

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

WRITTEN INTERVIEW

Amanda O'Connell

Editor and editorial educator

About Amanda O'Connell

Amanda O'Connell joined Allen & Unwin as an editor in 1990, working with authors including Peter FitzSimons, Marele Day and Paul Horsfall, whose debut novel, *The Touchstone*, was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. In 1992 she co-edited the *Allen & Unwin Style Guide for Authors and Editors* with Bernadette Foley and attended the Residential Editorial Program. She has worked as a freelancer, and also inhouse at HarperCollins, and has delivered training courses for junior editors at Pan Macmillan and Curtis Brown. Amanda has presented Editing Fiction seminars at Macquarie University and also taught at Writing NSW and the Master of Publishing Program at Sydney University.

Interview

When working as an editor, how do you approach changes with authors? (E.g., Do you prefer to give editorial feedback via a report, notes on the manuscript, over the phone or in person?) Tell us a bit about your practice and how you like to work.

I'm a freelancer, so the way I interact with authors usually depends on the requirements of the publisher who has engaged me to do the work, and sometimes on the preferences of the author. My preferences really don't come into it much: I'm hired to do a job and I'm confident in my ability to turn out a detailed structural report, perhaps suggesting significant areas of rewriting for the author; to make structural suggestions, both major and minor, via notes on a manuscript, often at the same time as copy-editing it; to chat with an author on the phone or via Zoom; or to meet face to face. Or any combination of the above.

In an ideal world, I'd like to start with a structural report, if one were necessary – many manuscripts are already in good shape and don't require one. I'd then move to a discussion with the author, followed by a comprehensive edit of the revised manuscript, involving shifting material around within chapters, paragraphs, sentences – even across the entire document. Finally, I'd do a thorough copy edit, all mixed in with as much interaction as the author desires. In the real world, however, many publishers take control of at least the preliminary structural discussions with an author, as is their right, leaving the editor to sometimes have to diplomatically and respectfully argue that the direction suggested by the publisher may not best serve the manuscript. Is that subversive? Perhaps, but I feel that an editor's first responsibility is to the manuscript, not the publisher. (Happily, most of the publishers I've worked with are amazing professionals whose sense of what a manuscript requires is almost invariably accurate and often inspired.) Also, as a freelance editor I work on one manuscript at a time, and devote myself to understanding it and trying to help realise its potential. An inhouse publisher or editor must juggle numerous titles and almost certainly doesn't have the time to engage as closely with every manuscript as they might wish. It may sound like self-aggrandisement, but I feel that a novel I edited that won the Prime Minister's Literary Award (*A World of Other People* by Steven Carroll) may have achieved some of that success because I was fully involved almost from the time the manuscript was

received by the publishing company. I had the opportunity to work closely with the author by means of a report, phone discussions, and a careful unrushed edit. I believe this helped him realise his vision and benefited the manuscript, perhaps to a significant extent. Unfortunately, it is rare to work one on one like this, which would be my – and I suspect many other editors’ – preference.

How do you get the best out of authors? What practical advice or editing tips would you suggest for others working in this industry?

Before speaking with or writing to an author, I try to make sure that I’m extremely familiar with their manuscript and that I understand what they are trying to achieve. I want the author to know that I have engaged closely with their work and will do my best to help them realise their vision. And I acknowledge that it is *their* vision that is important, not mine or anyone else’s; it is *their* book and my job is to help make it as good as it can be, not to turn it into *my* book or another sort of book altogether. It’s flattering for an author to have someone attend to their work in a positive, affirming way, and praise and diplomacy can work wonders. I’m always generous with praise, though it must be genuine, and I always emphasise that all my suggestions are simply that – suggestions, not commands – that the author can accept, reject, adapt or perhaps take inspiration from as they wish. Above all, I want the author to know that I’m on their side, if you like: an advocate, but one who’ll tell the truth, even if it’s sometimes unpalatable. All these steps build trust, the essential ingredient in a successful author–editor relationship. I’m sure this is standard practice for all editors.

But I don’t think this sort of relationship makes me, or any other editor, a doormat or a handmaiden or any of that sort of garbage. It’s more a question of understanding the editorial role, knowing it’s important and fulfilling it. Good authors know the value of editors and usually acknowledge the help they’ve had.

