as popular, the troubling as well as the conventional, to give voice to those who would be silenced by the majority of opinion-makers or by purveyors of fame. I know I have an obligation to those who pay my salary to give them a return on their investment in me. I like to believe that they understand this return can come in more forms than hard currency, and I try to confirm for them that it's true. Changing the way we think has its value, and books have proved a durable vehicle for such social change.

This does not mean I advocate the indiscriminate publication of provocative materials just *because* they are unpopular. Difficult ideas have to pass scrutiny so that their arguments hold up against the evidence amassed. But we can't surrender our responsibilities either from fear of the bottom line, fear of associating ourselves with a disturbing thought, or fear of mere dissent from the prevailing wisdom. Writers may owe us a great deal, as their stalwart editors and defenders of their faith, but we owe them something, too.

Editing Fiction

The Question of "Political Correctness"

Michael Denneny

Michael Denneny is a senior editor at St. Martin's Press and the general editor of the Stonewall Inn Editions, a line of trade paperbacks devoted to gay and lesbian literature. He is the author of Lovers: The Story of Two Men *and* Decent Passions: Real Stories about Love. *He has edited* First Love/Last Love: Fiction from Christopher Street *and* The Christopher Street Reader, *and is currently preparing a collection of his essays for publication. He was one of the founders of* Christopher Street *magazine and worked at the University of Chicago Press and Macmillan before joining St. Martin's Press.*

In this eloquently outspoken essay on political correctness and its relevance to fiction, Michael Denneny considers whether P.C. exerts a benign or malign effect on the writer and editor's freedom of expression.

Observing what he calls "The Supreme Rule of Editing: Always remember that this is not your book but the author's," Mr. Denneny recognizes the sensitivity of minorities—particularly African Americans, gays, and lesbians—to their portrayal in fiction. But he cautions editors to bow to no pressure in the effort to bring out the best of what the author has to say—however unpopular it may be with the currently influential literary, academic, and mass-media establishments. "The truth of the matter is that serious works of art can be neither propaganda nor public relations efforts, no matter how urgently needed or how well intentioned."

Following a stimulating discussion of the ethical and aesthetic quandaries faced by an editor dealing with a question of P.C., Mr. Denneny concludes

that "in general, the attempt to make any fiction politically correct is a misguided one; it is an attempt to police the imagination. This inclination has been quite prominent among the politically committed since Plato first banished poets from his ideal republic; its resurgence today is merely an unfortunate but quite predictable by-product of a valuable surge in political activism, the dangers of which have always been self-righteousness and intolerance. . . .

"As an editor, my loyalties lie with the freedom of the individual imagination, the fruits of which have done very little harm in the real world. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of political action. Until the politically correct can actually produce a better world in fact rather than in theory, I for one am not willing to grant them control—or even veto power—over the realm of imaginative literature."

Editing Fiction

The Question of "Political Correctness"

The recent squalls over politically correct speech that have swept through various college campuses and on into some of our national news magazines give some indication of the turbulence generated when a culture undergoes profound realignment. In the case of the P.C. debate, we see some of the strains attendant on the quite remarkable social changes occurring in American culture in the last few decades. For most of our history, American culture was dominated, defined, and evaluated by a relatively small segment of the population: English-speaking male persons with a deep grounding in and loyalty to the Anglo-Saxon literary and cultural tradition. Although there has always been some tension between the dominance of this so-called genteel tradition and various nativist, regional, or immigrant self-assertions, the main line of American culture has been emphatically Anglo, as has been the case with other countries that began their history as British colonies.

However, since World War II this country has witnessed seismic shifts in both the culture—consider the emergence of urban male Jewish writers in the fifties, African-American women writers in the seventies, and gay and lesbian writers today—and in the demographic and social substratum upon which that culture rests. For instance, on the Berkeley campus in 1960, only 3 percent of the students were nonwhite, whereas in the autumn of '91, over 50 percent of the incoming class came from non-Anglo traditions. This opening up of the educational and cultural establishment to hitherto disenfranchised groups, the emergence of what is known as pluralism, appears

today to be an irreversible trend. If it is indeed irreversible, this would mark a profound—and in my opinion a highly desirable—shift not only in the composition but perhaps even in the basic nature of that culture.

Times of such basic transitions naturally generate confusion, conflict, and trouble for those of us who work in cultural fields such as publishing. The recent insistence on politically correct speech, or more precisely the attacks on writers found guilty of being politically incorrect, i.e., offending members of one or another minority group, is a case in point. Its effects are felt on both ends of the publishing process, as a pressure on the individual author and as an influence on the opinion of the reviewer as well as the response of the reader, and they raise nice questions of judgment for the working editor.

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When an author from a hitherto marginalized group succeeds in raising her voice in the public space, she feels not only the weight an author feels—the dreadfully public nature of publication—but also the burden of being a spokesperson for her community. While attempting to speak in her own unique and authentic voice, she is constrained by the realization that she will be heard and read as a representative of her group. This is a dilemma that is inherent in the historical situation and cannot be avoided; each author must negotiate her way through these dangerous waters, finding a balance between the claims of her own voice and her responsibility to the community. There are in my opinion no flat rules here, and the responsibility of the editor is to be sensitive to the issue while acting as a sounding board for the writer. The decisions taken are so basic that they must be thrashed out by the author rather than imposed by the editor, who in this instance, as in so many others, plays a part oddly reminiscent of the nonjudgmental but supportive therapist. At times this can be a rather tedious role—editor as echo chamber—but it does have the great advantage of adhering to The Supreme Rule of Editing: Always remember that this is not your book but the author's.

The truth of the matter is that serious works of art can be neither propaganda nor public relations efforts, no matter how urgently needed or how well intentioned. It is curious that this is not abundantly clear to everyone today, given the dismal results of the fifty-year literary experiment with socialist realism in the USSR. I mean "Man meets tractor, man falls in love with tractor, man marries tractor" just doesn't cut the mustard. If we want art—and whether or not we want art has indeed been a serious question to political thinkers since Plato—we must give up this absurd notion that art can provide role models for anyone. It is beyond me how this idea ever achieved currency, since a moment's reflection blows it away.

