Breaking Faith
A Publishing Parable
Maxwell Gherkin

"MAXWELL GHERKIN" is the pseudonym of one of America's most distinguished editors.

The bottom line at Concord Press these days was the bottom line. So how energetically should a dedicated editor like Martha G. fight the powers that be at Concord to get behind the new novel by her talented, serious (but seriously uncommercial) author, David R.? Should she put her in-house reputation, maybe even her job, at risk to push for more advertising for a well-reviewed novel she knows will sell less than four thousand copies? Or should she abandon David and his career and bask in the glory and the credit for her work on a mediocre, glitzy, sexy novel that is literally un-whelming but is already a best-seller?

Veteran publishing insider Maxwell Gherkin's dissection of how Martha G. solved her professional and personal moral dilemmas stirred great controversy when it appeared in the pages of Publishers Weekly. And it is still being discussed passionately. Is it a piece of fiction about the amorality of contemporary publishing written by a cynical, embittered editor? Or is it a brutally candid, shrewdly observed piece of reportage by an unflinchingly honest editor offering a completely realistic look at a typical, practical problem faced by editors and writers in many publishing houses today? Your opinion may be colored by whether you are a successful or unsuccessful, commercial or uncommercial editor or writer. But wherever your career is at, you'll want to learn what Martha's decision was, and what economic, cultural, and publishing pressures influenced her decision. You might even look inside yourself and ask what you would have done if you were faced with her problem.

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David R. is a gifted novelist in his forties. His first book, a strongly drawn account of an auto worker's family that is torn apart by the conflicts of the 1960s, had been successful—glowing reviews, a $50,000 paperback sale, a National Book Award nomination, an immediate place in the sun. His next two were shorter, more experimental novels, one about a surreal commune in northern California, the other a metafictional treatment of people trapped inside a detective novel, and there was a sharp tailing off in review interest and sales. He wrote short stories for several years, trying unsuccessfully to find a way to score again.

David had taken all of this hard. He'd wanted to explore the different ways of telling a story, of imagining the world. But coming from a working-class background, he was particularly motivated to get ahead, to make his writing pay, and his attempts to develop his powers had made him lose ground; his career seemed to be going backwards, from modest riches to rags. He was also very conscious of the new generation of novelists, the so-called Brat Pack, who were getting so much attention and astonishing advances for what he dismissed as "go-go writing" but by whom he felt eclipsed. Stuck in a teaching job at a small university in Ohio, where he ran the writing program, burdened by family responsibilities, and bored spitless by the small-time community where he had been living for twelve years—the sort of town that novelists of previous generations had fled from—David felt himself sinking into the excuses and cynicism that he had seen mark the end of the line for a number of writers.

But then an NEA grant came through, and soon after he hit upon a story idea that was rich in possibilities, maybe even commercial ones. Spurred on by his returning powers, he wrote a three-hundred-page novel in eighteen months. Thinking it both the best book he had written and the riskiest, he sent it off to New York, and in the weeks that followed felt like a man awaiting a jury verdict.

Martha G., a veteran editor, was anticipating David's manuscript with mixed feelings. She loved most of his work, was glad that he had come out of his malaise, but was apprehensive about how a new novel by him would fly at Concord Press, where the success of his first book had worn thin. From what he had indicated to her, the new one was much more "mainstream" than his last two, but novelists usually tended to believe that, particularly the more experimental ones. She admired his desire to keep
exploring, but she found herself hoping that he had come back to a broadly interesting subject and the common touch that had launched him. Also, she could use a success herself.

For the bottom line at Concord Press these days was the bottom line. A house that had been small and venturesome in the arts, political and social thought, and children’s literature, Concord was now trying to find a new, broader identity as the hardcover house in a publishing group owned by INCOM, an international communications empire. Having acquired Concord, one of the last of the independent houses, for several times its value, the new management had dealt with it as a real-estate developer deals with a venerable town house he has bought mainly for its location and then carves up into condos. Under the mandate to spend what was necessary to increase profits by 10 percent each year, Concord had acquired a number of “brand name” authors, doubled its marketing operations, and pruned and diversified its editorial staff to provide more product for the shopping mall market; i.e., books that “meet a need or a trend,” as Dot B. — the chic, hard-driving marketing whiz whom INCOM had recently brought in as publisher — put it. The weekend after David’s book arrived Martha pushed aside a manuscript called The Adult Parent that she was editing and a hot project for a Romanian cookbook, and settled into her reading chair with Remembering Angie.

David had found his subject: she could tell that after two pages by the simple, unmistakable feeling of expectant pleasure that fiction that was right on the money gave her. “My first impression of Angie Annasari was of a pretty, glum-faced girl you might come across in a high school yearbook with one activity underneath her name.” The first chapter was in the words of Dwight Jay, a U.S. attorney, who twenty years ago had picked Angie up at a softball game in Dearborn, Michigan, where he was working that summer as a draft resistance counselor. In the next chapter Angie took up the story, prompted by a letter she had received from Dwight, who had been approached for help by her brother, Jimmy, an indicted drug dealer. “Dwight was like a lottery ticket in which you got Peter Fonda. Spectacular but foolish to believe in. Yet she had. People were believing all sorts of craziness back then. Like Jimmy had believed Dwight and ended up in prison.”

Told in alternate chapters and letters by the two of them — Dwight in Chicago, Angie in San Jose, California — the novel became a political parable of the past three decades, a drama of moral responsibility, and most of all a riveting study of a contemporary working-class woman. Ballsy, full-hearted, resolute, Angie has raised three children by herself; she had also become addicted to the amphetamines that got her through the days and to the Manhattans that got her to sleep. When Dwight contacted her, she was an assistant manager at a Sizzler restaurant, a fixture of her AA group, and thinking of marrying an older man, another recovering alcoholic. But the summer she had spent with Dwight was still the homing device of her heart, and the novel left her in limbo as a more or less emblematic figure of cultural betrayal like her brother.

Martha sensed that David hadn’t fully grasped Angie’s present life, which weakened the ending. She phoned David late Sunday night, sang the book’s praises for several minutes, and then entered her reservations. He didn’t agree with her about the ending. “You want some uplift that just isn’t in their cards,” he said.

A few days later she wrote to David, saying that since this was finally Angie’s story, she wondered if there could be an epilogue and some prior indication that registered where Angie had come out. David wrote back that that kind of ending had gone out with Dickens, that he didn’t know what decision she would make and didn’t want to have to rewrite the last third of the book to find out.

Shortly thereafter, David’s agent, Al V., phoned to say that unless Martha made a substantial offer they wanted to show the book elsewhere. “We feel that this is David’s breakout book,” he said. “We’re looking for six figures.”

Martha said that she’d been thinking in the $25,000 area if David agreed to find a way to pull the novel together.

“No way. We need much more of a commitment.”

“Commitment? We published David’s last two books, which didn’t earn twenty-five thousand between them. Be reasonable, Al.”

“Martha, things are crazy out there. I sold a first novel last month for a hundred sixty-five thousand that doesn’t have half the legs David’s book does.”

There was little else to say. Martha wrote David a wish-you-well letter and thought that was that. Another close, long-standing relationship down the tubes of what publishing had become.

A few months later David called Martha, said he was in New York and needed to see her. When he arrived, his normally sturdy bearing was visibly shaken. He told her of the other houses’ responses. Several had passed; one had offered a $7,500 advance; two others had mentioned considerably more, but one wanted “a big dramatic scene at the end in which they meet again” and the other wanted the story to focus more on the romance: “less telling, more showing; less talk, more sex.” David banged his big hands
together and grinned for the first time. "Less your book, baby, and more mine." The outcome of their meeting was that he decided to take a crack at revising it along the lines Martha had suggested.

