

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

AUDIO INTERVIEW: TRANSCRIPT

Erica Wagner

Editor and publisher

About Erica Wagner

Erica Wagner is a painter and collage artist, book publisher and creative consultant to storytellers. As an editor and publisher, she has worked on many ground-breaking and award-winning books for children and young adults. She was an editor and later Associate Publisher at Penguin Books Australia from 1988–1998, established Silverfish, a new children's list, for Duffy & Snellgrove in 1999, and was a children's publisher at Allen & Unwin from 2000–2020. In 2015 she founded the graphic novel micro-press Twelve Panels Press with Bernard Caleo and Elizabeth MacFarlane. The first children's book editor to receive the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship in 1999, Erica was awarded the Dromkeen Medal in 2017, the Australian Book Industry's Pixie O'Harris Award in 2021 and the Australian Publishers Association's George Robertson Award in 2022.

Passionate about creative collaborations and illustrated storytelling in particular, Erica co-facilitated the inaugural Octopus Story Camp for Top End writers and artists in 2019 with Johanna Bell. As well as generating several published works, Octopus was the impetus for Erica to illustrate her first picture book, *Hope is the Thing*, written by Johanna Bell and published by Allen & Unwin in February 2023. *Hope is the Thing* went on to win the 2024 CBCA New Illustrator Award and as well as the Picture Fiction category of the 2024 Wilderness Society Environment Awards for Children's Literature. Erica's latest book is *The Colt from Old Regret* written by Dianne Wolfer and published by NLA Publishing in 2025.

Interview

Jacqueline: You have had an extraordinary career. You began as a children's book editor at Penguin Books in 1988 before establishing Silverfish with Duffy & Snell Grove in 1999. You then spent two decades as a publisher at Allen & Unwin, while also receiving numerous honours including the Beatrice Davis Fellowship, the John Keene Medal, the Pixie O'Harris Award and the George Robertson Award.

Erica Wagner: I'll look forward to telling you that story. I'll just add one other little detail, which I always forget as well, but with two colleagues. I'm one of the co, um, publishers of 12 Panels Press, which is a micrographic novel press, and we've only published two books, and we made that happen in 2015. But the most successful book from that was *After Ahmed's Still Alive*. So that ran alongside my time at Allen and Unwin.

To answer your question, I always feel like I have to tell my life story when I talk about how I started and how this even happened.

I'll just do it in dot points because otherwise it's very long.

I fell in love with a poet who was living in a fishing village in Cornwall when I was travelling when I was 19. He was much older than me. We wrote letters. When I came back to Australia, he came out, we went to North Queensland. When we got together, it was like we hardly knew each other. It was a bit of love at first sight. Then it was, *Oh, what is this?* I said, "Well, if you're going to be here just for six months," which was his visa, "let's see a bit of the country."

So we drove north, we worked on farms. We did a whole lot of weird things. Then I was pregnant with our son, and then we got married.

We actually got married up on the tomato fields of Bowen in North Queensland. Then we came back to Melbourne.

Why is that important? Because he was a poet, so penniless.

I had worked at a bookshop from the age of 15 to this time. I did one year of uni. I did one year of an arts degree straight out of school. I did well at art and English when I was at school and sort of just thought, "Oh, I should do that." But I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I knew I

didn't want to be a teacher. I didn't want to have a conventional life, I guess. So that's why I deferred, and that whole chunk happened in between.

I'll just skip over that time because, being a poet, we went to lots of poetry readings. We were in that underground poetry world. I did a poster for La Mama Poet, which is something in Melbourne where there were readings. So I went to a million poetry readings. I overdosed on poetry readings.

But now I've actually, weirdly, come back to poetry. I love poetry again, but it was a bit too much at that time. I just needed to be the one who earned the money when the kids were small.

So I went begging back to the bookshop where I'd been when I was 15, and I said, "Can you give me a job?" And they did, which was really nice.

So I was working there three and a half days a week, had a one-year-old and a three-year-old. During that time, I had excellent managers, and those managers always told me to read everything. So I just read everything and, because I had little kids, I was in charge of the kids' section.

