

The Evolution of the American Editor

Marc Aronson

MARC ARONSON is a senior editor at Henry Holt's Books for Young Readers. As an editor of "multicultural" nonfiction for middle graders and young adults, he has specialized in introducing adult trade authors to children's book publishing. He is also writing a New York University history dissertation on William Crary Brownell and turn-of-the-century publishing. Mr. Aronson created and teaches a course in the history of publishing at NYU's Publishing Institute. Among the authors he has worked with are Bruce Brooks, Coretta Scott King, and Kyoko Mori.

An examination of the social, cultural, and economic influences on American editors and editing, Marc Aronson's informative, entertaining, often provocative essay takes you from when editing as we know it began—the structural changes editor Ripley Hitchcock made in Edward Noyes Westcott's novel *David Harum* (1898)—to a surprising and fascinating look at the innovative ways in which editors will work with writers as the new century approaches. "Editing . . . will enter the twenty-first [century] with an electronic bazaar. . . . We will all be editors when we choose to be, and, I'll bet, that will make us appreciate all the more those teams of hackers, pencil pushers, and typists who take the first crack at shaping our info-glut: the masters of multimedia, the captains of the cyberstream, the editors of the future."

The Evolution of the American Editor

Editing in America began with an auction. Agents were changing the rules of publishing around 1898 when Edward Noyes Westcott's *David Harum* was published; but the auction that transformed publishing was not for that book but in it. Westcott, a banker from upstate New York, had written a novel about a shrewd local named David Harum. Cracker-barrel philosophy written in dialect (think of Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus*) was very popular, and Westcott had every reason to believe he would find a publisher. But he had no luck until his manuscript came across the desk of Ripley Hitchcock at Appleton. Hitchcock, an authority on etchings and the author of a series of popular histories, was an editor who was willing to take a risk. He recognized that the horse swap in chapter 6 of the manuscript was really the first chapter of the book. The editor moved it, transferring five chapters in the process, and made cuts and stylistic revisions throughout. His editing worked miracles. *David Harum* was the number one best-seller for 1899. In March and April of that year up to 1,000 copies a day left bookstore shelves. The book reached a total sale of 727,000 hardcover copies by 1904 and 1,190,000 by 1946, with another 241,000 out in paperback.

The work Hitchcock actually did on the manuscript was not unusual—other editors had also made suggestions for radical cuts and had turned rejected manuscripts into hot sellers—but there were two crucial differences this time: the book sold at a record-breaking pace, and people found out what the editor had done. Hitchcock became known as the man who had "made" *David Harum*, and the book transformed his career. The editor and his wife adapted the book for the stage and shared profits with the house (Westcott died before the book was published); it was then turned into two movies, one of which starred Will Rogers. Forty years after publication, the *New York Times Magazine* was still running features on the book and the editor who was responsible for it. In his long career Hitchcock also edited Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, but his reputation, and modern American editing, turned on *David Harum*.

Following the success of *David Harum* the editor began to become a public personality, and by the 1930s a cultural mythology had formed around editing: the editor as savior, finding the soul of a manuscript; the editor as alchemist, turning lead into gold; the editor as seer, recognizing

what others had missed. Another image of the editor was already in place in Hitchcock's day: the editor as friend. Taken together, editor as miner-magician and editor as boon companion, we have the classic image of the "editor of genius" that crystallized around an editor of the twenties, thirties, and forties, William Maxwell Evarts Perkins. But to really understand Perkins we have to start earlier, at least one hundred years earlier.

The first American authors to write best-sellers, men like Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, broke through in the 1820s. Though New York was not yet the publishing mecca it would become, a few proto-agents set up shop in the city and groups of publishers, authors, and critics gathered around bookstores, beer halls, and restaurants to swap ideas and invent books. By the 1830s, recognizable publishing had taken shape in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Hartford (home of subscription publishing), and print was available in many formats, from cheap reprints to morocco leather. Twenty years later, in the 1850s, the United States had the largest literate public in history, and publishers put out books that ranged from sentimental love stories and children's textbooks, which sold in the hundreds of thousands, to fiction from sure money losers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and (after he stopped writing sea adventures) Herman Melville.

