

Blue Pencil

Newsletter of
the Society
of Editors
(NSW)

Patron: Hazel Hawke

ISSN 1030-2557

PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007

July 1997

Why we don't get no respect

Who's to blame for the editor's plight? And what are we going to do about it? Alison Pressley, former Publisher of Illustrated Books for HarperCollins and now running her own company, Belladonna Books, offered her views at the society's June meeting, and elicited a lively discussion.

I'm here tonight to act as an agent provocateur—to foment controversy. What I want to do is stimulate genuine debate, to get us all discussing the role of the book editor now and in the future.

I've claimed before that the role of the book editor in Australia is underrated—and that this is the fault of both publishing management and the editors themselves. So, let's look at the three parts of my claim.

Australian book editors are underrated

How are editors perceived? To the outside world, they are glamorous creatures of the media, hobnobbing with famous authors, attending literary lunches and book launches, deciding the bestseller lists with a careless nod or shake of the head.

To insiders in the book trade, they are nobodies. Assistant editors, editors, and senior editors are mysterious, quiet, backroom creatures. Nobody knows quite what they do, but they seem to take an eternity to do it, and 'slippage' is always deemed to be their fault. They don't appear to understand the demands of the commercial world, and most of the sales, marketing, and management people would rather do without them. In fact, many houses now just about do exactly that.

Editors are poorly paid, and have little voice in the overall direction of publishing.

Overseas, the image of the book editor is sharper, cleaner, and much more highly valued, particularly in America. There, people who in England would call themselves 'editorial directors' or 'publishing directors' and who in Australia would call themselves 'publishers', are

quite happy to be known as 'senior editor' or 'editor-in-chief'. Whole imprints are named after chief editors.

In other parts of the media—magazines, newspapers—the title 'editor' bestows far greater prestige than when

continued on page 2

Next meeting: Tuesday 1 July 1997

Thoughts on the role and meaning of 'style'

Lindsay Mackerras, editor of the AGPS *Style Manual*

Lindsay Mackerras is well qualified to help us explore what 'style' is all about— that exciting tension (well, exciting for us editors anyway) between 'rules' and 'usage', consistency and common sense, creativity and 'correctness'. Lindsay has been with the Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS) for 10 years. Previously Managing Editor, she currently fills the dual role of *Style Manual* editor and Manager, Standards and Style. She also edits the newsletter *Stylewise*, which she founded three years ago. Don't miss this opportunity for an update on a subject fundamental to our craft.

6.30 pm for 7 pm in the Rooftop Function Centre, 4th Floor, Australian Museum (enter from William Street). Drinks and light refreshments provided. Please RSVP by Friday 27 June to (02) 9552 0039 (voicemail). Members \$10; non-members and those who don't RSVP, \$12.

Coming meetings:

5 August: Sophie Cunningham, Trade Publisher for Allen & Unwin,
on the art of fiction editing

2 September: Frank Devine, on the state of the language

Respect

continued from page 1

it is preceded by the word 'book'. In terms of anonymity and lack of prestige, about the closest we get to book editors is film or video editors.

So whose fault is this? How did we get to such a woeful position since the heyday of Beatrice Davies?

The fault of publishing management

The vast majority of publishing houses in Australia are run by men who started out in sales. The majority of books sold in Australia originated overseas, mainly in the UK, and are merely distributed over here. Sales are nearly 50% Australian books now, but that is a very new thing. When I came to Australia in 1974, only a handful of Australian books were published each year. Most of the companies I rang to get a job didn't have editorial departments; they were merely distribution centres.

That distribution mentality still rules. All the big multinational publishing companies rely heavily on imported books—either from their mother company or from agencies, i.e., other publishers' lists which they distribute in this country. Even the independents such as Allen & Unwin couldn't survive without their overseas lists such as Bloomsbury or their Australian lists such as ABC books.

Of course, these lists come in finished form, as though the book fairy waved a magic wand, and lo and behold, there's

a lovely pile of beautiful new books. There's no sign of any editors attached to these. The sales and marketing people here deal with sales and marketing people in the other companies. They have no idea about the editorial process—and when they are confronted with it in their own local lists, they don't want to know about it. It's tiresome, time-consuming, full of excuses, mysterious, inexplicable.