I had all these semi-crazy ways of organising it because people would come rushing in and say, "I want a book for a ten-year-old and a twelve-year-old and a three-year-old." I thought, "Oh, I'll arrange it by ages. That will help." But then nobody could find anything because there were bits here and bits there, and the ages don't work neatly like that.

Anyway, a lot of everything I've learned in my whole career is by trial and error. So I made a lot of errors, but also had a lot of fun along the way.

It was while I was dusting shelves or something that I thought, "I want to be an editor. I want to work with books, but not with the public."

I had no idea what an editor did. I don't even know why I knew what an editor was, but I must have heard the word somewhere.

So I wrote to Penguin Books and said, "What do you have to do to be an editor?" Because I thought I had one year of an arts degree. It was hard for me to study and do that with everything else that was going on.

I got this excellent letter back from Bruce Sims. Bruce, up in the sky now, really set me on this path because he wrote back and didn't say, "You've got to have an honours degree in English."

He said, "Just try and get any job you can in publishing and work your way up." He also said that secretarial skills would be good.

Of course, I had no secretarial skills.

Then a trainee editor job came up in 1987 and I applied. Six months later, it would have been about May or June 1988, I got a phone call. I had just been yelling at the kids and picked up the phone saying, "Hello?" Then it was, "Hello, it's Julie Watts here from Penguin. Are you still interested in the job?"

I said, "Yes."

"Can you come in tomorrow?"

"Yes."

We really didn't have any money, so I wore my best clothes, which were a pair of pants and a rainbow-coloured jumper. This is the funny story that has done the rounds. I also had these feather earrings, so I was a bit of a hippie kind of person.

Anyway, I went to Ringwood and had the interview with Julie. I got really excited because I really wanted the job.

I got that job, and that's when I met Julie Watts, who was absolutely critical in my career, and Jane Godwin, who was there at the time. Jane had been working in the marketing department. What had happened was there used to be just one publishing department and the kids' books were part of that. Julie took over the children's division and was building her staff. She brought Jane across from publicity and marketing and was looking for the next person.

I think she was very visionary because she knew children's editing is a very specialised skill. You need the right person, and you can train that person, but it's hard. You can't necessarily put someone into the role who doesn't really want to do it because you have to be a bit in touch with your inner child to work in children's books.

Of course, then I was petrified because in the interview she had said, "Can you type?" I had said, "Yes."

The day before I started I thought, *Oh no, they're just going to find out I can't type.*

So I got there on my first day and instead of asking me to type, they said, "Can you read this Victor Kelleher manuscript? Can you read this children's book?"

Joan always tells the funny story that I came into her office and said, “How do you put the paper into the typewriter?”

Back then you made multiple copies. Every letter you wrote, even an internal memo or correspondence to authors, had a copy placed in a tray called the **circ file**, which circulated around the office so everyone knew what everyone else was doing.

That’s how you learned to write letters. I didn’t know how to do anything like that, so I could watch what everyone else did and learn from them.

Of course, when they tried to read my letters, because I was using the correcting ribbon all the time, they were illegible, so I always had to handwrite what I’d written.

It was pretty comical.

But it was a very, very good training ground. Again, I learned everything the hard way. I made so many mistakes, but that’s how you learn.

Julie supervised me, and I think that’s the other thing I feel sad about nowadays: that kind of really intensive training, with the opportunity and time to shadow someone.

One of the first books was *Looking for Alibrandi*. It had already been at Penguin for some time. Melina had sent it in, and a reader’s report had been done by Moira Robinson, who was brilliant. I learned so much from her about how to write a reader’s report.

Moira was Penguin’s trusted reader. If there was ever a manuscript that needed serious consideration, it would be sent to Moira.

She was quite eccentric. There was never a deadline. She would do it when she felt like it. Sometimes months would go by and you’d think, *Oh, Moira...* but you couldn’t rush her because when the report came, it was always fantastic.

She had done a reader’s report for *Looking for Alibrandi*. Everyone liked it, and it was one of the first manuscripts I read.

