

are in a position to make this essential judgment as prelude to committing your house to publish any work.

If you are deceived, profit from the experience and hope it will not be repeated. If you fall into it too often, seek another profession. Beware, too, of thinking that your skills can make the book something it is not. If you wish to be a writer, be one. Never tell an author that you can somehow inspire a book with qualities and essences that will somehow transform it. Be careful to keep a clear idea of your role; you are not the expert, not the creator. You are there to assist.

Remember whence your paycheck cometh—and why. If you have done your job properly, if you have really served the *book*, you will have served your employer *and* your author and behaved both morally and ethically. Remember: no matter how it sells, that book remains in your care until death or other employment do you part.

How Books Are Chosen

What Goes into Making an Editorial Decision

Richard Marek

RICHARD MAREK started as the "backlist editor" at Macmillan, then became a senior editor there, in charge of the backlist but bringing in new titles. At Macmillan he worked with Bruno Bettelheim on The Children of the Dream. Moving to World Publishing, he first published Robert Ludlum, then went to Dial and published James Baldwin and Mira Rothenberg. Leaving Dial, he had his own imprint, first at Putnam's, where he continued to publish Ludlum, then at St. Martin's, where he acquired The Silence of the Lambs. In 1985 he became president and publisher of E. P. Dutton, where he published Peter Straub, Judith Rapoport, and James Carroll. When Dutton was folded into NAL/Viking, he assumed his present position, that of editor-at-large at Crown Publishers, a division of Random House.

"When I'm asked by writers what I, as an editor, am looking for, my answer is, 'Something I haven't seen before.' The reply may infuriate the writer—it is of little help to him—but it is true. The new idea, the new voice, the jolt one feels at the unexpected are what most stimulate the editor and the reading public," says Richard Marek in his shrewd anatomy of the factors that make an editor buy—or reject—a manuscript.

Mr. Marek discusses the favorable impact on the editor of such important factors as the fiction writer's unique voice or vision, pacing, plotting, verisimilitude, gift for characterization, style, and dialogue. For the nonfiction writer, the way to tempt an editor is to display skills in the organization and presentation of original, relevant, interesting material in an entertaining, accessible way.

Mr. Marek concludes his eminently practical essay with two pieces of

advice for editors that, if followed, will surely enhance their careers. They will also benefit writers seeking to work with editors who are intuitively empathetic with their work. The first recommendation is that "an editor must develop a sense for commercial books even if he might not read them on his vacation," and the second is that an editor should not publish in fields he knows nothing about but should "go for what you know. Trust your instincts and your passions. And the readers will come—and they will buy."

How Books Are Chosen

What Goes into Making an Editorial Decision

Acquiring editors are hired for one primary reason: that the books they buy make money for the publishing company that employs them.

This somewhat oversimplified assertion does not reflect a new conspiracy on the part of money-hungry conglomerates; it was just as true thirty years ago, when I entered the business, as it is now, and historians of publishing report that it was true from the creation of the printing press.

Nor does the linking of profits and books imply that the editor is hired to buy "bad" books, junk. I am told that the biggest money-maker in the history of Random House is James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and numbers one and two at Macmillan are *Gone with the Wind* and *The Complete Poems of William Butler Yeats*. Yes, some junk sells, but much does not; best-seller lists are strange amalgams of down- and upmarket volumes that speak only of the diversity of American taste.

No matter, the first consideration that goes into making an editorial decision is a marketing one: whether the book will sell enough to make back its costs, including the advance to the author, and turn a profit.

In most cases, the answer is unclear; one doesn't *know*. It is probable that a biography of Cher will sell more copies than a biography of Madame de Sévigné, that a novel with violent action and steamy sex will outperform a *roman à clef* about an adolescent's slow progress toward maturity. But one must be careful in trying to generalize: perhaps the Sévigné biography will win the National Book Award and become a staple backlist book selling steadily over the years. Perhaps the *roman à clef* is by J. D. Salinger.

