince a buyer to take a boatload of a novel if the publisher was really behind it. This translated into Front of Store, the holy grail of placement and oftentimes, representative of 50% of a publisher's "marketing" plan. It was a case of if you build it (pyramids of books, right as the consumer walks in the door), they will come. But returns became the scourge of the business right from the time of Bennett Cerf, whose definition of returns serves as the title of this essay.

One of the first ways publishers tried to deal with returns was to offer a discount if stores kept their return rate low, which only succeeded in accounts lowering their initial buy, resulting in smaller print runs, which mathematically fostered an equation resulting in smaller sales. Publishers urged caution and often suffered for it. But the state of returns has changed dramatically; the things editors and publishers worried about a short time ago now seem so last-century. There is no more Borders. There's still a B&N, but lately, I've not seen that kind of gargantuan display of one title that used to make a publisher's heart beat fast with joy.

When you walk in the door of any B&N, first you notice the magazine rack. As you walk to the register, you pass an impulse-buy display of stationery, diaries, and gadgets – not books. "Front of Store" has dwindled, as has the environment where high returns were too often a reality. Online booksellers don't have to take big initial buys to feature a new book. For the most part, Target, Sam's, and Costco only take the "big" authors. Returns matter, but based on the popularity of the authors these stores select, it's less of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Maybe high returns aren't the death knell they once were, but we've lost the marketing power of the front-facing cover and the browsing opportunity the big bricks-and-mortar stores afforded without having to depend on a third party's "search engine." It's good for authors that returns have lost some of their damaging power, but I miss the big book displays, the marketing partnership between the chains and the publishers, and the joy of seeing a book I'd worked on, or a novel by a friend, stacked to the rafters.

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 most recently worked as a strategic advisor at Open Road Integrated Media. For more information, visit http://www.marjoriebraman.com.

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