ASA Professional Development Seminars

Working with your publisher
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This session is about working with editors and publishers, and it seems to me the best way of helping authors to do that is to outline how the editorial process looks from our side. So here’s a blow by blow — with an important caveat: most of this reflects my own workplace experience. My colleagues in other publishing houses may not work quite like this, and no comment on other people’s work practices should be inferred.

**Acquiring the book**

Publishers are always desperate to acquire good books, and do so in a number of ways:

**Overseas** books generally come via submissions from agents, publishers and scouts. These are mostly in the English language territories (UK, US, Canada and NZ); although foreign language submissions, either translated or to be translated, are probably becoming more common.

**Locally:**

*Unsolicited manuscripts*

At most publishing houses the slush pile gets the least and latest attention. It can yield gold of course, but it is a truth universally acknowledged that finding a bestseller there is a low-percentage game. This is one reason why it’s in most writers’ interests to get an agent.

*Agented manuscripts*

These come to the publisher ready-culled. Their agent has applied some quality control and usually also taken into account the publisher’s particular interests.

*Commissions*

Are low risk for the publisher (who wants the book or they wouldn’t have asked for it) but not *no* risk, since the author may deliver something the publisher considers inappropriate or inadequate, or the publisher may be wrong about whether there’s a market.

**What we look for**

In Australia, broadly speaking, a book acquired from overseas needs to offer commercial potential and high quality, in that order of priority.

A book sourced locally must have both those things too, but the publisher may be more prepared to contemplate a deferred or uncertain payoff in the belief that fostering talent is both intrinsically important and profitable in the longer term.

‘Commercial potential’ has many components, and one of them is a hook: a strong, clear, marketable point of interest. And yes: literary merit can be that hook.

Having assessed the manuscript and decided they want to publish it, the editor or publisher will shop it around the company, asking others to read it and trying to generate enthusiasm in-house, particularly in the publicity and marketing departments where the eye for commercial potential is highly trained. In the larger houses, the marketing department is likely to have quite a loud say in the decision, and may initiate projects as well.

If there’s enough support for the book, eventually an offer will be made.

**Offer for publication**

The publisher sets out the basic terms under which s/he is willing to contract the book. Usually at this stage only the terms to do with money (advance and royalty), territories and sometimes book format and publication date are discussed, along with any others that are deal-breakers for either party.

As with any commercial transaction, the seller (author) is in a better negotiating position if there is more than one buyer in the market. So the offer process can vary wildly depending on the level of interest: it may look like anything from an auction for a newly discovered Shakespeare folio to a free-
to-a-good-home ad. Either way, when agreement is reached, the bargaining terms form the basis of a contract.

**Contracts**

It’s worth giving a brief rundown on the basics of the contract, because this is the map of your business relationship with the publisher.

It sets out:

- The details of what the author is selling (which is essentially a licence: the author owns copyright in their work and is selling the publisher the right to try and make money out of it, for a limited time).
- What the publisher is paying (advances, royalty, gratis copies).
- The author’s associated responsibilities
- The publisher’s associated responsibilities
- Terms covering breaches or termination of the contract, and other ‘escape clauses’.

**Grant of rights and territories** This is what you are selling us: the exclusive right to reproduce and distribute your book in the bits of the world specified here: World? ANZ? Commonwealth?

**Publication** When we’ll publish, how many copies and at what price (all approximate at contract stage). We get to decide all the technical and marketing issues, usually including the cover design and copy: we may have to consult you, but the decision is ours.

**Delivery** The deadline for the finished book (if not complete when signed).

**Failure to deliver; acceptability** What happens if the book doesn’t eventuate or isn’t (in our opinion) any good. Typically, you are prevented from using this clause to weasel out of the contract: i.e. you can’t deliver something terrible, then subsequently whip the manuscript into shape and take it to another publisher.

