

Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship 2003–2004

Report

by Rowena Lennox

Sponsored by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the Australian Publishers Association, Allen & Unwin, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, HarperCollins Publishers, Hodder Headline, Melbourne University Press, Pan Macmillan, Pearson Australia, Random House Australia, Scholastic Australia, the Society of Editors (Queensland) and the Society of Editors (Tasmania).

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Aims

When I applied for the Beatrice Davis Fellowship in August 2002 I wanted to devise a project that would allow my writing and my editing practice to converge rather than diverge. Some of the most challenging and stimulating editing that had come my way was in the area of history and biography, and my first book *Fighting Spirit of East Timor: the Life of Martinho da Costa Lopes* won the 2001 NSW Premier's General History Award. I didn't want to have to hide my writer's hat while I presented myself as an editor, or vice versa.

After helpful discussions with Jo Jarrah, the 2001 Beatrice Davis Fellow, and Sophie Cunningham, then trade publisher at Allen & Unwin, about the sort of writing I was interested in and the way publishers position different kinds of books, I had the seeds of a project. I became quite excited about the possibilities of an investigation of the editorial development and distribution of writing that looks at history and politics through the prism of personality.

I have learned a great deal about this sort of writing through my editing and through the long process of researching, writing and redrafting *Fighting Spirit of East Timor*, a biography of the first Indigenous leader of the Catholic Church in East Timor. Through the experiences and responses of Dom Martinho, the changing history and circumstances of East Timor are revealed. The book combines social, political and religious history with biography, and aims to reconstruct the life of a neglected hero. Jacqueline Kent, the book's editor, made simple large-scale suggestions – she helped me see the wood for the trees – and her input made *Fighting Spirit* a much better book.

Public perceptions of the issue of East Timor changed while I was working on *Fighting Spirit*. In Australia in the early 1990s many people saw independence for East Timor as an unrealistic goal, a cause of the 'loony left'. Ironically, by 1999 conservative Prime Minister John Howard was sending Australian troops there. Historic events and the media coverage of them helped create this shift.

Fighting Spirit of East Timor was going through the editorial process around the time of East Timor's independence ballot in August 1999. As a response to the East Timorese people's overwhelming preference for independence rather than autonomy within Indonesia, Indonesian-backed militias embarked on a program of killing, destruction and forced removal of the East Timorese population. I worked on the final draft with the sense that Dom Martinho's biography provided significant background to the horrific events of 'Black September' being covered in the news.

Tackling the practical problems of trying to form a satisfying and cohesive narrative from messy and open-ended experience and political situations in my own writing has informed my editorial practice. I empathise with authors in the process of organising years of research and aim to give suggestions that will help create well-paced books. And I understand how editing works as a catalyst – sometimes an editor's suggestion is the trigger that makes an author realise why they want to arrange their book a certain way, why they want to adopt a particular viewpoint.

Consequently, in my Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship application I wrote about my belief in the power of books:

I think books offer a way of viewing and interpreting the world that is potentially more sustained, more multifarious and more intimate than other forms of media. While a plethora of information is available from radio, television, the internet and newspapers, books can think about current and historical events in a way that allows readers to engage and use their imaginations, to spend time in worlds that differ from their own experience. Ideally, and with the help of the editorial process, books can get behind the facades of public figures and burrow into the vagaries of political machinations.

In an era when ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ are less solidly defined than they used to be character or the human psyche seems to offer some form of cohesion. I think in this time of information overload, people need some key to understanding events and sometimes the key can be the human personality.

I’d like to learn more about how successful books that combine imaginative writing and real people and events are developed editorially and then positioned in the market. Memoir, biography, history and fiction are separate genres, and are treated in a different way by publishers. I would like to research the different treatment and also learn about how writing that plays in the common areas, the intersections between these different approaches, can be developed, publicised and marketed well.

I was interested in books that crossed genres – for example Laura Blumenfeld’s *Revenge: a Story of Hope*, which combines memoir with reportage and current affairs, and Sandra Benitez’ novel, *The Weight of All Things*, which begins with the assassination of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador in March 1980 and closes with the massacre of 600 peasants by Salvadoran and Honduran troops in May 1980. Between these news events was the very human, very involving story of a boy called Nicolas. (Please see Select bibliography for publication details of books mentioned in this report.)

Previous Beatrice Davis fellows had spoken about the benefits of having a broad topic to research in order to keep up momentum on their project even when they encountered staff changes or other setbacks at their host publisher. I thought that by looking at a wide range of genres – history, biography, memoir and fiction – I might gain some insights into how editors visualise the books they publish, how they develop their authors’ strengths and how they ensure the resulting books reach their audience.

The project was very open-ended. I wanted it to have a dynamic of its own, to lead me where it would. While I was interviewing people about my topic, researching the origins of the various books that interested me and observing the way books are displayed in NYC bookshops, more questions came to mind. How do authors conceive and describe their books, especially if they are writing in genre-bending areas: memoir/current affairs, or fiction/history, for example? How do agents pitch books to editors? And after the hard work of writing is done, and all the editorial hurdles have been overcome, and there is a book, or a set of proofs, what does the marketing department do and how do publicists get that precious media attention?

One of the most rewarding aspects of the fellowship for me was the process of seeking out books that fascinated me and thinking about how they came into being. But, as we know and as my time in New York demonstrated beyond a doubt, a book’s genesis is just one part of its life.

Preparation

Talks previous fellows had given on their return from America helped shape my ideas about publishing in the United States and what it might be possible to achieve during 12 weeks in New York. Their written reports were invaluable. As well as being funny and insightful, they built up a picture of NYC and publishing in the US. And they clarified some of the differences in the editorial process and terminology between Australia and the United States. For example, an 'editor' in the US acquires books and edits manuscripts. Manuscripts might also be sent to a freelance copyeditor but US editors pride themselves on doing the 'editing' as well as the acquiring. The reports also gave very useful advice and warnings: have your pitch ready, don't waste their time, don't be offended if people are brusque – it's just the NY way.

Publishers Lunch, a US email newsletter that summarises book deals and other industry gossip, fleshed out the picture of publishing in the US even more. I scoured the weekly deal reports for information about book projects, personnel and publishing companies that might be relevant to my Beatrice Davis project. When I finally started to approach US editors by email, I was occasionally able to show that I was familiar with some of their recent books. I read *Publishers Lunch* for almost a year before I left for NYC. It was time consuming but I wanted to leave no stone unturned. What if there were some unique project and I had the opportunity to talk with its editor? What if some publisher were breaking ground in a particular area?

Publishers Lunch was also a great introduction to the hype of US publishing. The deal report summarises books in about 20 words – an extremely useful skill – and talks about five- and six-figure advances for authors and other deals – foreign, film and audio rights. Indeed, reports of huge advances and industry gossip about damning reviews or 'shabby chic' catalogues seem to be part of the 'buzz' that surrounds attention-getting books and publishing personalities.

I had no knowledge of US publishing, apart from US-originated books I saw in Australia (which are often not published by the same publisher here), and knew no one in New York publishing, so I relied on colleagues and Australian supporters of the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship to point me in the right direction and to make crucial introductions for me. I really can't thank those people enough. I usually followed up introductions with an email that briefly described the fellowship, my project and my background, and asked whether that person would have time to meet with me and whether they knew of other people who may be able to offer their insights into my area of research.

Email was a great way of setting up these interviews. Those who did not wish to reply didn't – I didn't have to extricate myself from an embarrassing unwanted phone approach. In May 2003, during the Sydney Writers Festival at a party hosted by the Australia Council, I met Tim Bent, then a senior editor at St Martin's Press, and Catherine Drayton, an Australian agent who works in NYC. Both Tim and Catherine were participants in the Australia Council's Visiting International Publishers (VIP) program, and I can't stress enough how fortunate I was to meet them before I arrived in New York. I worked in-house with Tim at St Martin's. Catherine was able to tell me frankly and knowledgeably about the difficulties of selling Australian writing in the USA. Other NYC editors who had visited Australia as part of the VIP program (Will Schwalbe at Hyperion, Wendy Wolf at Viking) were helpful and approachable.

Perhaps I would have had a clearer notion of how to structure the fellowship if there were a particular publishing house or editor I wanted to work with. Other fellows had spent a majority of their time in-house with one or two publishers but sometimes the in-house placements became problematic with corporate reshuffles or if crucial members of staff left. Some of the previous fellows had described a situation in which their host publisher didn't quite know what to do with them. I decided to try to spend a couple of weeks in-house with a few different publishers and allow myself time to meet as many editors as I could, as well as agents, publicists, marketing people and some authors.

Requesting a two- or three-week (let alone ten- or 12-week) placement with an editor I had never met and who had no knowledge of me or my background seemed akin to asking a complete stranger whether I could come and stay with them. Before I left Australia I did ask a couple of editors, including Will Schwalbe at Hyperion (who I knew has an interest in South-East Asia) and Tim Bent, whether I would be able to spend some time in-house. I didn't press them for a firm reply because I, possibly like them, wanted to be sure they were simpatico, to talk with them first before committing precious time to one publisher. (The freelance mentality has become deeply ingrained on my psyche!)

So, on 15 August, I boarded my Qantas flight for New York City with neither a placement with a publisher nor long-term accommodation. It wasn't ideal but I'd been so worried about the whole thing I just couldn't sustain any more anxiety. I couldn't commit the vast sums required to rent an apartment in Manhattan without first seeing the accommodation. Agents' descriptions and internet pictures just weren't enough. An editor friend had given me the contact details for a bed and breakfast on the Upper West Side and I'd booked a week's accommodation there. Funds and exchange rates being as they were, I couldn't afford to spend a week or two in a New York hotel – that would have blown half the accommodation budget. Not being sure how long it would take me to set up my email stateside, in my diary I had written the names and telephone numbers of a dozen or more publishing people on the days they returned from their summer vacation, or noting when they were leaving for their vacation. These were the people who had replied to my emails and were happy for me to call them.

My arrival in NYC was delayed by the big blackout, the 'power outage' as they call it. I spent a couple of days recovering from jetlag in Los Angeles and I was able to visit the Getty Center, which is truly a marvel and can be seen from the freeway on approach. Before I knew that it was the Getty Center and our destination I had noticed an imposing building, fortress like and dominating its site, and was trying to work out whether I liked it or not. The complex is an amazing piece of architecture and landscaping, perhaps, like the USA itself, more sympathetic when you are in it than when you see it from afar. It's finished with a sumptuous attention to detail (travertine imported from Italy, a monorail ride from the car park, complimentary umbrellas for the sun and free chilled drinking water). There were several free exhibitions, more than we could take in in a day, in beautiful exhibition halls with verandahs and walkways that looked out over LA and the center's gardens. The place was busy, people seemed to have dressed up to go there, and it was an impressive example of America's tremendous wealth put to philanthropic use.

New York, not just like I pictured it

It was hot when I arrived in Manhattan and the garbage was piled high on the streets, a residue, I think, of the power outage. The piles of rubbish had a particular North American smell, which I remembered from my years at school in Canada. I'm not sure how to describe the difference – maybe Sydney garbage is affected more by the humidity, maybe the smell of Sydney garbage is more subtropical. Still, NYC garbage didn't smell any better than Sydney garbage, or any more, or less. It was the middle of August; the days were bright and hot and there was very little of what I would call air.

I spent the first couple of weeks finding an apartment and getting networked with mobile phone and internet access, as well as making phone contact with and meeting publishing people. Through an agency called Furnished Quarters, which specialises in short-term lets for the corporate market, I found a pleasant one-bedroom apartment with a terrace on the Upper West Side, very convenient to the 72nd Street subway and some great food shops: Fairway (for vegetables and supermarket goods), Citarella (for fish and prepared quiches and desserts) and Zabars (for bread, tea, deli goods). The terrace was a great luxury – it meant I had doors that actually opened not just an unopenable window fitted with an air-conditioning unit. I looked out through trees to the terraces of other brownstones, converted to one-bedroom and studio apartments. The apartment was well appointed (not with other people's dusty old clothes, which was the case in one of the places I looked at) – I didn't even need to buy washing-up liquid – and, at an exchange rate of the Aussie dollar being about US 65c, I calculated it would absorb just over 40 per cent of the Beatrice funds. It is a great luxury not to have to sleep in your living room in Manhattan.

The cheapest deal on a prepaid mobile telephone (I couldn't go on a 'plan' because I had no US credit identity) came my way in a shady shop downtown on Nassau Street. While I was buying the telephone a couple of young guys came in with garbage bags full of DVDs and video games to sell. The shop owner said he would take the goods if they were brand new, unused, and the seals weren't broken. After the teenagers had gone I said I hoped that my new cell phone hadn't come from a similar source, and the shop owner assured me that the DVDs were legitimately obtained – they'd got them through 'special offers'.

I didn't know it but it was the day the UN compound in Iraq was bombed and Sergio Vieira de Mello, head of the UN mission in Iraq, along with many others, was killed. On my way back to the subway I walked past City Hall, past the uniformed security officers with their dogs and the very SWAT-team-looking police (police are allowed to wear cargo pants in NYC now). It was the first time I had seen this undercurrent of hysteria, which I had expected to be much more prevalent. In the Fulton Street subway the driving bass guitar of a busker was overlaid with the sounds of the trains coming and going while the platform filled and emptied of people. The scene and the rhythm seemed to epitomise the restless energy of New York. Generally, New Yorkers were laidback and courteous and I was told that, since September 11, 2001, people took more interest in their fellows.

Connecting myself to the internet through one of America Online's free trials took me on another journey through a telephone labyrinth of special offers. AOL call centre workers must be trained to upsell or onsell or whatever selling another product, offering another free trial, is called. After having completed the necessary transaction and before I could say 'no, stop!' I'd be funnelled down another part of the network to another person on the other end of the line who, I believed, might have sold me their grandmother with the same genuine-sounding enthusiasm. What was even weirder was my passive complicity in all this. I hung on the telephone just to see what they would offer me next.