It's a truism that "brand names" sell, and it is indeed true that the public is loyal to authors, particularly in the area of fiction. Thus the next book by Stephen King is likely to outsell his current one, even if it is not quite as

good, and Agatha Christie's sales continued to grow and grow, though her skills in plotting diminished as she went on. One reason is that most hard-cover fiction is bought as a gift for someone else, and the buyer does not want to take a chance on an unknown. But more important, the brand name author is *good*. He or she tells a story better than the competition, is more inventive, cleverer at surprise, more insightful in characterization, etc. It is generally true that the better a writer is at what he does, the better the sales.

So it's certainly true that editors go after name authors. But they also remember that the fact that some writers are proven quantities does not necessarily negate the risk in acquiring them. Other publishers daily try to woo them as well, and since the lure is almost invariably money, brand name authors come high, even to the house that published them so well the last time. Eventually the money the publisher must pay in advance may exceed the author's earning power, and a book that sells one million copies may turn out to be a terrific disappointment. It isn't the number of copies the book sells that determines its success; it is the bottom-line profit the book generates.

. . .

There are, I believe, three kinds of books. First, there is the "sales department" book, the profitability of which is better determined by the sales manager than the editor. These books are always nonfiction, fill a market need, are easily explained. The sales manager need only describe the book to a few chains and independent stores to determine whether a market exists.

At The Dial Press, for example, I received a huge manuscript on magic. Our sales manager learned that there were a few expensive books on the subject, and many inexpensive pamphlets on how to do the most common tricks. Nothing existed, however, in a midprice range, so I went back to the author and asked him if he wanted to cut his book in half. He agreed, and Dial published a moderately priced, relatively substantial book that went on to sell twenty thousand copies—it was the only book of its kind. (Sales departments can be useful, too, in discovering the past record of authors whose previous books have been published by other houses. The editor who believes an agent on a past book's record does so at his peril; often, the agent will give as sales the number of copies *shipped*, without taking returns into account.)

Second, there is the "subsidiary rights" book. Much fiction, for example, is genre fiction—mysteries, romances, thrillers, "women's novels," gothics, historicals. It is the subsidiary rights manager's job to know which of these genres the paperback houses are buying, and within the genres what plots,

situations, kinds of detectives, locales, etc., are no longer viable. When I first entered publishing, two paperback houses were devoted primarily to science fiction; then the market faded, and one house folded while the other changed its direction completely. Soon after, science fiction returned, more popular than ever.

Since a hardcover novel's greatest chance for profit comes in its sale to a mass-market paperback house (or through sales by the conglomerate's paperback arm if the book was bought hard-soft), the editor who does not consult with his subsidiary rights manager before deciding on whether or not to buy a genre book is being derelict not only to his house, but to himself.

Finally, there is the "editor's" book, one that does not fall into a genre, fill a known niche, or remind a sales staff or book buyer of anything seen before. It is the editor's instinct for these books, bought on individual feel and passion, then explained (convincingly) to sales force and/or subsidiary rights departments, that will in the long run dictate the editor's chance for stardom. If his instinct is good, the books will sell. But it is essential to realize that such books come along *rarely*. In the short run, the more an editor seeks advice and follows it, the better off he is.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull was, I understand, turned down by over a dozen houses before it was bought by Macmillan ("a book about a talking bird?"), as was Lampedusa's *The Leopard* ("a novel by a dead Sicilian?") before Pantheon "took a chance" on one of the great books of the twentieth century. Sure, you and I would never have rejected them (especially in hindsight); there were just dumber editors in those days. The point is that these were surely editor's books; no sales department or rights manager could be expected to predict their success; no precedent existed by which to chart their futures.

Many books are bought on outlines and sample chapters and are years away from completion at the time of purchase; even a book offered as a finished manuscript will take nine months to produce. Thus, currently hot subjects, ones covered in newspapers and magazines, are generally bad bets for books. Yes, there were vastly successful Watergate books months (or even years) after the notorious break-in. But there were vastly unsuccessful Watergate books as well (the majority, I suspect), and publishers lost a lot of money thinking the public's interest in the subject would continue unabated. A book by the only reporter in Jonestown at the time of the famous massacre-suicide, which was published less than a year after the grisly events, sold fewer than ten thousand copies. Other grisly events had superseded Jonestown in the public's consciousness. It is far better to look to

"timeless" subjects and give them new slants (relationships, love, child-rearing, natural history, personal finances, etc.) than to try to derive books from material already covered in the press.