At first he reported that it was "like digging into frozen ground," but the more he imagined his way into Angie's recent life and state of mind, the more he found the material opening up again and coming alive. When he was finished, they both saw that his new accession of consciousness about Angie needed to be pieced into the earlier sections of her story.

When the revisions began to click, Martha submitted the first fifty pages and a description of the rest to the publishing committee in order to acquire the book. Believing that Remembering Angie now stood a good chance of selling a minimum of 10,000 in hardcover and again in paperback, she asked for an advance of $25,000.

But at the publishing committee meeting she ran into solid resistance. Dot B., looking more harried than stylish these days (Concord had just lost its top thriller writer to another house and its nonfiction leader, a "juicy" account of the Reagans' social circle, was taking heavy returns on a 250,000-copy first printing), said she hadn't gotten very far with Remembering Angie. "Half the time I didn't know where I was," she snapped. "Past or present. Chicago or California. Also, a tony lawyer and a hash slinger? Give me a break."

Mac S., the editorial director, liked the writing of the sample chapters but thought that the character of Angie was too blue-collar for many hardcover readers, particularly women, to identify with.

"Such things happen," Martha said as calmly as she could. "Even in fiction. For example, Love Story."

"This isn't Love Story," Dot said. "It's much less emotional and accessible. Also it's a downer, from what I can see."

Martha said that the book became more moving as it went along, particularly with the revisions the author was making. "I think it can succeed. Also I'm not asking for us to invest a ton of money."

"Who's going to buy this book?" marketing manager Lance L. asked.

Martha reminded herself that he was only doing his job. Gone were the days when a novel like Remembering Angie was perceived as an opportunity rather than a problem, when a book this promising by a Concord author created enthusiasm and affection, which was communicated inside the house and which then emanated from it, pitting the book's way to the review media and from there to the reading public. Now what was called for was a pseudosociology that reduced the book to some slot in the market. So, trying to keep her tongue out of her cheek, she gave them one. "This will appeal to the Big Chill audience. Also the educated reader who likes Bruce Springsteen . . . ."

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"But those people buy paperbacks," said Lance.

"Well, what about doing it as a quality paperback and take a strong position on it, really break it out?"

"We've been down that road before," Mac said. "If it doesn't work, you get killed."

Martha tried again. "You have to see it for what it is: a finely written love story that evokes an era that meant a lot to a lot of people. People who read books."

"Novels about the sixties just don't sell," said Lance. "Look what happened to his second book about the hippies."

"Well, where do we stand?" Martha then asked. When there was no immediate answer she played her last card. "I really want us to do this book. Also two other houses are after it at about that advance."

"I don't get it," said Dot. "I thought he was working on it with you."

"His agent has been showing it around, but he'd like to stay."

Dot wanted to know who the competition was. When Martha told her, she said, "Offer twelve-five. I wouldn't mind putting Al's feet to the fire for trying to move one of our authors."

"I've been talking in the neighborhood of twenty-five, and that was before he began improving it."

"Well, now you have a captive author so take advantage of it," Dot said. "I want people to know that we play hardball too."

With Mac's support Martha was able to get permission to settle at seventeen-five, with two-thirds of it paid right away. Even so, she left the meeting feeling thoroughly undermined. In her previous career as a senior editor, her estimate of the value of a book like David's would have been more or less taken for granted. Also her first offer would have been honored.

Needless to say, neither David nor Al was happy about the new terms. But now David was mainly bent on finishing the book, and Al was content to let her off the hook with a little dig. "I'm getting used to the fact that editors are powerless these days," he said.

While the book was in production, Martha sent out the usual bound galleys for quotes, and the book's luck began to change—or rather its class began to tell. Though most well-known authors are glutted with advance copies and seldom respond, Martha received several enthusiastic quotes, including one of ringing praise from a famous critic, Victor P., which began, "At last a new American novel with a social conscience and a cultural vision. Remembering Angie does for the sixties what The Great Gatsby did for the twenties by encoding a chapter of the Romantic movement in America in a love story."
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in advancing and in flogging the book until the reviewers were heard from.

Dot, the publisher, thought that the house should take an even stronger position: a first printing of 100,000 and an ad budget of $125,000 to give the book "more credibility, particularly with the chains." The publicity, sales, and advertising people around the table began to think of further ways to reach the figure that Dot had proposed. Since Martha felt the matter was out of her hands and that her views would be taken as another example of her not being "on board" at the new Concord, she kept silent.

Why all the enthusiasm for this soufflé of a novel—tasty but pretty empty? Martha had her ideas about it. The typical big-time publisher today was someone like Dot, whose expertise was high-volume marketing but who still took a certain pride in publishing quality books. Thus the particular feather in their caps was the classy writer like Melissa Rogers who allowed them to keep their heads high all the way to the bank and the management meeting. Also, in an era of publishing of information, advice, and entertainment, one list was pretty much like another, so that the presence of this or that "real writer" was about all that remained to distinguish one house from another. Then, too, there were the status drives of the new breed of publishers like Dot, their need to position themselves in the industry as "major players," their house as a "hot shop." All of which meant that the competition for the quality writer with a significant following had become as fierce and often as exorbitant as that for the tried-and-true authors of best-sellers. The inflated advances led directly to the excessive printings and advertising/promotion budgets that she was witnessing with Melissa Rogers's book. Martha figured that given the mixed reviews that The Limelight Café was likely to receive, they would do well to sell 30,000 copies. With a sensible first printing of 40,000 and an equivalent budget the book would then be a success. She feared that unfolding in the room was a scenario for a failure that was bound to adversely affect Melissa Rogers's relations with the house.

That morning, though, she was much more concerned about the fate of David's book. The marketing manager rattled off the numbers: a first printing of 6,000 copies, a minuscule budget that would drop it into a house ad with three other books, and a half page in the catalog. Martha girded herself to do battle.

"I'm more confident about the reviews for this book than I am for Melissa's," she said. "Look at the quotes it's been getting."

"They're impressive," said Dot. "But so are most quotes. That's why we use them."

"My cup runneth over," David said as Martha read the letter to him. When she was finished, he said, "If nothing else happens, this makes it all worthwhile."

Martha shared the critic's comment with Mac, her one ally, discussing with him how best to make use of it. They decided to shorten it to "It does for the sixties what The Great Gatsby did for the twenties." She sent it around with the other quotes in a memo to the key marketing executives that also invoked the success of David's first book. She wrote a similar letter to the field force and added a personal note and a copy of the galley pages for each of the reps who she thought would cotton to Remembering Angie and might speak up for it at the coming sales conference.

At a marketing meeting a book's initial position is established: its tentative first printing and the quota that the sales reps are asked to meet; its advertising and promotion budget, its space in the catalog. Even with the quotes, Martha hadn't been able to drum up interest, much less enthusiasm, from her editorial colleagues, none of whom read the book. That, too, was very different from the Concord she had known. Under the "lean and mean" edict of INCOM the editors were handling almost twice as many books as before and hardly had time for their own projects. And she had observed the ethos of the staff shifting from a collegial to an entrepreneurial one, in keeping with the pressures and rewards of meeting their individual acquisition quotas, which were reckoned on a scale that reflected the amount of the advance paid for a book.

Martha had two novels on the fall list: Remembering Angie and The Limelight Café by Melissa Rogers. The latter, which she was handling for Dot B., was a kind of contemporary version of Arthur Schnitzler's La Ronde in which a serial string of amorous relationships in all three flavors connects the odd lives and plenteous life-styles of nine youngish people in the Newport Beach/Laguna strip.