I was always extremely pleased when people replied to my introductory email and the tone of their communication was usually friendly and businesslike. New York is a working town – it's a breeze to navigate and the public transport system, on the whole, works. You can walk faster than the bus moves across town, but it was hot when I arrived and the buses are air conditioned, and also a good place for

checking out people. Of course, the subway is better for longer trips but you don't get to see the facades of all those buildings when you're underground.

The grid system allowed me to find addresses easily and I even usually knew which way to turn when I emerged from a subway station. New York was built to facilitate traffic and commerce. I saw one 19th-century plan in which Central Park didn't exist – the whole island of Manhattan was a cage of east–west streets and north–south avenues. While its design meant I could get to meetings all over town without too much fluster, I did get homesick for Sydney amid all that efficiency. I missed the space; the light; the sandstone; the meandering vistas of waterfront; places to sit; small, surprising public parks. In midtown NYC public spaces might bear a sign 'This is public space'. I'm sure the good people of Manhattan are grateful to Sony or Microsoft or Donald Trump for giving them a portion of precious New York in which to eat their lunch. Even the trees in New York City are controlled; I never saw one of the wide pavements buckled by tree roots. The dogs walk happily on their leads, pleased, no doubt, to be out of their air-conditioned apartments. They were so well behaved I thought they must have been on Prozac, or bred especially for New York conditions.

A New York state of mind

One of the biggest contrasts between NY publishing and Sydney publishing was the prime location of NY editorial offices, within easy reach of public transport right in the middle of Manhattan. The Simon & Schuster skyscraper squares off against the McGraw Hill Building on the other side of Avenue of the Americas. Hyperion, a Disney company, is part of the ABC complex on the Upper West Side at 66th Street, close to the Lincoln Center. St Martin's is in the historic Flat Iron Building, making the most of the triangular corner formed by the intersection of 5th Avenue and the refreshingly uncontained-by-the-grid Broadway. Scout Jane Starr's offices are in the thick of midtown on Madison Avenue, and just a few blocks west is the brand-new, purpose-built Random House building. So many people asked me what it was like inside, and Liz Kurnetz kindly gave me a tour of the upper floors – views north over Central Park, and west over the Hudson, sumptuous, streamlined wood panelling and fittings. In the foyer books published by Random and the other companies that are now part of the Random House group are displayed in glass cases – a history of publishing to contemplate while you go through the security procedures that are part of entry to most buildings.

Such central locations in such prestigious buildings gave me the impression that book publishing in NYC is a viable industry, even a very profitable business, part of the life blood of the city, part of what makes Manhattan the 'island at the centre of the world', the nerve centre of US intellectual life. Nevertheless, New York is not the biggest market for books in the US. That is Los Angeles, followed by Washington DC, with New York number three. Tim Bent explained to me that most of the publishing companies are subsidiaries of huge entertainment corporations, hence the prime real estate. Tim said that, despite appearances, publishing is a marginal business.

Hardbacks and paperbacks

US books are published in hardcover first, with very few exceptions. Publishing in hardcover is justified on a number of fronts: only hardcovers get serious reviews; institutions such as libraries will buy only hardcovers; certain book buyers want hardcovers; and the profits on hardcovers are better for the publisher. As Judith Curr, publisher at Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, explained, the hardcover builds the profile for the paperback. One editor told me that one of her colleagues described hardcover publishing as 'research and development'. Some genres sell only in hardcover. Martha Levin, of the Free Press, another division of Simon & Schuster, told me that biography doesn't sell in paperback. On the other hand, I heard elsewhere that titles directed at a younger audience – teenagers and 20-somethings – are more likely to be published as paperback originals so they are affordable.

Some books are published in different formats simultaneously. In August the *Special Illustrated Collector's Edition of Seabiscuit* by Laura Hillenbrand was hovering around number six on the *New York Times* bestseller list. By 21 September the \$15.95 hardback and \$7.99 paperback were at number one. The book, about a Depression-era racehorse, benefited from the success of the film. With tough economic times, people loved the story of the little horse that could.

Publishers try to reach a different audience with the release of the paperback, usually a year after the hardcover. They repackage the book, sometimes even re-title it. Kate Darnton at Public Affairs showed me how the paperback edition of Joan Burbick's *Rodeo Queens and the American Dream* was designed to emphasise its popular culture aspect rather than its historical qualities. The design was intended to appeal to buyers at Walmart – one of the supermarket chains that has become an important player in the book business.

The New York Times

Despite the economic downturn, and bleak news about low sales, books seem to have tremendous prominence. The walls of the apartments I peeked into (shameless, I know, but they do live without curtains in NYC) were lined with books. People read hardcovers on public transport. Several times on the subway on the way to work I saw people reading manuscripts. There are daily book reviews in the *New York Times* and every Saturday the *New York Times Book Review* publishes long reviews (about 1,500 words) of about 14 non-fiction titles and about six fiction. The fiction reviews can be very tough: it's either read it, or don't read it for fiction, according to Tim Bent. He thought asking people to part with \$25 for a first novel was asking for a leap of faith. Non-fiction reviews allow more scope for argument and analysis: the book covers this subject well but leaves out such and such. People are more likely to buy it if they're interested in the subject.

In addition to the long reviews in the *NYT Book Review* there are about eight short (less than 100 words) reviews of 'New & Noteworthy Paperbacks' and short summaries of about nine recently reviewed books of particular interest. Needless to say, the advertising in the *NYT Book Review* is all for books, though rarely are the books advertised the books reviewed. Judith Curr was matter of fact about the books on her list that would not be reviewed in the *New York Times*. 'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'They'll sell anyway.'

To cap it off, there are the famed *NYT* bestseller lists, compiled from reorders from a selection of 4,000 retailers and wholesalers nationally. Other newspapers' figures are not national, I was told. Of course, many books that sell extremely well, for example religious books, do not sell through the retailers included in the selection, so they never appear on the *NYT* lists.

Tim Bent explained that the fiction bestseller list tends to be more volatile than the non-fiction. According to Tim, some books are no longer books; they become what he calls 'phenomena', for example Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which on 24 August was number one and had been on the bestseller list for 21 weeks; *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold, which had been in the list for 59 weeks; and the Harry Potter books. With the exception of *The Lovely Bones* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, all the books on the fiction bestseller list on 24 August were genre fiction – thrillers, crime, chicklit, fantasy. The non-fiction list tends to be more stable, though some non-fiction titles become phenomena: *Living History* by Hillary Clinton (which has been on the list for nine weeks) and Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (14 weeks on the list). *Good to Great* by Jim Collins (about why some companies thrive and others do not) had been on the list for 28 weeks.

Savvy publishers do very complicated maths to ensure their books are reordered by the wholesalers so they hit the *Times* bestseller lists because the lists are an important part of a book's promotion. In the corridors of publishing houses hang framed copies of the *NYT* lists with relevant books highlighted. In Manhattan's cavernous Barnes & Noble stores books that have appeared on the *NYT* list get a special sticker and authors are subsequently described as '*NYT* best-selling authors'. Cutting through the hype to the real sales or success of a book is another story.

Barnes & Noble and readings

Books on the tables at the front of the uptown Fifth Avenue Barnes & Noble store are arranged under creative headings: 'Local Favourites' (mostly US or NY history); 'Beach Reads' includes *Madame Bovary* and *The Grapes of Wrath*; and 'Humorous, Helpful, Odd & Eclectic' has a fitting range of books. Another table 'At the Races' was no doubt devised to cash in on the success of *Seabiscuit* – the movie and the books. The shelves in another part of the store group 'Fiction & Literature' together. I wonder whether this evades category questions or raises them.

At the downtown B&N on Fifth Avenue there was a window especially for women. The 18 books displayed on pale pink satin and draped in a pale pink feather boa included Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez's *The Dirty Girls Social Club* and Candace Bushnell's *Trading Up* as well as Australian Anna Johnson's *Three Black Skirts*. The display featured background paper with funky 1950s-style illustrations of slippers, cosmetics, tea cups,

coffee mugs and a book with glasses on it. I read debates about whether chicklit is dead ('once it's been named, it's over' vs 'wouldn't there be a reading public interested in Bridget Jones's baby?').

At the B&N on Union Square I fought the front-of-shop distractions and did some statistical analysis for my project. Upstairs there's a vast wall of shelves dedicated to history: 44 shelves for US history; five shelves for British; three for Chinese; one for Indian; and one for Asian, which ranges from Central Asia to Indonesia. *The White Headhunter* by Nigel Randell, a book about 19th-century contact between a European sailor and Pacific Islanders appears in the African history section, perhaps because there is no section for Pacific history. I'm interested in this book because it seems, from a US point of view, to be devoted to very obscure subject matter – a Scottish sailor who 'goes native' among headhunters in the Solomon Islands – and the author has used oral history in his research. The book is packaged to maximise its exotic and controversial appeal – with a picture of skulls and what appear to be chains on the jacket and a suggestive subtitle: 'The story of a 19th-century sailor who survived a South Seas heart of darkness'.

It was 11 September, anniversary of the World Trade Center attack, and I was there to attend a talk by Ric Burns (brother of the well-known TV documentary maker Ken Burns) and James Sanders on the updated edition of their *Illustrated History of New York*. This book, laden with photographs and available for 'you couldn't make it for that' prices in both hard- and paperback, had been reissued with an epilogue called 'The Center of the World' subsequent to the World Trade Center bombings. The introduction to the book is peppered with the superlatives (like 'the greatest', 'the most amazing', 'the longest', 'the highest') that I found to be one of the most irritating aspects of cultural commentary in the US.

Nevertheless, the discussion that evening was informed and intelligent. Questions from the audience were conscious of the 'imperial arrogance of New York' displayed in buildings such as the twin towers, and Burns and Sanders described eloquently how the two-hour demise of the World Trade Center after the bombing was a horrific poem that made the connections that had always been there between the local story (Rockefeller wanting to open up lower Manhattan) and global capital. Their explanation showed how the World Trade Center was constructed and destroyed on the cusp of two ways of looking at the world – an American view and a non-American view.

There was seating for about 200 people (and this was just one small section of the store) and the seats were full. Audience members could browse through copies of the book during the talk and after the discussion (the readings/discussions I attended ran strictly to time) a queue of about 20 people formed, some holding three copies of the book to be signed. They would pay for them later, on their way out, on the ground (or, in American, first) floor. No sooner had Burns and Sanders descended the escalators after their reading and signing than B&N employees started to fill the display stands with Chuck Palahniuk's latest offering, *Diary*, in readiness for the next day's event.

Chuck P's readings were notorious that week – there'd been an article in *Publishers Weekly* and in a meeting at Doubleday Broadway I'd heard how when he read some audience members fainted and one person vomited. He appealed to a very specific audience. When the question went around the meeting 'Were the fainters planted?' one of the editors attested to the revolting, difficult, controversial nature of one of Chuck P's stories. It didn't appear in *Diary*, but it would appear in a forthcoming fiction collection. Despite or, more likely, because of the controversy, the readings were very successful. According to the Doubleday editor, at Fairway, Kansas, 700 people attended and 250 copies of *Diary* were sold. Obviously such readings were well regarded by publishers.

I gave Chuck P a miss but I did attend a couple of other B&N meet-the-author talks and, despite what Tim Bent told me about there being so many cultural activities in NYC it was hard to get people to attend literary events, to my eye these were both well attended. There were about 80 people to see David von Drehle, a *Washington Post* journalist, talk about his book, *Triangle: the Fire that Changed America*, at the B&N on the Upper West Side. The fire, in a garment factory in Greenwich Village, was the worst NYC disaster

before the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center attack. One hundred and forty-six garment workers, many of them young immigrant women, were killed. Drehle's wasn't the first book about the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, and he was a native of Denver, Colorado – it wasn't his local history.

He began by taking the audience into the factory, describing the blocked exits in terms of the room we were sitting in, and then, in the hour available, made the links between immigration, the garment industry (still, I think, New York City's major industry), workplace safety, workers' rights, insurance scams and women's fashion. Audience members were extremely knowledgeable about fires, labour reforms and the lawyers involved in the subsequent court case. They were there because they were interested in the subject, not because the author was especially well known. Still, the presentation was eminently watchable, copies of the book were available to browse and my interest in the subject of NYC labour conditions was sparked.

A few weeks later at the B&N on the Upper East Side I went to hear Caroline Alexander talk about her latest book, *The Bounty: the True Story of the Mutiny on the Bounty*. Considering the well-known and seemingly unassailable US obsession with the US, I'd been surprised to see the media interest in a book about an 18th-century Pacific event. Alexander's *Bounty* featured on the front of the *NYT Book Review* and parts of it were serialised in *The New Yorker*. Wendy Wolf, *The Bounty*'s editor at Viking, worked closely with Alexander to ensure that the *New Yorker* serialisation built the audience for the book rather than telling the whole story. It focused on the voyage of the *Pandora*, sent out to pick up the *Bounty* mutineers and wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef.

When I raised my question about US interest in a historical British maritime incident, Wendy pointed out that it was the most famous mutiny in history, and I suppose two Hollywood movies didn't hurt, either. Seafaring stories sell, Wendy told me, look at Patrick O'Brian. And in the case of the *Bounty*, everyone has an opinion.

The author of a book about Shackleton, Alexander's interest in the *Bounty* was piqued by Bligh's 3,000-mile voyage in the *Bounty*'s launch from Tahiti to Kupang. Her book aims to show that Fletcher Christian suffered a breakdown and that Bligh, who has suffered so much bad press, was not an unreasonable captain. In response to a question from the floor, Alexander admitted that she hadn't been to Pitcairn or Norfolk islands to interview Fletcher Christian's descendants. Curiously, in February 2004 I saw the Australian paperback edition of this book at Dymocks in George Street, Sydney, in the 'Australian non-fiction' section.