Publishing was growing into an important industry and was contributing to American culture, but there were no editors in the modern sense. In part, this was because, until 1891, British imports had no legal copyright protection. Established houses followed "the courtesy of the trade" and paid English writers a royalty, but many new houses got their start with cheap reprints of Dickens and Thackeray, which required no editorial intervention. At Harper, free-lance house readers helped out on acceptance and rejection. Those called "editors" sometimes steered writers toward more lucrative themes and subjects, but they spent more energy on promoting authors than shaping texts. Robert Bonner, owner and editor of the *New York Ledger*, was a brilliant publicist who paid top dollar for the works of popular female novelists. Bonner's most extravagant move was to decorate a railroad parlor car with a gold wreath emblazoned with the name of one of his best-selling authors. The Fanny Fern car rolled across America spreading the author's name far and wide, even after she died. Editors were also expected to write "puff pieces" that would run in the press as objective criticism.

Many houses were small enough that the author and the publisher, whose family name ran on the letterhead, communicated directly on projects. During the Civil War, for example, James T. Fields, editor of *Atlantic Monthly* and a partner in Ticknor & Fields, was forced to suggest that one of his authors make a radical change in an article. "Ticknor and I both

think," Fields chided Nathaniel Hawthorne, "it will be politic to alter your phrases with reference to the President, to leave out the description of his awkwardness and general uncouth aspect. England is reading the magazine now and will gloat over the monkey figure of 'Uncle Abe.'" In the heated Civil War debates it fell to the editor/publisher to tell an author not to call the president a monkey. After the failure of *Moby Dick*, Melville wrote a novel about publishing. In *Pierre*, it is the firm of Wonder & Wen that writes to an affluent popular author asking for his next book, and the firm of Steel, Flint & Asbestos that takes up the matter when the author becomes disreputable.

An author's reputation was very important to publishers throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. Publishers felt it was their duty to ensure that American fiction would be unimpeachably moral in content, tone, and expression. Editing for morals can seem very different from Hitchcock's editing for market, but actually the two were related. American readers wanted moral books; those are the ones that sold. There was no surer way to kill a book than for it to be deemed "objectionable." The editor who could monitor an author's moral tone was also protecting the author's market share. Since many books were serialized in magazines owned by publishing houses before they came out as books, editors used what they presumed to be the virginal sensibility of the typical teenage girl as the gauge for their publications. Like network television a century later, if the magazine couldn't sit out on the coffee table to be enjoyed by the whole family, it could not be published. Houses had two ways of getting this kind of moral imprimatur, by hiring editors in-house who held those values, or by engaging a wide network of free-lance readers who were in touch with the sensibilities of many different groups of tastemakers. Charles Scribner's Sons followed the first approach and eventually made a home for Max Perkins; Macmillan used the second and gave a lot of editorial assignments to well-read or socially prominent women. In both cases these editors remained largely invisible to the general public.

Monitoring morals involved more than just selecting authors and supervising plots. During the nineteenth century, language inspired some heated controversies. Conflicts over proper usage, vocabulary, and spelling were fought out in the development and sales of new dictionaries, grammar books, and especially translations of the Bible. At issue were the claims of tradition (say, the King James Bible) against those of academic experts (who had duller but more accurate translations to offer), the language of the street versus the language of society, but also how, and toward what ends, language would be shaped in America. What kind of society should America be? An ordered one in which language follows tradition and so, it is hoped, do people's lives? Or an open-ended society in which language and

behavior change from year to year? Similar conflicts came up in the 1960s as people raised the claims of Black English and debated which four-letter words should be included in dictionaries. We still have some traces of these imbroglios in discussions about gender and language. But the earlier debate was front-page news and had a direct impact on publishing houses, which had to choose who their readers, advisers, editors, and authors would be. Surprisingly, many houses chose the liberal academics or their allies over the elitist traditionalists.

By Hitchcock's day one last wrinkle had been added to the editorial mix. New magazines, financed by an explosion of consumer advertising, built their readership to record levels by publishing authors who employed a more "realistic" prose style. Some book editors who had been trained as journalists went after the same market. These new editors were more like corporate middle managers than moral monitors. They wanted American authors and they followed the latest fashions in public taste. These editors paid for authors who could deliver hard-hitting, lively prose on deadline. Turn-of-the-century writers' magazines recognized this trend and started to print articles on how to write to sell, and to issue profiles of leading editors and what they would buy. Authors complained that editors would take only well-known authors, how-to pieces, or human interest stories, while editors rejoined that they would be happy to publish great literature if only someone would write it. Between morals and market, people began to develop the idea that a house needed editors as well as publishers and that editing was a craft that could contribute to the success of a book. According to some publishers, like Alfred A. Knopf, this was a terrible mistake and led directly to the decline of publishing.