Why does it take six months, or more, from the time the manuscript comes in-house before they see the finished book? Why can't they have finished books to sell from? Why can't they have printed jackets six months before publication date? Because the bloody editors are bloody hopeless, that's why. Couldn't produce a book in a pink fit.

This situation has been compounded of late by the fact that an even more uncomprehending breed of people are taking over top management. They are called accountants. The 'a' word. Bean-counters. I have yet to meet one who appears to understand the nature of the business they are in.

In the past, this didn't matter so much. They were kept more or less in the background, counting the beans, keeping a genial eye on turnover, profits, cash flow, etc.

Now they run things. The world is besotted with the idea of 'economic rationalism'—and the world is going barking mad, as a result.

It may be possible that somewhere there is an accountant who under-

stands how, say, a pair of shoes is made. It is easy to estimate the amount of leather needed to make a particular pair, and sales of the latest boot can be based on sales of the previous model. The workmanship of the bootmaker can be measured relatively easily.

How do you translate this to books? You can't—but they keep trying to measure the unmeasurable. How long does it take to edit a book? How long is it between signing the contract and delivery of the book? Why should one book differ from another in either of these respects? Why has Author A taken six months to write his book, when Author B took only five weeks?

There is a seemingly deliberate attempt to deny the creativity involved, to pretend we are dealing with 'product' here, not with people, and with the extraordinary output of their imagination, their expertise, their lives.

So there is a huge and growing gulf between editorial departments on the one hand, who have to deal daily with writers and their human foibles, and sales, marketing, and accounting departments on the other. The result *always* is a denigration of the editor's role.

So far, you will, I presume, have agreed with every word I've said. Now we come to the bit that you perhaps won't accept so readily.

The fault of the editors themselves

What is the role of the editor, as perceived by most editors? It's to dot the i's and cross the t's. Nothing more. The majority of editors want a manuscript to land on their desk; then they want to take all the time in the world to scrutinise every paragraph, every sentence, every word, every comma. Then they want to hand it on to the designer to do the cover, and that's that. Next please.

They like to work in a hermetically sealed capsule, tucked away in a little office with a closed door. They have minimal contact with the sales, marketing, or publicity departments. Their only friends in-house are other editors, and one or two designers. They have no idea how books are sold; they have no idea who makes the decisions about dumpbins or counterpacks or shelf talkers; they have no idea about reprint decisions, returns, remainders.

They rarely get involved in the contract negotiations. Many who have

Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

Membership

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor in the print media, and anyone who supports the society's aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 1997 fees are \$45 for new members (\$25 if joining after 30 June) and \$40 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9552 0039, or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

Blue Pencil

The society's newsletter, *Blue Pencil*, is mailed to members monthly, except for January. We welcome your comments and contributions. Please mail them to Merry Pearson at 55 Collins St., North Narrabeen, NSW 2101, or fax or e-mail them to her as per the committee list on the back page.

Deadline for the August issue is Monday 14 July.

worked for me have turned down the opportunity to become commissioning editors because this would involve them in much more than the words on the manuscript page. They have very little grasp of the economics of publishing. Most don't want to know about costing sheets. In-house editors aren't even aware of the editorial costs associated with each book they work on. Mention the words 'gross profit' or 'margins' or 'break-even' and their eyes glaze over.

Who assesses editorial qualifications? In Australia—at least, in Sydney—we have no formal qualifications other than the Macquarie or Macleay College diplomas. I used to be inundated with applications from recent graduates wanting to get into publishing, wanting to be an editor. Most couldn't spell 'liaise'. All thought that their great love of books was qualification enough to be an editor.

When I ran the TAFE Editing and Publishing course in 1988, I was brutally frank with all the wannabees. If you can't spell very well, have a tenuous grasp of English grammar, aren't a very good writer, and don't know anything about the book industry, how the hell are you going to help an author to produce a better book?

A final gripe! Editors as a breed exhibit an almost complete lack of vision when it comes to the publishing industry. They appear to lack ambition; they don't *want* to steer the industry in a particular direction. They are so involved in the minute details of this comma or that heading that they cannot, or will not, lift their eyes to see the bigger picture.

So, what can be done to improve matters?

Editors have to learn to help themselves. Only by *lifting their game* will they convince publishing management to take them more seriously, understand their problems, and work more closely with them during the creation of a book.