At Alexander's talk I started to recognise some of the audience members from previous meet-the-author events – slightly eccentric-looking males in their forties, perhaps lonely, serious and interested in the subject matter of these books rather than the author. Of course, there were B&N readings in New York while I was there for which the drawcard was the author's celebrity: Madonna dressed like her impression of a writer, with a knitted vest, to sign copies of her children's book *The English Roses*. And though I wasn't able to attend, I heard there were plenty of people queuing for Donna Summer to sign their copy of her autobiography.

Print journalism, reviews and publicity

I was fascinated by the print journalism in NYC. The writing in the *New York Times* seemed to cut straight to the chase in a conversational but not over-familiar way, while still keeping the big picture firmly in view. I read a few newspaper articles about Australian subjects – the death of the last Anzac, allegations of biased reporting on the ABC about the war in Iraq and Simone Young's moving from the Australian Opera to Germany. All of them gave ample background to the news event, and the article about the Anzac quoted Australian vernacular speech in what seemed to me an affectionate way.

On a world level, an article called 'How to Talk about Israel' by Ian Buruma in the *NYT Magazine* on 31 August 2003 gave an incisive overview of the relationship between the US and Israel (both perceived and actual) over the last 50 years. As its subtitle ('Is anti-Semitism behind much of the world's view that Israel

moves American foreign policy? Thoughts on a very loaded question’) suggests, it aimed to answer questions about US foreign policy and Israel that many people think but do not voice. It uncovered some history that has rarely been mentioned lately. On 7 September an article by Michael Ignatieff in the *NYT Magazine* asked ‘Why Are We in Iraq? (And Liberia? And Afghanistan?)’ Such articles ask big questions, the staple of serious non-fiction, and straddled issues of American national interest and world events. It seems to me that such robust, engaged and in-depth journalism is a wonderful seedbed for good books of serious non-fiction.

It’s hard to keep up with the print journalism in NYC. *The New Yorker*, published weekly, showcases new writing and reviews. Also weekly is *The Nation*, and monthly is *Harper’s Magazine* to name a couple. Let alone *Time Out*, *New York Magazine* and the publishing journals *Kirkus Review* and *Publishers Weekly*. Still, editors said that not all books get the review attention they deserve. The *New York Times* reviews 500 books a year, and there are 15,000 books published.

I heard different opinions about the impact of reviews on sales. Editors worked hard to ensure their books were reviewed and those with modest expectations believed that reviews can make a difference. Nevertheless, sometimes promising starts (starred reviews in *Kirkus Reviews*, selection in the B&N ‘Discover Great New Writers’ catalogue) didn’t result in the hoped-for sales. Often, Martha Levin of the Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, told me, reviews have no impact on sales. She told me that Simon & Schuster had four finalists in the total of ten (fiction and non-fiction) books in the 2003 National Book Awards but between them those four books hadn’t sold 50,000 copies. Juri Jurjevics, of the small publisher Soho Press, told me there’d been massive returns after Christmas 2002 – over 70 per cent. At other times, according to Juri, the chains send about 46 per cent of books back and the independents send over 30 per cent.

Katie Wainwright, director of publicity at Hyperion, told me that bound galleys are sent out for reviews four months before a book is published. Late galleys miss out on reviews and if, say, the publicity for a book on horseracing misses the spring carnival season, sales suffer. With authors such as Steve Martin and Michael J Fox the role for the publicity department is to manage the demand for appearances. But it’s harder to create interest in small novels, and for some books – adventure, memoir – editors need to be able to pick the trends for two years time. Katie and the others who work in publicity needed to read local newspapers, they needed to know about local talk radio, and they needed to be persevering – if a book wasn’t reviewed in the book pages perhaps the religious affairs editor might be interested. They looked for opportunities to tie the book in with off-the-book-page news.

Lynne Goldberg, of Goldberg McDuffie Communications, Inc., was delighted an illustration from *Brundibar*, a children’s book by Maurice Sendak and Tony Kushner, appeared on the front page of the *NYT* Arts section (‘Dark Tones and Light, for 2 Friends: Sendak and Kushner Let Humor Get Through’ by Mel Gussso, *NYT*, 28 October 2003). This very article had been pointed out to me the day before in a cafe in a small town in upstate New York. We were having a coffee and sifting through the newspapers and a woman sat alone along the bench seat. Something had tickled her fancy and she had to share it with us. ‘I’ll think of this story whenever I need cheering up,’ she said.

As well as outlining the creative collaboration between Sendak and Kushner on *Brundibar*, the article talked about the filming of *Angels in America*, in which Sendak and Kushner play rabbis. During the filming of one scene a third rabbi kept on harassing Sendak ‘calling him Mr. Kiddie Book King and spritzing him in the face with water from a plastic bottle’. After the scene was finished Sendak reminded Kushner that he had promised he could talk to Meryl Streep, who was also playing in the movie. “‘You’ve just been talking to her for an hour and a half,” Mr. Kushner said, pointing to the third rabbi. If Ms. Streep could pass the Sendak test – and she did – she could play the rabbi in addition to her other roles.’ This is just the sort of off-the-book-page attention that Lynne, as a publicist, sought. Even for an illustrator as well known as Sendak and a writer as well known as Kushner, it could not be taken for granted.

Without a national newspaper, apart from *USA Today*, it's extremely important for books to be reviewed in the *New York Times*, as well as the newspapers in the major cities – LA, Chicago, Washington. Smaller newspapers syndicate reviews from the major papers, so the reach of the big newspapers is much broader than their home city.

Clive Priddle, an editor at Public Affairs who is English by birth and established Fourth Estate in the US, explained that, because US media tends to be local (apart from some television and public radio), books there can act on a scale that is not local. In England issues are talked about intensely and fast in the Sunday supplements of national newspapers. A topic is chewed up and spat out. Then everyone's attention is taken up by the next big story. In the US, Clive suggested, an issue can be ignored until the book comes out. And, without the intense going-over that occurs in Britain, books can come out of newspaper articles without being dated.

I was trying to put my finger on the differences between American journalism and Australian journalism and I hope I have not misinterpreted or simplified too drastically Clive's elucidation of what he saw as the differences between British and American journalism. It seems in the US journalists tend to prize factual accuracy, authority, universality; there's less obvious authorial presence. On the other hand, British journalists are more likely to excel at the colourful, intimate portrait; the subjective narrator is more likely to be part of the story. British journalists tend to be good on the close-up but it's rarer to extrapolate to the big philosophical point and they don't have the same degree of fact-checking back-up as US journalists. Of course, such generalisations have their limits, but I think the culture of print journalism greatly affects other writing, especially serious non-fiction and other genres I was thinking about for my project.

In the USA there is a vast pool of journalism. Different journalists excel at different kinds of articles, and in some newspapers each article is broken down into component parts. Some journalists specialise in writing the first paragraph or two of an article, which set the scene. In Australia there are, of course, fewer journalists and a more limited number of print outlets. Columnists seem to take up predictable positions, and many journalists and writers have to be jacks of all trades. Faced with the fact that the Australian economy is about five per cent of the USA's, our thriving culture of writing and publishing is impressive. But to see the breadth and the depth, the worldliness and the detail, the attention to background and the elegance of the print journalism in NYC made me think that competition in a big pond has some great results.

Platform

A recurring theme in my conversations with editors and publishers was the importance of an author's platform, their authority to write about a subject and their ability to gain publicity for their book. With more and more books competing on the shelves, an author needs to be able to grab media and public attention. From the discussion at some of the editorial meetings I went to, it became clear that a celebrity author or subject wasn't really enough to get a book idea the editorial backing it needed to make it to the next stage where sales, marketing and publicity staff were consulted about its viability. Sometimes an author's platform might come from their involvement with a subject – men who have had cancer, women in jail. Memoirists might gain platform by living in a caravan, being unconscious on aeroplanes or staging smutty readings. If their memories are outrageous enough TV might be interested in them. But there was caution about memoir – one editor said it's an oversubscribed category, another said it was hard to know who was the market for memoir.

Journalists can often reach a community more effectively than historians. They might come with their own platform in the form of their own TV or radio show, or a newspaper column. Much of the serious non-fiction I was interested in was written by journalists and I asked several of the editors I met about journalists writing books – whether it presents particular problems, whether they had any handy strategies for making sure that books don't end up as padded feature articles. It's logical, Gerry Howard, an editor at Doubleday said, that journalists should write books. He described to me how he had been working on a manuscript by an author

who was also a journalist. The book was very moving and Gerry wanted the author to start by putting the readers in the picture with his family situation, and to bring in the facts along the way, not all at once – as was this particular author’s journalistic tendency.

Regarding journalists writing books, and the relationship between news and books, Alice Mayhew at Simon & Schuster said that an editor still needs to take into account the long time frame and ask some common-sense questions. An author devotes years to a book. Will a book about current affairs add something to what’s in the paper? Has the author something that we don’t already know? And will there be any interest in it in two years time, when the book comes out?

Contrary to the buzz about platform, platform, platform, Gerry said that his decision to publish a book really depends on the writing. He pointed out Frank McCourt didn’t have a platform but that didn’t stop the success of *Angela’s Ashes*. Other editors did not feel the same way. No matter how fine the writing, one of them told me, an author needs a platform to help promote the book. Carol Fitzgerald, publisher of The Book Report, a web marketing site, pointed out all pundits dominating the *NYT* bestseller lists with political books: Al Franken, Michael Moore, Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter, columnists, celebrity journalists, cable TV stars. Australian-born agent Catherine Drayton spoke about the challenges of selling a narrative history book, set in the south of the US, by an Australian author, to US editors. She was asked whether the author was a professor at a southern university. No, that wasn’t the point, she explained, he didn’t need to be. The appeal of the book was in the writing.

Writers would be well served by expert advice from agents about editors receptive to writing – regardless of platform. Of course, platform is a bonus but it does not ensure success. Greer Hendricks at Atria was publishing Ralph Lauren’s niece’s memoir. Even though the author is wealthy and famous and she would not lack celebrity endorsements, she was hiring her own publicist to help promote the book. Greer told me she took on the book because of the subject matter and the writing – though I suppose it does become like a chicken and egg. Most of the editors I spoke with were willing to love good writing, whatever the author’s platform, though without a vision of how they could sell the book they were not in a position to acquire the manuscript. Fine writing needs an identifiable audience, and an acquiring editor needs to prove they can reach this audience.

Describing books for US audiences

Books about British history and subjects (Eric Hobsbawm; Patricia Highsmith; JMW Turner; Cunard, Brunel and transatlantic steamships; Frank Kermode; John Singer Sargent) were reviewed regularly in the *New York Times*, which made me wonder whether New Yorkers experience the kind of cultural cringe so familiar in Australia. Biographies of Winston Churchill continue to sell in the US, while I doubt a biography of Benjamin Franklin travels across the Atlantic in the other direction. One editor described it as ‘outmoded Anglophilia’. Another surmised that New York tends to look to Europe, while west coast cities might look across the Pacific.

Clive Priddle suggested it’s more straightforward to interest American audiences in subjects for which there exists a benign stereotype in the US (for example Tudor England and Churchill). Robert Archibald, director of public diplomacy, cultural relations, at the Australian Consulate told me that part of the public perception of Australia in the US is still coloured by Australian Tourist Commission Crocodile Dundee ads depicting Australia as a land of wide open spaces and adventurers. He said that Americans are sometimes surprised at Australian cultural production in the forms of dance and music.

The two writers whom most editors acknowledge have reached a US audience with their books on Australian subjects are Peter Carey and Robert Hughes (now American). I can’t help but wonder how much their well-deserved success in the US is dependent on them being there. Agent Catherine Drayton said that it was really important for Australian authors to visit their US publishers, talk to the sales staff, read from their work. New

York is that kind of place: you have to be there. To me it didn't seem as important for British writers to reside in New York. The Atlantic Ocean just doesn't seem to be the obstacle that the Pacific is.

To my question about how to interest US readers in subject matter not related to the US Clive said that it was only partly true that Americans weren't interested. You have to find a way to address an American audience. Many Australian books are local in their focus; many British publishers don't try to make the overtures. Catherine Drayton said it would be hard to sell a quiet urban Australian novel in the US because they already had their own.

Sara Bershtel at Metropolitan Books talked about the importance of keeping expectations realistic, knowing the readers you publish for. She described the 'odd experience of bestsellers' using Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* as an example. Bershtel had published 11 other books by Ehrenreich, but this one struck a chord and now there are 1 million copies in print. Ehrenreich went 'undercover' to work at low-paid jobs and see if she could survive. The book is a telling look at life for the working poor in the USA. Bershtel hadn't expected it to be a bestseller. With the sales force she was trying to paint a realistic picture regarding Ehrenreich's next book, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. Though it might sound sexy, the book is a collection of academic papers about domestic service.

Bershtel said you have to publish for current debates, you have to believe that you know about the world, but sometimes books are published before their time. Metropolitan was reissuing a book about the effects of American global policies by Chalmers Johnson called *Blowback: the Costs and Consequences of the American Empire* 'with a new introduction addressing the events of 9/11 and the war in Iraq'.

Many of the editors I met demonstrated the vital skill of being able to create interest with their description of a book, and the subtle art of placing words well to keep the emphasis where they want it. When I asked Alice Mayhew at Simon & Schuster about the nationalism in popular historian Stephen Ambrose's book about the railway link to the west coast *Nothing Like It in the World*, she politely said she wouldn't have used 'nationalism' because it had certain connotations. I didn't ask what these connotations were, but I perceived they were negative. Americans are interested in what America is all about, who they are, she said, and there was a huge reading public for American history. Walter Isaacson's biography of Benjamin Franklin was this summer's bestseller. According to Alice Mayhew, Stephen Ambrose was popular because he wrote about the people who worked on the railroad, the 'little people'. According to the author's introduction, in this book he re-evaluated his view on those who had made profits from the railroad and asked the question: How did they build it?

Clive Priddle at Public Affairs told me about one of his projects in progress – the story of three Dinka Sudanese boys who arrived in San Diego as refugees in 2002. The prospect of writing 70,000 words seemed daunting to three 19–20-year-old refugees whose first language is not English so Clive broke the book down into sections and suggested a dozen or so topics to write about – a 'sequential collage'. With the manuscript still being written, he didn't know how many copies of the book he would print.