Dot had paid $550,000 for world rights to The Limelight Café and the author's next book, the idea being to make her into a "brand name" and publish her books throughout the English-speaking world through INCOM's houses in New York, Toronto, and London.

Much of Martha's stint at the marketing meeting was taken up with the plans to advertise The Limelight Café and to tour Rogers. Martha, who felt that her colleagues were being carried away by their enthusiasm for the promotability of both the book and the author, pointed out that there was often a critical backlash to a novel by an author whose first one had gone to the races, and perhaps they might take a more conservative position both
“Review editors don’t care that much,” said Jackie L., the publicity director. “They just figure that the quotes are from the author’s friend. Or the editor’s.”

“It depends how you present them,” said Martha. “With the right copy...” She could sense that eyes were already glazing over. “Look,” she said, “the quotes are indicative of the book’s quality and of the seriousness with which other writers and critics will take it. That’s all I’m saying. This book warrants our taking a stronger position.”

“We can take any position we want,” said Bernie T., the sales director. “I’m still only going to get out four thousand copies based on his track record.”

“If it starts to get the attention and to move, we can reprint,” said Lance, the marketing manager.

Martha realized that she was already down to her last shot. “All right,” she said. “This is a book that the reviews will have to make. But if you give it only a half page in the catalog, you’re sending a message to the review editors that we think it’s a small, run-of-the-mill novel and they’ll pass it by.”

“Every editor wants a full page,” growled Bernie.

At this point Mac intervened. “I’ve been reading Remembering Angie, and it’s got real possibilities. Let’s give it a page and get on with things.”

The two novels were published within a month of each other, though most readers wouldn’t have known that. Because of the publicity and industry buzz generated by the advance paid for The Limelight Café, as well as the success of Melissa Rogers’s first book, it was prominently and widely reviewed, particularly in the book media that emanates from New York, where, generally speaking, the reputation of a book is established. It shared a front-page review in the New York Times Book Review with the work of another rising woman novelist, was praised in Newsweek and panned in Time, made most of the slick monthlies, and was even included in an omnibus review of “trendy” fiction in the New York Review of Books. The review in the New Republic titled “Trivial Pursuit” summed up much of the negative response. But the book’s combination of “the latest in life-styles” (Washington Post) and “suave kinkiness” (Vanity Fair) carried the day, and soon the novel was making its way up the best-seller list.

Martha found herself being almost as swept away by the reception as Melissa was. As her author’s stock soared, so did hers: she felt herself being treated no longer like an old-fashioned family retainer who was out of step with the ambitious and lavish new master and mistress, but instead like a shrewd woman of the world who knew how to make things happen. Her judgment about promoting Melissa and the book was taken seriously, her initial reservations forgotten in the heat of success. Dot invited her to a getting-to-know-you lunch, asked her opinion of a prominent writer who was being “moved” by his agent, then wanted to know whom Martha was “cruising.”

Martha said she now and then expressed an interest in an author to his or her agent but didn’t like to go further than that. “If the author’s worth stealing,” she said, “the other publisher must have been doing something right. All you’re offering is more money and getting an author who has become committed to the highest bidder.”

“I don’t see it that way. I’m concerned about the next three years. Also, there’s nothing like money for building an author. As you’ve seen with Melissa. I’ll bet she’s feeling great about Concord these days.”

Which was true. Martha’s mind turned to David, who was her unhappy author. Remembering Angie had been published a month ago and the reviews so far hadn’t amounted to a hill of beans. Though bitterly disappointed, Martha could not honestly say she was surprised. In her mind, editing a book like David’s was somewhat like raising her two children. While they were growing up, the world was full of possibilities for them; now that they were out in the world—one a painter, the other an actress—they faced intense struggles and slender prospects of making their ways. So too with a book like David’s, which had been nurtured by hope, hers as well as his, but was now at the mercy of chance and conditions.

The main condition was a glutted market. Each month four thousand or five thousand books poured from the presses; most of them sold a few thousand copies and were dead a year later. It was as though books had become as precarious and perishable as fish eggs, so that so many had to be spawned in order for a few to live. The colleges and universities seemed to be producing more writers of literary fiction and poetry than readers of them. Caught in the overflow, book review editors and writers, like readers, latched onto reputation and fashion and hype. Sometimes an unheralded book, like David’s first one, hit a public nerve of topicality or taste, got a few breaks from the media, and went to the head of the line. But the culture’s memory was short, almost amnesiac, and ten years later, the author had fallen back into the pack of so-called midlist writers.

At his end, David was telling himself some of the same things in a more despairing way. The early quotes from other writers and then an enthusiastic advance notice in Publishers Weekly had confirmed the feeling that he had broken out of his long slump, and visions of glowing reviews, even of best-seller lists and choice teaching positions, danced in his head. But then the publication week of the book came and went with a resounding silence, and the weeks that followed brought only a handful of perfunctory reviews.
Something had to be done. He made up a list of demands and phoned Martha. She began to commiserate with him about the "shopping-guide state of book reviewing" but he was through with ironic detachment. He wanted some action. "Have you called the Times Book Review?"

"The book has been out only a little more than a month. Let's give it another week or two."

"How about Time? You said you had a friend there?"

"It'd be too late for them to review it now."

"What about Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles?"

"I'll ask the publicity director what she knows."

"You sure your friend at Time saw the book? You thought we had a good chance there. That it was his kind of book."

"David, I sent him one myself."

"How about calling him, then?"

"I've just told you it's too late now."

"One place it's too soon, the other it's too late, the others you don't know about."

"I'm doing what I can, David. I know it's disappointing but it can still turn around."

But David now had the bit of frustration between his teeth and he continued to grind away. In the ensuing weeks he wanted to know why they weren't pushing his book in Detroit, where he had grown up, and in Ann Arbor, where he had gone to the university, or elsewhere in the state. He wanted to know why the one ad scheduled hadn't even appeared yet. He arranged for the local campus bookstore to do a window display, but the books didn't arrive for three weeks.

Around this time two major reviews finally appeared. The one in the Chicago Tribune concluded: "With this book he moves into the front rank of midwestern novelists," and the Village Voice Literary Supplement sang its praises as "a high-class class novel that will stay in your mind's eye like a piece of grit." Two days later David was on the phone. What were they doing to get more books in the Chicago and New York stores? Could he finally get a decent ad? "Give me just a small fraction of the money and attention you're throwing after the Rogers book."

"That's not my decision, kiddo," Martha said, trying to keep her cool.

"I happen to agree with you."

"That's not doing me much good, is it?"

Though aggrieved by David's words, Martha went to Lance to make a case for an ad that could draw on the two impressive reviews as well as the authors' quotes to make a formidable presentation. Lance looked up the marketing figures. "Forty-two hundred copies," he said. He held up empty hands. "Besides, we're cutting our ad budget by 20 percent."

"You mean that he's not even getting that lousy group ad?"

"What can I tell you? I don't make these decisions. Go talk to Dot."

Her gorge rising and her heart sinking, Martha asked to see Dot. Only a few minutes later she was called to her office. Dot was beaming. "Next week, Limelight goes to No. 6 and we're going back for another twenty-five thousand copies."

"That's great." Martha let the good news calm her and also permeate the atmosphere with good will. Then she said, "I've got a problem," and laid it out.

Dot's expression went from jovial to impassive to impatient. "So you'll lose this author. What have you lost? Someone whose books sell five thousand copies!"

"He asked me why we published his book if we're not going to support it. I didn't have an answer for him."

"We're not meeting our profit targets, so we have to cut overhead. It's as simple as that."

"Not to an author, it isn't."