Homer's Achilles, whatever else he was, was certainly no role model for the ancient Greeks, as he rejected all counsel of moderation and stormed against the limits of mortality, which for the Greeks defined the human condition. Nor was Madame Bovary intended to be a guide for the lives of provincial French women. This role model theory of literature boils down to a simplistic notion of monkey see, monkey do, which reveals a profound misunderstanding of the relation between literature and life.

Nevertheless, there is an understandable tendency on the part of social groups who have not previously achieved visibility in the culture or who have suffered under negative public images generated by others to feel intensely possessive about how they are portrayed, especially by their own. Ever since the furor over Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint,* various communities have shown a tendency to judge works of fiction by the impact they assume such works will have on the community's public reputation. This is both a remarkably shortsighted and a remarkably persistent tendency, as can be seen in the initial reaction to Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* or Larry Kramer's *Faggots,* both of which were attacked most bitterly by members of each author's own community. As far as I can see, the author has no choice but to endure such emotional buffeting and critical riptides, while preserving the authentic honesty of her own vision; the editor's job is to support the author against all comers. This can sometimes be a bruising experience for an editor—though nowhere near as bruising as it is for the author—but it comes with the territory, as my mother would say. To my mind, the most apt response to such a situation was that of Spike Lee after the storm of advice and criticism unleashed by the announcement that he intended to make a movie about the life of Malcolm X: "If you don't like the movie I make about Malcolm, go make your own."

In such situations both the author and the editor will constantly feel the pressure to conform and be politically correct. But this is merely another expression of the essential dialectic of the creative imagination, the tension between the author and society, between individual talent and the tradition. Society, tradition, and the currently politically correct always have the advantage, both of weight of opinion and of numbers. It seems reasonable to me that the editor do what he or she can to redress the balance by standing behind the author's individual talent and unique vision.

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In addition to protecting the author from the demands for political correctness emanting from her own community—"Is it good for the Jews?"—there are other, more subtle issues that arise when publishing writers from a community different from one's own. As Joan Pinkvoss of Aunt Lute

Books has pointed out, the great danger when, for instance, a white editor is working with a writer of color is the sometimes almost unconscious temptation to make the writer's voice more intelligible or acceptable (the one sliding into the other) to white readers. This temptation must be resisted absolutely. It is the integrity of the writer's voice and vision *alone* that can provide the editor with a true standard for the editing process. The goal of editing is to make the book better, not different. From the history of black music in this country, we know fairly well the mechanics of producing a white "cover" for a black song. This is essentially a commercial and cultural rip-off, which to my mind would be a serious crime if committed by an editor. Even if the writer is willing—or eager—to make such changes in an effort to be more commercially successful (which we used to call selling out), it seems to me that such pandering to the marketplace negates the reason you would sign up such a book in the first place—your delight in the power and freshness of a voice and message that expand your own horizon.

The temptation to make a black author more acceptable to white readers, far from making the work more "universally" available is a subtle but serious betrayal of the author, for it masks the attempt, however innocent, to change the audience the writer intended to the readers the editor has in mind. This truly negates the purpose of engaging in pluralistic publishing in the first place and is reminiscent of the early explorers and anthropologists who brought back samples of the "exotic" humanity they encountered around the globe for the amusement or edification of Europeans. This is abhorrent since it would ultimately turn literature into a zoo. The purpose of pluralistic publishing is to open the realm of the written word to hitherto excluded groups while at the same time letting people from other communities hear these new voices. Of course, the first time you listen to someone who speaks in a dialect or accent new to you, it takes some time to get the hang of it. But the editor's job is never to make everyone speak in the same way, but to rejoice in the richness that a variety of different voices offers us.

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Although most of the conflicts over political correctness emerge from differences between the writer's vision and the convictions of the more vocal members of her own community regarding how members of that community should be portrayed publicly, there is also the question of writers characterizing members of "other" groups in what could be considered a negative way. In fact, one gets the impression from public discussions of the topic that this is the major problem, for instance the presentation of African American men in the media mainly as criminals or drug addicts, thus slandering a whole group. Whether or not this is still true of the media in general is another question; however, in my experience it comes up remark-

ably rarely in publishing. Negative stereotypes of African Americans are now unusual and generally arise from clichéd thinking and lack of imagination (the signs of a poor writer of fiction) rather than from racism. And, except for an occasional British book, one simply doesn't come across casual anti-Semitism in novels today.

One does still see unthinking homophobic comments now and then, in which case the editor's job is to point these out to the author. If there is no justification for such comments in either the plot or the portrayal of the character, the author should be made aware of the possible impact on the reader. (Obviously portraying a homophobic character or a homophobic act does not make the author homophobic.) Recently I was working on a mystery in which one character asserted, "I'm not queer," and I flagged it for the author. In context the use of the word "queer" instead of "gay" would to my ear indicate one of the following: *(a)* this is a bad guy because bad guys use bad language (which he was, but at this point in the plot the reader should not have been tipped off to that), *(b)* this character is homophobic and that will somehow be relevant to the plot, or *(c)* this character protests too much, which means he's uncertain or conflicted about his sexuality and this fact will somehow be relevant to the plot. Since the second and third explanations did not seem to me to fit the plot, I thought the author had made the mistake of tipping the reader off to this man's character too early in the mystery. However, after some discussion the author realized that he did mean to indicate some severe sexual repression in this man; it was a theme that he had intended to bring out more but that had gotten lost in the writing, and a few further changes in the manuscript made it fit smoothly (without giving the plot away).

The fact that such words are today freighted with more significance in fiction than they may carry in real life *is* a fact, and the author has to take it into account. A woman executive swearing in the office is common; a woman executive swearing in a novel will probably signal things to the reader that the author might not intend. As always, the editor's primary task is to clarify the author's intentions.

It is certainly possible that one would come across an author who was actually homophobic, racist, or anti-Semitic, in which case you have the option of simply not publishing him. But let us be clear: the option of *my* not publishing a given author can *not* be called censorship. Censorship is a general prohibition against publication, usually requiring the power of the state or a similar social institution, such as the church. As specific editors, or even specific publishers, a disinclination to publish a certain book is a matter of taste, of whom we choose to be associated with, not of censorship. As long as the author has the option of taking the book elsewhere, or of publishing it himself if all else fails, there is not a question of censorship,

only of commercial or social success, which is a different matter entirely.