Max Perkins arrived at Charles Scribner's Sons in 1910 to work in the advertising department. William Crary Brownell, the literary adviser to the house, wrote books with titles like *Criticism*, *Standards*, and *Victorian Prose Masters* and was one of the fifty Americans who are periodically elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in recognition of their cultural prominence. Authors felt that approaching him was like entering a church, and Brownell saw editing as a form of cultural mission as well as a hard-headed business. Perkins shared Brownell's sense of the importance of books but made a major shift by decreeing that "the book belongs to the author." The young editor believed that editing involved a sort of compact to uncover and shape an author's talent, no matter what that took. This tireless, even heroic, devotion to the author and to the book was the hallmark of elite editing from the twenties to the forties.

Starting with F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose first novel he acquired over

Brownell's objection, Perkins worked with a memorable sequence of important authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Taylor Caldwell, and, especially, Thomas Wolfe. There is no more resonant image of American editing than the story of how Perkins crafted *Of Time and the River* out of the four-hundred-thousand-word tangle of unnumbered pages packed into three cartons that Wolfe submitted to him. Wolfe acknowledged his help in the book's dedication to "a great editor and a brave and honest man, who stuck to the writer of this book through times of bitter hopelessness and doubt and would not let him give in to his own despair." Perkins was not eager for the publicity, but his role in editing Wolfe's books became so well known that critics began to question how much Wolfe had actually written. Bernard De Voto accused "Mr. Perkins and the assembly line at Scribner's" of essentially creating Wolfe's books. Wolfe himself helped to shape the Perkins legend by turning the editor into Foxhall Edwards, a character in *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Perkins, and other "heroic" editors like Pascal Covici and Saxe Commins, pushed editing to (or even past) the line where it became necessary to an author's success. Did they go too far? These editors took on mammoth editing chores single-handedly while conducting intense, even melodramatic friendships with their brilliant but often self-destructive authors. And, all the while, they had to try to make the books commercial successes. In the mix of what we might now call genius and alcoholism, absolute devotion and codependency, hard work and burnout some of America's greatest fiction was published. But the editors did at times become too attached to their own importance, altering works without the author's permission and distorting the writer's text.

In the thirties, editing was expanded in other ways by women, many of whom were agents. Elizabeth Nowell, for example, did as much for Wolfe's magazine pieces as Perkins did for his novels—or even more: she selected, cut, and revised sections of his sprawling manuscripts to fit magazine word limits, negotiated fees, and even advised him on contraception so that he wouldn't have to worry about getting his lovers pregnant. Simon & Schuster was notorious for hiring secretaries on the basis of their appearance, but women became crucial to the industry as a result of their (often unacknowledged) intellectual merits. Female "executive assistants" often did much of the copy editing and detail work for their better-known bosses. Women also began to carve out a territory of their own as in-house editors of children's books. The most dramatic expansion of the editing pool, though, had to do with religion, not gender.

Starting in the teens, a series of new publishing houses appeared founded by young Jewish men, most of whom had graduated from Columbia University. These included houses that were founded as, or later became, Alfred

A. Knopf, Simon & Schuster, Random House, Viking, and Farrar, Straus, Giroux. The new Jewish houses moved editing in two directions: toward an expansion of free speech and toward a wider public that had been disdained or ignored by the Protestant elite. The new houses were not likely to sign up the stalwarts of mainstream America, who were already aligned with older houses like Appleton, Harper, or Scribner's. Instead, they looked to Europe and to the radicals of Greenwich Village for authors. This led to a series of censorship battles, including one turning point in 1923, when the New York State Assembly actually passed a censorship law only to have the Senate defeat it, and another in 1933, when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Other houses found new books by expanding their lists. The first books that S & S issued (albeit under a dummy name) were crossword puzzle books. Though tax guides had first appeared during the Civil War, and how-to manuals have existed in various forms since colonial days, S & S transformed that category of publishing with all-time best-sellers like *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The company's approach was summarized in its motto, "Give the Reader a Break." While for some houses editing for morals was giving way to a search for avant-garde authors, for others the old sense of cultural mission was being supplanted by a well-organized effort to address more pragmatic needs. Either way, the new houses brought new editing styles to the industry.

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Max Perkins died in 1947; while the myth of the heroic editor persisted, it no longer described the day-to-day reality of trade publishing. Perkins himself had grown discouraged, feeling that materialism was ruling America and that some book people were choosing expediency over literary values. Others sensed this as well. According to one character in Dawn Powell's 1942 novel, *A Time to Be Born* (reissued in 1991 by Yarrow Press), "the test of a publishing genius . . . is the ability to keep ahead of the times, to change your whole set of standards, overnight, if needs be." If we can believe this savvy, if cynical, author, the real values of the old-line houses and the herculean efforts of the great editors were also being mimicked by clever hypocrites with their eyes on the market. While Perkins remained the model for eager young entry-level editors until very close to the present day, a whole new brand of publishing began before he died that more frankly courted sales and changed the rules of the game entirely: paperbacks.