"What's this author?" Dot snapped, her dark, pretty face hardening, her words moving toward the side of her mouth. "I'll tell you what this author is. He's a chip in a roulette game, like most authors. Most literary fiction is going to lose money, right? It's a fact of life. But we go on publishing it because you never know. Now and then one of them comes up a winner. If it doesn't we're not going to throw good money after bad. How long have you been in this business?"

"I've been in it long enough to remember when a book got ten percent of the cover price to advertise and promote it. Okay, I'm not asking for that. I'm just asking that we don't abandon David completely."

"Do you know how many editors are going to tell me that if we cut the ad budget this or that author is going to leave?"

"If this was your typical first novel, with little enough to put in an ad, I could live with it. But we've published four of David's books, one of them has made money, and this one has gotten fabulous quotes and is starting to get some major attention. We've got a stake in him."

"She paused, weighed her next words, and decided to use them. "Also a responsibility. We're building reputations, careers, not only publishing books. Even a small ad with the right quotes in the New York Review of Books puts this book on the literary map and maybe helps him to get a better teaching job. I'm asking for fifteen hundred, two thousand tops."

"I'm already five minutes late for a meeting. I'll think it over. But, there's other editors to consider."
Martha stood up. "I think the house owes me one. And this is the one I want."

"Put it in a memo. I'll see what I can do."

Two days later a copy of a memo came to her authorizing the group ad that included David's book. She called advertising and learned there would be room for one quote. Then she called David. As she explained the situation, in the teeth of his silence, she felt a bit of a Soviet bureaucrat talking to a Lithuanian.

When she was finished, he said, "What are the publicity people doing? Any action there?"

"There's not much they can do yet."

"You said they were waiting for reviews. Now they've got them, right?"

"Come on, David. You know that a review in the Voice doesn't get you on Leiterman."

"It should get me on something. The one in the Chicago Tribune could get me on the Stads Terkel show. I'm only asking for a little effort from you."

"From me? I'm the one who's neglecting you and your . . . book?"


"I think we both need to cool off and see things in perspective."

"Which perspective? From Old Bottom-line Moneybags's perspective, I'm a nothing who's being a pain in the ass. From my perspective, I'm an author fighting for his book, maybe his career. And I'm not getting what other authors in my position are getting. I see what Knopf does for Jane Smiley or Harpers for James Wilcox or Seymour Lawrence for Jayne Anne Phillips."

"Seymour Lawrence has his own imprint. And I'm sure that there are authors at Knopf and Harpers who are in your position and are just as unhappy. It's not any one house. It's the way publishing is now."

"What am I supposed to do? Everyone tells me you have to hustle for your book these days, but I can't get to first base with you guys or even get to bat. I'm looking at a major failure."

Martha took a deep breath and interrupted him. "David, listen to me. You remember when you said that getting Victor's words made it all worthwhile, even if nothing else happens. That's what matters finally. The judgment of your peers, of the real critics and writers you've been hearing from. All the rest is just fashion, hype, and luck."

After he hung up, David sat at his desk, his mind still churning with anger and resentment. He tried to shift his thinking, to find consolation in Martha's words, which were ones he had often told himself. Why had he stopped believing them? It was as though the premise of the literary vocation had shifted from exploring your imagination to marketing it. It was in the air: the big money, the publicity hunting, the careerism. The brightest of the young writers he taught or met took it for granted and acted accordingly. He remembered a remark of Louis Kronenberger's some years ago: "It used to be writers sold out at forty. Today they sign on at twenty-five."

But it had affected him too. Like other writers of the middle generation, he saw through the higher commercialism, its wanton conversion of fame (still the "Spur," as Milton called it) into stupid celebrity; and yet felt left out of the action. He had had his chance after his first book and hadn't exploited it, and now he was condemned to this third-rate job in Nowheresville and to struggle for nominal advances, a lousy ad, scraps of recognition. He felt like a fool.

A week later Martha sent him a copy of the ad, two clips of short reviews that were six weeks old, and the news that the Times Book Review had killed the review of his book. Several fruitless conversations followed with his agent and Martha. The fact that his book had still only netted some 4,300 copies and that returns were already coming in to reduce that figure loomed like a wall that bounced back any suggestions or requests that cost money.

Finally, David wrote a long letter to the publisher that wired all of his complaints and grievances to set off the explosive conclusion: "Being published by Concord has proved to be the worst form of rejection: another publisher who had as little interest in the book as you would merely have turned it down; instead you took it on and then through your indifference and incompetence killed it."

Enraged, Dot summoned Martha and handed her the letter. "Who does this bastard think he is?"

Martha read it through, her own anger, frustration, and sense of betrayal rising finally to match David's. "He's a difficult author whose book will sell less than four thousand copies," she said. "Forget him."
Mistah Perkins—He Dead
Publishing Today

Gerald Howard

GERALD HOWARD has worked as an assistant editor in the educational department of New American Library and as a Viking hardcover and Penguin paperback editor at Penguin USA, where he eventually became an executive editor. He is currently an editor in the trade department of W. W. Norton.

Much admired since its appearance in the American Scholar in the summer of 1989, and reprinted here with a “Postscript” especially written for this edition of Editors on Editing, Mr. Howard’s incisive overview of the state of contemporary editing, writing, and publishing, “Mistah Perkins—He Dead: Publishing Today,” is still discussed and debated with undiminished interest among editors, writers, and publishers.

Exploring “the forces that are reshaping the landscape of American publishing, particularly as they affect the function of the book editor, be he the accomplice or victim (or both) of these forces . . . , and matters of taste and judgment in writing that aspires to the status of literature,” Mr. Howard ruminates on how the patron saint of American editors, Maxwell Perkins, would fare in today’s publishing world.

After a vividly detailed examination of how the pressures of the marketplace, the media, and publishing tend to tempt writer and editor away from dedication to the highest ideals of their callings, Mr. Howard decides that “it is impossible to imagine that august figure Max Perkins working happily or even successfully in this world, for his values—loyalty, honesty, taste, proportion, Olympian standards—are not always negotiable currency.
more consistently compelling *mission commerciale* to separate the consumer
from his cash. Happy the publisher (and happy the author) who can man-
age to make a single book fulfill both functions! The real art of publishing
consists not in reconciling what are, in a capitalist system, quite simply
irreconcilable imperatives but in orchestrating the built-in tensions in a
harmonious fashion. However, the two-way road in publishing from the
bottom line to Mount Olympus travels right across a fault line, and that is
where the serious editor lives and plies his trade. To put it bluntly, the
tectonic plates are shifting, there’s an earthquake going on, and all that
moving and shaking you’ve read about is making it hard to attend to
business—or even to be certain, from day to day, just what our business is.
The delicate task of orchestrating tensions becomes more difficult still when
the walls threaten to collapse about you.

I overstate the situation, of course, but not by much. It may be that since
book editors stand at the very center of the publishing process and also
mediate between what the culture is offering up and what the firm is putting
out, they register crises earlier and more severely, like canaries in coal
mines. They certainly operate in highly contested, tremendously tricky
terrain. Lionel Trilling famously referred to the “bloody crossroads” where
literature and politics meet; the intersection between culture and commerce
where editors do their work is no less sanguine a piece of ground. In this
essay I’d like to explore the forces that are reshaping the landscape of
American publishing, particularly as they affect the function of the book
editor, be he the accomplice or the victim (or both) of those forces. This
exploration will of necessity touch on matters of taste and judgment in
writing that aspires to the status of literature. Indeed, it may illuminate the
question of whether such writing is likely to be produced at all in the coming
decades, and if so, what form it will take. I hope to be able to demonstrate
that, first, matters are more hopeful in this respect than the conventional
critics of American publishing are telling us; but, second, for many of the
same reasons, things are in a parlous state. Our particular bloody cross-
roads is especially fertile ground for contradictions and ironies.