There is, of course, also the possibility that one might find a homophobic, racist, or anti-Semitic author who was a truly great writer—consider the cases of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. I have always wondered what I would do if I came across a fiction writer whom I believed to be truly excellent who was also, say, homophobic; but since this has never happened, I honestly don't know how I would react, although I'm very curious. I could certainly imagine publishing a nonfiction book by an author I thought was significant although he was homophobic—the essays of Louis Farrakhan, for instance.

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As a rule, I firmly believe that an editor's own politics, opinions, and prejudices have no place in the editing process, which can lead to some strange situations. While editing G. Gordon Liddy's autobiography, *Will,* I found myself in the odd situation of helping Gordon rewrite his attack on the student radicals who had converged on the Democratic convention in Chicago in '68. There we were, sitting at my dining room table as I urged Gordon to cut the rhetoric and hone his comments on the antiwar demonstrators into a substantive attack, an irony not lost on either of us since Gordon knew well I had been there myself rioting in Grant Park. Luckily, we had become good friends despite differences in some of our political opinions, and in return for my editorial help I extracted a promise that he would read Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution,* which salved my noneditorial conscience somewhat.

In some respects it is easier to edit someone whose experience in the world or political convictions are widely different from my own than it is to edit someone who stands closer to me. The very distance creates a discipline and an alertness: you can feel yourself making the effort of imagination and empathy required by the task; the discipline is palpable, indeed sometimes mind-wrenching. When dealing with a closely allied sensibility or political orientation, the temptation to slide oneself into the text is more subtle. Before signing a contract with Dennis Altman for *The Homosexualization of America; The Americanization of the Homosexual,* Dennis and I had to have long and frank discussions, for this was an area I was actively involved in, had in fact written about, and Dennis was understandably nervous that precisely this closeness could represent a danger to the integrity of his views, the individuality of his opinions. Thus prepared, we managed the process quite well and, while I do not agree with everything written in that book either, I was proud of the fact that in the end Dennis assured me that he felt the book had remained totally his.

Perhaps the tenderest area of P.C. sensitivity in gay fiction today con-

cerns the portrayal of unsafe sex in gay novels set in the era of AIDS. On the one hand, there is the strong stand taken by Sasha Alyson, who will not allow any descriptions of unsafe sexual practices in any fiction published by Alyson Publications. On the other hand is the position taken by Warren Singer, an old friend of mine who had AIDS and with whom I discussed Sasha's position: "Lord, the only place we ought not to have to practice safe sex is in our imagination!" This quandary could lead to endless philosophic discussion, but the question is best addressed on a concrete basis, case by case.

Recently I read a story of gay romance between an HIV-positive and an HIV-negative person—their antibody status clearly established in the text—in which the protagonist who is positive realizes after withdrawal that the condom he was using had broken. Neither the protagonist nor the author made any comment about this, and the story simply went on, but I didn't. I had been brought to a full stop because I didn't know how to interpret this incident. It would certainly be a significant event if it happened to you in the course of a romance and it must be significant in the course of this story, but the author had left unclear what that significance was supposed to be. This is a bit like saying offhandedly that there is an elephant in the living room and not mentioning it again. This will not do. As Chekhov informed us: if you introduce a gun in the first act of a play, it had better go off before the end of the last act, otherwise it shouldn't have been there in the first place. If a character practices unsafe sex in a contemporary gay novel, that fact carries an interpretive weight that the author has to take into account, because the reader certainly will. Times have changed. Similarly, if a character casually uses words like "Jew boy" or "nigger" today, the reader will inevitably feel the author is making a rather strong point about that character, whereas we would not necessarily assume that if the text were written sixty years ago.

The point, I think, is not to have general rules, which never work very well in editing anyway, but to point out to the author in each case what implications the reader will likely draw from the incident and to make sure that the author does not inadvertently create an effect that was not desired. The author may well intend a character to be obnoxious, but authors seldom intend to present themselves as obnoxious. As always, the editor's role is to help the author achieve her aim, not to ensure that the writer is politically correct.

In general, the attempt to make any fiction politically correct is a misguided one; it is an attempt to police the imagination. This inclination has been quite prominent among the politically committed since Plato first banished poets from his ideal republic; its resurgence today is merely an unfortunate but quite predictable by-product of a valuable surge in political

activism, the dangers of which have always been self-righteousness and intolerance.

The political activist and the poet have always marched to different drummers. As an editor, my loyalties lie with the freedom of the individual imagination, the fruits of which have done very little harm in the real world. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of political action. Until the politically correct can actually produce a better world in fact rather than in theory, I for one am not willing to grant them control—or even veto power—over the realm of imaginative literature.

department to go out again with a book that may work the second time around.

Returning for the last time to Mr. Thornton, when he wrote his essay, the nonbook, impulse-buy trade paperback, like the previously mentioned book about Rubik's Cube, was all the rage. Now, with the exception of brand-name humor and a few quirky, trendy, short-lived titles, these disposable books have fallen by the wayside. Personally, I'm trying to stay away from fads; by the time you get the fad-oriented book into the stores, the fickle public is following another fad.

As I write this essay, we're in a recession. As a result we've probably lost the occasional impulse buyer. But I believe it doesn't matter what economic climate we're in: there will always be serious readers going into bookstores to find good books that contain real information and that cost less than the hardcover. This, I am convinced, is the real audience for trade paperbacks, now and in the next millennium—a mere seven years away. If corporate owners learn to be patient they will see what so many have seen before them, that the only way to build up strong companies is with strong backlist titles that contribute to the bottom line every year. Slow and steady *does* win the race. The mission of trade paperback editors is to recognize this but also not to turn their noses up when a rare chance for opportunism comes along (for example, an instant book on a popular rock band).