Educate yourself. Learn more about the book industry. Go out with a rep for a day; learn to appreciate the problems they face, and the crucial nature of the selling kit materials they go into the shops with. Volunteer to work in a bookshop one weekend. Find out what people are reading; what sort of questions people ask the bookshop staff; what display items catch people's eyes.

Stay on top of trends and fads. More than one editor has proudly said to me,

'Oh, I don't have time to read newspapers.' I was flabbergasted. A good editor reads everything he or she can lay their hands on; not only books, but magazines, journals, and, of course, newspapers. A good editor is up to the minute with world events, with fashions and trends in all kinds of areas, not just their own narrow area of expertise. A good editor is a well-informed person.

The most important point, I think, is to learn about the financial side of book publishing. Attend a course on accounting for small business, if necessary. At the very least, take someone from the accounts department out to lunch and pick their brains. Ask the publisher to take you through a costing for a particular book, then through an annual budget for a list.

Get involved in the life of the book you're working on, from the initial idea to its shelf life out there in the shops. Attend ideas meetings; have some of your own, and put them forward. And when you've handed the polished manuscript over, don't fall into the trap described in a book published in 1970:

To the editors who make books, books are something more than a better brand of corn flakes, packaged brightly and attractively, to be sold for the profit of the owner of the house.

Editors are allowed to craft the books, and even to promote them, but the really public life of the book is left to the salespeople, who take the perfected product into the outside world. Once the book is a book, it is no longer any part of the job or concern of those who have made it—it is a better brand of corn flakes, something for the salespeople to tend to and profit from while the little editors remain in the house to care for the next book.

The situation that book is describing is just as prevalent today as it was in 1970, but *it doesn't have to be*. Don't let sales people and publicity people take over your book. Badger them, pester them, make them realise that you are interested in *helping* them to promote and market the book, that you want to be involved, that you care.

Don't be a shrinking violet. It can be pretty rough out there in sales and marketing land, especially when they all sneer at your ideas or call your books dogs or otherwise belittle your performance. I've seen plenty of editors leave ideas meetings in tears, or white and shaking, and I've done the same my-

self—particularly the latter when I've been white with anger. But you've got to be tough. You've got to be prepared to take knockbacks. And you've got to be prepared to speak publicly. Because the best advocate of a book is its editor. The editor is the closest person in the world to a book, bar the author. If *you* can present your book to the reps, you can do more than anyone to convince them it's a fabulous book. And *you* can be crucial to the book's success.

So now I would like to invite some comments on my observations, because I feel quite passionately about this, and my observations are based on long experience, and observation of the attitudes of various players in the field in-house.

Question: Is the difference in editors in the US caused by the fact that they are doing the things that you are talking about?

I think so, and also, I think it stems from the fact that, until very recently, the top people in book publishing in the UK and America came from an editorial background. The guys in grey suits are very new, stemming from the corporate take-overs of the last 10 to 15 years. Essentially, editors have never been at the top here, unless they've gone out on their own and started companies such as Sally Milner's. I don't know a managing director here that ever was a publisher, never mind an editor.

Question: Do you have an editorial background yourself?

That's all I've ever done. I started off as a general dogsbody. I went to Allison and Busby straight out of university; I was the only employee in an attic in Soho. I answered the phone, typed invoices, wrote the blurbs, read the manuscripts, proofread with a list of proofreading signs on the table next to the proofs. I learnt that way.

Question: That's probably very good training for knowing all the business.

That's right, and that's my beef against the courses, particularly Macleay College, because I've had some pretty rough experiences in the past of employing people from Macleay who have done the course. They feel that they know everything and want to go straight into an editorial job. They know nothing; and it's very difficult.

continued on page 4

Respect

continued from page 3

Question: I happen to be doing that course; what other options are there?

I'm not against the courses as such. They are the only ones around, and they are useful. But people go through them and expect to go into a top job because they feel as though they know it all. It's a beginning rather than an end.

Question: I don't know anyone who would suggest that after 16 weeks, four hours a week, that you could know anything. But then where do you go?

There is a lack of ongoing training, and a lack of mentoring. When I worked at Weldon Owen, I started an in-house course there based on the TAFE course that I'd run. Rhonda Black used to run in-house courses for her editorial and production staff when she was at Allen & Unwin which were terrific. But this all has to be done on a voluntary basis now and, because the bean counters rule, I don't know that many people do them.