I’d also advise editors to respect the authors they work with, just as they (editors) wish to be respected themselves. Try not to fall into the trap of thinking along the lines of ‘Aren’t authors hopeless; aren’t I [an editor] wonderful and how lucky is that author to have me’. I think editors should enjoy and value their work but recognise their role in the publishing process; if they don’t, they are possibly pursuing the wrong profession. Of course editors should be well paid and well-treated, and of course some manuscripts are poor, and some authors are rude or incompetent; that said, the core role of an editor, I

believe, is to assist an author to bring their manuscript to its full potential, no matter how slight the content or how disagreeable the author (within limits). I don't mean this to sound overly stoic or self-sacrificing; I just mean that an editor should accept that the author is the star of the show, if you like, but should know that at the same time she, the editor, has an important, even critical, role to play.

On a more mundane level, I would advise editors to read, read and read some more. It's only through reading that you can see what works and what doesn't in a book. And an editor should trust her own judgement; just because a book has won prizes or sold well doesn't mean it's well written or well edited – reading should be a pleasure, but the editorial eye can still be switched on.

I'd also suggest that editors should focus on engaging with the content of a manuscript, rather than concerning themselves unduly with its formatting, which is a growing trend, in my observation. To be fair, many freelance editors are mostly working with authors looking to self-publish, so formatting is important for them. In general, however, while it may be helpful if editors tidy a manuscript in terms of layout, paragraph spacing etc, their core role is to elevate content, not become junior typesetting partners.

Has your editing style changed across your career? If so, has it changed because of experience you've gained, specific author relationships or industry changes?

I don't think my essential style has changed much across my career, but I have definitely become more empathetic and diplomatic with experience. It's not that I set out to be rude or show-offy or disagreeable when I was starting out, and I hope I never was. But youthful gawkins and an excess of enthusiasm and determination possibly caused some awkwardness or hurt feelings that I was blithely unaware of or shrugged off. Age and experience have made me more aware of others' (i.e. authors') frailties and insecurities, and now I consciously try to always be encouraging and to couch comments and constructive criticism in the most positive terms.

I'm also more confident in my own abilities and am no longer in the least overawed by any author. Very early in my freelance career I edited a trilogy by Rodney Hall and agonised over any but the most minor suggestions. I was practically shaking when I spoke to him on the phone. Now I trust my judgement and know that the suggestions I'm making are for the good of the manuscript, in my opinion at least!

What core job aspects have stayed the same in the editorial role across your career despite industry changes?

As I've outlined above, the core role of an editor will always be to engage with a manuscript and assist the author to bring it to its full potential. This hasn't changed and is unlikely to.

Some other core job aspects that haven't changed are tight deadlines and often inadequate budgets, leading to less-than-optimal outcomes, i.e. books that aren't as good as they should be. And the under-payment and overworking of editors continues.

What are your career highlights? (E.g., What has been the most challenging book you've worked on, or a career-defining moment?)

I remember a structural report and edit, followed by a copy edit, at the very beginning of my freelance career, on Monica Attard's *Russia: Which Way Paradise?* These edits were perhaps not objectively super-challenging, but they proved to me that I could be successful at my chosen job, given the outcome of a happy author (who seemed initially a little sensitive and fearful), a happy publisher and very positive reviews, achieved within a fairly tight timeframe. It was a great confidence boost to get that first major job successfully under my belt.

Edits that were definitely challenging include my work on Christopher Kremmer's book about the deposed royal dynasty of Laos, *Bamboo Palace*, which was extensively rewritten and rewritten again, until the eleventh hour, due to the highly professional author's unearthing of new information. By contrast, my work on Mike Monroe's *The Last Bushrangers* involved extensive research and adapting and rearranging the work of an enthusiastic first-time author. Monroe had amassed a huge amount of material concerning his notorious titular forebears and at first struggled to sort the wheat from the chaff while remaining cognisant of family sensitivities. Perhaps most memorably, I spent many hours researching and adapting material (including working till 10pm on New Year's Eve, the day before I left very early on a long-planned holiday) for Martin Jarvis's *Written by Mrs Bach*. The spark and flair of the author's voice were being deadened under the weight of the technical information he needed to impart, and the one thousand or so manuscript pages he provided from a number of drafts didn't help. Ultimately, recapturing Jarvis's charismatic voice in the relatively slim published volume

helped to earn him a professorship and a film deal. With all these authors, I enjoyed excellent professional relationships and mutual respect.

