

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

WRITTEN INTERVIEW

Bernadette Foley

Publisher and editor

About Bernadette Foley

Across my career, for over 35 years, I have worked in-house and freelance for many of Australia's leading publishing companies, including in the role of fiction and non-fiction publisher at Hachette Australia and Pan Macmillan. As a publisher and editor, I have worked with well-loved authors, including Di Morrissey and Thomas Mayo, Ned Manning and Professor Marcia Langton, and I've helped many emerging writers to build their careers.

For services to the publishing industry, I received the George Robertson Award.

Since 2016, I have run Broadcast Books, working directly with writers, assisting and encouraging them to develop their writing skills through individual mentoring and workshops. As well, I work with authors to publish their books independently to a professional standard. I established and lectured in the UTS Graduate Certificate in Editing and Publishing for many years. Also, I have lectured in the Masters of Publishing at Sydney University. I lead online workshops for the Australian Writers Centre.

I believe it is important to share my knowledge of the publishing industry with writers, so they can fully understand the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in creating good books. I love stories – real and imagined – and enjoy working with people to broadcast and share their stories effectively.

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.

The way I give editorial feedback depends partly on the author's preference. I nearly always provide a written report and a structural edit with notes in the margins on the manuscript.

In the editorial report I focus on what I believe are the main issues in the manuscript that need attention, as well as identifying its strengths. I try to keep the report to around four to five pages; any longer and it can overwhelm the author. Also, if many issues need attention, then perhaps the editing and rewriting should be done over a couple of drafts – time and budget permitting. In that case, an initial report will focus on the major issues; once the author has dealt with them, a second report might identify smaller points that they can work on in the subsequent draft.

Talking on the phone or meeting in person can be invaluable. It gives me the opportunity to explain in more detail than in the report why I think something is or isn't working in the manuscript. Also, the author can raise any problems they are having with the writing or discuss their ideas for developing the text.

In these meetings it's exciting when the author and editor come up with a solution or a different approach to improve the writing or the structure of the text. New characters have been created and chapter orders changed completely, all through talking and throwing ideas around. Of course, the editor shouldn't take over – these meetings should assist the author to come up with their own ideas or solutions.

If an author delivers their manuscript for editing in batches, the process outlined above still works. However, I find the phone meetings are even more useful. Ideally, I will give written and verbal feedback within a few days of receiving the text. Then the author can

take this feedback on board, as they wish, and it may help them as they write the next batch of chapters.

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

Always respect the author's skills and talent and keep them informed about the editing process or the whole publishing process.

Here are some practical tips, in no particular order:

- If possible, immerse yourself in the manuscript so you can really understand what the author is aiming to do. This means reading it (in just one or two sittings, if possible), give yourself at least a few days to think about it, and then start on the editing.
- The publishing company may have contracted the work because of the author's unique voice. If you try to edit out their voice or change it substantially, you might destroy the originality, sparkle and appeal of the writing. This can also apply to correcting grammar – a sentence can be perfectly compelling, humorous, or tragic, even though the grammar is 'wrong'.
- Be sincere. Never say that the writing or an idea about the book is good if it isn't. Authors rely on editors for criticism to help them improve their writing. Be aware of how you deliver the criticism. Give it in a way that you would be happy to receive it, if you were the author.
- Praise is always welcome. If you sincerely think the author has written a beautiful sentence or created an outstanding character, etc., tell them. It's easy to forget to do this and yet praise can be so encouraging for the author and give them confidence.
- Don't assume the author knows all the steps in the editing process, even if they have been published before. Give them the opportunity to ask questions; email them to let them know where the manuscript is up to in the production process – when you send the text to the typesetter, for example. Do whatever you can to help the author to become involved in all aspects of their book's publication. In fact, email them to ask how they are, send articles they might be interested in, or tell them about book events, for example. Remember that the writing life can be solitary and many authors will be delighted to hear from you.

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?

As my confidence increased, I could help the author to do more with their writing though the editing process. That is, I gained the confidence to suggest major changes that I believe will improve the quality and clarity of the writing. Equally, I have the confidence not to edit heavily if it isn't necessary. This ability has grown through editing many manuscripts across non-fiction and literary and commercial fiction – and talking with authors about their views and experiences with the editing process. It's ongoing; I learn something about the practice of editing with every project I work on.

People, including many book reviewers, often say that the standard of editing isn't as good as it used to be. I don't know what era they are looking back to. We are editing on screen instead of using pencil on paper, but editors are still aiming to do the best possible job on every book they work on.

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

My career has evolved – from trainee to junior editor, editor to senior editor, commissioning editor to publisher. Now I am working for myself, running my business Broadcast Books. Throughout my career, the essential aspects of editing and helping an author to produce the most appropriate book for the readership has not changed. It's always essential at the start of the editing process to define the readership and find out what those readers will need and want from the book. It's also helpful to understand the book's market and what it is competing with.

The writer will always be the book's creator, no matter how the industry might change. It's important to keep this in mind now when AI is more widely used. Authors might use AI as a writing tool, but the work will still come from the author's own experiences, knowledge and imagination.

Recently I read *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius* by A. Scott Berg. Perkins edited F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemmingway, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, among others. I was struck by the similarities between his role in the 1920s and what editors do today. The fundamentals remain the same.

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

The publishing industry has given me some tremendous high points in my career so far. This question also asks about a challenging book I've worked on, and the one I think of immediately is *The Voice to Parliament Handbook*, written by Thomas Mayo and Kerry O'Brien, published by Melissa Kayser, Hardie Grant Explore.