**Ancillary materials, illustrative materials, permissions** The terms by which you supply pics and other extras: it’s usually the author’s responsibility to acquire and pay for permission to use quotes, lyrics, pics etc.

**Correction of proofs; revision** You agree to proofread the book within a certain time. If you insist on major corrections after typesetting, you agree to bear the cost. You agree to make (or let us make) revisions to subsequent editions if needed.

**Warranties; indemnity; amendment of objectionable text etc.** You put your signature to the fact that the book is not defamation or plagiarised or in breach of copyright, and doesn’t give dangerous advice.

**Copyright, infringement of copyright** We assert and defend your ownership of the text: we agree to act if third parties try to rip you off.

**Advance, Royalties and related issues** The terms and amount of payment: how much up front? How much per copy? How often do we pay? Exceptions for special cases where we are selling the book cheap; how many free copies you get; your right to cheap copies; no royalty payable on damaged, destroyed or gratis copies etc.

**Subsidiary rights** All the other associated ways of making money from the book, such as translation rights, audio books, movies: the contract sets out which ones we may try to sell on your behalf, and what percentage we get on the deal.
**Remainders & overstocks** What happens if the book doesn’t sell: destroy or remainder? The financial implications for the author.

**Reversion of rights** We retain ownership of the rights until the book’s been out of print for a certain time, then they revert back to you.

**Option** Whether we get first consideration of your next book.

**Scheduling**

The contract stipulates approximately when the book will be published, but often the publication date is not formally scheduled at contract stage. It could depend on how the editing process goes, or how long it takes the author to do any (re-)writing or corrections that are requested. At some stage, however, it will be clear that the book is on track and a decision will be made.

Scheduling is an art in which the publisher’s judgment and experience loom large, but there are some clear seasonal trends. For example, the Christmas market (September, October, November) is like a vat of piranhas, and a book has to be big and muscular enough to fight for attention. December is a good time for novelty books (stocking fillers), while the summer holidays (Jan., Feb.) are often good for quieter books and ‘beach reads’. Father’s Day is for books we think women might buy for men — and so on.

The question of whether and when the book is being published elsewhere in the world, and whether Australian booksellers will be tempted to import a competing overseas edition, may also affect scheduling.

**Editors working with authors**

NB: this is an idealistic scenario. Not every editor will have time for every aspect of this process. Note also that in some publishing houses, this editorial role falls to a single person. In others, the publisher, managing editor, freelance editor and possibly others will divide the tasks between them.

**Pre-offer meeting**

There may be a chance for author and editor to meet as part of the contract negotiation. In this case, depending on who has the upper hand (i.e. multiple bidders competing vs one bidder deciding whether to offer), the author may be checking out the editor to determine whether they like their ideas/style, or the editor may be sizing up the author to decide whether this is someone they can work with.

Sometimes it’s a little from column A, a little from column B.

At this stage, there may be some exploratory sharing of editorial ideas, but it’s only when the contract is signed that the editor can begin in earnest.

**The editorial conversation**

Many editors distinguish between structural editing — which deals with things like plot construction, chapter order and broad characterisation — and copy editing, which addresses the minutiae of spelling, sentence structure and style consistency. Others think more loosely in terms of a series of sweeps through the text, tending to diminish in scope as they increase in intensity.

The practical outcome is similar in either case: If the editor wants to suggest major rewriting, their comments at this stage will be ‘big-picture’: do central or important supporting characters need development? Is the narrative structure sound? Would it work better with a different narrative position (e.g. first/third person)? How effective is the climax? Non-fiction editing, although it tends to be less sweeping and speculative than fiction, usually follows a similar contour: are the ideas being developed to best effect? Is there a better way of ordering
information, or outlining evidence for an argument? Would it be better to play for a more (or less) dramatic exposition?

The editor may write broad-brush comments on the manuscript itself, but most of their suggestions will be in ancillary notes and/or discussion with the author. Then, in consultation (usually) with the author, the editor sets a deadline for the next draft and the author goes off to process the feedback and work out what to do with it — if anything.