Paperbacks had been a part of American publishing at least since the 1840s, but the houses that issued them were disdained and fiercely opposed by the hardcover houses. "Story papers," dime novels, and "pirate" reprints were never treated as mainstream books. It took a more widespread

acceptance of "middlebrow" culture, as well as the persistence and market research of Robert Fair de Graff, to make possible the advent of modern paperbacks in 1939. While changes in American society helped to give a new respectability to cheap books, the houses themselves made room for a new type of editor. Frankly seeking a mass readership, some houses hired editors from lower-class backgrounds, and even a few who had not gone to college. Market wisdom began to compete with the old school tie as a reason for hiring an editor.

At first these paperbacks were cheap reprints of hardcovers that were sold in new locations like drugstores and newsstands. Genre fiction, such as detective stories, westerns, romances, and later science fiction, was a natural for paperback since it could be put out cheaply in large numbers with relatively predictable sales. By the early fifties, though, NAL's Mentor list, Penguin, and most famously the Anchor list Jason Epstein founded at Doubleday added trade paperback lines that were sold through regular bookstores and included more "serious" titles. In all cases, paperback houses had to play by hardcover rules, stressing their literary interests, their respect for the main and original publisher, and their deep concern for an author's welfare. Paperback editing involved knowing who was publishing what and how they could be approached.

In the sixties, NAL moved publishing another step when it started to commission books with built-in movie tie-ins, but editors were already well aware of other media. As early as 1944 S & S was bought by Marshall Field, who also owned television and radio stations. Editors first realized the importance of author appearances on television in 1958, when Alexander King's monologues on Jack Paar's *Tonight* show made two of his books number one best-sellers. By the early sixties a hardcover editor had to be concerned not only with the merits of an author's work but with the other lives it might lead: would it go into paperback, could it be made into a movie, might the author (or, in the case of Bennett Cerf, the publisher) appear on television? Mass-market paperback editors began not only to buy books from hardcover houses but also to invent entirely new kinds of fiction, like gothic mystery and romance and later bodice rippers, that might never appear in hardcover.

In some houses the income from these new paperbacks helped to support smaller sellers, allowing upscale editors to concentrate their attention on literary value. Trade paperback editors were especially favored by this trade-off. In the fifties, for example, NAL was very proud that it could call Erskine Caldwell, and later Mickey Spillane, "the world's best-selling author," but it also gave a forum to new black writers like James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. This balance, however, went only so far. At one point, Victor Weybright, copublisher of NAL, regretfully in-

formed the house literary adviser that he could not publish a book unless it would have a minimum sale of 75,000 copies.

According to Ted Solotaroff, who worked there at the time, NAL still balanced trade and mass market successfully in the mid-sixties. If this was so, part of the credit must go to the mood of the much-maligned sixties. Great Society spending on libraries, as well as the entry of the baby boomers into high school and then college, increased the market for serious and challenging works. The counterculture may have been a product of television news and rock records, but every self-respecting radical had a shelf full of well-thumbed paperbacks including everyone from Herbert Marcuse and Eldridge Cleaver to Carlos Castaneda and Wilhelm Reich. The editor who acquired and published radicals had risked court challenges in the 1920s; by the 1960s he or she had a good chance of buying a best-seller.

Civil rights even entered publishing itself in the sixties and seventies as houses made their first, short-lived efforts to hire nonwhite editors. However, because editing requires a college education yet offers very low entry-level salaries, most intelligent, motivated people from low-income backgrounds wisely pursued more lucrative professions. To this day editing remains one of America's least integrated professions. On the other hand, women have come near to, or have even broken through, the very highest glass ceilings in publishing. Not only are many, perhaps most editors female, but women are frequently in very senior roles, such as editors-in-chief or publishers. While this is particularly true in children's books, publishing is one of the few industries in which the profile of the typical customer (for fiction, a college-educated, middle-class woman from the Midwest) matches that of a typical manager. You might say that, in publishing, women have come close to controlling the means of production of their own reading. In that sense, editors may be more in touch with the sensibilities of their readers today than they have ever been.

