

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

WRITTEN INTERVIEW

Bryony Cosgrove

Publisher and editor

About Bryony Cosgrove

Bryony Cosgrove has over forty-five years' experience in the publishing industry both as an editor and publisher. She is a recipient of the Fellowship of Australian Writers Barbara Ramsden Award for Editors, and the Beatrice Davis New York Residential Editorial Fellowship. In 2007, her book *Portrait of a Friendship: the letters of Barbara Blackman and Judith Wright 1950-2000* was published by Miegunyah Press. She has lectured in editing and publishing programs at Deakin and RMIT universities and coordinated the Publishing and Communications Program at the University of Melbourne from 2010 to 2013. She has an MA in Life Writing and a PhD in History, both from Monash University, and is currently writing a biography of an Australian-born silent film star.

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.

When I was fully employed in the profession my preferred approach was to meet the author in person, if possible, in their own home to get a clear sense of what part of their lives their writing occupied (even such observations as whether the author had a dedicated writing room or wrote on the kitchen table when the children were in bed). Getting an author to talk about their work provides clues for the editor as to how they might go about working with a particular manuscript – which parts the author is uneasy about and which parts they will not change under any circumstances. It's also useful to get a sense of where an author places their own work on the shelves – which authors do they themselves admire/dislike? Are they hardback lovers or do they grasp the role of paperback publishing in the industry?

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

The working relationship established between an author and an editor is very important. Some authors describe this process as being like a conversation – the tossing back and forth of ideas. As an editor you need to be a good listener, be discreet, be widely read, be aware of the workings of the publishing process and how the editorial role fits into this and be aware of the financial aspects of publishing – it is a commercial enterprise, not a charitable institution. Editors are invisible menders/sounding boards – the well-edited book does not show the editing. A good structural editor must be capable of identifying and working with an author's voice, never over-riding it, and must understand the author's aims. The editor should have a well-tuned sense for something that does not quite ring true – and this could be for a range of reasons – and then have the ability to raise this constructively with the author.

Editors must be possessed of consummate tact, a perfect memory for trivia, a working knowledge of a couple of languages other than English, the ability to hold several themes in their mind at once, a passing familiarity with cooking, botany, architecture, football, forensic science and the current political climate of every country in the world, and the stamina to endure the excited phone call from the author who has just resolved something that was troubling them – in my case one call came through to the maternity hospital where I had given birth 24 hours before. ‘Just wanted to run something by you. And by the way, did you have a boy or a girl?’

The author needs to trust the editor’s judgement, to be able to use the editor as a sounding board for ideas. Structural editing will go as far as the author will allow it to go. This can range from some minor alterations to issues concerning tone and choice of words, accuracy of research (as much of a problem in fiction as in non-fiction if not done carefully), as well as plot, character and settings.

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 modified my approach over the years as I both became more experienced and confident in my own work but also learnt when to leave well alone and became more skilled at identifying just how far I could push an author. I also very quickly learnt to work using a 2B pencil, NOT a red pen, in the days when editing was done on hard copy manuscripts. A pencilled comment or marking is a suggestion not a correction. Unfortunately, Track Changes repeats the red pen intrusion, though I guess we and authors mostly learnt to work with it.

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

The intellectual work of an editor, the establishing of an author-editor working relationship most importantly, I would hope has not changed, however the actual nuts and bolts of the job have, with much if not all editorial work now taking place on-screen using Track Changes or similar programs. I also wonder if there are now fewer inhouse editors, possibly leading to less of a sense of ownership of a project.

A major difference is probably the entry point into the industry for editors. When I started my first job as a trainee editor at Cassell Publishers in Sydney in 1979, there were no editing courses/degrees on offer. I had completed an honours degree majoring in History and English at the ANU the previous year and was fortunate enough to get an entry level job in publishing. I was trained on the job by Cassell Senior Editor Jane Arms, who supervised everything I did and allowed me to sit in on her meetings with authors, designers and production managers. She also arranged for me to spend time out with sales reps and publicists so that I could gain a broader sense of how the whole industry functioned. Invaluable.

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

It is always a thrill and a challenge to read an early draft of a manuscript and be left wondering how an author has created it, while still being aware of how it could be shaped to fully achieve its potential. This can be the case with both fiction and non-fiction. I have had the privilege of working with novelists such as Alex Miller, Amy Witting and Blanche d'Alpuget, however I think my favourite genre is biography/autobiography because of its deeply personal style melded with the techniques of fiction writing. When working with actors Reg Livermore and Ruth Cracknell and director Jim Sharman on their respective memoirs I was particularly fascinated by their understanding of silences and pauses in writing. Perhaps the most challenging book I ever worked on was a highly illustrated book on the Great Barrier Reef, which had over thirty contributors who were all experts in their respective fields, at various institutions around Australia, and had varying levels of ability in terms of writing for a lay audience. Some were open to editorial advice, and some were not. And some were not on speaking terms with each other. It all came together, the book was published successfully, and it won various awards both in Australia and overseas.

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

Ideally, the publisher and editor work closely and present a united front to the author. The publisher is responsible for the bigger picture – putting together the package to secure the manuscript, negotiating with agents and/or authors: advance, rights sales, marketing plans etc. The editor focuses on the manuscript but needs to be aware at all stages of the agreed budget, timeframe and market for the work in question.

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'?

The author/editor working relationship is confidential. The author can be metaphorically exposing themselves with an early draft of a manuscript – the strengths and the weaknesses all on display. Were an editor to talk in detail about their work on a particular manuscript, identifying the book and author, it would quite probably destroy this relationship and would not help sales. The reading public generally does not really understand the role of the editor and doesn't need to in order to enjoy a book. This has much to do with editing remaining an invisible profession – “hiding under a bushel of discretion”, to quote Phillip Adams.

Sometimes authors acknowledge their editors, in print and/or in person, and sometimes they do not. It's no secret in the publishing industry, however, that sometimes the editor will have fallen in love with the draft of a manuscript, with the idea of a book and championed the cause of that writer and that book right through to the top, arguing the case all the way and showing how a book could be made to work in a particular way. It is because of the editor's support that a manuscript is even contracted in some cases. Publishing companies need to nurture their editors – and considering the rates of pay it's the least they could do - and acknowledge individual skills and provide a mix of inhouse on the job training with more experienced staff as well as out of house training.

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?

Editors tend to stay in the profession because it's immensely satisfying to work with an author on their manuscript and help them to shape it so that it achieves its true potential.

I've never really had a problem with the term invisible mender. Financially, it can be a challenge to sustain a career as an editor and in the years that I worked as a freelancer I took on a range of projects, including company reports and government work, both of which were much better paid than trade publishing editorial jobs.

What makes Australian writing so unique?

Financially it can be harder to make books work in this country because of the size of the population, therefore the selling of rights can swing a deal. But uniquely Australian writing? Is that how Australian works would be marketed overseas? Does a book need to work first and foremost in its own home market? I think the question really refers to fiction. The content of non-fiction books can be easily copied/reproduced for an overseas audience by their own home market.

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

Broaden your experience by working across all areas of the industry if you possibly can – in particular, production and marketing, so you are fully aware of the whole process. You need to understand how all the costs work and how a book finds its audience.

How would you define a successful edit?

The author is happy with the final manuscript, the publisher is happy with the finished book, the reviews are glowing and the book finds a market. Successful editing is invisible to the reader.

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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