Ironically, though, that most immediate of all media, television, has a huge bearing on the decision of whether or not to buy a book. "Is (s)he good on the tube?" is one of the questions most frequently asked about the author; it often seems that articulateness in person (to say nothing of good looks) is more important than articulateness in writing, and for good reason. There is no question that a strong appearance on a talk show like *Oprah* or *Donahue* will influence sales far more than the writer's skill in organizing his material or presenting a logically written case. Still, the writer with new, exciting ideas who has presented them logically and enthusiastically stands a better chance of getting on talk shows than the glamorous hack. So the editor is still better off judging the words rather than their author.

When I'm asked by writers what I, as an editor, am looking for, my answer is, "Something I haven't seen before." The reply may infuriate the writer—it is of little help to him—but it is true. The new idea, the new voice, the jolt one feels at the unexpected are what most stimulate the editor and the reading public. The great naturalist Loren Eiseley once said that what characterizes great art is that it so renders an idea, an object, or an emotion that it is impossible to encounter it again without thinking of the artist's conception of it. He used as an example a van Gogh sunflower, but he could just as well have used a Melville whale or a Salinger preadolescent.

When a writer comes along with a new voice or vision, something unique, editors scramble after it as though it were gold. Sometimes the voice or vision is so new that it is difficult to comprehend, and then only a few editors might go after it (I think of James Joyce, for example—or Charles Darwin). Sometimes, too, the voice takes a while to become familiar, and the sales of an author's early books are small (Faulkner, or John Irving). But my colleagues and I are convinced that no truly original voice goes undiscovered, that no masterpiece lies unpublished in the writer's attic. In his lifetime, a writer is always recognized by his peers, and while not precisely writers' peers, editors at least are people of words, and our hunger virtually guarantees that at least one or two of us, when presented with combinations of words we have not read before, will find them exciting.

My answer to what we specifically look for in judging a manuscript is one to which most editors would subscribe. (I will take up fiction and nonfiction separately.)

In fiction, above all else, there is voice. Do I want to spend the next several hours with the author? Do I *trust* him? Is he entertaining? Does he render familiar scenes in ways that are new, or unfamiliar ones in ways that make me see them clearly? Does he reveal enough of himself to make me like his company?

The thriller writer who begins his novel with a description of snow falling over Washington or the telephone call that interrupts the general in the middle of a sexual act with a buxom blond had better follow with a terrific tale if he wants me to buy his book (chances are he won't; the author who writes in clichés generally plots in clichés). But if I get in a manuscript with the equivalent of the marching words "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan" as its opening, the author has me won immediately, and his book will have to deteriorate before I turn it down.

Please note that by voice I do not mean *style*. Robert Ludlum, for one, is an infelicitous stylist, yet his impassioned, breathless, extravagant prose is perfectly suited to his melodramas. One never doubts his sincerity and his commitment; his ability to convey his own feelings is what sweeps his readers along.

Following voice there is pace, and for this the test is simple: After I finish one page, do I want to read the next? Ludlum, of course, is a master of pace—events move with something like the speed of a bullet—but the pace of great language drawing its reader deeper and deeper into thought and feeling is also irresistible. I've found that for writers, pace is instinctive (as it seems to be in movies and the theater). If the writer (or director) can make his story move in an appropriate rhythm, then the pace works.

Then comes character. I used to think that plot superseded character on this list, but despite several examples to the contrary, plot *does* come out of characters in conflict, as we're told in our first creative writing classes. So: Do we *like* the characters; do we care about their fates? Do we have an emotional investment in whether they marry or divorce, revenge themselves on those who did them wrong? Do they *live*? Are they complicated, surprising, *real*? If the answers are yes, the editor will be strongly influenced to buy the book.