Question: It strikes me that a good editor, who does all the things that you're doing, won't stay as an editor for very long. They'll become publishers, or go out on their own and form companies. It chases its tail, because the value that the bean counters see an editor adding doesn't allow them to pay an editor a huge amount, so the people who are good at it have to find other ways of getting . . .

As a publisher I spent my time poring over figures, negotiating contracts, endlessly doing costings and attending meetings. Not much editing in that.

Question: I would suggest that the nature of the editorial job actually works against you, because if you do a really good editorial job it becomes invisible.

Yes and no. At the inaugural award to the Editor of the Year, the recipient said exactly that: if you're a really good editor, your work is invisible; it is a seamless process. I think that it's time that editors stopped pretending their work didn't exist. I think it's actually time we started blowing our own trumpet, making sales and marketing people aware of how much editorial work is involved in the average book. I think we've been backroom people too long.

Question: But the nature of the work makes this very difficult. If you're saying that a salesperson goes into a store and it's the brightness of the portfolio that will suggest a sale, it's the author and the designer who are important for sales, not the editor.

Well, in my experience the editor has been very much involved in that side of it. I certainly always involved them at HarperCollins because they were the closest to the book.

Question: So they're the interface between the author and the designer.

Absolutely; they hold the author's hand.

Question: When we first formed the Editors' Society in 1976 we wanted to encourage editors to push more, and get themselves into political power in companies. The only one I can remember who did was Barbara Ker-Wilson, who became a director of *Reader's Digest*. The thing was that most editors were people of integrity, of reason in the true sense: emotionally and intellectually; whereas the people who had the power simply weren't educated, and they exploited them.

It's time that ended, and in fact a ray of hope on the horizon is that even though bean counters do rule, they are gradually coming to realise that, 'Oops, editorial direction does matter'. There has been a huge outcry about the death of the editor in the UK recently and a lot of comment out there in the open by agents and publishers about the need to go back to the editorial base. I think it's time we saw similar things happening here.

Question: How did that arise?

I don't know. I suppose it's the perception that editorial standards have been slipping simply because some publishing houses aren't using editors at all, just pumping out raw manuscripts. It starts making a difference to sales.

Question: Publishing standards, not editing standards.

That's right, it's not editing standards because there is no editing.

Question: If we're talking about editors with and without power, it seems to me extraordinary that in book publishing, editors have so little power, and yet in magazines and newspapers, they have so much more power and recognition.

It's a different job, and another beef I have against the editorial role is that anyone with one year's experience can call themselves an editor. That's union rules. Magazine and newspaper editors have years of experience.

Question: Not necessarily. Because you're doing a task and if you can do that task, you do it. To me, there's an interesting point coming up that's to do with perception of what the task of editing is, and the value that an editor can add to a publication to make it successful. The bean counters can say, 'The world out there doesn't know whether that's grammatically correct or not, but they will know whether the book is targeted right, whether the direction is right, whether it's structured well'. When you get down to just confining yourself to words and copyediting, there is a law of diminishing returns in terms of the marketability of that skill. And that is where I think what you're saying is absolutely right. If you get more involved in thinking about who's going to read the book, and how you're going to make sure the reader gets the book, you get involved in thinking about marketing. You can't avoid it.

I've been amazed at how little editors have known or been interested in other publications in the area they're working in. When an editor gets a gardening book or a cookbook, they need to know what that book is up against in the field. The publisher's involved in that too, of course, but they need to work together.

Question: As a copy editor, I always think of myself as being a representative of the reader in dealing with the manuscript. Why can't we take that through to being a representative of the reader in a marketing sense?

Question: The managers of most successful corporations, and even some large government departments, accept the responsibility to train their staff from the understanding that they will do their job better, and move forward, if not in that corporation, in the profession in general. Is it naive to expect that publishers may somewhere adopt that habit and train their own editors?

There was a glimmer of hope when the training 'thing' was in place, and they

were more or less forced into sending staff off on training schemes. But by and large publishing management expect appointed editors to be able to edit; they expect them to be trained when they come into the company.

Question: But not trained in the other things that you were talking about?

That's right.