There is a large audience whom we used to call yuppies, who have aged into what we now sometimes call the baby boomers. I identify them as the Cultural Literacy Generation. This generation is becoming more sedate, turning inward, raising families, and staying at home more. These readers are looking for good serious fiction, a "liberal arts" program of nonfiction titles, and popular books on a wide variety of subjects that are not too dry or academic in content. Trade paperbacks and the editors who have published them for four decades reflect this generation. I suppose these books and editors have become less daring and more practical. But as always, a new generation of editors and readers will come up from the ranks who will be innovative and bold and will inject new life into trade paperbacks. One of these editors will no doubt inherit this space in the next edition of *Editors on Editing*. It will be interesting to see what the latest "truths" about trade paperbacks will be at that time.

Editing Nonfiction

The Question of "Political Correctness"

Wendy M. Wolf

WENDY M. WOLF is a senior editor at HarperCollins and was previously a senior editor at Pantheon Books. She edits books in history, popular culture, music, sports, biography, science, and humor. The authors she has published include Barry Commoner, Robert Christgau, Vine Deloria, Jr., Tom Lehrer, and Matt Groening, as well as John Cleese, Michael Palin, and the other members of Monty Python's Flying Circus.

What role should the nonfiction editor play in the current debate over P.C. (political correctness)? Should the editor "otherly label" controversial words, opinions, and political, social, and personal situations and relationships to suit the trend toward using currently fashionable euphemisms for these difficult and problematical aspects of our culture? Or should the editor maintain the traditional role of the facilitator of the author's intent? And what if that intent differs from the political, sexual, or social beliefs of influential areas of the literary or academic establishment, or even those of the editor?

Wendy Wolf approaches these controversial issues by recognizing her editorial responsibility to her author, her publisher, "to some vague notion of the world or Western civilization at large, and to myself. . . . The key to sane survival, to my thinking and in my experience," she writes, "is to focus on the word 'responsibility' and to try to see how the balance of my conflicting obligations affects various major and minor editorial issues."

Eloquently, passionately, and provocatively, Ms. Wolf considers all the ramifications of the pressures and impact of political correctness on her choice of nonfiction books to edit, on her relationships with her authors, her

publisher, the reading public, and on her own integrity, conscience, and humanity.

"Difficult ideas," she writes, "have to pass scrutiny so that their arguments hold up against the evidence amassed. But we can't surrender our responsibilities either from fear of the bottom line, fear of associating ourselves with a disturbing thought, or fear of mere dissent from the prevailing wisdom. Writers may owe us a great deal, as their stalwart editors and defenders of their faith, but we owe them something, too."

Editing Nonfiction

The Question of "Political Correctness"

Most of my friends who started out with me as editorial assistants saw the light and went on to something sensible like real estate. A few hardy souls, however, decided to stay in for the long run. Remember that word, "decide." Any editor who doesn't own up to that initial act of free will sooner or later find herself in trouble when she tries to clarify one of the murkier but unavoidable aspects of our work: facing up to the constant query, "How do I choose what to publish?"

My answer is actually simple. As an editor, I have responsibilities in a number of directions: to my author, to my employer, to some vague notion of the world or Western civilization at large, and to myself. Nine times out of ten I don't know or worry about where one begins and the other ends, because the ends of each are jointly served. It's when they fall out of synch, and conflicts of interest and responsibility result, however, that I wonder if the role of the editor is anything more than cultural bureaucrat or literary cipher. The key to sane survival, to my thinking and in my experience, is to focus on the word "responsibility" and to try to see how the balance of my conflicting obligations affects various major and minor editorial issues. It's in this context that I think about the question of "political correctness," now ubiquitously dubbed "P.C."

An editor is an active participant in a great chain of choice. When you take on a book, you have to answer to yourself why you're doing it and be willing to live with the consequences. The chain operates in different ways over time—at the moment you decide to work for a particular company, over the course of your tenure with them, as you generate a track record (and you see which races are counted on that ledger), and over the historical performance of your employer in the long and short run.

I—like, I suspect, most of my colleagues—choose a book after I consider

how that book can fulfill one of a myriad of different goals or expectations that I have set for myself. It might be to win a prize, to make the news, to attack an enemy, to uncover a crime, to make money, to amuse, to annoy, to bring down a government, to please the eye, to create an object I can give my mother for Christmas, to present a new argument, to refute an old one, to offer a useful synthesis of a broad topic, or to explain how to fix a broken steam pipe. Not every book starts a revolution, and I'd be the first to list the many, many books I've published over the years that serve no more sophisticated purpose than to give a few laughs. No one can say that, for sure and forever, any one of these reasons is more or less valid than any other. I have my priorities, both for my own list and for the industry as a whole; others have theirs. I wish we all agreed; we don't. At best we can agree to respect each other's decisions, and that no one factor—profitability or current political vogue—is, a priori, a *necessary* element in a book's potential profile.

More often than not it's some quirky combination of several of these categories that encourages me to pursue a book, and I'm often hard-pressed to say precisely toward which one or toward what valence my brain is being drawn. It's a source of delightful frustration to the computer-systems folks who strive valiantly to come up with a data base that would reduce the editorial decision-making process to a set of variables and programs. We sit in conferences gladly urging them to create these informational resources, and then politely add, "But of course that's not really how it works."

I don't entirely accept the increasingly popular argument that editors have been stripped of all responsibility in the decision chain, that their job—the reason they're paid—is just to pump out what sells, content or impact notwithstanding, that we are neutral facilitators, not gatekeepers whose job includes deliberately regulating the flow of ideas. Some would in fact argue that we have no right regulating—who are we, after all, to determine what will and what won't pass into the marketplace of ideas? Shouldn't all views, all writers have unfettered access to the reading public? Publish what the public wants, or what sells; they try to claim it's a neutral, nonjudgmental stance we should be taking. But deciding what the public wants is not as easy as it looks, as we'll see. The rage over cultural disenfranchisement, control of the canon, and that much-debated new hegemonic force, "political correctness," sends off clashing and often contradictory messages about exactly who the "public" is and what they want, or should want. Interestingly, the war over the canon seems to have been waged by armies other than those that fight the battle of the best-sellers.