The very success of paperbacks in the sixties and seventies, along with the increased visibility of all forms of media, made publishing houses attractive to Wall Street. Many prestigious hardcover houses, faced with the power of paperbacks and the overtures of potential buyers, had to find new money to stay independent, merge with other houses, or go out of business. As a wave of takeovers washed over publishing, the lifetime job security that old-line houses had offered to editors and authors gave way to a free market in which both jumped from house to house seeking a better deal. Agents, recognizing that houses needed bankable names, became more adroit at using the old technique of an auction to get top dollar for their authors. Big advances, which often did not earn out, only increased the financial pres-

ures on publishing houses, which were now often small units in large, cost-conscious organizations. "Return on investment" went from being an unfamiliar term in a book, which an editor might query, to being the crucial fiscal marker that could determine whether he or she even had a job.

In the eighties, as many publishing houses were subsumed into a new group of international conglomerates, the individual editor became less and less familiar to the public. Editors who were known at all gained fame more for their own novels, their social lives, or their media appearances than for their labors on texts. With millions of dollars riding on big-name authors, it became more important to a house that a book appear on a list than that it be in perfect shape. Editors simply had less time to edit and had to concentrate on hot new acquisitions. The actual work of line editing then fell to a variety of people, including assistants, agents, copy editors, writers' groups, book doctors, packagers, and well-meaning friends. In some respects this diffusion of editing to many out-of-house helpers was similar to the turn-of-the-century networks of free-lance readers. Today the editor is asked to think like a publisher, taking on many other tasks in addition to editing; as a result, authors and agents are pressured to turn in more polished work. Editing in the day of the media conglomerate looks more like antebellum "puffery," or the "reading" of the late nineteenth century, than the "heroic" labors of the middle twentieth.

What is the future of editing? The skills of identifying authors, negotiating with agents, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of texts, guiding a manuscript through the politics and perils of a house, and adding body English to its passage into the marketplace will continue to be important to publishing. The distinct image of the editor as the one person who discharges all of these functions out of some combination of professional pride and personal passion may not survive. Publishing, it has been said, goes through a standard twenty-year cycle including an initial phase, in which there are many small houses; a middle period, when these upstarts collapse, merge, or are bought out by larger houses; and a final stage, when the large houses falter, breaking apart once again into many small units. Today's large conglomerates may be about to break up, but there is another alternative that would create new possibilities for editors.

The Japanese model of commercial organization—many small, often-competitive units working within a loose larger structure—is gaining popularity as a way to organize former nations like what was once the Soviet Union, as well as large corporations like IBM. This structure is especially attractive for publishing now because computer networks make it increasingly possi-

ble for authors to share and edit each other's texts, while the design capabilities of work stations blur the boundaries between editors and designers. Some publishers already mate editor, author, designer, and computer as a team entirely devoted to one project. The image of a house as made of distinct departments that report "up" to publishers and CEOs may give way to congeries of teams that share jobs and are responsible only for what they produce. In that loose structure groups of authors, such as a consortium of MFA students and faculty, or the members of a writers' group, might craft their texts electronically and function as a sort of allied imprint of a major house. Taking the current idea of an imprint to an extreme, a house would offer only technical support, distribution, and marketing, while the acquisition and editing of books would take place entirely in these semiautonomous teams whose only responsibility would be to meet some agreed-upon fiscal goal.

Instead of integrated hierarchies, publishing houses would be archipelagoes of diverse units, each with its own strategy and agenda. As multimedia options, including cybertexts, interactive home computers, and electronic books, become more prevalent, houses would offer the expertise, capital, and access to a broad band of media options that creative people will need. In exchange, the creative teams would be the avenue through which houses would keep in touch with the rapidly changing tastes of a public increasingly attached to the electronic media. Under these conditions, editing would come to mean anything that could be done for a book on a computer, including turning it into a multimedia extravaganza.

In the electronic-networked world of future publishing there will be as many editing styles as the distinct units require. Fully computerized editing programs could take quantified focus-group studies, mix them with marketing figures, and generate genre paperbacks from text through bound books untouched by human hands. On the other hand, small literary lines that rely on the taste and devotion of motivated individuals will be able to revive the editing of Perkins's day for those authors who require it and those readers who enjoy the results.

If editing ended the nineteenth century with an auction, it will enter the twenty-first with an electronic bazaar. As the tenth edition of this book is transmitted to your hand-held electronic page, you, the reader/editor, will have the option to compare all of the editions and edit the raw text for morals, language, market, art, mass taste, or some future alternative, and to clip in whatever art you like. The electronic editor will give you those selections, like rhythm buttons on electronic keyboards, and then offer you what some team has chosen as its own, time-saving best choice. We will all

be editors when we choose to be, and, I'll bet, that will make us appreciate all the more those teams of hackers, pencil pushers, and typists who take the first crack at shaping our info-glut: the masters of multimedia, the captains of the cyberstream, the editors of the future.