Despite US President Bush and British PM Blair's both talking about addressing issues of Africa, there wasn't much interest in African refugees in the US, Clive said. Nevertheless, how the boys came to be refugees is a dramatic story and how they arrived in the US with no preconceptions about what the First World was like, 'latter-day Columbuses' according to Clive, is fascinating. They see the US in a new way and for American audiences the fact that the book is about US society through African eyes will help. He said that primarily it's a book about Africa and then about the US, and it needs to be good enough to stand up to reviews. It will lend itself well to question and answer feature interviews, too.

To some it may be stating the obvious, but I was learning something new: you can't publish into a vacuum. Several editors spoke of the need to print and distribute a minimum of 20,000 copies of a book – to get it in the stores in front of the public. They couldn't afford to do small print runs. There needed to be some

existing culture, some public knowledge, some terms, hooks, with which to describe a book before it could be published successfully. I must say that I had seen publishing in quite a different way – as the art of bringing new, unknown things to the public’s attention. But in New York editors confirmed my suspicions: you can’t create interest where there’s none – though, as a blind optimist and one who is interested in all sorts of obscure subjects, I think what one person describes as a situation of ‘no interest’ is always open to change. What successful books do is awaken dormant interest, or make apparently uninteresting subjects (the history of longitude or tulips, for instance) fascinating. What successful authors and editors demonstrate is the ability to ignite interest in a target audience with a persuasive description.

My placements

Jane Starr Literary Scouts, 3–18 September

I was put in touch with Jane by Patrick Gallagher at Allen & Unwin, and even before I arrived in New York she was friendly and perceptive about the difficulties of negotiating a strange city. She was the person who told me I needed to put 1 before the 212 area code when I was dialling Manhattan numbers. She made a computer available for me to check emails before I had successfully navigated the virtual corridors of America Online.

I had a very flexible arrangement with Jane. I had a desk and a computer, and Jane and her assistant Lenya made sure that I had manuscripts, publishers' catalogues and agents' lists to read. If I thought a manuscript looked interesting, I could ask Lenya to ask the agent or publisher for a copy. I wrote brief reports for Jane, and talked with her about the material I was reading. I was also free to attend meetings at Doubleday Broadway and Hyperion, and with editors at other houses. Jane organised for me to sit in on some of her meetings with rights directors and an agent.

Jane's role as a scout is to seek US literary talent for her foreign clients, which are publishing companies in a number of countries around the world – Australia (Allen & Unwin), Japan, Germany and the Netherlands to name a few. Scouts need to be aware of all that is being published – or even thought about – and they need to know if it will interest their client. An important aspect of the role is a thorough understanding of each client publisher's list.

Scouts are their clients' eyes and ears in the US publishing world. They provide information that gives their clients the edge in the negotiations for the rights to a book. They need to be able to match books to buyers, to bring the rights holders (agents or publishers) and the rights buyers (clients) together. To function effectively, scouts are under a lot of pressure to act quickly to put their clients in the picture and they also need to know what is important to the rights holder – the advance? the promotion? – so their client can, ideally, pre-empt any other deals. Numerous times in NYC I heard about the advantages of a pre-empt, the situation in which a book is bought by a publisher before it goes to auction, hence excluding competitive bids from other publishers.

Scouts compile reports for their clients on forthcoming titles that describe, as far as possible, what the book is about, how the author's previous books have sold, whether there is a lot of buzz, and who holds the rights for various territories. Sometimes the support material available for a book is very sketchy – agents don't always even make proposals available.

Like many other aspects of publishing, scouting is increasingly competitive and high-pressured work, especially in the weeks before the Frankfurt Book Fair when many foreign publishers come to New York to start buying. A scout's role might involve making sure their clients are comfortably accommodated in the Big Apple, filling them in on the family background and marriage networks of various high-profile NYC agents, or taking them on a tour of an author's stomping grounds in the South Bronx, as well as organising their diaries and shepherding them to meetings with publishing personnel all over Manhattan. Before Jane started scouting (first for another scout and now in her own business) she worked in rights for Doubleday.

Some of my big discoveries in NYC are probably common knowledge for in-house editors – especially the business side of editorial work: the acquisitions deals, the rights sales. Nevertheless, the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship gave me as a freelance editor and writer the valuable opportunity to observe the cut and thrust of publishing as business. My time in NYC impressed upon me how important rights sales are to the business of books. The sale of territorial, audio and paperback rights contribute considerably to the viability of a book and the profitability of a publishing company.

While in-house commissioning editors in Australia are no doubt dealing with rights sales on a day-to-day basis, as a freelance editor and writer I found the break-up of rights a fascinating area – especially as Australian publishers try to forge their own way, separate from British companies. Traditionally, in the USA, Australia and New Zealand is a small market, the rights to which were sold to British publishers. An independent publisher from such a small market has to convince US authors, agents and publishers to deal with it. Even if a company is part of a multinational conglomerate, it doesn't mean that foreign rights automatically go to the same publisher. For example, Simon & Schuster US gives Simon & Schuster UK the first look at the rights (Australia is just part of the UK in this relationship), but Simon & Schuster UK must still pay for the rights.

Of course, the big traditional publishing powers want to hang on to their rights. Wendy Weil, an agent, told me that splitting off Australian rights hampered the sale of a book to British publishers. An editor told me that for British books, it was always better to get North American rather than just US rights. One editor likened splitting Canadian and US rights to breaking off Scottish and English rights. Perhaps if Australian publishers were in the same position as US or British publishers they'd be just as protective of these subsidiary rights.

I had a great time sitting in Jane's office, trying to follow as much of the gossip as I could, while reading through agents' lists, publishers' catalogues, and proposals and manuscripts. The reading I did there differed in a remarkable and refreshing way from the reading I do as a freelance editor. Instead of asking myself how I was going to make this manuscript work (which is what I do as an editor), I could skip through the pages to see whether a manuscript did work. What was the author trying to do? Were they successful? Who was the audience? Would it appeal internationally? Of course, I was able to read much more quickly and I had the impression, or delusion, that I could gain an overview of what was being published.

Jane taught me some useful Yiddish words that I heard in later meetings. *Michigass* (mess), for example – in an editorial meeting talking about a particularly difficult author: 'We don't want that *michigass* again.' And *schlepp* (carry): 'I can't *schlepp* that book all the way back to Australia.'

Doubleday Broadway, 10 and 11 September

If I ever thought the editorial process was an intimate and private one, and the relationship between author and publisher was personal and confidential, the editorial and positioning meetings I attended in NYC disabused me of such notions. I was attending the meetings more for the general tenor of discussion than to learn specifics of how large an advance was being offered, how many copies of a book were being printed, or how many had been ordered by retailers. I knew so little of the market the numbers meant nothing to me, and these discussions are confidential.

Still, I did learn that the announced print run is usually a code; the actual print run may be higher or lower. Publishers use announced print runs as part of the marketing campaign for a book, just as reports of high advances have become part of a book's promotion. The advances and the print runs are guides to the publishers' confidence in a particular title.

I attended meetings at Doubleday Broadway, divisions of Random House, thanks to the hospitality of editor-in-chief Bill Thomas. Both the Doubleday and the Broadway editorial meetings started with a summary of the *New York Times* bestsellers. Bill had told me that these two divisions were doing very well, but he couldn't expect it to last. Doubleday books were at number one (*The Da Vinci Code*), number seven (*The Devil Wears Prada*), number nine (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*) and number ten (*Diary*) on the fiction list. Then there was a recap of rights sales. Then a discussion of books bought, missed or turned down.

New proposals were discussed in terms of published books in the same genre (eg 'the last natural disaster book to work') and whether they would be more appropriate for another publisher's list. At all the editorial

meetings I attended the match of the book to the publishing company was an important factor in the decision to publish or not. A couple of the editors floated ideas about books they would like to do. Editors described various projects that appealed to them to the 20 or so other people at the meeting. If they were very enthusiastic Bill asked to read a few chapters, and other editors volunteered to read it too.

One of the projects they discussed was a novel, already published in Canada. Bill asked where it was set. The editor backing it said the author was American but now lives in Canada so it was not ‘impenetrably Canadian’. A few days later, Jane Starr let me sit in on a meeting with Denise Bukowski, an agent who is American but now lives in Canada. Unfortunately Denise and Jane’s meeting was far too focused and fast moving for me to be able to ask about what ‘impenetrably Canadian’ might mean.

In one-on-one meetings when NY editors described to me their latest projects they were impressive and eloquent. Sometimes their enthusiasm was for a book that was not to my taste, but they always convinced me that it was to some readers’ taste. Bill Thomas told me how important it is for an editor to be passionate, not cynical, and how crucial it is to be able to talk about a book easily. He said that if an editor can’t describe a book succinctly, they’re going to have trouble selling it. But the editorial meetings allowed space for exploration, indecision. People bandied around ideas, sought guidance, gave synopses of not very impressive-sounding plots. More experienced editors, with more precedents to draw on, gave valuable input into a project’s potential and avenues of further research. These meetings were a great place to see the non-science of publishing, the hit and miss nature of the business. ‘It’s a crapshoot,’ more than one editor told me.

The positioning or marketing meeting had double the cast of the editorial meeting – about 45 people. It opened with editors giving well-prepared presentations on various projects. People brainstormed about ways to get extra publicity for the book: approach Bill Bryson for a quote, try for *Spike TV*, *The Man Show* and men’s magazines for publicity for a book about being a man’s man.

Then the publicity team gave their report: author tours and press items. There were accounts of the number of books that had gone out and sales of previous books in that genre. Keeping up with the discussion relied on having a good knowledge of the company’s big books and authors, and on more than a passing knowledge of American media – for example, *The Today Show*, Amazon online debates and the Borders holiday catalogue.

Some important business didn’t get done in meetings but in the corridors in the spaces around meetings. There was an auction underway and one of the editors was checking with Bill and Bill’s boss about what her next move should be. The sums they were bandying about were those six-figure ones you read about.

Hyperion, 22–26 September

Hyperion, part of the Disney group, which is part of the Time Warner Group, is a relatively small publisher by US standards – it employs about 50 people, six of whom are editors and ten of whom are in publicity, and publishes about 100 books a year. It’s also a new publisher – founded about 11 years ago. Several different people at Hyperion from Bob Miller, the president, to Katie Wainwright, the director of publicity, to Will Schwalbe, editor-in-chief, to Bill Strachan, executive editor, told me that, even though the Hyperion list is eclectic, with literary fiction, cooking, fitness, movitation and self-help, as well as serious non-fiction and history, like all publishers, they do best with books they can get publicity for.

For the most part I shared an office with a young man called Josh, who, I think, was involved in keeping information technology records about expenses. He had previously been working in the licensing department of Disney and book publishing seemed to him to be quite a contrast to the lucrative business of Disney licensing. I was sitting at the desk of Lesley Wells, an editor who worked from home four days a week. On the day Lesley was in the office, I moved to another desk.

I attended a round of meetings at Hyperion (there was one almost every day of the week) for the week before I went in-house so I had some background when I did go in-house. During my week there I read some manuscripts and for editor Gretchen Young I copyedited parts of *American Idol* judge Randy Jackson's book *What's Up, Dawg?* and the introduction to a book about sports television station ESPN. Again, I was free to come and go as I pleased (which was much easier once I'd remembered the code to get back into the Hyperion offices) so I could attend appointments outside of Hyperion.

Around 1 pm on my first day there was an announcement through the PA system that 'an unidentified powdery substance has been found in a bin in the mailroom. We do not feel there is any particular cause for alarm and normal precautionary procedures have been taken.' Staff were told to exit the building via a different route. Around 4.30 pm there was an update: 'Preliminary examination shows no cause for concern and the Department of Health is conducting further tests.' The mailroom was the only area being examined. Hyperion is just one part of a media conglomerate and a television station, ABC, shared the premises. Josh told me that they might be a target. I wasn't sure anymore how much I liked this central location for publishing.

At Hyperion I was asked to read a couple of manuscripts of novels (one was a spy thriller and the other a cosy tale of four women in a small town, with recipes) and give my opinion. Regardless of the quality of the writing in these manuscripts, each one was aimed at a specific and very different market. As an editor I was thinking of all the suggestions I would give the author, which episodes were superfluous, which needed work, how characters were unbelievable. But for a considerate rejection letter, I learned, it's better just to demonstrate that you've read the book and to advise the author that in the tough climate, Hyperion just couldn't take it on.

Randy Jackson's *What's Up Dawg?* is a colloquially written guide for would-be superstars in the music business. Did they have what it takes for success in the entertainment industry? What did they have to do to develop their talent? I had fun trying to work within Randy's vernacular, and there certainly was scope to reorganise passages and sections so the discussion flowed and was logical. I drafted a very rough blurb.

I also attended meetings. The editorial meeting began with a round up of 'bids, buys and misses'. It was an important forum for the staff to keep up to date with news and people and there was some great gossip about other publishing companies' buys and celebrities holed up in luxury hotels holding meetings and fishing for publishers with their ideas for their autobiography. Editors discussed various proposals in the same open-ended, non-convinced way I'd heard at Doubleday Broadway and everyone was encouraged to bring ideas to the meeting.

Proposals were discussed in terms of genre, 'a prequel to such and such', and the amount of editorial work they might need. Will, as editor-in-chief, was forthcoming with information about precedents 'such and such, the definitive account of that episode, sold 500,000 copies'. Will and other editors gave advice, and suggested caution in some areas: the timing mightn't be right; check the author of a celebrity biography's publicity credentials – find out more from the agent about the author's previous sales and other publishers' bids; can a formerly successful author be 'picked up and dusted off' to go out there again?