You can like a book for as many reasons as there are to write one, but to pretend that, as an acquiring editor, you're not standing in judgment and making a choice is a dangerous and self-deluding stance. Even those who

claim that they're just providing, as a public service, "what the world wants to read" have in fact judged, this time not just one author, one project, or one's own interest on one day, but a large and usually unknowable broad taste in the world at large. So much for neutrality.

My point here isn't to assign some divine order to which kinds of reasons are better or worse; the point is simply to acknowledge that an editor must, in the end, take responsibility for the decision to take on a book or an idea, to fund it, to see it through execution, to help the publishing company position it in its dual journey through the world of ideas and the world of commodities. Just saying "I'm doing it because it's what the world wants to read" isn't, to me, a satisfying explanation. You've made a conscious calculation. There's a whiny complaint lurking in the comment that the editor is a victim of the marketplace, forced by circumstance to take on a distasteful project against his or her will. I find this rarely borne out in reality. Books don't fall out of the sky and land on you like smelly albatrosses (though many quickly become just that in the process). No one publishes a book utterly against his will and against his better judgment. Somewhere inside, some voice is whispering that there's a reason.

In an ideal world, we work to integrate our own balance sheet into our company's by publishing books that we find both attractive and stimulating intellectually and that, *on the whole,* allow us to function profitably. Remember that italicized phrase. Thomas Boswell, *Washington Post* sports columnist, says that you can't tell anything about a baseball player's abilities from a single week, much less a single game—performance quality shows up only over time. The same is true for an editor or author, and even for a publisher's list. Not every player is expected to get on base at each at bat, and the way I see it, nor should every book be judged solely on the basis of its potential financial profile or its immediate popularity estimation. First of all, our predictive capabilities are just too crude to rely on for long. We know about those durable war-horses of the best-seller lists, but if we publish only in the existing categories and genres, we risk missing out not just on the most interesting new books, but on the greatest profits. Ask me, an early (and doubting) reader, about an Italian manuscript, a dense and difficult historical mystery by a semiologist, of all things. Who was to know what could come of *The Name of the Rose* in the right and able hands? The same pertains in the entertainment industry; ask the A&R guy who first heard Elvis.

Second, books have, since the beginning, served a critical function in the discourse of ideas as well as in the marketplace of goods. We run grave risks when the two parts of books' identities are severed, and we get carried away with our own perceptions of the demands of the marketplace. Even when I'm calculating a small readership for a book, I'm making an implicit

assumption about a book's potential readership—what readers it might reach, whom it should reach. As I try to imagine a book's readership, I have to ask how important it is that people agree with said book's content, for giving the public what we think it wants, now as well as in the past, doesn't necessarily mean publishing garbage. But it involves a precise definition of "audience," which all too often conforms for us to the demographics of the suburban mall.

Even an editor who claims to make a judgment entirely in market or money terms has to, at some point, account for his or her failures. We all spend far too little time in postmortems, reviewing our miscalculations and misreadings of the marketplace, but if we did, I suspect we'd find that while there may have been different justifications voiced for a signing decision (I took this on because it's good/it's important/it will sell), in fact all decisions are a mix of value judgments and more or less accurate ideas about potential sales. And in this context, it's not that editors are more or less interested in markets, but that those in pursuit of the mass market probably hold it in more contempt than those who target the various niche audiences. We have to consider the so-called rights of the niche audience to gain access to the mainstream outlets for books, and our complicity in keeping them out by bending to the status quo in book*selling,* an issue I'll elaborate on further.

Part of the challenge of being an editor at a time when many of the old assumptions about history, historiography, and language itself are under fire is to stay honest about the person I imagine as a reader or book buyer. Writers from the disenfranchised minorities claim we discriminate against their potential audience because they aren't "traditional" (white, well-educated, well-heeled book club types). I think we do, in large part because our bookselling outlets service those "other" audiences so poorly. It sounds like a vicious circle of blame, and it is incumbent upon all the participants to take responsibility for breaking the cycle, but as we press toward greater representation of *all* voices through the books we publish, we should be trying not just to expand the rolls of writers, but of readers as well. Opening up the book-buying world, supporting libraries, attending to literacy on a mass level—these are tasks as crucial as finding the new Terry McMillan or Toni Morrison.

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The large majority of the books we all deal with raise little controversy—other than disagreement over sales potential and whether blue or red on the jacket makes the most sense. What happens, then, when I am presented with what we delicately refer to as one of "those difficult projects"—nonfiction books that propose unpopular ideas, that challenge conventionally held

and often widely beloved notions, that upset and are upsetting, that sometimes seem designed to cause trouble and nothing else?

It's simple. I know I have a choice. I have to figure out why I want to publish this particular work and ally my name with it—what it's going to do for (or to) the universe, the discourse, the author, my company, and myself—and go on from there. It's no more than taking responsibility for your own decisions, and then standing by them. I know that the decision I make to pursue one project will affect what happens on several others on my desk at the same time, and that a book that appeals to me one year will sound like old hat another. No standard formula works for long because the individual variables in that formula change not just from editor to editor but from book to book, and change over time, as the demands of keeping a list functioning create certain other demands. But I personally don't subscribe to the belief that the money quotient always comes first and last. Anyway, there just isn't that much money to make. If maximizing profits at any cost is your interest, go into the shoe business. At least you can wear the remainders.

Now here's the part that's not quite so simple. What if, in said book, the argument being presented not only flies in the face of world opinion or taste, but speaks against your own sensibilities or values. The author presents a fascinating account of working at the pioneering frontiers of brain biology and research, but amasses his evidence to prove that there is not only racial differentiation but limitation in capability or content; you find the lab work riveting and the conclusions revolting. Or a discredited refugee from a notorious political scandal comes to you promising that he will name names (perhaps or perhaps not clearing his own); you know his name will attract attention—and revenues—but believe the man to be in fact guilty of the crimes accused. The offense can be launched from anywhere on the political spectrum—Right attacking the Left; black attacking Jew; female attacking male; a proponent of "family values" alleging a gay conspiracy; and so on. The pairs of possible opponents and available controversies are infinite, and for this argument, the particulars are irrelevant. But what happens when I'm both attracted to and disturbed by the contents of the proposal or manuscript at the same time?