I said, “I love this,” because I really did love it.

Julie said, “Well, you can edit it.”

It wasn’t my very first book, but it was one of my first.

I would edit it, writing comments in pencil on the hard copy, and then Julie would look at it and add all these other things.

There's a bit of a myth that I edited *Looking for Alibrandi*. I did—I was Melina's editor—but it was definitely a joint effort between Julie and me.

That's how I learned. I'd look at a page and make a few little marks, and Julie would add all these other suggestions. I'd think, *I would never have even thought of doing that*.

The other key editor I learned from there was Kay Ryan, who I think was freelancing by then. She had been working with Isobelle Carmody. *Obernewtyn* had already been published, but the new manuscript, *The Farseekers*, had come in.

I was shadowing Kay's editing. I wasn't a big fantasy reader at the time. I loved Tolkien and Narnia, but I wasn't immersed in fantasy.

When I first tried to read it, I just couldn't get into it. But I had a long commute because we only had one car. We were sharing the driving, so we read the manuscript aloud to each other in the car.

That's how I got into it. Reading it aloud helped me hear what was working and what wasn't—whether something was too long, unsatisfying, or whether a character disappeared.

I then wrote a report on *The Farseekers*, and because Isobelle responded well to that report, I was allowed to shadow Kay during her editing.

That was incredibly instructive for me as well.

Here's your passage with **only** the verbal fillers, repeated words, false starts and obvious transcription artefacts removed. I have **not** rewritten the content or changed the meaning.

Jacqueline: You've said lots of really great things. One of them was that editing is—you've got the technical skills. You have to have the training. I think we've been reading *Editing Conversations*, and Jackie mentioned that you can have a test for learning the standards of being a good editor.

We all learn that at different stages, and often by making mistakes. But then there's this idea—you mentioned children's editors and publishers having to be in touch with their inner child.

So I guess, what do you think those qualities are?

If you were looking to hire—and you probably have done a lot of hiring in your career—what are the standout differences between children’s editors in your children’s department compared to adult editors?

We have a children’s department at UQP, and I’m amazed by how much work, and how many versions and drafts, get developed, which I don’t think you could pull off to the same extent in adult publishing. It gets really creative in that space, and authors are very receptive to it. It seems to be a much more dynamic kind of project to work on.

What are your thoughts on that?

Erica Wagner: I completely agree, and that’s why I’ve surrounded myself with a few books here to demonstrate that as well.

I think what’s interesting about children’s books is that you’re doing them for children. So you’ve got to think of the child reader, whatever age they are. But you’re also thinking of the adults who are buying the books and who are the intermediaries reading them to the child—the teachers and parents, and so on.

The qualities you need are to be able to discern those two things and to be passionate about children’s books. You’ve got to be knowledgeable. You’ve got to genuinely love children’s books, because otherwise you’re not going to edit them well.

That’s what you try to look for if you’re recruiting an editor. You’re looking at what they’ve read. Do they collect books? Are they interested? Have they got favourite authors?

There are so many strands. There are picture books for babies right through to sophisticated picture books and graphic novels. Then you’ve got novels, and stories that seem really simple. You think, *Oh, anyone can write that*, but they can’t, because the really good ones use so few words, and they’re so well chosen.

That’s the craft of being a good children’s writer.

I think the editors who are really good at that are able to discern quality. You see a lot of manuscripts that are well-meaning. They’ve got a lesson to impart, or they’re looking back through rose-coloured glasses at childhood, or they’re based on things the author liked when they were a child.

You’ve got to have an earthy sense of what kids are interested in right now and what they’ll respond to.

You've also got to have an ability to see what they might not know they'll like. Otherwise we'd all just be doing the same sort of mass-marketing, semi-boring things.

You're always trying to broaden them. Kids are sponges, and they'll be happy and excited if you're happy and excited about something. But then there are going to be books that speak directly to them, and that's what switches them on.

So it's being in touch with your inner child, but it's really a genuine interest and passion for children's books. I think that would be the first and foremost thing you'd look for.