Editing for a Small Press

Publishing the Way It Used to Be

Scott Walker

SCOTT WALKER is the founder, editorial director, and publisher of Graywolf Press, a company that has published poetry, fiction, and literary nonfiction since 1974. He has taught at the Radcliffe Publishing Procedures Course and at the Denver Publishing Institute, and lectures and consults regularly on publishing issues.

When should an author seek to be published by a small press, rather than a huge one? What can a small press offer a writer that a huge one can't? Why, when, and for what kind of writer is it preferable to accept a small advance but receive a lot of tender, loving care from a small press rather than bank a big advance but suffer indifference and outright neglect at the hands of a giant-sized publisher? These are just a few of the questions asked and answered in this reasoned and affectionate guide to the dedicated, idealistic world of the small publisher "for whom the notion of 'midlist' is meaningless." As Mr. Walker puts it so clearly and correctly: "To a smaller house, all its books are equally important; every title must sell well."

Mr. Walker outlines what could be, for the right writer, the very real advantages of being published by a small press. Among them a greater receptivity to literary writing, innovative marketing techniques that engage publishers' "hearts and minds rather than their checkbooks" to target the writer's audience effectively, a deeper and more long-lasting involvement between editor and author, and a greater willingness to keep books in print than is the practice of larger houses.

"Ten or even five years ago," Mr. Walker writes, "the small press might

have been the last resort for some authors; now it is often the first and best option. . . .

"This is publishing the way it used to be: good books published well. And it is yet another case of small being not just beautiful but more effective, too, for the right author with the right book."

Editing for a Small Press

Publishing the Way It Used to Be

Authors should consider publishing with a smaller press if they are concerned about their book being lost on a massive list, of which only three or four command most of the publisher's attention; if their book is likely to reach a narrower-than-mass audience; if they prefer a nurturing, ongoing relationship with a publisher and editor; and if they want their book kept in print. Or if they want to be sure the book is published—edited, designed, produced, and marketed—with care and enthusiasm along every step of the way.

Graywolf Press has published literary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, for what is obviously a narrower-than-mass audience, for nearly twenty years. Graywolf authors are known for their adept use of language and their artful sense of the proper shape of a good piece of writing. Graywolf books often use good literature to take on important cultural issues: *The Graywolf Annual Five: Multi-Cultural Literacy* is a seminal work in a much-debated field. We've also published anthologies of short fiction centered on the topics of aging, alcoholism, and the family. The books are beautifully designed. They are marketed not only to the bookstores but to places most publishers never think of: the aging anthology sells to state and county offices on aging and to doctors' offices; the anthologies on the family are sold widely to therapists; we've sold novels and books of poetry to environmental organizations, who offer them as membership premiums.

Graywolf Press is cited here because I know it best, but it is similar to dozens of smaller, independent houses for whom the notion of "midlist" is meaningless. To a smaller house, all its books are *equally* important; *every* title must sell well. A smaller house is unlikely to divert its human and financial resources entirely to the aid of a potential best-seller, nor is it likely to concentrate only on one part (say, chain stores) of the book market—the small publisher will chase down every nook and cranny of a book's potential audience, because it must.

Ten or even five years ago, the small press might have been the last resort for some authors; now it is often the first and best option.

Graywolf Press is one of many hundreds of smaller publishers who have in the past fifteen years emerged to publish books and genres abandoned by larger, aggressively commercial houses. As larger houses have been taken over by conglomerates, their management has become more oriented to the bottom line than to the finely wrought sentence, and other economic pressures have forced them to concentrate resources on "big" books. They have stopped publishing books that fail to offer quick return on investment—midlist fiction, poetry, essays, philosophy, natural history, how-to books in areas that have yet to become broadly established. In the 1990s, this process has accelerated.

At the same time, the smaller, independent presses have both greatly improved their ability to publish books of all types and seized the opportunity presented to them by changes in the publishing industry. Nowadays, the smaller house is likely to have national sales representation, good sales to chain stores, more varied publishing list, better design, and usually can offer all of the ancillary services—imaginative publicity efforts, author tours, foreign and domestic subsidiary rights sales, and accurate and on-time royalty reports and payments—that were once solely in the domain of the larger houses. As the larger houses, catering to the chain stores, began to cut their lists to concentrate on publishing best-sellers, the independent bookstores needed to find some way to distinguish themselves. The small houses began not only to publish better and higher-profile books, but simultaneously to supply the independent stores with just what they needed: a diverse stock.