One of two other awful considerations usually arises here, too. Either the book is almost certain to lose money or—sometimes a worse prospect, I think—we might actually sell large quantities of something readily deemed hateful; after all, it's what the public wants/believes/is believed to believe. What do I do?

There is no convincing argument for avoiding controversy or conflict, for suppressing a minority opinion, for controlling language, for rounding sharp edges, for censorship. Period. Even if applied under the supposed

"best of humane intentions" in a particular situation, any censoring effort creates a precedent of suppression. But if I don't censor *them,* they won't have that excuse to censor *me.* However—and I think this is crucial in the debate over the tyranny of the marketplace and censorship through commercial choices—this is *not* the same as saying an editor or a house is under *obligation* to publish anything and everything they are presented with, nor does the simple fact of controversial content merit selection and promotion as a trade book. Recognizing that I chose to be in this position not only gives me a responsibility—it gives me protection as well.

Much ink is spilled these days over what is now commonly called "the new McCarthyism of the Left"—the tyrannical rule of "political correctness," which in its extreme form is said to demand that any attempt to write history or to describe the past or future of our society pass through stringent screens designed to filter out discriminatory language, hegemonic cultural assumptions, or any intended or unintended slur against the traditionally disenfranchised special-interest or "ethnic" (read non-Caucasian, usually non-European) people in American society. Writers across the cultural and political spectrum, from Robert Hughes to C. Vann Woodward, have argued in venues from the *New York Review of Books* to the *Village Voice* about the breadth and depth of the P.C. Reign of Terror on campuses today, and I would not presume to venture unarmed into *that* debate. I can only speak about the supposed tyranny of P.C. as witnessed from the acquiring editor's chair, and I merely point to recent best-seller lists as evidence of who's on top, who's selling, and who's getting big bucks. The fury over P.C. may in fact be yet another index of the well-organized, well-connected, highly visible, and voluble Right effectively articulating its paranoia. Chew over the sales figures for Allan Bloom, Camille Paglia, Dinesh D'Souza, E. D. Hirsch. Notice that there's nary a defender of the misbegotten rights of otherly abled Trotskyite Basques of Puerto Rican descent among them. Defending the old regime still seems to be a pretty marketable commodity.

From where I sit, being an O. A. T. B. of P. R. D. neither qualifies nor disqualifies you from publication. On the other hand, neither does being a tenured professor at Yale. It's the same boring story—I gotta like, or at least respect, what you're trying to say, or find a value in it on my own terms. Needless to say, a *balance* of voices from niches large and small should be the ideal.

Books have also become an extension of the celebrity tee shirt–rock video–breakfast cereal-endorsement merchandise package. It's innocuous when it's merely football players and soap opera stars to whom this publishing prerogative is extended. Their books may not save Western civilization or advance the cause of freedom, but they usually don't harm anyone either,

and can generate revenues that can be put to good use elsewhere. But consider this more troubling scenario.

What if David Duke were to approach me with a proposal? The celebrity component is certainly there, as is the public recognition, the proven publicity machinery, and the arguably legitimate interest in hearing his arguments, seeing them played out, testing their validity. There's also the point to be considered that such a book could conceivably produce revenues and profits. After all, so they would say, many people agree with him and would want to hear what he has to say. But to take him on, I would have to find my own answers to a series of pointed questions. How would I be serving any community's interest or enlarging the debate about race, the social welfare structure, and the role of government? Would I in fact be contributing to the legitimizing of what I consider a wholly unacceptable position by permitting him this platform to sound off from? Now, an assemblage of Duke documents as evidence could be a usefully frightening object. But my answer, on the packaged offering of Duke *himself,* would be a clear no. I might question the judgment of another publisher who did take him on, but that would be that publisher's prerogative. Yes, that's a personal political and moral decision on my part, but so would be the decision *to* publish him. There is no such thing as an impersonal decision in this realm. This touches on an area I'll elaborate on later, in specific issues of language and terminology. Certain books arrive in more or less fixed shape, due to the odd insistence by the author to have it his way, come hell, high water, or editor armed with sharp pencils. In assessing a book's "worth" and its hazards to me, my house, and the world at large, I try, not always successfully, to stay aware of the distinctions between what I would like a book to be or become, and what its real features and limitations are.

As editors, we more often are presented with less extreme cases of crises of conscience—a well-grounded argument that takes a few uncomfortable turns, throws a few dangerous curves. I don't have a hard-and-fast rule for myself, and I attempt, not always with success, to stop short of the doctrinaire, to keep my own mind open to new persuasions. "It's a mixed bag," I often say, describing a complicated project. But there are usually few surprises; it's rare that, if you take the time to investigate even the skimpiest three-page proposal, you can't suss out where the dark corners are going to be. I know that I have to make a choice whether to throw myself into it, but once I do commit, then my absolute obligation is to help the author get it right.

If only there were a computer program to work this one out—but you're stuck with your own cost-benefit ratio analysis; of course, the definitions of what constitutes a cost—or a benefit—follow no rigid formula. The decision to take on only profitable books is not automatically or a priori more

or less defensible than a choice based on "political" principles. It's not a given but a deliberate choice in and of itself, and one with grave ramifications as editors perform the necessary ritual of trying to come to terms with why they do what they do. Unfortunately, we spend little time assessing or accounting for the times we miscalculated the size of the audience, the nature of the book's appeal.

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So I've got this daring work of dissident scholarship on my desk. Now what do I do with it?

There are, to my mind, three stages of influence or intervention for an editor, each with distinct opportunities and requisites. Stage One is the period in which I'm considering signing up a project. Once there might have been a significant portion of a manuscript and a clear profile of the author to back it up. These days I'm lucky if I get three irrelevant magazine articles and a ten-page outline. Still, I've got investigative tools at my disposal to help me determine just what I'm getting into—where this argument might lead, for better or worse, what skeletonic secondary characters might be dancing in the author's closet, what portions of his or her work I know I'll have issues with.