Fourth, there is plot. Some writers (Ludlum again) can tell such a riveting story that it doesn't matter that his characters are one-dimensional. Others, the majority, develop their plots out of their characters' development. But in any case, here we are looking for the story that draws us along because we want to know what happens next—and if what happens next convincingly surprises us, then so much the better. Arbitrary surprises won't do. Logical ones are glorious.

Next—and there is a gulf between this category and the one above it—comes style. Good writing is a lovely thing in and of itself, but it isn't

enough to make me want to take on a book. Indeed, the manuscript I most fear is the one so beautifully written I must go on reading, yet in the end says nothing, reveals nothing, is without impact or astonishment.

Finally, there is verisimilitude. It helps (and it's fun) if the author gets his details right, but accuracy pales before invention if the invention is convincing. The author who tells me that "it's the way it happened in real life" or "it's the way the room actually looked" is not convincing me of a book's quality. The insistence on accuracy rather than verisimilitude is probably the reason so many journalists can't write good novels. If the author convinces me it's true, then I don't care if it's actually true or not.

In reading a nonfiction book or proposal, a similar but different list applies. Here, too, we start out with voice, for, even more than in fiction, the reader must trust the author. A self-assured, enthusiastic writer who seems sure of where his book is heading, and who presents his material with a distinctive voice, has a far better chance than the hack who tells me already known facts to make his case for the book or who presents his "groundbreaking" conclusions without the logic to back them up.

Perhaps more important (although I list it second) is, of course, subject matter. It's foolhardy to discuss what the best subjects are for commercial books, for tastes change, public issues change, categories once considered surefire (self-help, for example) get overcrowded and lose their potency. A big hit in one subject area often spawns so many imitations that books on the same subject, no matter how cogent, will have trouble finding an audience. As a general rule, readers want to read about things that affect their own lives. The sensational subjects—sex, money, murder, bizarre relationships, the kinks of the rich and famous—tend to be perennially popular, if only because the common man can find titillations and balm in the success or misfortunes of others. Other people's lives, provided they are exciting, have always fascinated us; if there is one category to back, that is it.

Third comes organization, the marshaling of material. A logical narrative, as in fiction, going persuasively from one point to the next, building to a climax, is a pleasure to read. Such an achievement suggests that the author knows more than he can put into his book, that he is in control of his material. This aptitude is extremely comforting to the reader. One wants to be led by an expert, and the author sure of his facts, and selecting them wisely, is likely to convince us of his expertise.

Fourth, style. The author who writes really well can make even an unlikely subject seem interesting. I've read pieces by John McPhee, for example, that have persuaded me that Alaska is a fascinating place, and that have told me more about oranges than I thought I wanted to know. On the other hand, dull writers can make fascinating subjects boring. A hack can make the most sensational murder seem soporific; the author who writes with

enthusiasm and verve can make us feel virtually any subject is exciting.

Finally, as in fiction, there is verisimilitude. The writer who can take even preposterous subjects and make them convincing—generally through the use of detail and the ability to communicate his own passion and belief—is one to venerate. Recently I read a book on something I simply don't believe in: reincarnation. Yet the author made me believe that *he* believed, and I read the book avidly, troubled and confused. He didn't convince me—a few days later I had dismissed his ideas as poppycock. But he took me with him and, briefly at least, shook my soul.

One last word. Writers are always told to write from experience, and editors should follow the same advice. Your problems, concerns, your passions are not unique—they are mirrored by others, and therefore there is an audience for books about them. The young single editor with relationship problems is far better off looking for writers who share his concerns than for books on marriage. An editor with an expertise in science might be advised to turn over a book on ballet to a colleague better read in the existing books in the field.

There is a difference between personal taste and professional taste; an editor must develop a sense for commercial books even if he might not read them on his vacation. But the editor who tries to publish in fields that do not interest him, just *because* he knows books in those fields have been successful, is likely to fail. Go for what you know. Trust your instincts and your passions. And the readers will come—and they will buy.

Practice