Question: If someone is sitting in a room doing their particular job, but doesn't understand where that fits into that corporation's responsibilities, I think that's bad management.

It is bad management. Once upon a time, when a cadet or a trainee came in, they spent two weeks in each department, which is a fantastic idea and really ought to be mandatory.

Question: Over the last 25 years there's been a downgrade in literacy in Australian society. All of these management/marketing people, who might even have degrees, have no respect for literacy because they didn't have to have literacy to get their degrees. How on earth are they going to treat editors with respect?

That's a curly one. I don't know. And it's actually getting worse, particularly with the computer generation; they neither know nor care about editing. So we have to address more than that.

Question: Does survival of the editors depend on them becoming, like almost everybody else, multiskilled?

Yes.

Question: You gave some tips for editors about getting involved with the selling of the book. How feasible is this for your average editor, particularly bearing in mind the fact that many are freelance?

This talk had to be directed towards in-house editors because it's almost impossible for freelance editors to get involved. I've been a freelance editor and I loathed it for that very reason—you are simply a cog in a machine, and you don't have the overall picture at all. You have no idea where the book comes from when it gets to you, you don't know where it goes when you hand it back, and you have no involvement.

Question: Unless you go to a publisher as a freelance editor with other parts

of a team, and solve problems for them that involve more than just the manuscript: liaise with the designer and so on. More and more people are doing that in business everywhere, networking instead of growing a company and having departments that may not always be at work, having informal links between people or groups of people to offer services.

Yes, there's quite a lot of scope for small groups of people to get together and put books together for publishers as they shed staff, like snakes sloughing skin.

Question: My background is professional publishing. I think editors should see declining industry standards not so much as an insoluble problem, but as a challenge to them to safeguard those standards. In my experience, when editors have taken a wider interest in broader things like sales and marketing and the publishing processes, they do get promoted to management positions. But when they get there, they've come from backgrounds where editing is important. When people do get to that top point with an editorial background, they do actually have some influence over the suits, more so than when they're working as editors.

Absolutely. It's vitally important for people with editorial experience to get up into those top echelons of management if we're going to see any change. To do that, you have to be more than a wordsmith.

Question: What sort of subjects should Macleay and Macquarie teach to make them more practical?

I don't know much about the content of the Macleay course. The Macquarie course, I feel, is too academic. It's part of the linguistics department of the university, and is too ivory tower, not enough nuts and bolts. Book publishing is an industry, it's a commercial enterprise. You're there to make profits for your owners. The nicest and best publishing houses publish potboilers to enable them to publish the books which aren't actually going to make that much money. That's a standard in the industry and I like that and I hope it continues. But, essentially, at the end of the day you have to make money; books have to sell.

Question: Is there a role you can see for the Society of Editors?

I'd like to think there is. I've been involved in Women in Publishing for a long time and we used to run a lot of seminars on finance in publishing because that's a huge area of ignorance that book editors have.

Question: I'd like to think there was also something that we could do that was related to making the value that we as editors can add to the process more visible. How can you do a controlled experiment which says this book edited, this manuscript raw would sell or not sell?

Question: Some of these books are being typeset by non-English speaking people; copytyping. For instance, Colleen McCullough's first book in the Roman series, I stopped reading it because it was so full of typographical errors I couldn't stand it any more.

Question: I propose a system of quality accreditation of books, to say that they've actually been edited.

Question: But who assesses whether or not that book meets that standard; whose, and what, standard is it?

Question: Well you'd have to have a third party group assessing that standard.

Question: Well what you're saying depends on consumers caring as well.

Question: Well, they do, look at corporate products, they look for the 'five ticks'.

Question: It still doesn't guarantee a good read. What does quality mean to the consumer, does it mean that it's a good read, does it mean that it's information they want, or does it mean that it's grammatically correct?

continued on page 7

New members

A warm welcome to all those who joined the society from 16 May to 14 June 1997:

Samantha Miles
William Pearce
Joan Rosenthal

Profession: editor—but what

‘What is an editor?’ Again they ask! Stupid question.

‘You don’t know, do you?’

How childish. I get ready to drop a brick on my interrogators.

‘A non-problem—everybody knows. An editor—’ Pause for reflection.