Unfortunately, not every challenging experience can be positive. Of the well-known authors I've worked with, the rudest and most challenging by far (indeed the rudest person I've ever worked with in any capacity) was a prize-winning Australian expat. She was self-pitying, deluded (she extensively plagiarised Wikipedia despite declaring it beneath contempt), imperious and vituperative in the extreme. I was the inhouse editor for her publications, and though I engaged extremely competent freelance editors to work on the manuscripts, I was deeply involved in every part of the editorial process and was in frequent communication with the author. While rudeness can never be condoned or even meekly accepted, I tried to let it all be water off a duck's back, and shielded the freelance editors and more junior inhouse staff from the author's ill-informed attacks. I also referred the rudeness up the line to the publisher and head of the department, who were very supportive and engaged with the author in an attempt to curb her fractiousness and to gently explain to her that the company's hardworking staff and freelancers should be thanked, not belittled. Eventually the author's manuscripts were successfully published and well received. As I indicated earlier, understanding that she was insecure was the key to managing her and the editorial process.

In more positive terms, the numerous fiction and non-fiction works of Tom Keneally that I've edited have shown me how a highly professional and immensely talented author reacts positively and generously to editing, and the same can be said of Steven Carroll, for whom I have edited many novels. The fact that the writing style of both these authors may not always be to my personal taste has also illustrated and reinforced my belief that my core role is to engage with a manuscript and to help bring the author's vision to fruition, regardless of my feelings about how I might prefer the manuscript to be written.

Another author who taught me a lot is Tara Moss, a consummate professional. Her willingness to learn and improve showed me that you can't underestimate authors' devotion to their craft and their desire to work with editorial assistance to bring out the very best in their manuscripts. Moss, for example, might be dismissed in some quarters as being too beautiful to take seriously as an author, or as cashing in on her celebrity, but nothing is further from the truth.

What is the role of an editor, and where do they sit between the author and the publisher?

In my opinion, the editor is equal to the publisher. She has a different role to play, and is not in any way the subordinate of the publisher. She is not employed to merely carry out the publisher's bidding. Nor is the editor the unthinking tool of the author. The editor's allegiance is to the manuscript, and she should (politely, diplomatically) challenge the publisher and the author in fulfilling that role. However, the editor should listen to both publisher and author carefully and consider their desires and viewpoints seriously. The editor must pay attention both to the publisher's brief and the author's vision, which fortunately usually align, given that the publisher has contracted the manuscript in the first place. But she must be prepared to advocate for the manuscript.

Ultimately, though, the editor (and publisher) should bear in mind that it's the author who has created the book and whose name is on it when it's released into the world, and who will feel the joy and sorrow of reviews good and bad. So any weighting of preference, for want of a better term, should probably fall on the side of the author.

Why do you think editors aren't more celebrated as part of the book process? What makes the industry/society keep this part of the process as 'invisible mending'?

I don't think there's a conspiracy to keep editors hidden from the world at large. Just as the general public wouldn't know who edited a book, they equally wouldn't know who the sales reps were who got it into shops, or the publicists who arranged for the author to be interviewed, or the publisher who contracted the book, or often even which company published the book. And why should they? In every industry, including the creative ones, there are front people and support people and back-room people. But I do think the public knows that books are edited, even if people sometimes have misguided opinions about what editing is: simply fixing the spelling and grammar is a common belief. Readers also express opinions about how a book might have been improved: 'I didn't like the ending' or 'I didn't like that character' and 'Why didn't the editor fix it?' – this last sentiment revealing another misapprehension as to the editor's role. In reality, of course, the editor is neither a mere spellchecker nor a tyrant who wields power over authorial choices. Does there need to be more awareness of what an editor does? I don't believe so. I don't understand all the roles behind films or TV or restaurants or fashion or smartphone apps or the design and construction of buildings, but I can still enjoy them and know that the finished products are the work of many people, not just the front person.

If there were to be more awards for editors, would that be a good thing? In theory, yes, but how can the editing process be uncovered, judged and compared? Wouldn't it take almost as long to judge an edit as to do the edit itself? The celebration and recognition that editors need and deserve is financial, I believe. Editors are notoriously underpaid and overworked and should be afforded the same salaries and benefits as those working in sales, marketing and so on.