Editors had to be resilient and the intelligence that went into editorial decisions was eclectic and wide-ranging. Many of their ideas didn't make it past this discussion: books about political campaigns might be subsumed by the news; fashion–humour books for the gay market are difficult – that audience tends to just want to look at the pictures and they don't read from front to back; a proposal from authors wanting to do a book to tie in with a television program might not be the book Hyperion wants to do about the program.

The way proposals were turned down was sensitive. 'We're always considering a book about such and such a television program and we'll consider you ...' Rights were the sticking point for some projects – they would need the Spanish-language rights for a biography of a Cuban musician but those had already been

sold. All members of staff offered to read chapters or gave their opinions if they had read manuscripts. Those with promise might make it to the acquisitions meeting the following week.

The acquisitions meeting was a forum in which numbers were crunched and decisions were made. There, Bob Miller, president, Ellen Archer, vice president and publisher, Will Schwalbe, editor-in-chief, Jane Comins, director of marketing, Katie Wainwright, director of publicity, and Jill Sansone, director of sub-rights, spoke frankly with the editor backing the project. Of the five projects up for discussion, three resulted in a 'keep thinking/start anew' response. Of the two that were still on the burner, Bob suggested the editor talk to the agent about what they were looking for (I presume as far as the advance went) and how the author's other books sold. The discussion about the other title revolved around what advance they might offer (taking into account the cost of production, how the author's previous book sold) and the author's possible appearance on *Oprah*. Again, my vocabulary expanded when Bob talked about finding ways to 'incentivize' an author to behave and perform.

St Martin's Press, 29 September – 10 October

St Martin's Press publishes about 800 titles a year and employs 18 senior editors. It is a Holtzbrinck company, owned by a German media family, and part of the same stable as Palgrave Macmillan and Henry Holt. I spent two weeks working with Tim Bent, senior editor, and Julia Pastore, associate editor, in the beautiful Flat Iron Building at the corner of 23rd Street and Fifth Avenue. Tim and Julia had organised an office, telephone and computer for me. The wide view from the women's toilets on the 18th floor, west over the rooftop water towers towards the Hudson, was, to me, one of the most satisfying in Manhattan. More importantly, I attended staff and editorial meetings, and talked with other personnel there – Matthew Baldacci, director of marketing, Tom Dunne, publisher of Thomas Dunne books, and Matthew Shear, publisher of mass market and Griffin trade paperback and reference.

The weekly staff meetings at St Martin's, attended by around 23 people and chaired by editor-in-chief George Witte, were fairly informal events in which book ideas and general matters relating to day-to-day publishing life were discussed, for example, who is rewriting the editors' catalogue copy badly? Why does the warehouse no longer accept authors' credit cards when they telephone to buy books?

Rights were extremely important. The first week I attended an editorial meeting, publisher Sally Richardson gave an update on deals. A number of small deals, rights sold to book clubs, and to Britain, Australia and New Zealand, brought in over \$100,000. The following week the director of rights, just back from Italy, congratulated the editors on holding on to rights. She summarised what had been hot there. Then there was a round-up on publicity – one of Julia Pastore's books called *We Just Want to Live Here*, comprising letters between two teenage girls, one an Israeli and one a Palestinian, was scheduled to receive its two minutes of fame on the next day's *Today* show because its authors – Amal Rifa'i and Odelia Ainbinder – were to receive an award in Berlin. However, the next day's *Today* show was running late and didn't end up featuring the book. Julia was stoic about the vagaries of publicity. Still, a push on the *Today* show might have made the world of difference to such a book.

There was an update on Bookscan figures – one week Mitch Ablom was doing well, but Dr Phil (a nonsense *Oprah* regular) was beating him and the overall sales of *Atkins for Life* dwarfed both of them. You can guess SMP published *Atkins for Life*.

Like the other meetings I'd attended, there was a recap on buys and misses – the celebrity who had been fishing for a publisher the week I'd been at Hyperion had her book pre-empted for a 'high six figures' but no one was saying who the publisher was.

The discussion of the various book ideas at this meeting was, once again, wide ranging and detailed, and lasted for the whole morning. The editors talked about SMP's ability to sell a dance book outside of the book

trade – in dance schools or specialist stores; whether the author was easily publicised; format – hardcover, trade paperback?; price – is it a gift book?

I thought the conversation about a novel about a woman trying to get pregnant – ‘the biggest hot-button issue for women in their thirties’ – would have been valuable for the writer. Various editors made suggestions for this English novel whose Englishness was the subject of some debate. They were used to Bridget Jones and Alison Pearson, but for this book ‘you’ve gotta get a baby at the end’. It had been sold in several countries – how open would the author be to US editorial intervention? Predictably, publicity wanted some story about the author to help promote the book. But sometimes, the reverse was true. For some books the St Martin’s editors concluded it would be easy to get publicity but there was no audience for the book.

The next week the meeting ranged over books about the inside story of Metallica; an Australian memoir about a tough childhood (which, though it was supported by one editor, didn’t win the support of others, perhaps because the author’s childhood wasn’t quite tough enough, and there had been other, more compelling books in this genre); a young NY basketball player deciding whether to go to college or to play professional basketball; tennis nostalgia for the McEnroe era (nostalgia was big, I thought, novels about high-school sweethearts and school reunions kept coming up); diet; yoga; the diary of a 13-year-old girl in the Soviet Union in the 1930s recently discovered in a KGB archive; feminism (not a big issue the meeting decided); empowerment for activists; William Shakespeare; more yoga; exercise for women over 40; a Booker nominee novel; and the second instalment of a radio announcer’s memoir. (The research on the first instalment was interesting: according to the agent there were 60,000 copies in print; the SMP editor estimated there might be 30,000; the book had spent three weeks on the *NYT* bestseller list and according to Bookscan it had sold 16,000 copies.)

The afternoon editorial meeting was much smaller, attended by publisher Sally Richardson, editor-in-chief, George Witte, the directors of marketing, publicity and sales, and one editor at a time. The editor presented profit and loss projections for their book based on various print runs and retail prices. SMP tended to base their projections on an author’s previous sales and this, of course, affected the advance that was offered. Sometimes editors were requested to revise the figures. No matter how enthusiastic an editor might be about a book, they needed approval from senior staffers regarding the size of the advance. All the editors I spoke with talked with varying degrees of frustration and equanimity about the ones that got away. Even though an editor might believe in a book, that, of course, is just the first of many hurdles in getting it published well.

Outside of meetings I helped Tim take in on disk the freelance copyeditor’s corrections to the manuscript of a novel called *Green Mountain, White Cloud*. Its author, Francois Cheng, left China during the Cultural Revolution to live in Paris. Though Chinese is his first language, this novel, set in China during the Ming Dynasty, was written originally in French. Tim translated it from French, and the editor’s suggestions raised some interesting points about meaning, idiom and the flow of words for works in translation. Tim wanted a clean copy of the manuscript to send out for review and quotes. Though I read long-running and inconclusive debates in *Publishers Weekly* about whether a bad review kills a book, good reviews and endorsements of delicate fiction such as *Green Mountain, White Cloud* could make a difference.

Publishing works in translation poses challenges on several fronts: there is the expense and time of translating the manuscript and the question of the author’s approval of the translation. Then there is the issue of whether the author is able to promote the book in the US. Can they address English-speaking audiences fluently? And the eternal question, even if they are very well known at home, do they have a platform in the US?

I had my antennae out for the trickle of books that looked at or were set in places other than the USA and I noticed a couple of books about Asia. I surmise that perhaps there is some interest in China because of its growing economic might, even though there didn’t seem widespread interest in or acknowledgment of the USA’s increasing dependence on imports of manufactured goods from China. For Julia, at St Martin’s, I read

the manuscript of a novel set in present-day China, about a father ambitious for his son to find a better life in the USA. Migrant aspiration is a much told story in New York. Generational and cultural differences create humour and though the novel was well-constructed and I liked it, I thought it would be a difficult book to publish. As I had heard in so many meetings, 'I didn't love it enough'; I didn't see how it would stand out from other novels.

Tim had published a book by Amelie Nothomb called *The Character of Rain*, which was originally published in France. I had heard anecdotes about successful books dealing with the Pacific arena in the Second World War, and I wonder why there isn't more of a sense of shared history and publishing collaboration between the United States and Australia on this topic. But *The Character of Rain*, set in Japan, exhibited quite a different mood to the war memoirs and military histories. In the novel the aloofness of a traditional Japanese woman is explained partly by reference to the mass suicide of Japanese in Okinawa before the US occupation. I wondered whether this novel partly filled a gap in American understanding, a space perhaps created by guilt.

Tom Dunne has his own imprint at St Martin's. He publishes around 150 books a year, some bought from the UK. I asked him about some of his books in the SMP winter catalogue – how he expected them to go, who was the audience for them. I was delighted when Tom said I was asking him about the hard books. I thought with his experience and his expertise he would have realistic insights into what to expect of the 'hard' books, the books that don't obviously sell themselves, but might, with the right backing from a publisher, find their readership.

I wanted to talk with him about the books I thought the editors who needed massive (20,000 +) print runs could no longer publish. He described a family memoir by journalist Beth J Harpaz called *Finding Annie Farrell* as a good book, though, he said, there are plenty of journalists who write well. He bought in a biography of Anthony Burgess by Roger Lewis from Britain and used the British cover. He planned an academic mailing campaign for a biography of Nasser by Said K Aburish and expected the book would be bought by university libraries. He said it was hard to go wrong with a book about book collecting, *A Pound of Paper* by John Baxter. He expected a book called *Scurvy* by Canadian writer Stephen Brown to appeal to readers interested in trade and the age of sail. If it sold 3,500–6,000 copies that was fine. He said it was hard to commission history – you just have to wait.

Tom's view was that it was better to publish than not to publish. Put a lot of books on the table and minimise the risk. He pointed out that Rosamunde Pilcher wrote 11 books before *The Shell Seekers*. He told me a story about an old friend of his, writer Jincy Willet, whose collection of short stories *Jenny and the Jaws of Life* he had published in the late eighties. It sold 2,000 copies, earned out its advance and was well reviewed. When *Time Out* asked David Sedaris, popular comedy writer and author of *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, if he could bring one book back what would it be, he answered *Jenny and the Jaws of Life*. The collection was revived, selected for the Book of the Month Club, and reviewed in the *NYT* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Willett has just published a second book with Tom, a novel called *Winner of the National Book Award*. Tom believes that if a small book gets the reviews, it will go.

It seems to me that a book's success really depends on its publisher's expectations. If a huge advance is paid, of course the publisher's expectations are necessarily much higher, whereas if a book earns out a modest advance there is no subsequent embarrassment for author or publisher. It's the role of the publisher to make the correct estimations. But in New York, some powerful agents seem to be able to extract vast sums from editors. Some editors get carried away in auctions.

Jackets

At Hyperion jackets need to be ready three months before publication. At the jacket meeting cover designs for various forthcoming books were put through the wringer. Production editors and design staff were at this meeting, as well as Bob, Ellen, Will et al. Conscious that they needed to sell the books to the booksellers before they could reach the public, the covers were finetuned in great detail to appeal to their target market. For one, a serious non-fiction book critical of Bush's presidency called *The Exception to the Rulers* by Amy Goodman (host of a radio program called *Democracy Now* and known to me because she had been an eyewitness at the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre in East Timor), the upshot was to increase the edginess of the cover, to make the human figures look angrier, to make the type stand out on its own.

The subtitle was a matter of lengthy discussion – they wanted to get 'exposing' and 'oily' into it. The final subtitle was: *Exposing Oily Politicians, War Profiteers, and the Media That Love Them*. For serious non-fiction subtitles were very important vehicles to convey information about the book and arrest the roving eyes of readers. Subtitles were extensively discussed, every word weighed.

The US titles and subtitles I saw were devised to hone in on the book's target audience in a more specific way than Australian titles and subtitles sometimes do. One Australian history book being considered by a US editor while I was there did not have that crucial subtitle; the title of another book, about which I subsequently heard excellent reports, seemed too general and did not accurately describe the focus of the book, which immediately put off the US editor. Greer Hendricks at Atria told me that although Norma Khouri's original title for her book was *Forbidden Love*, which was the Australian title, she wanted a more serious title, something she considered less downmarket. In the US the book is called *Honor Lost*.

As I've pointed out, the Hyperion list is eclectic and other books at the jacket meeting had a totally different look: the cover of a literary novel made allusions to India with flowing script in metallic ink and embossing. The art director said they could buy out the girly, floral design for a chicklit novel. For a small-ish sum they could use the design on the hardback cover; for four times that amount they could use it in advertisements, and on note cards, wherever they liked. There were visions of coasters, caps and T-shirts spinning off the well-received design for Linda Greenlaw's *All Fishermen Are Liars*. Now all the author had to do was write the book!

I noticed a couple of striking differences between US jackets and Australian covers. To my eye American designers seem to use more boxes around their type. US editors consciously position their books – as in Australia, literary or upmarket fiction has a different look from commercial fiction. But I thought Australian jacket design has more parallels with English jacket design in the use of images (often full-bleed) and type (rarely boxed). At Carroll & Graf I could identify immediately an English cover that editor Tina Pohlman had thought was appropriate for the US edition of an Irish novel. The colours of the full-bleed, slightly out of focus image were muted. The type was not boxed. To my mind, in Australia a more literary, arty look is more popular across a wide range of titles.

Tim Bent bought *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts when he was in Australia in May 2003, but the New York St Martin's marketing department did not like the Australian title (too obscure, not descriptive or commercial enough) or the cover (too literary looking). Another book Tim bought was *Marching Powder* by Rusty Young. He wanted to re-jacket the book to make it look less literary, more sensational. He was planning to publish it as a paperback original so a young audience could afford to buy it. As the book was about cocaine, Tim thought there should be a picture of drugs on the cover.