Jackie was an important figure. I didn't know her when she was at Penguin. She'd just left when I started. But Julie always used to talk about Jackie Yule, and she had been trained by Jackie Yule.

I feel like my training, through Julie, came from Jackie.

Julie used to say that when she wrote a letter, Jackie and Bruce would lean over it and really dissect every line. Is the tone right? Are you saying the right things?

That's that really meticulous professionalism we're talking about when we talk about being a professional editor. It's being very mindful of your communication and tailoring it to the person.

Nowadays I text some authors because I'm not going to get anything from them unless I text them. There are some I email, some I phone, and some I have to see in person.

You have to be able to do all of that.

I guess the other quality is communication skills. That's interesting now because I do feel as if that's changed, because everything is on email now. Most of it is written.

Margot: Do you have a preferred way of communicating with authors? Would you rather have a phone conversation to discuss things first, or...

Erica Wagner: I want to feel that we've got rapport. Establishing rapport is the absolute crucial part of the puzzle, and everyone is so different.

I learned this in that first decade at Penguin, which is where I learned the most. I became a little bit arrogant at the end because I thought I knew how to do everything, but I actually didn't. I had to have a bit of a fall and then learn it all again.

Now I'm still learning, because I know I still am.

The office was in Ringwood, in the outer suburbs. There was the Japanese restaurant in Ringwood and the Potter's Cottage in Warrandyte. They were the two fancy places. Otherwise you'd go to Car City, which was next door, where there was a little van with instant coffee or something.

But we'd have lunches all the time with people. I'd be forever having these unbelievably expensive lunches, which would be like a week of rent or a week of food. I always felt like I was wearing these two very peculiar kind of...

Jacqueline: I've got to jump in and ask. Has that lasted your whole career or did that tail off?

Erica Wagner: Now there are no lunches. You meet someone, they're lucky if they get a glass of water.

Jacqueline: I love this idea that you continually learn. It's like music in a way.

Erica Wagner: Yeah.

Jacqueline: And every person is different.

Erica Wagner: Exactly. Every book with the same person is also different. Even when you think, *Oh yeah, I know how to do that person*, suddenly you don't because the book requires something different.

I think what I found interesting, and I just need to explain this because it was key to my development, was that I was always a bit blunt by nature. I was amazed we'd go out to have lunch with a famous author and Julie would say, "How are you? How's the family? What films have you seen? What books have you read?" She'd talk a lot about her own things.

I'd think, *Why aren't you saying the book's bad and you've got to rewrite it?*

Then I realised what she was doing. She was going around and around to make the person feel comfortable, and then very gently... There was one particular author and we were having lunch. All we had to do was hint that there was something about the character that wasn't quite ringing true. That was enough. You didn't have to go into a great big, long explanation, or explain why, or have all these ideas about how it could be better.

That's the other thing I learned: don't overdo the editorial notes and suggestions. There was one time I made massive notes. I thought I had all these brilliant suggestions and wrote them all down. Then it was too much. That book never happened because it was too much.

Margot: Overwhelming.

Erica Wagner: It was. I think it's learning how to judge all of that.

I noticed one of your questions was about AI. I think AI is helpful with certain kinds of things. I haven't played with it for editing. I've only played with it, as we probably all have: "Write a letter to a person about something or other." That's quite helpful because even though it's not perfect, you can use it as a draft and make it better.

But it would never get the nuances of that author. I learned from Ursula Dubosarsky, from Sonya Hartnett... Ursula said, "Even if you suggested a word that is actually better than my word, I don't want to use it because it's not my word. It's your word."

I thought, *Wow*.

I think it's about questions and genuine responses. "I don't know why exactly, but this..." Then you can talk around it. You're trying to tease it out.

But then there are other authors where you can just go in. It's not that they don't care, it's just that they've written it and they trust you. They aren't such wordsmiths, I guess, and they're happy for you to neaten it up or tighten it up, or whatever it is you want to do, which might involve slashing here and there.

Margot: A bit of moving around.