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surrounding just what it is that a book editor does. In the mind of the
educated public, the figure of Maxwell Perkins, editor of F. Scott Fitz-
gerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, and Thomas Wolfe, stands forth
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significance, their contributions, if any, to the world of literature and ideas. By the time Illness as Metaphor came up for discussion I was thoroughly disoriented, and whatever fine insights I may have mentally prepared myself to deliver had evaporated under an onslaught of anxiety. I stammered out a few jumbled and perfectly ineffective sentences and then, sensing my utter failure to communicate the book's importance, played what I felt was my only card left: "It will probably be nominated for the National Book Award." (Her previous book, On Photography, had won the award some months earlier.)

The reaction was swift, but not what I had anticipated: an editor on the other side of the table snorted sarcastically, "Well, that will sell a lot of books."

My performance on behalf of Gass's book was little better. I did say, somewhat apologetically this time, that I thought that it, too, would be nominated for an NBA, a remark that carried the same absence of force in that forum. Needless to say, my employer declined to offer a red cent to reprint either of the books.

There is something to be said for having the stuffing knocked out of you on your first entry into the ring, I suppose. Since that time I've attended several hundred editorial meetings and run quite a few myself, and I now know just what I say under the same circumstances. (Gass's book was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, and Sontag's book went nominationless, incidentally, but contrary to my new colleague's disdainful remark, an astute publisher, hardcover or paperback, can most certainly use the aroma of prestige such a citation imparts as a tool to sell books.) But I had not fallen into a pit of philistinism; I had simply encountered the world of commercial publishing as a quiveringly unprepared naif. The shorthand did not necessarily imply disdain for content; it was just a way of cutting to the business heart of the matter. What I heard at that big paperback house did not differ radically from what I have later encountered at the editorial meetings of two distinguished hardcover imprints. That the publishing process can very well chill the blood of the uninitiated does not imply an absence of seriousness on the part of the participants, editors emphatically included. To paraphrase Bismarck's mot about the law, it is with books as it is with sausage: if you like the stuff, it's best not to watch it being made.

The point I wish to make is that book editing is not now and never has been a pursuit that permits a narrow purism. F. Scott Fitzgerald characterizes his film producer hero Monroe Stahr in The Last Tycoon as one of the few people who can hold the whole complex equation of filmmaking in his head at once; it might be said that good editors do something similar with the publishing equation. Their ministrations extend equally to the narrow compass of the page of text where the reader will experience the book and the wide cultural and commercial arena where the book itself must find its way; their fealty is equally to the spiritual, emotional, and financial well-being of the authors they publish and the firms that employ them. One might say that the effective editor is on comfortable terms with God and with Mammon. The great Max Perkins also published Taylor Caldwell and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Probably the most remunerative book ever published by Alfred A. Knopf was Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet (over eight million copies sold in this country alone, and climbing still), and the ultra-prestigious firm that bears Knopf's name is known in the book trade for its top-of-the-culinary-line cookbooks and for the commercial éclat with which it publishes glossy show business memoirs. The firm of Farrar, Straus, Giroux, publisher of several Nobel Prize winners and generally regarded as the most purely literary house in the country, pulled itself out of the red in 1950 after four financially lackluster years by publishing Gayelord Hauser's best-selling Look Younger, Live Longer; it is currently happily awash in the incredible revenues generated by Scott Turow's Presumed Innocent and Tom Wolfe's Bonfire of the Vanities. I could cite dozens of similar examples with ease.

I perhaps overemphasize the point about book editing, even at the highest level of practice, having a lot to do with money and promotion and gamesmanship and overall business sense because these are the aspects of the craft that the public least understands or cares to recognize. The other part, the priesthood-of-literature aspect, well, that certainly exists; that is the star by which the serious editor sets his course, but it is also something primary and largely irreducible and unsusceptible to explanation. The code is simple, really. Be loyal to your authors. Nurture the best that is in them and give them the best that is in you—including sticking by them in lean times. Publish the best writing that you can find or that finds you. Don't send books to the printer that you know can be made better. Be proud of the firm and give it books that the firm can be proud to publish. If you have to or want to publish some junk or sheer product (it happens), don't represent your dross as gold. Honor the past while remaining alert to what is new and interesting and valuable and maybe upsetting to conventional taste—and have the guts to publish it. Don't fall into the all-too-available smugness about who and what will sell—and about your own infallibility. Strive to be the kind of editor your younger, hopelessly literary self wanted to be. Book editing, like politics, at its most fulfilling engages the participant at a very deep, test-of-character level, and that is what makes it worth doing.

On the good days (and for me most of them are good), I believe all that. On the bad days, I feel like a self-victimizing chump for believing it. On the
bad days, the days when another venerable American house is neutron-bombed by the mindless conglomerate that enfolded it, or a Big Name in the Lit Biz has deserted his longtime publisher for a big fat check from Long Green and Gotricks, or an agent has slammed the wind out of me with a punishing demand for money on a book my soul cries out to publish, on those days I decide that literature is the very last thing that publishing is about. I decide that publishing is about power and money and ego and sharp practice and staying ahead of the unearned advances while fanning the flames of memory under your successes. On the bad days I seriously ask myself why I should care so much about a totally uncodified and thoroughly outmoded set of standards and ethics when so many others appear to be doing so well without them—and all of it in the service of a form of cultural transmission unlikely to be in existence much beyond my lifespan. As Bugs Bunny says, What a maroon.

I usually get over it fairly quickly. A sense of humor helps. There are, however, more and more of those bad days for editors to get over. The shape of the publishing landscape changes, sometimes drastically, almost every week. The players change partners with the frequency of a square dance; the houses change ownership with the indignity of a bankruptcy sale. The prevailing atmosphere is very much one of high capitalism characteristic of the late Reagan era: all of a sudden there seems to be this incredible amount of money around, sales are going up and up, but nobody feels secure because it all might go bust tomorrow, because we might very well all be living beyond our means. You know, that homeless-in-Trump Tower feeling. The precious basics of the editor's craft—time, security, loyalty, a shared understanding of literary and intellectual values and financial value—become less and less dependably available as stronger and stronger gusts of change sweep through the business. The forward march of culture begins to feel like a rear-guard action, and purely literary values begin to look entirely beside the point of a larger, colder, scarcely expensive game. When one reaches the point, as I have on numerous occasions, of having to decide during an auction whether the paperback rights to a first collection of short stories or a first novel are worth many, many tens or several hundreds of thousands of dollars, one's fine discriminations tend to feel awfully fussy and irrelevant. But then, when a van Gogh or Monet or Gauguin is going right through the roof at Sotheby's, the curator doesn't interrupt the proceedings to remind the crowd that the work in question is not from the artist's strongest period.

I've spent a good deal of time brooding over the possible reasons why things seem so badly out of whack—why, to put it bluntly, publishers are behaving so stupidly and self-destructively in some instances, and so peculiarly shortsightedly overall. There is no one primal cause for the transfor-

mations all have witnessed and many question and deplore (it suits others just fine, of course), any more than one can explain simply why mergers and acquisitions became the major-league sport of Wall Street. World historical forces are clearly at work. From my point of view down in the editorial trenches, however, I think I can isolate a few broad developments, all working in concert to reinforce one another, that have caused huge distortions and discontinuities in the way publishers in general and editors in particular go about their business.