The other obvious difference was the use of quotes on US jackets. One editor told me that gathering jacket quotes was her least favourite part of the job but it's a necessity – in some cases quotes are seen as more important than sales of previous books by the same author. US editors were surprised to receive books from Australian publishers that were not adorned with endorsements from well-known people. Descriptions of Australian books in some US publishers' catalogues look, by comparison, strangely naked without the

boldface names after the soundbite of praise. That said, some US publishers eschew the celebrity quote in their catalogue descriptions even though they appear on the jackets.

While I was in New York I worked on the first chapters and draft blurb of *American Idol* judge Randy Jackson's *What's Up, Dawg?* The finished book arrived on my desk as I was writing this report. There were precious cover endorsements from Mariah Carey and Beyonce. As with much publicity, it's hard to measure the results. I was very pleased to see that Gretchen Young, the book's editor at Hyperion, had used some of my ideas for the structure of the blurb – though the finished blurb was a vast improvement on my attempt: more descriptive, more specific, giving more information to the book's audience.

The covers of the US and Australian paperback editions of Laura Blumenfeld's *Revenge* exemplify some of these differences in design and cover copy. The full-colour US cover features a small boxed picture of Laura and her father above the title. The lower third of the cover is a serene photograph of Jerusalem. There are mentions that the book is 'a *New York Times* notable book of the year' and a '*New York Times* bestseller'. A quote, from Thomas L Friedman in a sans serif face, states: 'Laura Blumenfeld has the eye of a reporter, the soul of a novelist, and the passion of an activist. She brings all three to bear superbly in this gripping and haunting first book. It is a sure winner.' The title, in red, is in a classic serif face and the subtitle, in black (with main words capitalised), is below it in italics.

The Australian paperback cover, in two colours, also features the title in red, but the type is a beaten-up Courier typewriter face and the whole look is much more raw, less classically balanced. The cover is designed, I think, to look spontaneous, heartfelt. Instead of formally aligned mentions of the *NYT* there is a brief excerpt: 'My father was shot by a terrorist. A decade later, I went looking for him ...' The subtitle, in red, is all lower case. Elie Wiesel's quote says 'An exploration of human responses to extreme suffering and evil ... a remarkable suspense story; it will enrich and inspire its many readers'. A black and white picture of Laura as a child with her family sits at an angle and the author's name is in the same typewriter face, all white caps reversed out of a band of colour – red darkening to black – that covers the lower third of the cover.

The differences don't stop at the front cover. The back cover of the US paperback features three quotes (from Janet Maslin in the *NYT*, the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*), a two-sentence biography of Laura, cover design and photo credits and the category 'current events' as well as the blurb. The Australian cover has no quotes, category, credits or author biog, just the blurb, which differs from the US one.

Design taste seems to be so much a matter of what you're familiar with. I can see that US audiences might find the cover of the Australian paperback of *Revenge* almost savage-looking and sparse. The US paperback manages to contain a lot of extra information, while still being a clean, clear and evocative design. To me the Australian cover and blurb emphasise immediacy and the personal nature of Laura's quest. The Australian blurb is less wordy and there is more emphasis on 'back home', 'childhood dreams' and 'family', while the US blurb closes with a big-picture question: 'What is the best revenge?' This reinforces my perceptions about US preoccupations with big questions and perhaps also reflects the fact that Australian audiences still have not had their fill of memoir, while I detected more caution about memoir in the US.

Marketing

Hyperion

The week I was in-house was a momentous week for Hyperion, with the release of Mitch Albom's (author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*) latest: *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* with an extensive and intensive marketing plan. Jane Comins, director of marketing, told me that there were 800,000 copies in print. Using Bookscan, a system that tracks sales from about 60 per cent of the retail accounts, they would know by noon on the day after the book's release how many had been sold on the first day. There had already been a pre-sell author tour in August and September, and from 21 September until 17 November Albom had a gruelling schedule promoting the book across the country: New York, Detroit, Denver, Philadelphia, Nashville, Cleveland, Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles, San Diego, Miami, Atlanta, Dallas, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, to name just some of the stops. There was print and television publicity as well as advertising and an online marketing and publicity campaign. Books were sent to the Barnes & Nobles' managers' meeting, which took place just before the book's release, and special limited-edition signed cloth-bound hardcover advance reading copies were sent to booksellers.

Publishers buy display space in stores – both book stores and the cut-price retail chains that are becoming increasingly important in the book trade – with 'coop' money. For example B&N charges publishers to discount a particular book and display it face out (at, for instance, \$1 per book, publishers might pay B&N \$7,500 to display 7,500 books). The money is taken as a credit against the next payment to the publisher. I was told that the publishers and the bookstores decide on how the coop money is spent. *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* was going to be in people's faces, both in the front of the store and in the holiday catalogues. It would also be popping up on the Amazon homepage.

What more could an author ask for? Yet at the Hyperion marketing meeting, staff were still trying to work out what they had missed. 'Would the coop and front-of-store displays extend through October? If the book was a bestseller, the stores might keep it out front anyway.' 'What was the best use of funds – advertising or coop purchase of tables?' 'What about the timing of the print ads? When would the book appear in the *NYT* bestseller list? When would the ad be able to say "national bestseller"?' With backing from the publisher like that, did it matter that some reviewers turned up their noses a little at the 'sentimentality' of the book?

Of course, not all the books received that sort of attention. The healthy publicity, advertising, promotion and coop plans for Steve Martin's latest novel, *The Pleasure of My Company*, looked modest in comparison. And some titles were what is described as 'review led', which means, an editor at a different publishing house told me, there's no author publicity tour.

St Martin's Press

At St Martin's I helped editors Julia and Tim with their own marketing. Julia had recently published a memoir called *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords* by Miguel Melendez. It was the first inside look at a group of Puerto Rican activists called the Young Lords, who combined guerrilla tactics with media savvy to promote Latino empowerment and social justice in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Julia asked me to draft a letter to academics teaching Latino studies to introduce *We Took the Streets* to them. It was a handsome hardcover with a two-colour screenprinted jacket with block type. She had bought it on the basis of a proposal in 1999. When the manuscript finally arrived four years later it was in point form. Originally Jose Torres, a journalist and boxer, had been going to co-write, but budget constraints prohibited that arrangement. During the editing Julia asked the author for more, to expand on feelings and sensations. I admired her for, as she explained it, publishing this book to 'open up the topic'.

Tim asked me to draft a letter to introduce a memoir he had published by Canadian writer and actor Susan Coyne to booksellers in the Great Lakes region, because the book was set there. *In the Kingdom of the*

Fairies: a Memoir of a Magical Summer and a Remarkable Friendship tells the story of a five-year-old girl who, while holidaying with her family by Lake of the Woods in Western Ontario, exchanged letters with a rather imperious fairy princess called Nootsie Tah. These letters, actually penned by an elderly neighbour called Mr Moir, opened up new worlds of poetry and magic to the author. Mr Moir's letters weave in quotes from the likes of Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats and Swinburne with subjects as important as Nootsie Tah's instructions for how teeth should be presented for the tooth fairy. I could find nothing impenetrably Canadian about this gentle memoir.

Drafts of the letter to the booksellers passed backwards and forwards between Tim and me. It was great to take the time to discuss and redraft and hone, to see how the letter expanded and contracted to convey Tim's enthusiasm for the book without sounding like a blurb – just part of the fun of working with a good editor!

While I surfed the net for contact details for the members of the Great Lakes Booksellers Association (yes, there are some independent booksellers in the US), I came across the Publishers Marketing Association (<http://www.pma-online.org/programs.cfm>), which, for a small fee, organises promotional mailings to libraries, reviewers and booksellers, as well as cooperative advertising in industry publications and a trade distribution program for independent publishers.

Also on the Publishers Marketing Association website was a sample marketing plan prepared by Curt Matthews of IPG/Chicago Review Press. This marketing plan makes explicit all the steps that I'd been hearing about. Months before publication bound galleys or page proofs go to library reviewers, and other long lead-time publications such as *Publishers Weekly* as well as magazines for excerpting. On publication printed books with a press release are sent off to the print media; television and radio interviews garnered and the electronic media informed. Matthews stresses the importance of lead times, of making sure books are in-store when the PR and publicity hits; of local and regional media, keeping focused on media that will actually review the book; and of specialised or niche promotion. Be prepared to send out between 100 and 300 copies of the book with a one-page press release, says Matthews, which should be followed up with a phone call. It's expensive to publish, he says, don't scrimp on the publicity and, if you don't have time to do this work, hire a publicist.

The US publishing year seems to fall neatly into four seasons and most of the publishers' catalogues were organised into fall, winter, spring and summer releases. Powerful agents ensure that publishers come up with marketing budgets for their clients' books, and, it seemed to me, the big marketing dollars are spent on books by well-known authors. Matthew Baldacci, the director of marketing at SMP, explained that for every book printed, publishers really needed to spend \$1 per book on publicity, advances, promotion and coop money with the bookstores. As Tom Dunne said, it's expensive to publish bestsellers.

In the last 12 years, Matt explained, bookselling in the US has changed. Twelve years ago the independent stores were still a force but now the big accounts – Barnes & Noble, Borders, Walden – take a great proportion of the books (65–70 per cent by one account – 'that's the print run'). Through the late nineties the newsagency suppliers merged. If the big accounts don't take any copies of a book, the publisher is in trouble. And their size gives them advantages regarding the discounts they can offer and the influence they have over how books look.

Juri Jurjevics of Soho Press told me that there is one fiction buyer for Barnes & Noble nationally. If she doesn't like a cover, B&N don't order as many copies of the book. An embarrassing situation arose when the publisher didn't change the cover of *Cold Mountain* on this buyer's say so, B&N didn't take as many copies and then, when the book sold extremely well, they found they were out of stock.

Matt estimated that the independents were about 12–14 per cent of the market, and at SMP a national sales force of about 25 people looked after the independent accounts. Many of the smaller bookstores order through wholesalers (such as Ingrams or library wholesaler Baker & Taylor) who deal with the publishing

companies and independent bookstores. In contrast, Sara Bershtel at Metropolitan (a much smaller publisher than SMP) told me that they had a full-time person looking after the Barnes & Noble account.

Bill Strachan at Hyperion told me that publishers must sell books to retailers at a standard price, with a uniform discount – it's the law. Then the bookstores – B&N, Borders – can sell the books for whatever price they like. In all the Barnes & Noble bookstores I visited (there seems to be one close to all the publishing houses) some new-release hardbacks were discounted 20 to 30 per cent. Now, not only are the chain bookstores discounting but the discount stores – Walmart, Costco, Kmart and Target – are selling books as loss leaders. Ironically, it's making the bookstore chains, the original discounters, sweat. Bill Strachan said that books appeal to these discount retailers because, unlike many consumer goods, their prices appear on the jacket. So when the retailer offers them at a cheaper price, consumers see what a good deal they are getting. Then consumers think they are getting a good deal on all the other items in the store, whether that is the case or not.

Matt Baldacci thought the biggest change wrought by the consolidation over the last decade is in how the coop money is spent, with publishers rethinking how they spend this money. He also thought that the superstores would retract. Perhaps there would be smaller chain stores instead of mega-stores. Some editors took the view that the chains had weeded out the weaker stores and that wasn't a bad thing. Tom Dunne pointed out there are many more places you can buy books now than in the past.

The gigantic chains seem to rationalise things in some ways, as publishers ship the books to the B&N distribution channel and then B&N ships the books to the individual stores. Nevertheless, I understood Tim Bent when he said B&N stores aren't bookstores, they are service centres. The staff are young, probably badly paid and know little about the product they are selling. Customers receive little individual attention. This situation means it is even more crucial for publishers to package, describe and promote books to their target audience, so customers can find what they want when they come to shop.

Editors told me about their favourite independent bookstores – it seems there are less than a handful of them in Manhattan. It was refreshing to visit some independents – the Seminary Bookstore at the University of Chicago and Oblong, a music and bookstore in Rhinebeck in upstate New York – to see the different ways books are displayed and, in the Seminary, to look at shelves stacked with books that might never make it onto B&N's face-out tables.

Matthew Shear, publisher of mass market and trade paperback at SMP, explained that mass market books are sold through bookstores but the majority (60 per cent) go to wholesalers who distribute to supermarkets. The publisher pays a placement fee to, say, get parenting books placed in the baby products ('diaper') aisle of a supermarket. In the last twenty years 450 wholesalers have decreased to five who represent 80–90 per cent of the business. This consolidation has resulted in fewer titles being bought – publishers have to be more selective about what they put in mass market. Years ago there was a greater variety of mass market books and the print runs were bigger – over 25,000 as opposed to a likely 15,000 now.

Matt publishes about 12 mass market titles a month – if Target takes three of those, it's a good month. He said it helps if there's a big name at the top of the list to encourage people to buy the rest. In non-fiction, health (at drugstores) and true crime were the successful genres. Women are the main audience – women's fiction, romance, Westerns, mysteries and true crime. Not surprisingly, mass market has to be entertaining.

I took heart when Matt said that trade paperbacks, a more likely format for history, are doing well. They are bigger in size than mass market paperbacks and baby boomers like them, I assume because they are a more desirable consumer item than the mass market paperbacks.

Web marketing

Some books, for example *The Pirate Hunter: the True Story of Captain Kidd* by Richard Zacks, exceeded their publisher's expectations. In September 2003 *The Pirate Hunter* had sold 35,000 copies in hardcover and 30,000 in paper. I had some inkling of the popularity of pirates on the net because I had tried to visit the 'Talk Like a Pirate for a Day' website, which had closed down because it had received too many clicks. Fauzia Burke of FSB Associates (www.fsbassociates.com), an internet marketing company for books, confirmed that tons of people are obsessed by pirates. Bill Strachan at Hyperion had suggested I talk with Fauzia. She told me she was able to market *The Pirate Hunter* as top-tier history/non-fiction on FSB's site, and then she found the pirate sites. She explained that once you find the audience, as a web marketer, you can hand deliver the book that's appropriate.

Fauzia said that the ideal books to market on the web are serious non-fiction. For history there are long-term online communities. Similarly for niche fiction – mystery, sci-fi. Parenting and health does well with web marketing, as well as relationships and diet but inspirational books are harder to market on the web.