Of course, it is fatal to pause. Definitions come creeping out of the woodwork. Beatrice Davis: ‘—is an invisible mender’; the Liquid Paper bottle: ‘Rights wrongs’; the winner of the Definition competition at our Christmas party: ‘Editing is an art only apparent in its absence.’

Self-effacing twaddle; why must editors affect hubristic modesty? If Thomas Wolfe’s editor hadn’t possessed the talent to dredge and dig for the great stories in his gargantuan manuscripts, Thomas Wolfe would now be history, corpsed under truckloads of verbiage. And Wolfe’s editor, Maxwell Perkins, is just one—there are many many more who are simply unsung heroes.

Yet the original question always sidles back, ‘What the hell is an editor?’ I mean to search out an answer. I don’t know if a pithy definition will emerge, but we can begin, at least, by getting a better grip on the nature of the profession.

A generalist occupation

Like that of scientist, the profession of editor is a generalist occupation. This generalist nature is, I am convinced, one reason for the unsatisfactoriness of many definitions. If I tell you I am a scientist, you will not be much the wiser; you will need to quiz me further before you get any clear idea of my work and area of expertise—in nuclear physics, say, or botany, or medicine. Similarly with editing: there are many different editors.

If you tell me you are one, I must ask in what branch of the profession you work. As technical editor with an engineering firm, for instance, or consultant editor for an international scholarly journal? As a book editor, fiction or non-fiction, in a large publishing house? As a stressed-out sub on a daily newspaper?

In your particular job, you may copy-edit and proof until your eyeballs give off steam; on the other hand, you may

coordinate the work of others and never lift a red pen to a line of text. You may specialise in manuscript assessment, or indexing, or editing translation, or producing newsletters. The list goes on.

All these positions may be called ‘editing’. In addition, people use the term figuratively—misleadingly—to mean something akin to distort or cut short: the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation edited my income; a politician complains his opponent edited his words; the Education Board edited out the works of Gillian Mears and Enid Blyton; the greybeard with the scythe edits us all. This article will not concern itself with figurative uses.

Akin to a scientist

As I mentioned earlier, telling you that I am a scientist does not, by itself, tell you very much about me. Nevertheless, it does tell you *something*, something about the sort of person I am in this role, the qualities I deploy, the skills I use. You will assume that this ‘scientist’ person is a meticulous observer, organised and methodical, painstaking over repetitious detail, proceeding by logic and common sense, able to discern effects and tell you why they happen (or fail to happen)—a person who acknowledges the primacy of reason.

Now, while that is a fair description (admittedly rather stereotyped) of The Essential Scientist, it could serve equally to describe The Essential Editor. The two professions deal with very different materials, but their methods and skills are quite alike. Both are activities that use the left side of the brain. While both of them welcome the odd visitation from the imagination, they worship every day at the shrine of intellect.

More akin to a writer

Having reminded you, even a shade too insistently, of an affinity between editor and scientist, I can now turn to a much more familiar relationship: that between editor and writer. For if, as I have suggested, editing has some connections with science, it stands even closer to the art and craft of writing.

Close, but not too close. Dorothea Brande’s classic book, *Becoming a Writer*, has a number of excellent things

to say about the role of the editor, or simply the editorial side of one’s own nature, in producing good writing—and I wish I could quote from it here. But maybe Someone has borrowed my copy and failed to return it; or maybe I have hidden it from Someone, for reasons I leave you to guess, but neglected to write its whereabouts into my Concealment Book, and so I am not likely to find it again in this life.

Basically, however, Brande’s thesis is this: we should think of the editing process as the writer’s alter ego, the cool elder sister who can be called in once a first draft is in existence, to revise and improve. The intellect can be corrosive to the imagination, but applied in the right order, the morning after the heat and passion of creation, it can prove tonic, showing the impetuous creator the strengths and weaknesses in the writing.

Muse’s elder sister?

Editing: the cool elder sister of writing. The muse’s elder sister. Have we arrived at a definition? That depends how you look at it (setting aside any unworthy cynicism about particular elder sisters). Should definition, or meaning, be a neat container that captures a word forever, or can a word have frayed-out edges? As the British linguist Jean Aitchison points out, some think that a definition settles on a word in the same precise way as a seagull settles on a post; but in fact, she believes, definitions are fuzzy. They hover over words the way seagulls hover over the stems of ships. Picture an editor as this cool elder sister of a writer, a critic of imperturbable kindness who knows from the start what the muddled writer intended to say, and is able to coax from that fertile-but-scrambled brain just the right words to say it. Do we see ourselves there? The answer, I think and hope, would have to be, ‘Yes’. Or at least, ‘Yes—up to a point’.