**More detailed intervention**

After the author delivers the new draft, or if the text does not need this sort of conceptual reworking in the first place, the editor will work more closely on the manuscript pages, either with a pencil or on screen using track changes. They will often supplement these comments and corrections with more general discursive written notes.

The editor may still suggest substantial changes at this stage, but these tend to be more circumscribed: changes to paragraph order rather than chapter order, or short rewrites directed at bridging some particular gap in the text. The editor might, for example, ask the author to write a couple of sentences taking a character from one location to another, or expanding on an implied relationship between concepts.

In most instances the author will again take this material away and work out what to do with it: which of the editor’s specific suggestions to incorporate; how to respond to queries and rewrites. In some houses, the editor expects the author to supply a new draft of the manuscript based on their response to the edit. Elsewhere, the editors key in the changes themselves before asking the author to indicate which ones they won’t accept. This latter approach is obviously much more efficient, and also more likely to result in the editor’s suggestions being adopted—for better or worse.

This latest draft is then spell-checked, formatted and generally neatened up for the typesetter, who will do their stuff and send back first pages.

At first pages, it’s nice to have the book in good shape for proof-reading, simple corrections then second (and final) pages in a neat, efficient sequence. Nice, but not always possible. Even at this stage some books undergo considerable structural alteration, or at least significant changes on the line. There are times when it’s necessary to go to third or fourth pages, even further, before the book’s ready to print.

As author, you should be involved in or at the very least consulted on all these changes. You will then normally be asked to proof the final or penultimate set of pages (and asked to refrain from gratuitous changes of mind before you sign the book off). The contract probably prohibits you from making substantial changes at proof stage, and sets a time frame for you to return your corrected pages to your editor.

**Covers and blurring**

Let’s be clear: it is the function of a cover package —i.e. design and text, often including the title — to sell the book. It is essentially an aspect of marketing. (To the extent that editors are involved, it works best if they put away their pencil and get stuck into the cocaine, figuratively speaking.) Authors almost always get an important say in cover packaging but it’s usually limited in form to a veto, and for a good reason.

Some authors are very good at jacket and cover blurbs; most are not. By the same token, although some writers are also wonderfully visual people, most are not very helpful on the subject of their own jackets. In fact, jacket designers sometimes say the author doesn’t want a cover, they want a movie: something that conveys story and development, and does justice to all the important facets of the content. A good cover, in contrast, almost always says one static thing very powerfully. (A great
cover appears to do that but actually says a lot of other things as well…but that’s another subject.)
And the single powerful statement is generally better coined by a well-briefed expert outsider.

Why? Because an author’s whole purpose is quite contrary: it’s to inhabit their book, to live completely inside its complexities in order to render it for readers as a vivid, multi-layered experience. Yes, non-fiction too—albeit often in a more intellectually inflected way.

You need to wear the book like a skin, which is not the best perspective from which to work out how it can be made attractive to people who don’t (yet) care about it. For that, you need to step back outside the book and around to the front: approach it in simplified terms, stripping it of its richness and subtlety so as to mount a more forceful selling argument. Even where the richness and subtlety are the selling point, that needs to be represented in a simple way.

The copy is an important component of a good cover package, and subject to the same functional constraints as the design: it’s there to sell the book, not to encapsulate its every nuance. That can be a balancing act, because the book’s nuances are often crucial to its appeal; but again, they need to be hinted at rather than enumerated.

No book is the same as any other; every one of them needs a unique marketing approach. So it’s really helpful if authors understand that this is an art, not a science; that the people who design the presentation of their work are generally highly experienced in making a success of it and that the chances of us getting it right are much greater than those of someone who a) hasn’t done much of it and b) is approaching the book from an overly intimate perspective.

In short: authors must always have a say in the appearance of their book. Understanding the function of that appearance and the skills of those who generate it is very important in making a constructive contribution to the book’s success.