Of course, the web marketing plan depends on the budget. A full campaign might include a website for the book and a web publicity campaign, lasting for six months. Depending on the flashes, such a campaign might cost \$12,000–\$15,000. Cheaper options are available – for around \$3,500 FSB devises campaigns that last two months from shipping date. They include interviews, chats, news groups and list serves that link back to the website for the book, which links to the Amazon website. In Amazon's affiliate programs, all linked websites receive a commission every time Amazon sells a copy of the book. Publishers may pay for the campaign or, in some cases, authors deal directly with Fauzia.

For a big book such as Mitch Ablom's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, FSB looks after the web campaign while Hyperion manages radio and print publicity. Special care has to be taken regarding copyright when using radio interviews on the web. The publisher might organise a special author interview for the booksellers and Mitch Ablom has his own website.

History and fiction, according to Fauzia are better served by a longer (three- to four- or six-month) campaign. Fauzia works with the galleys – reading the book carefully – and then spends time plain old-fashioned surfing the web to find the communities that will be interested in a title. Non-fiction has an advantage because it can be promoted on its subject matter as well as on the book itself. Audiences would be interested in the content of *The Pirate Hunter* even if they hadn't read the whole book.

Memoir, like fiction (excluding niche fiction) has to be read from cover to cover before Fauzia can recommend it. As Wendy Wolf said, memoirs are hard to predict. Fauzia said they either resonate or they don't. For Linda Greenlaw's *The Lobster Chronicles*, Fauzia would research fishing communities, women writers' sites, and the history of *The Perfect Storm*.

Kate Darnton, a senior editor at Public Affairs, explained to me how web marketing can be extremely time consuming but, for the right book, tremendously effective. She described to me the success she had with online marketing for a book called *Blindman's Bluff*, a history of espionage on submarines. Despite the great numbers of ex-submariners in the US, their story had never been told. Two *NYT* journalists were persistent in getting the story and writing this book, which was published in fall 1998, an early season for Public Affairs. The authors toured the ports of the USA and at their readings individuals bought not one but five copies of the book each.

Furthermore, a huge community of submariners kept in touch online. One man had created a webring and organised reunions attended by hundreds of thousands of people. Public Affairs' marketing campaign involved offering blades of the book to anyone who responded online. Kate said that this was a clever marketing campaign, though it did take time and effort to find the book's core market, and it was aided by

the fact that in 1998 people were less cynical about the internet, less wary of responding to the online campaign. Public Affairs sold the paperback rights to *Blindman's Bluff* to Harper for a good price.

Fauzia, too, described how it was better for a book to reach a core audience than a general one. It was more important for a history of the civil war to be endorsed by a civil war website than by CNN. She said you can measure the tangible results of web marketing by online sales (through Amazon and B&N) and also by how many features you've got, how you've been able to tap into the market. She said it's a very economical, much more cost effective than a \$50,000 ad in the *NYT*, and flexible way of marketing – if you find a story you think your author's perfect for, you can get something ready.

Though a web campaign might last for two to six months, the material stays online for years. The longevity appeals to authors and helps them build a web identity. It helps if an author knows their online audience, and of course it pays to be polite online. Fauzia said the best way to interact with an online audience is to act as if you are at a cocktail party.

Carol Fitzgerald, publisher of The Book Report (www.bookreporter.com) as well as several other websites (www.readinggroupguides.com, www.authorsontheweb.com, authoryellowpages.com, kidsreads.com and teenreads.com) said that readers love author interviews. They're always interested in an author's motivation to write a book, and publishers sometimes overlook the fact that when a reader discovers an author they are interested in all their work, not just the latest release. Her sites aim to connect readers with authors and feature reviews, author interviews and talks. Web discussion offers a contrast to the private act of reading.

She tailors her web marketing campaigns to suit the publisher's budget for a particular book. For \$1,500 she might be able to do a homepage, a newsletter and a contest. For \$3,000 an author will be featured as author of the month. The feature stays on the web for a year, but not on the front page. There are many ways to web market: advance reading copy giveaways, reviews and author interviews to coincide with the book's release date, author biographies, multipart excerpts and features in 'author to watch' sections of the websites.

I met with Carol in October and she talked about how book-buying behaviour had changed over the last six months. She said it was harder to get the browsing buy, the 'maybe I'll read this' buy. She said people now only buy the books they know they'll read. She suggested that publishers should spend the Christmas season in the bookstores, talking to book buyers and hand-selling books (talking to customers, finding out their needs and making recommendations) because, she said, the Borders and B&N staff certainly wouldn't be.

According to Carol, publishers were too busy in meetings, too immersed in putting out new books for each season and too caught up in the sell-in rather than the sell-through. Rather than spending huge amounts of money on advances that don't earn out and then tarnish the author's reputation for future books, Carol said that publishers should pay less lavish advances and carry out a proper marketing plan. I'm sure they would love to do this. But it seemed to me that the books for which publishers had paid huge advances were also the ones with the big marketing budgets.

Authors

Thoroughly distracted by the business of publishing – the editorial hurdles, the need to describe and package books effectively, the struggle for marketing, the publicity hype and the rights wheeling and dealing – I'd forgotten the people upon whom the whole edifice is built: the authors.

At the Vancouver Writers Festival (21–26 October) I heard Garth Nix beguile his young audience, saw Joan London tackle big questions of Australian history for an international audience, and attended a panel in which Brian Fawcett (Canadian non-fiction author of *Virtual Clearcut*, about logging in British Columbia) and Ruth Ozecke (author of the novel *All over Creation*, about agribusiness and genetic modification) talked about common political imperatives for their different genres. At another session Gil Courmanche (*Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*), Orly Castel-Bloom (*Human Parts*) and David Homel (*The Speaking Cure*) talked about how they had responded through their writing to conflicts in, respectively, Rwanda, Israel and the former Yugoslavia.

These talks took me back to that essential ingredient – the author's motivation to write a book. It sometimes seems difficult to reconcile the urge to write with the more commercial aspects of publishing but, really, this is the crux of my project. And in New York I saw how editors must be able to visualise a book in terms of its audience, describe it to that audience and package it appropriately. Of course, it helps if authors have a strong idea of the audience for their work and successful serious non-fiction relies on this synergy between editor and author.

My interviews with and observations of agents, editors, marketers and publicists revolved around decision making, pitching, describing, positioning, selling and promoting. Authors, too, make decisions and describe but in my interviews with them, these activities revolved not around the process of bringing a book to the marketplace but around the writing itself. I was privileged to be able to talk with three writers, two of whom had helped inspire my Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship application: Sandra Benitez (*The Weight of All Things*), Peter Carey (*True History of the Kelly Gang*) and Laura Blumenfeld (*Revenge*). Their books related to my project in the ways they thought about history or politics in human terms. I was surprised to find out that these authors had not necessarily had to pitch their work in the ways described and demonstrated by agents and editors, or those suggested by textbooks helping aspiring authors to be published. Talking with these writers returned me to that core element of publishing – the writer's great leap of faith in committing themselves to tell a story or investigate some question that won't leave them alone.

Sandra Benitez

Sandra Benitez grew up in El Salvador. Her father, who was from Missouri, worked in the foreign service and her mother was Puerto Rican. As a child, living in a house with servants who could not read or write and attending school with the children of the oligarchy, she didn't realise she was caught between the two worlds. Her first book, *A Place Where the Sea Remembers*, was published by Coffee House Press in Minnesota. After it won the Minnesota Book Award, the B&N Discover Award and was a finalist in the *LA Times* Book Award agents started writing to her. She signed with Ellen Levine and Hyperion. It seemed to be a common situation that smaller publishers were the seedbeds for new writing. When an author was noticed or became successful, they signed with a bigger publisher. It was important for Sandy that her agent understood she was writing from a Latino perspective but she didn't want to get lost on a mostly Latino list.

Two of Sandy's novels – *A Place Where the Sea Remembers* and *Bitter Grounds* – won several prizes. Her fourth book, *Night of the Radishes*, was published in January 2004. I wanted to talk with her about her third novel, *The Weight of All Things*, in which two historical events, the assassination of Archbishop Romero of El Salvador in March 1980 and the massacre of refugees crossing a river between El Salvador and Honduras in May 1980 form the bookends for the story of a nine-year-old boy called Nicolas. She knew these events would frame the action, and she knew she'd write a book set during the war in El Salvador because her

previous book, *Bitter Grounds*, had ended in 1977. She had thought she would write the war in that book, but it was getting too long.

Bitter Grounds involved lots of historical research about the fortunes of members of the oligarchy and the people who work for them from 1932 to 1977. Her main goal was to let the historical events affect the characters, not to write historical or political novels, though of course history and politics play a big part. She aimed to present the events as a situation, a circumstance and show, without taking sides, how the events affect her characters.

Her forthcoming book begins in the US with a woman who is trying to let go of her past. She travels to Mexico looking for her brother. It's a change for her to concentrate on an American character, though, she says, there are always some Latino elements. She's hoping the critics are accepting of her new direction. For Sandra it's not a matter of writing something to get on the bestseller list. She said, 'Stories are calling for us to write.'

Her husband, a writer of speeches and film scripts, is her first reader and her trusted line editor. A chapter will go back and forth between them three or four times. She said that the editors are book buyers; they don't have the time to nurse the book through. A big challenge for Sandra in writing lives that are being lived in Spanish is to make things clear but to keep something of the Spanish character of the language.

Peter Carey

I walked around the block near Peter Carey's apartment building in Tribeca nervously not wanting to be early. A busy man, he had telephoned to adjust our meeting time and to clarify the amount of time he would have available for our interview. I'd been a fan of his early fantastic short stories, so I asked him what had made him turn to history. For him writing about the past was the same as writing about the future. You're always making it up, what's the difference? He asks 'What if?' (which might lead to science fiction) or 'Why?' (which leads to how we got to where we are). What is the past? he asked. As soon as something is written it's the past.

In *True History of the Kelly Gang* he was interested in the unimagined life of Ned Kelly. He didn't want to write about the two big robberies, he wanted to build up the characterisation so that the newspaper accounts made sense. He used Ian Jones' *Ned Kelly: a Short Life* as a source for the story, but added some bits, like Ellen Kelly's affair with Harry Power. His research took him into Irish folk customs and the life of Victorian farm workers.

Part of the fascination of reading the book for me was trying to work out what was 'true' and what wasn't. Unlike *The Weight of All Things*, in which Nicolas and his life are invented but the opening and closing events really happened, *True History* creates a character from a person who really existed, and events may or may not have happened. Novelists have such freedom.

And perhaps this tremendous freedom brings its own problems. Peter Carey explained how Ned's life was a big complicated story, like a spiderweb with hyperlinks, and a difficult part of the writing was working out the emotional focus. When the relationship between Ned and Mary Hearn started to challenge the focus on the relationship between Ned and his mother, one of them had to go.

Ned's voice was easy, he said. Being away from Australia enabled him to see the way Australians use expletives. He heard the voice clearly but, to help it make sense, as he was writing he used commas and dashes. Afterwards he went through and took out every comma and dash.

Gary Fisketjon, Peter Carey's editor, gave him a different way into the sentences, suggestions to vary the sentences, to avoid repetitions and 'I'. PC never felt manipulated or bullied. He understood that his editor was giving him his best read. He responded quickly to the edits, making decisions about the changes and taking

in the ones he agreed with fast. Then he would read through and print out the edited version. If he thought he had lost his voice he had the chance to reclaim it straight away. At the age of 30, he said, such detailed editing might have driven him mad and made him feel crushed. He and his editor had late night conversations about the use of ampersands and Gary Fisketjon took pains to get the map right. He appreciated Gary Fisketjon's care to make sure that readers in 100 years time would know that PC knew what he was doing.

When I asked him about living in Manhattan and writing about Australia he said it wasn't so strange not to be there in the same way that the past and the future aren't here either. Nevertheless, in what seemed to me a contradictory admission, he has a constant anxiety about not being there, that the language changes, that he forgets things, that he no longer knows the country. As an Australian in the US he is aware he changes the way he does things or talks to be understood. Hardware stores, he says, are great places for local idioms and terms. He writes primarily for Australians, he'd 'go nuts otherwise' he said, though he did know that *True History* would be read outside Australia. That helped him with clarity – he couldn't take a free ride on shared knowledge. Even with younger Australians, he said, he couldn't assume they would know the Kelly story.

Laura Blumenfeld

Laura Blumenfeld's *Revenge* combines memoir, reportage and philosophical or religious comment. Blumenfeld's father, an American Jew, was shot by a Palestinian in Jerusalem in the 1980s. Her book is a personal story of her search for the shooter and her quest for revenge; a big-picture investigation into how different religions regard revenge; and, inevitably, an account of Middle East politics.

I was interested in how she had pitched the book to her agent and how it had been described to its editor. But, she told me on the telephone from Washington, she never wrote a proposal for the book. A *Washington Post* journalist, she had written a story about death and David Rosenthal, at Simon & Schuster, approached her to write a book about grief. 'Grief is for wimps,' she said, 'I want to write about revenge.' She had an agent to help with the signing of the contract but no proposal was shopped around.

Laura wasn't clear about how she was going to structure the book. She didn't have a plan. First she lived it. As a reporter she had to answer the question of why some people get revenge and others don't but as a daughter, she said, she was afraid. She started her investigation of the man who had shot her father by going to police records. She was 'a mess' when she went to visit his family. She kept telling herself that she wouldn't go any further, even though she used journalism as 'a magic cloak' to take her places. Just as she didn't reveal her identity as an American Jew to the Palestinian shooter's family, she didn't tell people how personal her book on revenge was. There was a lot of taboo around revenge, she said. It was not the topic people expected a young woman to be writing about.

She had to erase her identity, she told me, to force the shooter's family to see her as human. In the end they accepted her and were 'great' about her deception.