Pride of place must of course go to the by-now almost exclusively corporate nature of American publishing (I exclude from this discussion the university presses and the hundreds of small presses, whose nature, influence, and problems require a totally separate inquiry). Not very long ago, publishing houses tended to be family-owned and family-run businesses, with the founder or the founder's descendants at the helm. Scribner's was run by a Scribner, Putnam's by a Putnam, Doubleday by a Doubleday, Simon & Schuster by a Simon and a Schuster. Even where a specifically family connection to management no longer existed, as in the case of Little, Brown, Harper & Row, and Houghton Mifflin, the houses remained closely held entities, and trade publishing itself formed something of a peculiar archipelago off the continent of corporate America, subject to the same economic weather but governed by its own insular rules. Do not imagine this island nation as paradise, by any means, only as a reasonably stable confederation where change came slowly and business proceeded at a comparatively stately pace.

The philosophers tell us that man has fallen into the quotidian; it may be said that publishing at some point fell into the fiscal—the early-to-mid sixties is the likely starting date. One by one the great trade houses sold themselves to the conglomerates and the huge communications concerns, and so ceded, whether they recognized it or not, the control of their own destiny. On the side of the houses, the impetus for the sale varied. In some cases the founders or their heirs found themselves getting on in years and no longer vigorous enough or committed enough to handle the business of the firm properly. So in effect they cashed out their interests for a handsome price. In other instances the independent houses believed that allying themselves with powerful corporate owners would solve the perennial problems of modest concerns—cash flow and capital shortage—and allow them to ride out the inevitable lean seasons cushioned by the corporation's substantial assets against the squeeze of high inflation and interest rates. Better to go to the friendly corporate owner than the possibly unfriendly banker or the impersonal capital markets for the necessary funds, the logic went. On the conglomerates' side, these houses, controlling as they did substantial literary properties and themselves brand names of widespread recognition,
offered a highly cost-effective entry into what everybody saw as a growth industry, now that a vast new generation of Americans was in the process of becoming college-educated and thus, it was assumed, lifelong readers.

At the heart of these sales lay a terrible misunderstanding. The trade houses thought they would run their business as they had before, with similar independence of taste and action, safely cocooned within their conglomerates. The corporations, however, with far less naïveté, expected and insisted that their new assets adopt the same financial lockstep as their other assets, show quarterly growth, institute strict managerial controls—the shareholders expected no less. God, as usual, was with the big battalions, and today almost all the houses bearing the great names in American publishing are either huge corporations themselves or smoothly integrated into vast corporate combines. They now dance to the tune of big-time finance, and it’s not a fox-trot; it’s a bruising slam dance.

From down here on the shop floor, the results often look ludicrous and disastrous. Publishers are playing a big-money game with comparatively minuscule resources. On the map of corporate America as a whole, trade publishing commands such a small portion of the consumer dollar that it is barely visible. Let me illustrate the point. The January 1989 issue of Manhattan, inc. reports that Nintendo Video Entertainment was the toy industry’s top-selling product in 1988, grossing $2.3 billion. The net income to Nintendo from that one toy (assume 50 percent of gross) amounts to more than a quarter of the income of the entire trade book industry, which was $4.4 billion last year. What conceivable clout can even a $100 million company wield in such an environment? On the southern tip of Manhattan, twenty-five-year-olds in bright red suspenders buy and sell such concerns the way kids trade baseball cards—and with less feeling for the object in question.

No wonder, then, that publishers are demonstrating an almost inexorable tendency to huddle together in self-protective combinations, to weather the financial storms and preserve some autonomy of action. No wonder they are reaching out to create global publishing empires. Simon & Schuster, under the capacious Gulf and Western umbrella, now includes the Simon & Schuster imprint, Pocket Books, Poseidon, Prentice-Hall, Fireside, Touchstone, and a long list of subsidiaries. Random House, itself owned by the Newhouse family, which also owns the New Yorker and the Conde Nast magazine empire, controls Random House Trade, Alfred A. Knopf, Pantheon (which includes Schocken), Villard, the paperback imprints Ballantine, Vintage, and Fawcett, and recently concluded the purchase of one of the few remaining owner-run houses, Crown Publishing—itself a considerable nest of imprints and divisions and a highly profitable concern. On the other side of the pond, Random House has established a substantial pres-

ence in British publishing by purchasing the venerable houses of Jonathan Cape, Chatto and Windus, and The Bodley Head, thereby making feasible the purchase and implementation of worldwide publishing rights in the English language. The latter is a special strength of my old employer, Penguin Books, which doth bidestide the globe like a colossus and which, in this country, controls Viking, New American Library, E. P. Dutton... I can’t go on.

I’ll learn from the example of King Canute and spare myself a plea that all this merger activity stop. But even when such major reshufflings are handled sensitively and efficiently, there must of necessity be a disquieting interregnum of new managers, shifts in publishing philosophy, rerouting of the lines of communication and hierarchies of authority. At its worst a blind corporate stupidity descends upon a house, a reign of chaos in the putative name of profit and rationalization that in very swift order leads to the demoralization of the staff and the final destruction of its publishing identity and mission. Some of these latter cases are willful, others the simple result of putting the management of the finely tuned entity that is a top-flight publishing house in the hands of apes in suits. (One of the finest literary editors in American publishing was given his walking papers with the contemptuous remark, "You’re a six-thousand-copy editor," six thousand being about the lowest feasible printing for the average book. Of sweetest of ironies, though, his first acquisition for his next employer sold about a million copies in hardcover!) The effect of all this on serious book editors scarcely needs spelling out. Suffice it to say that they move around a lot these days from house to house, hoping to stay a few steps ahead of the whirlwind, searching for the diminishing solid and stable places where they can hang out their shingles for a few years and do some good publishing.

The loss of an editor is almost always a shock to the writer, for it is the rare writer indeed who can write a book in splendid isolation and autonomy; and once the book is done, the writer must depend on the editor to guide the book through the course of its preparation for publication. The Brownian motion among the editorial class has resulted in a situation where many fine writers no longer feel they can afford any particular loyalty to a single publishing house. They’ve been taught the core lesson in modern corporate American life: expendability. Lately they’ve been learning another lesson as well, one writ large in the massive prices paid for corporate buyouts and objets d’art alike: that value is an exceedingly variable quality, its assessment highly dependent upon circumstance and subject to all manner of manipulation. The loss of heart suffered by many editors is paralleled by a similar decline of faith in the part of the writers that the writing itself will be enough, that the artistic act will suffice, without assiduous attention
to literary politics, public presentation, and publishing strategy.

We enter here into highly ironic territory. The conventional wisdom of the early eighties was that the rise of corporate publishing and the mirror-image growth of the huge book retailing chains could spell the end of serious writing and publishing—that so much time and money and effort would be expended in putting under contract and marketing the sure commercial thing the accountants demanded that nothing would be left over for the risky, the new, the demanding work. (See Thomas Whiteside’s *The Blockbuster Complex* for this argument in its purest form.) Oddly enough, something quite the opposite has happened: these days nothing is hotter, nothing more sought after than the prestige property, the fresh new face and voice. For that let us thank God, for a world full of Ludlums and Kings and Steels and Sheklons alone is not a world worth living in.

There are a variety of reasons behind this development. I would first cite a saving conservatism in the book business and in book culture, a saving remnant of people at all levels and in all areas of publishing whose commitment to quality has never flagged and whose energy on behalf of good books (and inventiveness) knows no bounds. Then there was the at-first bewildering and later inspiring best-selling success of such unlikely books as Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, which demonstrated the heretofore unsuspected existence of a genuinely mass market willing to purchase, if not finish reading, works of obvious difficulty. Apparently the same vast distribution mechanism that channels oceans of schlock can be used to deliver the better class of goods in heroic numbers. Lastly, a crop of new writers of quality and freshness arose whose first books managed to find an audience sufficient to put their books on the best-seller lists and to indicate the rise, among writers and readers alike, of something like a new generation. These books include Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*, Ethan Canin’s *Emperor of the Air*, David Leavitt’s *Family Dancing*, Tama Janowitz’s *Slaves of New York*, Mona Simpson’s *Anywhere But Here*, Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, and Michael Chabon’s *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*. Each of these books was a legitimate best-seller; each of these authors was under the age of thirty-five when he or she published his or her first book, and a couple of them were barely past twenty-one; and two of these books were short-story collections, utterly confounding conventional publishing wisdom about the commercial difficulties such books should face.