The two authors, Melissa and I put everything we had into crafting chapters that would be clear, comprehensive and give readers the details they would need when they voted in the Voice to Parliament referendum in 2023. We were committed to achieving a 'Yes' vote, so our challenge was to fully inform a wide range of people and give them objective reasons to vote for the Voice. We felt a shared pressure to get every word right, to make every sentence work hard, and for the writing to be clear, engaging and accessible.

The authors started to write in December 2022, and the book went to print in March 2023 for a mid-May release. My brother Julian was perceptive when he said that the writing and editing process sounded like 'painting a boat while it's sailing through a tempest'. Thomas and Kerry had to make essential changes at the last minute when the wording for the referendum question and the proposed changes to the Constitution were finally confirmed.

This edit was both a challenge and a career highlight. It's a rare privilege to work on such an important a book. *The Voice to Parliament Handbook* was named ABIA Book of the Year 2024. Sadly, the referendum failed.

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

The editor – freelance or inhouse – is paid by the publishing company and so their primary responsibilities are always to the publisher. The exception is when an author is publishing independently and commissions the editor directly.

An editor's role often extends beyond working on the manuscript; you become a communications point for the author and your colleagues. For example, you can keep the author informed about the progress of their work and give your colleagues information that will help them to promote and sell the book.

The publishing team are the initial champions for a book within the company. Spruik it and let your colleagues know why you think it is good, as long as you are sincere. As the editor, you can help to start the buzz inhouse that will spread via the sales and publicity teams to booksellers, the media and then on to readers. That's very exciting.

A major aspect of the editor's role is collaboration. A great feature of the publishing process, in my opinion, is that no one ever needs to work in isolation. If problems arise, you discuss them with the appropriate colleagues and deal with them together. If you'd like a second opinion on a sentence or a draft back-cover blurb, you can ask another editor. And when great things happen for a book you worked on, you can share the news with everyone, starting with 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'?

That's because the majority of editors are women!

I believe this is a bigger issue in Australia than it is in the US. Here editors might be described as 'midwives', while an editor in the US might be called a 'team leader', a book's 'cheer leader', or other dynamic sporting labels. A team leader is upfront and visible, and that's how we should think of editors in Australia too.

'Invisible mending', though, is a good thing. If it's possible to detect where text has been edited, then the editor is not doing their job well. Also, a book's creator is its author, so it's often appropriate for the editor to stay in the background and encourage the author to take centre stage. But we shouldn't stand so far from the limelight that we are in total darkness.

Think about these questions: Why is the book designer usually credited on the imprint page but not the editor? (I think the designer and editor should both be credited.) Why do our publishing colleagues often say that they don't really understand what editors do? Many people say, 'So, you must spend your whole day reading.' (Lovely thought, so far from the reality.)

As editors we should celebrate our skills and achievements and let others know what we actually do. I have helped to establish the REP (Residential Editorial Program), taught editing at a post-grad level and mentored other editors, as part of my contribution to

bring editors and our work out into the light. I congratulate the team at UQP for setting up the Australian Editor Series. Thank you!

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?

The writers! And their stories.

I work with talented, interesting and intelligent people, who love words and ideas. They tell me stories – real and imagined – and I help them to bring those stories out to readers. That is what makes this an amazing job.

What makes Australian writing unique?

Writing from every country and each community is unique. At the same time, there are similarities in values and styles, for example, that cross borders and oceans. So, I don't want to generalise about what might make Australian writing unique. However, I can say that in Australia we are incredibly fortunate to have brilliant Indigenous writers, and this has always been the case. Think, for example, about David Unaipon (1872–1967) who wrote long ago, and Kirli Saunders who is creating today.

I am privileged to work with Indigenous writers, including Professor Marcia Langton, Terri Janke, Victor Steffensen and Thomas Mayo. They generously share their knowledge as Indigenous leaders in their writing and in their daily lives. They show all Australians different, positive ways to view our country and world and how we can interact with others and with nature.

How would you define a successful edit?

One aspect of a successful edit is that it helps the author to write a book that suits its readership and market. That's why it's essential for editors to know the target readership for each manuscript they are about to edit.

The editor may be presented with a manuscript that is poorly structured, dull, too long or short, and they are expected to ‘fix it up’. They might make astonishing improvements that only the author and perhaps some publishing colleagues are aware of – back to the ‘invisible mending’. That invisible but invaluable work can be part of a successful edit.

I would never equate a successful edit with high sales figures – although it can help. A well-edited book might fail, and a poorly edited one can be a mega seller.

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

You don’t become an editor to make a fortune, but nor should you work all hours for a very low wage. If you sometimes have to work after hours to meet a deadline, that is fine and an accepted part of project-based work. Also, you’ll usually have to read manuscripts in your own time, but if it’s a good manuscript that can be one of the joys of the job. However, regularly working long hours, and being expected to reply to work emails outside of standard working hours, for example, are not reasonable work practices – and with the emails, perhaps no longer legal. If you are in that position, Talk to your manager.

Call authors on the phone sometimes and don’t rely only on email correspondence. The author might be amazed, surprised and very happy to hear from you.

Learn about all aspects of the book industry (especially the financial side) and ask your colleagues in other departments what they do in their roles. Talk to booksellers too. The more you know about the industry, the more enjoyment and fulfilment you are likely to gain from your job. Also, this knowledge will help you to be a good editor – you can bring more to every book you work on, and you can help authors to understand the industry and their essential place in it.

Create ways for people from various publishing companies, bookshops and industry organisations to get together. Post-Covid, opportunities to network are still rare, so set them up yourself. It’s valuable and enjoyable to immerse yourself in the industry and meet your peers from beyond your own workplace.

Throughout your publishing career, be open to new ideas, learn everything you can, immerse yourself in projects and have fun!

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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