First, I talk to other people I know and trust in the field. As a "general interest" editor, there are a few areas I know a lot about, and many I can't pretend expertise in. One of my talents (or maybe just a trick of the trade) is knowing how to get good advice from people who do know. Second, I try, if possible, to meet with the author in person; I find that if the author-hopeful seems to be calculatingly eyeing the size of my window rather than investigating the contents of my bookshelf, brain, or in-box for clues to my identity and status, that tells me something about our future relationship. Where necessary or appropriate, I also explain where my personal opinion diverges from his or hers, and where I think the potential weaknesses or danger zones of the book's argument might lie. Obviously, if you're only working with an outline, there's much detail to come, but a good free-ranging but directed conversation will reveal most potential bugaboos.

The point isn't to be best friends with each and every author, but if there isn't a common basis of trust, I won't be able to do my job; I can't engage in the necessary dialogue with a writer I don't respect, even as we disagree. I also believe the author has as much right to "discovery" vis-à-vis his or her editor's position as the editor has of the author, because once the decision is made to go ahead—once you do your numbers and decide what to do with your numbers—and you give an author a contract, there's no waffling. Wrestle your angels to the ground here, in Stage One, before commitment, because once you have accepted the book's premise, body,

and conclusion, your commitment is to work to make it as perfect a piece as your collective energies and personalities will warrant.

Thus we enter Stage Two, where the editor's role, to my mind, is blindingly clear: to dog, torment, torture, question, challenge, pry, invade, coax, cajole, praise, and attack that work and its creator until its argument is airtight, or until it has reached the goal of acceptability you mutually have determined upon embarkation. This mutuality of assumption is a critical, if weasely, aspect of Stage Two, since it's the vexing decision of whether a work is "acceptable" that has the most profound legal, moral, and financial repercussions; it is, in fact, *the* critical breakpoint for many a controversial or risk-taking book. This is also the stage during which I must constantly keep in the front of the discussion whose book this is—the author's, not mine. Where am I challenging the author to defend his position against my dissenting argument, and where are we agreeing to disagree?

In romantic fashion, I like to imagine all our arguments being over deep political truths, but in fact, the issue is usually not what is said but how it is said—its manner of expression and, in particular, who the readership will be or what it will do in reaction to the writer's choice of words. This can be turned into an issue of ideas and censorship by an aggrieved author, but that's usually self-deception. I think the realm of language, expression, and simply choices in words is one where the sensitively blunt editor can perform the most heroic duty in helping a manuscript toward completion.

I don't subscribe to a fixed lexicon of political correctness; I do think the minutiae of language and rhetoric are hugely significant, and I try to impart a respect and sensitivity about that belief to my authors. But it's been my experience that actual language usually flows from the ideas, that if the thought is sensitive, it's not difficult to make the expression of the thought equally so. I try to help writers, for example, see the impact of words like *mankind* versus *humanity,* or sort out difficult vocabulary decisions—determining whether to use *Native American* or *American Indian*; *Black, African American, people of color,* or a more "retro" form, perhaps in a historical context or to make a specific dramatic statement. I try to explore the political implications of controversial name changes like Kampuchea or Myanmar, where what we (or the *New York Times*) might casually presume to be the currently popular or P.C. choice is in fact the expression of imposed will by a small group of tyrants, and hardly the people's term of choice.

You can tie yourself into linguistic knots trying to accommodate the various needs and demands voiced by special-interest groups regarding how they would like to be described. In many cases I think it's a matter of the disenfranchised, being powerless to control the more substantive issues determining their condition, at least asserting themselves over labeling. We

know from the experience of schoolchildren that labels have powerful and enduring social effects, but at some point you've just got to apply some combination of sensitivity to both politics and the language and good old-fashioned common sense. In many cases you can avoid cumbersome labels for groups by simply rewriting the sentence, avoiding those "portmanteau" descriptive phrases and using plain nouns and verbs instead. I think of this as combing the knots out of tangled prose.

The choice of gender in pronouns can be deliberately provocative and can also be alienating. I don't think there's a slide rule of implications that will automatically determine what's right. I do think that author and editor together can discuss why (or even if) a choice has been made, and whether it's been an informed and directed one. Is the author trying to conform to a vocabulary mutually agreed upon by a preselected readership? What if a term is comfortable to the writer or to the person described, but not to readers outside the preselected group? Who should prevail?

I often think of myself as playing the role of Gentle Reader with an author. That is, my job isn't to *correct* his or her words, but to alert the author to the impact of his or her phrases: "This is how I read this sentence; this is what it says to me. Is that what you *want* it to say? Is that the most effective (or most direct, or most evocative, or most provocative) way of accomplishing that end?" The run of issues is usually similar from project to project. Is the argument well documented? Is the evidence there? Is the presentation effective? Is the language sensitive and accurate? Is its effect what you want? It's not always easy to listen with an open mind to the author's answers to my questions when I still may profoundly disagree with aspects of his argument, assumptions, or conclusions, but my job isn't to impose my will and worldview on every book I publish, just to give them the benefit of my skepticism.

When are we through? Obviously, every book takes a different course, but they all wind up in somewhat the same place. A book is done when the author can say to me with absolute conviction: "This is how I want to say it, damn it, and I stand by my words!" (Or sometimes, "This is the best I can do, and I think it's good enough.") In a reasonable world, that is also the place where I believe the manuscript does what I wanted it to do in the beginning, and I stand by it as well.

At this point, I (perhaps in conjunction with a battery of attorneys, expert readers, and colleagues) must make the decision whether to accept the manuscript or not. This is of course the second key moment in a book's life. Once a book is accepted, the publisher is under legal, contractual responsibility to publish it within a specific period of time, and I firmly believe publishers should be held to that legal obligation, regardless of shifting winds of opinion within or outside the house. The fact that many publish-

ers' contracts already contain language covering the publisher's failure to fulfill that obligation indicates that not everyone agrees. I recognize that the changing contingencies in the fragile marketplace can place a publisher in an awkward bind, but face up to those realities at the moment of acceptance.