Has it been hard to sustain a career as an editor? What keeps/kept you committed to working as an editor in an industry where your work is largely unacknowledged? What is it about the job that makes/made this 'invisible' career fulfilling?

I've been lucky in that I've never had a shortage of work as a freelancer and have also worked inhouse with many wonderful colleagues and interesting authors at Allen & Unwin and HarperCollins Publishers. Those authors and colleagues have frequently acknowledged my work warmly and generously. Every editorial job has been a new adventure, and I've learned something from every manuscript and author. This may sound Pollyanna-ish, but it's true that I've enjoyed my career of forty-odd years very much and am only slowing down now because I'm financially secure and have realised that there are other things I'd rather be doing. That's when you know it's time to stop! Of course, there have been some tedious manuscripts and many late nights and stressful deadlines and stropky authors and colleagues, but as soon as I became an editor (I abandoned a career in law and the public service), I knew it was the job for me. I felt I had found my vocation.

I suppose it's fun to see books that I've edited for sale in shops or reviewed in various publications, but it's the day-to-day work that provides the satisfaction – the contentment of a job well done – not the sales figures or the prizes that the titles I've worked on might achieve. And often helping a small title reach its potential is more satisfying than working with celebrated authors who know what they're doing and need very little guidance.

I have to acknowledge that I've been fortunate to have a partner whose income has made up for the insufficiencies of an editor's pay and, as noted above, this is the area in which I believe editors should be better recognised and celebrated – with salaries and conditions equivalent to those earned by others in publishing, as well as in other industries.

I also acknowledge that I'm stepping back from editorial work before needing to engage or grapple deeply with the arrival of AI – a development that perhaps may have affected my enjoyment of my career.

What makes Australian writing so unique?

Aside from the writing of First Nations Australians, with which I have very limited experience as an editor, I'm not sure that Australian writing is unique. Of course, there are settings and dialogue and expressions unique to Australia, but doesn't every country, in its writing, reveal and celebrate its own uniqueness? And is any extra uniqueness desirable? Writing should tap into universal themes, even while rooted in the local.

What advice would you give to young editors starting in the business?

First, I'd advise them to understand what the job entails before signing up to be an editor. I know from my own teaching at universities and other institutions, and from friends who have taught or taken courses, that some editorial students – perhaps reflecting the common public view – mistakenly see editing as a relatively straightforward, even easy job that almost anyone can do. They need to know that it entails more than just minor text correction, and also that there's very little glamour involved. Socialising at book launches and writers festivals can be fun, but these are tiny parts of the job. (In fact, book launches have been a rarity throughout my career and usually editors are too busy to get to festival events held during, or even outside, working hours.) There's also a fair amount of deadline stress without the financial pay-off that workers in other deadline-oriented professions might enjoy.

Next, as mentioned above, I believe reading widely is essential and it's what I would strongly recommend to young editors. I would also advise being open to constructive criticism, and being open to learning, always. I'd advise kindness and respect towards authors, while valuing your own talents and judgement. I'd also tell any young editor that editing is not a half-hearted job; it requires care and devotion, and an edit done without sufficient attention can let down the book, the author and the publisher – as well as the reading public. I'd encourage young editors to speak up for better remuneration and conditions, but to acknowledge that success in that area comes with the responsibility to do a careful, fully engaged job every time.

How would you define a successful edit?

As you'll have guessed by now, a successful edit is one where the manuscript has been brought to its potential, the author has realised their vision and is happy with the published book, and the publisher is also satisfied with the outcome. The editor will have enjoyed a trusting, amicable relationship with the author while fulfilling the publisher's brief to the best of her ability, all the time bearing in mind that the first duty is to the manuscript and to elevating it, she hopes, to excellence. Easy!

About Beyond the Margins

Beyond the Margins is an oral history and interview project developed by the Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd) to document the experiences, editorial practices and publishing histories of Australian editors.

Featuring both written and audio interviews, the series preserves editorial knowledge and celebrates the people whose work has shaped Australian publishing.

The interviews were conducted by **Jacqueline Blanchard** and developed in collaboration with **Margot Lloyd** and **Felicity Dunning**, whose editorial expertise helped shape the written and audio content. IPEd coordinated the project, production and publication to create a lasting resource for the editing profession.

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