This is all very fine, in that it gives serious writers and their editors confidence and heart and clout as they write and publish. The world will not end with a five-part miniseries, at least not yet. But there is a palpable Faustian element to the bargain: the huge distribution mechanism and the celebrity-hungry media machine that function to make these splashy successes possible extract their own costs and compromises and create much confusion of literary values and financial value.

Among the younger writers these days one can observe a great deal more career ambition—an itchiness to get it now—that purely literary ambition. Far from offering any resistance to the mighty engines and subtle strategies of contemporary success, they eagerly embrace and employ them. In this regard they are only mirroring the behavior of their contemporaries in business and financial services who reportedly sense failure if they haven’t made their first million by the age of twenty-seven. The eighties have not been a decade for patience. The proliferation of creative writing programs has made possible *ab ovo* a career-management approach to literature. Go to the right college, get into the right MFA program, make the right contacts among established writers and book and magazine editors, find the right literary agent, who’ll sell your book to the right publisher, who’ll give your book the right cover and shake down the right writers (some of whom you already know, of course) for the right blurbs, and you’re off! You get the good review from Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, the paperback reprinters and Hollywood producers begin throwing money at your book, the hip nightclubs beckon, the galleys begin to arrive asking you for blurbs, you guest-teach at the right creative writing program, you summer at Yaddo or McDowell . . . everything is on track and on time.

And, very possibly, out of scale. What nobody will tell the hot young writers, least of all their editors, is that however fresh or unusual their first books were, they may have a long way to travel before they develop mastery of their craft. (That news may be delivered, brutally, by reviewers of the second book.) The system that helps make these talented young people also exploits them and can possibly destroy them. They may be living in a flashy Potemkin village of their agents’ and publishers’ construction. What the showy early success removes is the possibility of a slow, even fitful progress toward artistic maturity, well away from the harsh spotlight and the demands of an impersonal star system. The Muse does not speak on the Bitch Goddess’s schedule, and for many writers the most precious gift of all is not a big fat book contract, but the space and time to find their unique style and subject, to learn from an honorable failure, perhaps, without being tossed on the ash heap for it.

What also seems to have departed from the world for the moment is the desire among young writers to create the masterpiece, the total work that, whether gorgeously compressed or encyclopedically vast, seems to say all that must or can be said at its particular moment. Once upon a time (1944)
Cyril Connolly could write, to general agreement: “The more books we read, the clearer it becomes that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence.” To live by such words is to cultivate an imperial contempt for the mundane, for the world and its shabby workings. It is impossible, I believe, for an attitude of proud self-sufficiency such as cultivated by a Lawrence or a Joyce or a Beckett to coexist with an eagerness to play ball with the literary star search. It is certainly impossible for an editor to expect his young author to make the complete spiritual and artistic commitment the creation of a masterpiece demands when he has previously ascribed cultural authority to the system of hype. The masterpiece, almost by definition, is written outside this system.

Implicit in the above remarks, of course, is the assumption that the main event happens on the page, not in the gossip columns and on the celebrity circuit. This assumption is not one shared universally by writers and publishers. At the baroque end of the spectrum of literary decay stands Tama Janowitz, a figure one could find poignantly pathetic if she were not so annoying. Having gone to school on Andy Warhol, Janowitz proceeded to promote her genuinely fresh collection of stories, *Slaves of New York*, with shrewd shamelessness—the writer as photo opportunity, the self-huckster as literary waltz. Her publishers were delighted to play along: as her publicist averred, “Tama’s too fabulous to waste on the book pages.” The so-called promotability of an author—one with an interesting personal story, a mediagenic profile, a set of powerful friends, a snappy line of patter—is routinely taken into consideration by publishers these days and may well obscure certain literary failings in the work even as it enhances its dollar value. Shall we call these young writers Capote’s Children?

The itch for the big score, the Faustian willingness to strike a bargain with the devil, does not confine itself to the younger set; it is common as well among older writers, even those who have tried to live by Connolly’s dictate. This is very understandable, for such writers will have seen on the one hand staggering sums paid over to the hacks of the best-seller list, and on the other disproportionate praise and attention (and money) lavished on the upstart of the moment. Meanwhile, they must labor away, it seems, in prestigious obscurity, and it is all very galling. Little wonder, then, that some of these writers decide that writing well is insufficient revenge, that a system so manifestly incapable of matching reward to merit deserves to be subverted and manipulated. I believe that a number of important American writers have made some such conscious internal decision to maneuver cold-bloodedly for the big time, and I cannot say that I blame them. Their publishers are most likely parts of huge corporations, they’ve probably had too many editors in their careers to depend on them very much, the faith that art can save your soul is a quaint and dying creed, the surrounding literary culture is thin and fragmented and unsustaining—why subsist on such thin gruel as a prestigious literary career? So off these writers go with their work into the open market, a move usually orchestrated by a shrewd and powerful agent (about whom more in a moment), and sure enough, the classy scent these authors give off proves to be a powerful financial aphrodisiac. The rupture, in some cases, of publishing relationships of long standing can seem a small price to pay for such largesse.

Let me be specific. Up until fairly recently, William Gaddis was known to a pretty small circle of cognoscenti as the author of two massive, dense, and demanding masterpieces, *The Recognitions* and *J.R.* These works make absolutely no compromise with the reader as they attack the question of authenticity in the modern age, and they have sold over the years in modest numbers at best. Last year, after publication by Viking of a relatively short and, by Gaddis’s standards, accessible novel, *Carpenter’s Gothic*, Gaddis and his agent put on the block a proposal for his next and probably last novel, *The Last Act*, a work about the American legal system—and everything else. I know, because I read it for Viking and offered on it. As reported in *Publishers Weekly* (and much discussed on the Rialto), the work was knocked down to Simon & Schuster for $275,000, an amount that makes no sense whatsoever unless you understand that Simon & Schuster was simply purchasing the prestige of publishing one of the few certifiable geniuses (in my view) in current American fiction. The book that Gaddis will write will, I am quite certain, be brilliant, and Gaddis deserves the money and more. But save for some kind of miracle, Simon & Schuster will be quite deeply in the red at the end of the day. It indicates how thoroughly unmoored ends have become from means in the corporate era of publishing.

Other writers of stature have grasped the essence of celebrity culture, none more egregiously than the novelist Harold Brodkey. He has so adroitly broadcast the unbounded ambition behind his long-awaited and long-undelivered magnum opus, *A Party of Animals*, and the angst of his life and its creation that respected critics proclaim the work a masterpiece and Brodkey a presaging genius of twentieth-century American fiction before they have even read it. The mixed reviews that Brodkey’s recent collection, *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode*, has received did not deter *New York* and *People* from profiling Brodkey and his unhappy childhood and his peculiar adulthood. Meanwhile, *A Party of Animals* has over its twenty-five-year gestation period accumulated an ever thicker layer of advance payments from various publishers; his current one, Knopf, has sunk
Gerald Howard

well over half a million dollars into it. Whatever one makes of Brodkey's talent on the basis of what has already been printed (I find him hard, obsessive going for the most part), a reductio ad absurdum of the cult of tortured literary creation has been reached here, possibly the most handily rewarded instance of writer's block in literary history. Brodkey has made his very inability to create a sign of his genius; what he is selling is not literature so much as the idea of literature. Here is the notion of artistic struggle retooled for the age of intellectual property. Somewhere out there Andy Warhol is applauding.