Stage Three is the preparation for publication once the manuscript is complete. With potentially noisy manuscripts, I believe it's part of my job to pave the way for the book in-house by preparing the sales and marketing staff; this might include alerting them to the nature and extent of the controversies in which the book engages, what kinds of reactions we might expect from reviewers, and whether the author belongs to one camp or another in a particular academic or political battle. Forewarned is forearmed; if I can keep a publicist from being caught by surprise by a hostile interviewer, or give the sales department the essential context from which a book was written, there are likely to be fewer unpleasant surprises or unmet expectations. This is as important a part of "positioning" the book as is trying to predict the size of a book's audience. While, as I've said before, it's the unanticipated breakouts and breakthrough books that in the long run generate the greatest profits, I don't think you do anyone—author or publisher—a favor by unrealistically overselling a book. The clearer we can all be on why a book is important, and what our expectations are, the happier we'll be when the book goes on to exceed them wildly.

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The assumed neutrality—that supposed value-free stance that publishers like to claim they are taking when publishing controversial materials—is worth examining closely. It works in two directions—when we're asked to publish works that, in all likelihood, the larger part of the book-buying audience will find disturbing (and therefore not buy), and when we're asked to publish works that we ourselves find disturbing, but that we believe people "out there" will agree with, will embrace, and will buy. The argument is generally made that publishers are not complicit in any crime simply by "giving the world what it wants," that in fact they are under obligation to provide books across the board or spectrum. Therefore, publishing the distasteful-but-popular is seen as a neutral position, with the editor as a mere cipher passing along public taste. In fact, no part of a book's publication is neutral. Choosing to publish, at least the way books are published today, confers an inescapable kind of legitimacy on a writer or public figure by the act of a commercial presentation of his or her argument.

I think we are, more often than not, disguising our moral responsibility with market-oriented camouflage. We do not just present undigested documents to the world for the world at large to read, analyze, and respond to.

In every aspect of the packaging, presentation, and in the language with which we describe books, we are attempting to influence and control the reception of that book, by reviewers and critics, by booksellers, and by readers. We aren't saying, "Read these words, judge for yourselves," but "This is the truth." We grant authenticity and legitimacy by our imprimatur and, equally important, by advertising, author tours, and the other usual mechanisms of the marketing apparatus. We deliberately attempt to control the debate or reception with our labels, covers, copy, promotion efforts, and even with our name and logo on the spine.

The book was once (and sometimes still can be) a source of celebritydom, but book publishing is increasingly embedded within a vast network of media events and exploitation of material—star in a movie, do the talk shows, film an exercise video, endorse a spaghetti sauce or perfume, write a book. Publishers would be fools not to cash in on their portion of this exploitable market, but we should also not let what was once a *by-product* of publication (fame) become a necessary *prerequisite* for a book contract. While not everyone agrees with me, I believe that in fact it's part of a publisher's obligation to give voice to just those people who don't qualify for the nine-city tour, that balancing big and little books is a sign of a publisher's healthy recognition that we, in fact, are not mere merchants of cultural artifacts.

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Naturally, I'm attracted to writing that already reflects my own set of beliefs, but I've had my mind changed many a time, just as I think I've changed the mind or at least the temporary orientation of some of my writers. Sometimes I come across a book that I know will play a key role in moving a debate along because of its extreme position. I might find that the argument, be it about feminist psychology, national drug policy, black capitalism, or colonial Indian policy, strays much further than I personally find acceptable. But if I feel confident that giving voice to this extreme point of view will make a concrete and positive contribution to a debate, then publishing the book is a responsible act. Is this imposing on the world my will, my prejudices, through the act of selection? Of course. But so is signing up a book because you think it will make money.

The powers of persuasion of a book, and of a publisher, are large and terrible, and none of us should ever lose sight of that. If you truly believed numbers tell the only truth, then compared to the awesome audience draw of a single television show or movie, our impact on the world should be almost undetectable; instead we influence debate, thought, individual self-image, public policy, national conscience and consciousness. With that influence comes an inescapable obligation to attend to the unpopular as well

as popular, the troubling as well as the conventional, to give voice to those who would be silenced by the majority of opinion-makers or by purveyors of fame. I know I have an obligation to those who pay my salary to give them a return on their investment in me. I like to believe that they understand this return can come in more forms than hard currency, and I try to confirm for them that it's true. Changing the way we think has its value, and books have proved a durable vehicle for such social change.

This does not mean I advocate the indiscriminate publication of provocative materials just *because* they are unpopular. Difficult ideas have to pass scrutiny so that their arguments hold up against the evidence amassed. But we can't surrender our responsibilities either from fear of the bottom line, fear of associating ourselves with a disturbing thought, or fear of mere dissent from the prevailing wisdom. Writers may owe us a great deal, as their stalwart editors and defenders of their faith, but we owe them something, too.

Editing Fiction

The Question of "Political Correctness"

Michael Denneny

MICHAEL DENNENY is a senior editor at St. Martin's Press and the general editor of the Stonewall Inn Editions, a line of trade paperbacks devoted to gay and lesbian literature. He is the author of Lovers: The Story of Two Men *and* Decent Passions: Real Stories about Love. *He has edited* First Love/Last Love: Fiction from Christopher Street *and* The Christopher Street Reader, *and is currently preparing a collection of his essays for publication. He was one of the founders of* Christopher Street *magazine and worked at the University of Chicago Press and Macmillan before joining St. Martin's Press.*

In this eloquently outspoken essay on political correctness and its relevance to fiction, Michael Denneny considers whether P.C. exerts a benign or malign effect on the writer and editor's freedom of expression.

Observing what he calls "The Supreme Rule of Editing: Always remember that this is not your book but the author's," Mr. Denneny recognizes the sensitivity of minorities—particularly African Americans, gays, and lesbians—to their portrayal in fiction. But he cautions editors to bow to no pressure in the effort to bring out the best of what the author has to say—however unpopular it may be with the currently influential literary, academic, and mass-media establishments. "The truth of the matter is that serious works of art can be neither propaganda nor public relations efforts, no matter how urgently needed or how well intentioned."

Following a stimulating discussion of the ethical and aesthetic quandaries faced by an editor dealing with a question of P.C., Mr. Denneny concludes