Grand table of editors

Describing what editors do, though it doesn’t constitute a definition, is certainly helpful to those seeking information with some idea of entering the profession themselves. It would be possible to tabulate, or list in some other graphic way, *all* the many different edi-

does it really mean?

tors I talked about at the start of this article, and give a brief description of the work of each.'

John Bangsund has done something of this sort for the roles of book editors:

The word 'editor' has many meanings. It can mean the person who decides what is published. It can mean the person who takes a manuscript that has been accepted for publication and to some extent reshapes, restructures, perhaps even rewrites it. It can mean the person who imposes house style on a manuscript, corrects the spelling and grammar, corrects or queries facts and quotations, and points out inconsistencies of all kinds. In Australian publishing houses the first kind of editor is usually called a publisher or commissioning editor, the second a structural editor, the third a copy-editor. There are also 'commissioning editors' who might better be

called publishers' scouts or procurers, and 'production editors', who are traffic managers, co-ordinating the work of editors, designers, printers and everyone else concerned in the production of a book.

John Bangsund, *Meanjin* 2, 1994

A small but informative brochure on editing

I find the idea of a comprehensive table of the different editors and their tasks truly awesome, but compiling it is beyond the compass of my software. My hardware doesn't feel too comfortable with it either.

I do have a practical interest, however, in understanding and presenting the essentials of what being an editor entails: our society has been asked to send out literature to careers advisers to help them

in informing young aspirants about the profession.

And the society's committee, in turn, has fingered Robin Appleton and me to prepare it. Members who attended the Christmas party or the AGM might have noticed the two of us whimpering inside our new hair-shirts.

Part of the challenge facing us will be to sort out how much (how little?) an introductory brochure should contain. Robin has already drafted a wealth of material, enough to serve as the basis for several brochures, during the time it has taken me to lace my shoes. For me, this article marks a stage further along in the process of collecting my thoughts.

Josephine Bastian

Respect

continued from page 5

Question: All sorts of people that I talk to comment on the appalling quality of books, and they do it with a kind of dull despair, as if it's inevitable. So I think that people do actually notice.

Question: What they have to do is not buy the book.

Question: Well it's too late after you've bought it. There should be returns.

Question: That's right, if you could do that, then they'd notice.

Question: What people have to do is start sending them back to the publisher and complaining, saying, 'Do something'.

Question: Start a very vocal complaint about asking for your money back because it's got so many typos in it, just little errors.

Question: Why don't reviewers comment on this?

They do, frequently. Always badly, they only ever notice if a book's been badly edited.

Question: That's the 'seamless' point really. And you also don't know how long that editor has been given to edit the book. They point the finger at the editor.

Except, I think it was Jill Kitson who made the point once in an article years ago that newspapers have very little time to get it right, and they frequently do get it right.

Question: They also have a hundred and ten subs working.

Question: I was working as a university lecturer and was sent a book to assess. I sent it back to the publisher with comments on the editing, saying I didn't actually think it was safe for anyone to use this book. I was praying actually that there wasn't some hapless editor sitting there with all this falling on his or her head.

Maybe there was and maybe there wasn't. Another point that I'm loath to make because we are talking about people is that I've employed a lot of editors over the years, and some of them are lousy—they couldn't edit to save their lives. Everything I've ever read about being a team leader and nurturing your team, starts off with the assumption that your team members are competent. This is not necessarily so.

Question: You can't be sure that an editor edited that book. I worked in an organisation where a designer owned the company and he used to edit all the books he fancied, and he couldn't edit.

That brings me back to the lack of accreditation, the lack of a standard. I think they're trying to address this in England with the Book House qualifications.

Question: The Canberra Society is making noises that there should be national accreditation, but who's going to run it, and who's going to say what's good and what's not good?

Question: Knowing whether a book is accurate, though, in the way discussed earlier, where the book's content could be dangerous, is that an editor's problem?