She ended up with 50 notebooks and sat down one afternoon to write an outline. She thought she could arrange the book chronologically or thematically and psychologically. So she looked at each period of time to work out what type of revenge that pertained to. Even between the publication of the US hardcover and the paperback the story continued (as life does) and there is a different end to the paperback.

There was a great deal of media interest in *Revenge* – its subject matter is controversial and, because of her insights into the Middle East, there were many requests for Laura to speak. The book was embargoed, which no doubt fanned media interest and, on publication, Laura had to come out of her secrecy and reticence in talking about the book to do interviews. Greer Hendricks, the editor of the paperback edition at Atria, said that there was so much interest in the hardback that it wasn't easy to get more publicity for the paperback. Atria sent 2,500 free copies to pastors and rabbis and tried to concentrate on the Christian market for the paperback.

Just as Laura found it hard to tell acquaintances what she was writing about, she finds it hard when people who don't know her very well read it. She found the British press less charitable than the US press. When I asked her about her next book, she didn't know. 'It's like love,' she says, 'it chooses you.'

Conclusions: never final!

Before leaving Australia I had felt trepidation about visiting an America at war, an America on guard, a depressed America where people weren't buying books and where military books were being published. But no one I spoke with in New York was gung ho about the war in Iraq, and America the entertainer was alive and well. I was pleased to see that Donna Summer and Chaka Khan were appearing to sign copies of their autobiographies in Manhattan.

It's not surprising that I was completely distracted by commercial considerations in NYC and, as I observed editorial meetings, I continued a longstanding interrogation of my commercial instincts, or lack of them. NYC editors were sometimes bemused by the fact that I wasn't there to buy or sell, but to learn. Though I don't buy books and I certainly don't work with the pressure of New York editors, I identified with one editor when she told me she loves to read books that she doesn't have to publish, books that she doesn't have to visualise how to move tens of thousands of copies of, books that someone else has to think about how to make them work.

After seeing how little mainstream interest there is in the USA in South-East Asia I asked Will Schwalbe how he managed to publish less commercial books, such as Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer and William Duiker's biography of Ho Chi Minh. 'You want the truth?' Will said. (I forgot there are many ways to answer a question, especially in publishing.) 'I spend most of my time on books that sell hundreds of thousands of copies, and a tiny tiny percentage of my time on books that sell fewer copies.' The energy and intelligence Will brought to the meetings in which Hyperion aims for the books that sell in very high numbers demonstrated to me how much he enjoys this aspect of the work, and how commercial considerations can be rigorous criteria, imposing their own satisfying discipline. Happily, I think, some less commercial books still manage to make it through. As Bob Miller said, 'Some books we do for love.'

Nevertheless many, many projects are just not loved enough and as Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato say in their book *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction – and Get It Published*: 'Gone are the days when most publishers can justify publication of a book solely on the grounds that it "deserves" to be published.' Of course, commercial success and quality are not necessarily mutually exclusive and their convergence is the ideal for publishers in the US and Australia. The strength of the media and intellectual life in New York City show it is one place where ideas and money coexist. Perhaps, in some cases, making sharp divisions between genres such as 'literary' and 'commercial' is a mistake – it's more of a continuum.

In New York, being the town of deals, it seemed to me that much serious non-fiction was sold before it was written. Book proposals become very important. And what's wrong with thinking about the market before you write a book? Rabiner and Fortunato's book, aimed at writers, demystifies the acquisitions process and explains how serious non-fiction needs a driving question. For authors, thinking about whether there is an audience for a book and selling the idea to a publisher is efficient and sensible. It saves the time and energy, not to mention the emotional investment, it takes to write a manuscript that may be rejected. Still, not all writers can follow this path.

Like Laura Blumenfeld, some writers need to 'live it', and then to write the book to find out what it is they want to say. An editor had faith in Blumenfeld and the resulting book gained an enormous amount of media interest. Blumenfeld moves from her personal story to the big issue of revenge without losing a very human tone. Her subject matter, an individual's response to terrorism, is hot; the clandestine way she researched her story was controversial; and the reviews were great.

In my placements and through interviews with editors I learned a lot about the different editorial work that goes into manuscripts. While *What's Up, Dawg?* had a co-writer, it still benefited from editing. Tim Bent told me how he and *Shantaram*'s British editor were collaborating on a line edit of the Australian book, to

tighten up the expression, make the writing more effective. I thought the author and the book were fortunate to receive this attention.

From the agents I talked with I gained some sense of the finetuning that goes into manuscripts before they even reach the agent. Agent Liv Blumer told me how one author worked with a journalist to prepare her book proposal. When I asked about payment for this work Liv told me the journalist helped out because she cared about the subject matter – the author's home for stray animals. Liv said that before she takes on a project she needs to have a very firm idea about the editor she will approach. In *Publishers Weekly* deal reports on Wednesday, 18 February 2004, I noticed that this book – *Getting Lucky* – has been sold. The care that went into choosing a title (not something depressing) and preparing the package to send out to publishers has paid off.

Agent Wendy Weil expressed doubts about that eternal question – when to show a manuscript to editors. When a manuscript needed work, did editors want to have input or was it better to wait until the manuscript was polished? She told me that experienced freelance editors were employed by authors to work on manuscripts before they were sent to an agent. Obviously these editors would have had enough experience in-house to know how to shape the manuscript to make it saleable to a publisher.

I find that for my work as a freelance editor in Australia publisher's briefs regarding a manuscript are indispensable. The in-house acquiring editor (sometimes called a publisher in Australia) is the person who has the vision for the book. That vision, which ideally is the same as the author's, must match the book to its audience. Before I left Australia in 2003 I had the privilege of working with Kirsty Sword Gusmão, Australian-born wife of President Xanana Gusmão of East Timor, on her memoir *A Woman of Independence: a Story of Love and the Birth of a New Nation*. Early in 2001 Kirsty had appeared on the television program *Australian Story* and she was subsequently approached to write her autobiography.

Her book, I think, is an example of astute publishing. She has a great story, she is a committed writer and, as the first lady of East Timor, she has platform, or what we might call profile. On publication, Kirsty had a busy publicity schedule and *A Woman of Independence* sold over 20,000 copies in Australia in less than two months. The book's publisher, Tom Gilliatt at Pan Macmillan, was happy for Kirsty's memoir to be the book she wanted to write: a story about political intrigue, courage, love and idealism.

New York editors take pride in the fact that they 'edit' and, though it must place enormous time pressures on them, collaborating with the author and editing are very satisfying creative stages of the publishing process. I did detect among a couple of younger editors a lack of confidence about production (especially for complicated illustrated books – illustrated history, photography) but the more desirable focus for editors in the US is on deals and ideas.

Alice Mayhew at Simon & Schuster took the view that editing is common sense. Editors learn by working under someone and having their mistakes corrected. But, I wonder, who has time to check an editor's copyediting? At the more substantive level of editing, the Australian Residential Editorial Program allows editors to learn from mentors in a supportive environment and, given the workloads in publishing houses, it is a very efficient and economical way of training editors, giving them confidence to undertake the structural editing of manuscripts and enabling them to discuss how the editorial process fits into the larger scene of publishing.

Talking about structure, Mayhew said the organising principles for narrative history and biography are usually quite straightforward, while thematic books might be harder to organise. Laura Blumenfeld's comments about the organisation of her book spring to mind here. *Revenge* is both narrative (the story of her search for her father's shooter) and thematic (how do different cultures and individuals regard and enact revenge?). She fitted the chronology into different themes and organised chapters along those lines: Heat, Shame, Memory, The Rules, Predator and Prey, Collective Punishment, Divine Vengeance ...

My project was not to investigate the minutiae of Australian vs US editing styles, or to find out about the interface between in-house and freelance editorial work. I was there for the big picture view – how editors visualise and position books – and I came to see that the synergy between writer and editor is crucial here. Similarly, the symbiosis between books and other forms of media is vital, not only for promotion and publicity. Print media, radio, television, cinema and the internet are all sources for book ideas and areas of employment for writers. Books, potentially a ‘more sustained, more multifarious and more intimate’ form, complement other media.

Benitez and Blumenfeld were not motivated by commercial considerations but they were committed to excellent writing. Their publishers’ role was to make sure these books reached their audience, and I hope much of the discussion in this report has outlined the ways publishers do this. As a buying editor, I learned, it’s wise to aim for a specific definable audience rather than a vaguely defined general audience. As Wendy Wolf explained about John Cornwell’s bestseller, *Hitler’s Pope: the Secret History of Pius XII*, this book had easily identifiable markets: Catholics, Jews, students of the Holocaust. Author and editor make publicity and marketing’s work much easier if a book’s audience is clear and the book is easy to describe. Nevertheless, the practice of describing books in terms of other books – ‘just like *Running with Scissors*’, ‘Bridget Jones gets pregnant’ – does not, I think, do justice to many original voices and books. I asked several editors how they would describe WG Sebald in terms of other writers and genres. While some editors shrugged and said ‘Good question’, Scott Moyers, at the Penguin Press, suggested Sebald could be described in terms of Kafka or Thomas Bernhard.

Some cultural differences between Australia and the US inevitably come out in writing. The individual ‘I’ narrator appears in history written recently by Australians Anna Lanyon (*Malinche’s Conquest*) and Inga Clendinnen (*Dancing with Strangers*). But it seems hard to sell the small-voice ‘I’ narrator to American editors and audiences, who are used to an implicit confidence of tone, a kind of epic–objective narration. Take, for example, the opening sentence of Stephen Ambrose’s *Nothing Like It in the World*: ‘Next to winning the Civil War and abolishing slavery, building the first transcontinental railroad, from Omaha, Nebraska, to Sacramento, California, was the greatest achievement of the American people in the nineteenth century.’ As a counter to this kind of assertion I enjoyed Joan Didion’s latest book, *Where I Was From*, an elegant reassessment of her former belief in the so-called pioneering spirit of California.

Even William Duiker’s less jingoistic biography of Ho Chi Minh begins with a straightforward description of a moment that resonates for US readers: ‘On the morning of April 30, 1975, Soviet-manufactured North Vietnamese tanks rumbled through the northern suburbs of Saigon and headed toward the presidential palace in the heart of the city.’

While I can see that the ‘I’ narrator for history is in some senses accurate and appropriate, I can understand how Americans are not arrested by such an approach. I was impressed by the magisterial, large-scale tone of the writing I read in New York. As an editor I adapt my editorial suggestions for each different author and for each different book and (as I discovered writing *Fighting Spirit of East Timor*) the grand opening is not always an author’s preferred one. But it never hurts to be conscious of the differences, the implicit aspects of writing that may influence a book’s reception by US audiences.

Many of the books I was drawn to in the US were never going to dominate the bestseller lists. Editors spoke about how they wanted to build authors and I was relieved when some editors told me that selling 4,000–6,000 copies of a book was fine. There was much discussion of the author’s ‘break-through book’, and sometimes editors were prepared to stick with an author in search of the break through. Successful publishing is so much a matter of getting the estimations right: not paying too much for the advance, being realistic about the print run. And following through.

Kate Darnton at Public Affairs explained that it was easier for her to devise an extensive web marketing campaign for a particular book when Public Affairs was starting up and the list was very small. Some publishers just don't have the resources to market and publicise their books the way the big guns do. Others, with their eye on marketing and publicity opportunities, are extremely selective. And while it seems predictable, which books will get the marketing dollars and the publicity department's attention, the beautiful thing about publishing is that there are always surprises. Word of mouth can't always be bought. Successful books come out of the blue, and that keeps editors open minded.

The future

The value of exports of the Australian publishing industry is \$162.5 million. With 34 per cent of exports, the US is our largest export market, well ahead of New Zealand (16 per cent) and the UK (14 per cent) (John Mutler, 'The Wizards of Oz', *Publishers Weekly*, 1 September 2003). The promotion of Australian writing and books in the USA is no longer in its infancy. It requires a sustained and strategic approach that involves constant learning about the US publishing scene and the people who make it happen. Initiatives such as the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship broaden and deepen the networks.

Just as the support of the Australian publishing industry is crucial to the fellowship, fellows bring back valuable insights that they can share through their reports, their editorial practice, APA seminars (seminars are scheduled for Sydney and Melbourne in June 2004) and other training initiatives (I spoke at the 2004 Residential Editorial Program in March).

I think it would help future applicants and fellows if the BDEF steering committee addressed how some administrative matters relating to the fellowship are dealt with – for example accommodation and the availability of previous fellows' reports and other information. It would also be useful to look at how the fellowship can be supported so that future fellows are not starting from scratch each time and so that the publishing industry can gain from the fellow's knowledge. The Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship is an extremely prestigious award and a tremendous learning opportunity for an individual editor and the wider Australian publishing industry. Ideally, its benefits can be maximised to help Australian writing and publishing as a whole.

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Expenditure summary

(in Australian dollars, calculating, on average, \$Aust1 = US0.65c)

Total fellowship funds	\$30,000
+ GST	\$3,000
<i>Comprising</i>	
Australian income forgone (\$700 x 12 weeks)	\$8,400
Travel	\$3,500
Living and accommodation (\$1,450 x 12 weeks)	\$17,400
Summary of expenses	
Australian income forgone*	\$8,400
Airfare (Sydney–NY–Vancouver–NY–Sydney) + insurance	\$2,970
Accommodation 15 August – 2 November (incl. electricity)	\$12,467
Telephone + internet	\$650
Transport (taxis, public transport)	\$925
Postage	\$175
Food and staples	\$3,470
(incl. return hospitality, gifts for host publishers, pharmacy etc.)	
Vancouver Writers Festival tickets (Can\$123.35)	\$138
Recreation (museums, shows, tours)	\$853
Total	\$30,048

* The Australian income forgone component of the fellowship funds covered some expenses, including bank fees (\$53.50) and stationery, magazines, newspapers and books (\$1,126). The remainder of this money was used to cover utilities and mortgage repayments in Australia, gifts for people taking care of my affairs (and dog) in Australia, a weekend trip to Chicago and personal purchases in NYC.