

OHS for editors working with sensitive and explicit content

by Jane Fitzpatrick AE

edvic.vicepres@iped-editors.org

Dr Renée Otmar is well known to IPEd members for her contributions in many aspects of IPEd activity. For EdVic's March online speaker meeting, Renée presented a generous and stimulating exploration of how editors might approach and take care of themselves when they are working on difficult material.

The lively discussion that followed the formal presentation showed this was a timely consideration with potential to benefit and engage us all. The event was not recorded, so attendees could share their experiences freely, and the [Chatham House rule](#) applied.

Sensitive content includes material that can have legal implications; explicit content can include coverage of violence, sexual themes, trauma, grief and loss, and topics related to personal identity. Sensitive and explicit material can turn up in many types of works, from fiction to memoir, from commissioned reports to medical journals. Such material may have legal and ethical considerations for the editor as well as philosophical, emotional and professional implications. For example, consider an editor engaged to work with a parent wishing to write about their child's traumatic experiences. They may need to consider the child's current and future rights to privacy and protection, and those of other family members, neighbours and communities they are part of. When considering such issues, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important starting place for the editor.

An editor may need to consider the philosophical basis of a work — what is the author trying to achieve, and how do their aims sit with the editor's views? Understanding one's own values and principles is key to supporting the author.

Renée recommended reflection and reflexivity as important practices in professional editing, and highlighted that the key to these is to cultivate personal awareness. There is also the business consideration: what happens if you do or don't take on this work? In weighing these factors, Renée outlined how awareness of professional experience (your own and the author's), personal history, views and values are vital. It's important to understand the effect of the zeitgeist on professional wellbeing, as trauma can be triggered or exacerbated when public events echo those being revealed in a work.

Renée reminded us that the *Australian standards for editing practice* (IPEd, 2013) clearly set out the scope — and the boundaries or limitations — of an editor's work. Editors must consider the emotional implications of working on sensitive or explicit material. Her practical suggestions for managing the effects of editing sensitive and explicit content included:

- maintain professional boundaries in your relationship with your client
- build in regular breaks from explicit material

- schedule to edit it over a longer than usual period, so as to limit one's daily and weekly exposure
- swap between projects to limit exposure and change the focus of one's work.

It's a valid choice to state on your website whether you work on such material at all, so as to avoid or invite such work offers.

As a counterpoint to the stresses of engaging with sensitive and explicit material, Renée talked about seeking out those things that provide personal respite, restoration and inspiration, such as being in nature, enjoying works of art, intellectual, creative or social pursuits, or performing acts of kindness to others. Professional supervision — individually or in a facilitated group — is another very beneficial strategy to provide a safe and confidential space in which to debrief and seek professional advice.

The presentation was complemented by a valuable Q&A session. Among the resources supplied by participants were fantastic guidelines developed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies on working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors.

Mark Lock from Cultural Safety Editing Service also kindly offered some extensive tips on cultural safety for editors working with First Nations Australians. Rather than presenting them here in abridged form, I refer you to Mark's post of 31 March 2021 in the Secret Editor's Business Facebook group.

Thanks to Renée for this thoughtful presentation and to participants for bringing their ideas and experiences to the event.

Renée's most recent book is [*Editing for sensitivity, diversity and inclusion: a guide for professional editors*](#).

Renée provides project-specific and ongoing professional supervision for writers and editors, individually and in small groups (four to six people). Editors interested in finding out more should contact Renée by email (admin@reneeotmar.com.au).