Without seeing the individual book, I can't say. It is the role of the editor to pick it up. But the status of the editor is so low in some places that they daren't question the author. They are not used to rewriting prose. They are not used to questioning authors to the extent that we were actually encouraged to at *Reader's Digest*. I can say many things in their favour, and one is that they really made you wade in boots and all into a piece of copy and get it right, and gave you the time to do it.

1997 COMMITTEE

President and Treasurer

Catherine Gray

Phone/fax : (02) 9130 8331 (w & h)

E-mail: cgray@mpx.com.au

Vice President

Robin Appleton

Phone/fax: (02) 9560 1017 (w & h)

Secretary

Michael Giffin

Phone: (02) 9360 9985 (h & w)

Fax: (02) 9331 4653

Membership Secretary

Rhana Pike

Phone: (02) 9569 7831 (h)

Fax: (02) 9351 5687 (w)

E-mail: rhanap@ozemail.com.au

Catering

Tim Badgery-Parker (food)

Phone: (02) 9518 7225 (h)

(02) 9936 6334 (w)

Carey Martin (wine)

Phone: ((02) 9816 3684 (h)

Newsletter Editor

Merry Pearson

Phone/fax: (02) 9913 7799 (w & h)

E-mail: mmripear@ozemail.com.au

Newsletter Assistants

Kylie Lowson

Phone: (02) 9516 4753 (h)

Robert Stove

Phone: (046) 28 7189 (h)

Fax: (02) 9264 3906

E-mail: rstove@fisher.biz.usyd.edu.au

Publicity Officer

Terry Johnston

Phone/fax: (02) 9337 4126 (w & h)

Members

Isabel Partridge

Phone: (02) 9523 7295

Fax: (02) 9544 4389

Barbara Hasslacher

Phone: Phone/fax: (02) 9558 6131 (h)

Noticeboard

Indexing workshop

The Society of Editors (NSW) will present an Introduction to Indexing on Saturday 16 August 1997, 9 am to 5 pm, in Seminar Room 1 at the State Library of New South Wales. The presenters will be Caroline Colton and Michael Wyatt. The workshop will cover such topics as: the importance of indexes; managing the indexing process; the function of an index; the principles of indexing; the mechanics of indexing; editing an index; and evaluating an index.

The cost is \$65 for society members and \$80 for non-members, which includes lunch and morning and afternoon tea. Places will be strictly limited, so please book early to avoid disappointment.

Use the registration form included in this issue of *Blue Pencil*. To obtain extra registration forms, please leave your name and address on the society's voicemail on 9552 0039 or write to the secretary, Society of Editors (NSW), PO Box 234, Broadway 2007.

At the Writers' Centre

For those of you who missed the society's Basic Grammar workshop in June, Ann Tarulli will present a grammar course at the NSW Writers' Centre, Rozelle, 12-13 July. Also, Robin Appleton will present a Practical Editing Workshop 19-20 July at the centre. Phone (02) 9555 9757 for information.

Indexers medal

The Australian Society of Indexers will present its annual medal for best index at the society's conference, *The Futureproof Indexer*, at Katoomba, on 27 September 1997.

Publishers, indexers, and others are invited to nominate indexes which they regard as outstanding professional achievements. Indexers are encouraged to nominate their own works. Deadline for submissions is Thursday 31 July 1997.

For criteria and submission details, please contact Alan Walker by telephone at 02 9368 0174; by fax at 02 9358 5593; or by e-mail at alan.walker@syd054.aone.net.au

L E T T E R

Dear Editor:

I am hoping that one or more of your readers will be able to help me with two matters.

First, I think it's time I did something about professional indemnity insurance, but I dread the idea of phoning around brokers and exposing myself to the hard sell in an alien jargon. Can anyone recommend a firm which seems to understand the nature of our work and offers bearable premiums? I would hate to be sued (wrongly, of course) by a client who's being sued for breaching copyright on my advice, issuing contracts which were somehow weakened by my editing, or implementing apparently ineffective policies which I helped draft.

Second, for years I've relied on Colin Wheildon's *Communicating or just making pretty shapes* as the basis of my approach to design and desktopping. I still believe Wheildon's is an excellent reference, but I want more. Have his findings ever been tested, contradicted, or supported by other researchers? Can anyone lead me to other excellent references? Okay, well how about some reasonably good ones?

Thank you for granting me access to the collective expertise of the society.

Catherine Hockings