There are still many good reasons to publish with one of the six or seven large, often foreign-owned companies responsible for the publication of 85 percent of the books we are likely to find in the local Waldenbooks. If your book is one of the few able to reach a large audience, an audience large enough to be called a "mass," the bigger houses offer a big advance on royalties and the marketing muscle to *make* a best-seller. You can be taken to lunch at the Four Seasons, stay in the best hotels as you are flown from city to city on a promotion tour, and toast in the warm glow of a full-page advertisement in the *Times Book Review*.

There are for most authors and books some downsides to publishing with a larger house. Authors are often left with the following questions:

What happened to my editor? Books are most often acquired rather than edited. (Enjoy that lunch—it may be the last time you see or hear from your editor.) At any gathering of writers you will hear about the musical-chairs world of big-time publishing, in which an author's book is liable to have three or four editors as one after another leaves the company between the

times the book is accepted and published. Since the editor is a book's main in-house advocate, and since received enthusiasm is diminished enthusiasm, the book seems abandoned even if it is finally published.

Where is everybody? A Graywolf author had one of her books, published by Graywolf in hardcover, brought out in paperback by one of the largest mass-market houses. She heard absolutely nothing from anyone employed by the mass-market publisher from the time the contract was signed until she managed to corral the company's head publicist at a PEN meeting. She was told that her book was one of eighty-five scheduled for publication that July, and that the company could afford to promote only two of them. Most books are published seemingly without thought, into an awful silence.

Where's the book? Most mass-market books have an average shelf life of ten days, after which their covers are ripped off and returned to the publisher for credit and their innards are "recycled." Most books receive at tops three months of active promotion and then are either declared out of print or relegated to the deep backlist.

For some authors, the big check makes up for most of this misery, but many others have begun to regard smaller houses as a wonderful alternative, as publishing the way it used to be.

Editing for the small publisher is in some respects no different from editing for a large commercial house. Manuscripts are sought and acquired and prepared for publication. But for the author, the difference in attitude and commitment at a small press can turn publishing a book from an isolating to an involving and very pleasant experience.

Editors for smaller houses are much more likely to read and even to encourage "over the transom," unagented submissions rather than rely on a select group of agents to provide prescreening. A small-press editor may not respond as quickly to submissions because he or she must read so many more manuscripts than do the editors at larger houses, but each manuscript is given a fair reading by a senior editor.

The author won't receive an exorbitant advance from a smaller house (though a fair amount of money may change hands), but is more likely to receive substantial and ongoing praise and support. The publisher of only twenty books a year doesn't have cracks for books to slip through: the publisher must care deeply about every book published, and is more likely to be thorough, attentive to details, and communicative with the book's author. The small-press editor is in some respects more like the author, in that they both are, in the old sense, amateurs, engaged in an effort for the love of it rather than for the money. More than one small-press editor has likened the acceptance of a manuscript to the decision to get married; the

editor is not only taking on a book, but committing to an author's work in the future. Authors are likely to be treated respectfully, with the extra care one takes in any long relationship. The editor can be relied on to be the author's chief advocate, career counselor, and cheerleader—and to be there for the next book and the next.

Many authors and literary agents have realized that even though the small-press advance may be smaller, since small presses market midlist books longer, more carefully and energetically, and because they are more likely to keep the book in print, authors can often earn more in royalties over the long run. For the first three years after North Point Press published Beryl Markham's *West with the Night*, total sales were about 5,000 copies; the next year North Point sold 29,000 copies; and for the next three years the book was on top of the paperback best-seller lists. Because North Point was committed to the book, able to keep it in print and continue to advocate for it, the audience finally discovered *West with the Night*. It is likely that at a larger house the book wouldn't have stayed in print more than a year.

A small press has no bureaucratic superstructure in which books and authors can become entangled and lost. Most small-press editors not only acquire books but serve as line editor, managing editor (coordinating scheduling and the work of copy editors and proofreaders), legal department, receptionist, and administrative assistant—i.e., as the entire editor half of the old-fashioned author-editor relationship. The small-press editor's acquisition won't get shot down in an editorial or marketing committee meeting. To be sure, an editor must be able to position the book in such a way that other members of the publishing team will share in his or her enthusiasm, but in the more intimate surroundings of a smaller house the editor is more likely to succeed. The editor will be leading the charge when the book is published, on the phone with an author as the reviews come in, and leading the cheers as the author composes his or her next book.