Little wonder, then, that, in a situation where the writers are so eager to receive and the publishers so eager to give, the literary agents have moved to the center stage of what Ted Solotaroff calls "the literary-industrial complex." Only agents intimately familiar with the territory can orchestrate the complex and often expensive courtship dance between writer and publisher. Only agents who have behind them the clout of their own lists of blockbuster authors can hope to counterbalance the immense power of conglomerate publishers on their clients' behalf. Only agents with a network of well-established connections and years of professional experience can maximize for an author the potentially enormous income to be realized from the complex web of subsidiary rights—foreign, film, dramatic, audiovisual, information retrieval, and so on. Finally, in a culture where the idea of the art object often substitutes for or takes precedence over the object itself, agents serve as the spin doctors of literature, shaping the idea of the book and the author for public consumption. These are the facts, and there is no arguing against them.

For the editor, however, the centrality of the agent in the writer's life has come in part at his expense. It is the rare agent who will become as intimately involved as the editor in the crafting of the work, and that seems a structural feature of the business. But with the ceaseless movement in the corporate ownership of houses and in editorial staff, the agent becomes by default still the point of the turning world for the writer as well as the source of his financial salvation or triumph. Most writers these days are glad to forgo 10 or 15 percent of their income in exchange for the agent's going to the mat with the publishers and wrestling out of them the last dollar of advance money. The agents are quite good at this, of course, and it allows the writer and publisher to live within the convenient fiction that the lethal street fight is masquerading as a contract negotiation never took place.

What very few people say explicitly is that publishers are scared stiff of the powerful agents—that the million-dollar contracts you read about are paid over with silent screams. Agents are the direct beneficiaries of the decline of understanding among corporate-owned publishers of financial cause and effect, for the checks always clear but the returns and the losses stay with the publisher. In almost every book negotiation these days is the spoken or unspoken threat that if the terms are not satisfactory, there is some other publisher who would be delighted to pay the asking price—and there usually is. A superb publication of the author's previous work is often used against you: every editor has had the experience of an agent reminding him in a negotiation that "there are a lot of people out there interested in—-'s work" when it is the sweat equity and promotional money and publishing smarts you and your firm have applied to—-'s last book, as much as the literary quality of the work itself, that created the interest.

The editor occupies a diminishing space in the midst of these developments. The writer may feel great personal loyalty and gratitude for the editor's intimate understanding and stalwart sponsorship of his work, but such bonds are divisible. The writer's life is a precarious one, the vagaries of taste and talent and the marketplace impossible to predict. If the writer finds himself in the happy (and still relatively rare) position of being a highly sought-after commodity, well, the agent is there to do the nasty work, with the writer in effect saying, "I'm sorry that things have worked out this way, but I'll always be grateful for your help." After all, Thomas Wolfe left Scribner's and Max Perkins and broke the great man's heart, but he did write him that nice Valentine in You Can't Go Home Again.

This is what it looks like from here, the editor's uneasy chair. It is damned peculiar out there, and damned Hobbesian—what used to be known as a gentleman's profession has been transformed into a war of all against all. It is impossible to imagine that augury figure Max Perkins working happily or even successfully in this world, for his values—loyalty, honesty, taste, proportion, Olympian standards—are not always negotiable currency these days. They have not disappeared from publishing—after all, Robert Giroux still shows up for work at Farrar, Straus, Giroux on Union Square—but they surely do not mean what they once did. Editors of my generation and younger (I'm thirty-eight) are resigned to and cynically humorous about the departure of a particular sort of grace from our world, intensely grateful when we encounter instances of it, and determined to emulate it to the extent that conditions will allow. We've learned the rules of the rough new games being played—or rather, the absence of rules—but a lot of us don't like the lessons we're being taught.

The heart of darkness at the center of today's publishing world is not a jungle. Rather, it is a flashy, disorienting environment, a combination hall of mirrors, MTV video, commodities pit, cocktail party, soap opera, circus, fun house, and three-card monte game. The message one emerges with, stunned and shaken by what one has witnessed, is: "Mistah Perkins—he dead."
Postscript

“Mistah Perkins—He Dead” was written in late 1988 and published in the American Scholar in the summer of 1989. In rereading it now, three years later, I am struck by its tone of angst, which reflected a certain anguish over what the go-go eighties did to the trade publishing business. We are now well into the nineties, and the giddy, go-for-broke atmosphere has downshifted into a low-grade, we-may-be-broke depression—and not in publishing alone, of course. On September 2, 1991, Roger Cohen, the publishing reporter for the New York Times, headlined his tour d’horizon of the state of the business “An Ailing, Murky Industry Looks for Signs of Change.” In the midst of a stubborn recession he reported that “Sales are very weak. Even the most die-hard optimists concede that the notion of publishing’s being recession-proof has been shown to be nonsense. . . . So a profound change, it seems, has taken place. After a decade of rapid sales growth, which fueled a rapid rise in the money that authors were able to command for their books, a period of retrenchment has begun.”

And yet . . . Cohen takes note of the inveterately optimistic nature of publishers, a quality reflected in the oversized advances still being paid for the hot property ($6 million for the Norman Schwarzkopf autobiography being an egregious case in point) and the highly desirable prestige item. So right at this moment I am choosing to accentuate the positive as far as book editing is concerned. Yes, the corporate shenanigans described in my piece still go on, the agents call the tune, the culture is decaying, nobody reads anymore, the universe will eventually suffer death. . . . Meanwhile, the good editor’s task—and there are plenty of good editors out there, many of them my friends—is simply to ignore all this and go about the business of bringing the best books he or she can to market, at a price that makes turning a profit possible. This may mean any number of personal and business compromises with a commercial culture capable of the most stupefying inanition. But victories, however difficult to win, are the lifeblood of editors, and they come more often than one might expect. And such victories are what make publishing mean infinitely more than the simple sum of $ thousands of units shipped at $ cover price with a profit margin of 2 percent. It means that the soul of publishing, and to a certain extent of American literary and intellectual culture, if that’s not too grandiose, resides in the stewardship of editors who care deeply about quality and excellence.

And so we soldier on. And so we’d better.

Doing Good—And Doing It Right

The Ethical and Moral Dimensions of Editing

James O’Shea Wade

James O’Shea Wade graduated from Harvard College in 1962 and initially worked in sales and editorial in college and professional publishing. He switched over to trade in the late sixties as a senior editor at Macmillan. He was subsequently editor-in-chief of World Publishing and then editorial director and vice-president of David McKay. He founded his own publishing operation and then joined forces with Kennett and Eleanor Rawson to form Rawson, Wade Publishers. He is presently executive editor and vice-president of Crown Publishers and editorial director of Orion Books.

Not only editors but writers, too, can profit greatly from Mr. Wade’s expert advice to editors on how to conduct themselves according to the highest moral and ethical standards of publishing. In a situation where the interests of author and publisher do not coincide, he asks “how one reconciles the obligations of friendship (with an author) with those of an editor who is expected to contribute to the corporate interests of his or her publisher.”

His answer is that “the only workable way to reconcile what may seem to be conflicting obligations and interests is to stay with one essential truth: the editor’s primary obligation is to the book. If you fail in that you are no friend to the author and you are not doing what a publisher pays you to do.”

Mr. Wade offers illuminating insights into the editor’s moral and ethical role in such areas as censorship, responsibility for the authenticity of a manuscript, the decision to reject a manuscript deemed to be unpublishable, the necessity for honesty between editor and agent, and many other problems and procedures that plague and often perplex the working editor.