The small-press editor also is intimately involved in the marketing and design of an author's book, and the author is likely to be, to the extent desired, a full-fledged partner in the entire publishing process. Smaller houses are more likely to recognize how powerful an ally an interested author can be, and to encourage ideas and enthusiasm and involvement. An author is likely to be asked to contribute ideas for cover art, to participate in the writing of sympathetic jacket and advertising copy, to suggest stores receptive to hosting a signing, etc. You can be sure that a small-press publisher will take very seriously an author's list of towns he or she has lived in—notice will go to libraries, stores, newspapers, and magazines in all the "hometowns" an author can think of.

Small presses market books in a manner that can be just as effective as,

though quieter than, the ways of the larger houses. Because they publish so many books, the large commercial publishers can, at best, throw books into the standard book pipeline (chain stores and the larger independent stores), take out a couple of ads, and rush on to the next season's list. A smaller house, because it needs each book to produce more, is more likely to delve deeper and more imaginatively for a book's audience.

Smaller houses focus their trade marketing efforts on actions that build enthusiasm among the community of reviewers and booksellers who care deeply for good books. Trade marketing efforts are likely to rest on advance galleys that are sent with personal letters from the editor to key booksellers nationally; on a marketing director who knows the reading interests of each store's clerks and book buyers, and who can pique those interests with a well-timed letter or phone call; on carefully placing in-store promotions for individual titles and carefully touring the author. A good small-press publisher will make use of the many low-cost and very effective vehicles for obtaining publicity for a title, both in and outside normal book trade channels.

Most smaller publishers will market not only into traditional trade accounts, but will take the time (for the small house, time and imagination can replace the large publisher's capital) to explore other markets for books. Globe Pequot Press does a fine job marketing to the book trade, but also sells books in many other imaginative ways: their bicycling books are sold through bike shops; their bed-and-breakfast inn books sell as many copies in the inns as in bookstores. Seal Press has a thriving nontrade business, selling their superb titles on women coming to terms with abusive relationships to women's shelters nationally. Graywolf Press once published a book of Caribbean folk tales that was marketed as a short-story collection, as folklore, as "prose poetry," as a children's book, to Caribbean studies departments, and to storytelling guilds. That effort wasn't terribly successful, but the effort was made. We were much more successful marketing anthologies of short stories on aging not only to the trade as good literary collections, but to doctors with an elderly clientele and to retirement centers.

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As the market for authors' works shrinks, with more of the larger houses swallowing portions of other, formerly large houses, authors would be well served to look outside of New York to one of the many fine, smaller, independent houses dedicated to publishing good books well.

Check the best-seller lists and the review sections of your newspaper: you are likely to find books there published by houses like Thunder's Mouth Press, Algonquin Press, Workman Publishing, Chronicle Books, and the

more notable university presses. Even the more literary Graywolf Press has one title (*If You Want to Write*, by Brenda Ueland) that has to date sold over 120,000 copies. The smaller houses are marketers, not mass marketers; they care about the books they publish, and their readers and authors care about them. They all have to make a profit, but because of lower overhead, an unwillingness (and inability) to pay huge advances, and the tendency to solve marketing problems through the more effective means of using their hearts and minds rather than their checkbooks, they are able to turn a good midlist book into a profitable one.

This is publishing the way it used to be: good books published well. And it is yet another case of small being not just beautiful but more effective, too, for the right author with the right book.

Editing Fiction as an Act of Love

Faith Sale

FAITH SALE is vice-president and executive editor of G. P. Putnam's Sons, where she has been since December 1979. Before that she was a senior editor at E. P. Dutton for two years, after more than a decade as a free-lance editor. She is a member of PEN American Center's Executive Board and cochair of its Freedom-to-Write Committee.

"My devotion to fiction," Ms. Sale writes, "is born more out of instinct than intellect, based more on emotional response than calculated judgment. The moment of connection is the moment I become a book's (or an author's) advocate—its nurturer, defender, supporter, mouthpiece, bodyguard."

Ms. Sale dramatically demonstrates her passionate commitment to her authors and to her editorial art and craft in this illuminating essay.

She begins with some deeply perceptive comments on the role of the editor: "The process of helping to shape and polish the work of a writer I admire can be a form of an act of love"; "I remind the author as often as I can that any remark I utter or any mark I make on the manuscript is to be taken only as a suggestion"; "What I try to be for the author is the smartest, most sympathetic reader of the manuscript (at least until it becomes a book)."

Ms. Sale then takes us along with her on a typically atypical editorial experience: the discovery, editing, and publication of a novel. The novel she discusses is *Sugar Cage* by Connie May Fowler. We share everything about the way Ms. Sale guides the work from manuscript to published book, beginning with learning her first impression of the work ("I did find it immediately readable and I felt compelled to keep reading . . ."). We accompany Ms. Sale through her negotiations and discussions about the