Erica Wagner: Yeah, moving things around.

Margot: We've talked about the editor's relationship with the author. We're also interested in the relationship with the publisher and how the author, editor and publisher all sit in relation to each other. You've occupied both editorial and publishing roles. How do you think that relationship should go?

Jacqueline: In your experience, how does it work best?

Erica Wagner: How does it work best? That's a really good question.

When I moved to Allen and Unwin, I had been an associate publisher at Penguin, but I was still doing the bulk of the editing, or I worked with the editor and was still very involved.

When I moved to Allen and Unwin, I found it hard to let go and let the editor look after the project. I remember there were a couple of authors, and Sarah Brennan and Sue Flockhart were there. They're absolutely brilliant, wonderful people and editors. That was when I first started, so it was Rosalind and me and Sue and Sarah. That was the team. Then it grew from there.

I had to let go of having all that control. It takes time. You've got to adjust into all these roles.

Now I totally value the editors. It was funny when I went freelance at the end of March 2020 because I had to remember how to edit things. It was like, *Oh gosh, a style sheet. I better do that. What do I do and how do I do this?*

It was very instructive, remembering how long it took. You sit there and hours and hours pass.

I did another freelance job, which was Sarah Firth's *Eventually Everything Connects*, a graphic novel. I did all the permissions because she'd quoted lots of people. Getting permission for all of that is the very tedious stuff that editors do.

I used to blithely say, "Make sure you've got permission for blah and blah." When you do it yourself, you remember that everything takes hours.

My biggest failing as a publisher and as an editor was overestimating my capabilities. I would think, *Yes, we can do this book in three or four months*, and then realise, *No, actually this is going to take much longer than this*.

I think that can be when trouble happens between the publisher and the editor: if the publisher has forgotten how long things take and expects the poor editor to do something superhuman that isn't actually possible.

I think the more you can talk and really clarify who does what, the better. That's something Allen and Unwin is very good at. The editors are fantastic. There's a process where you have a conversation about it. You involve them as much as they want to be involved early on.

But when you have a handover, that's when you're really handing it over. You're handing it to them, and then they'll come to you.

With some authors, I still stay very hands-on. Lee Hobbs, who I've worked with now for over 30 years, I still do the lion's share. But it still needs an editor. It needs another eye.

I would say I help Lee construct those stories. We work together. We worked together the other day on a new book, and we both said this only works when we're sitting next to each other. I'll have looked at what he's done and maybe have some ideas, but it's in the sitting together that he'll draw a picture, then we'll get another idea. It's very organic and intuitive.

Once the story's created, which takes quite a long time, it still needs that eagle eye, that other person who says, "That doesn't make sense," or, "That sounds better like this," or, "Have you thought about that?"

Then you can say, “No, we deliberately want it to be like that,” but you’ve got to go up against that. That’s what the editor’s job is.

I can’t really call myself an editor now, even though in the last three years I’ve edited more than I did in the previous six years, because my publishing role meant I was doing less and less editing as it went along.

I haven’t really answered the question. I think communication between who’s doing what is terribly important. Clarity with the author is terribly important, so that you can back each other up, or be good cop/bad cop if you have to be, or just a sounding board.

As we know, there are a million different ways you can say something. You could make a case that it’s fine like this, or you might make a case that it’s fine like that, but it would be better if we did this. Then it’s, “How do we try and do that?”

That’s experience. That’s the available time, the available resources, and where the author is at. Maybe it would be better, but that’s enough. That’s what that author can do right now. It’s better to get the book out so they can have closure and do something new than to keep pulling at it for too long.

Jacqueline: In your resume, you mention Lee Hobbs. He gives you this fantastic quote about working with you. He basically said, in praise of your work, that Erica has the ability to nurture the creative impulse in writers and illustrators, to coax out, formulate and extend an idea.

What do you think is so important about working with creatives? How do you get the best out of him?

A lot of people would say it’s listening, or communicating, but it’s more than that too, isn’t it?

Erica Wagner: It is. I think, and this is my style, so this is how I’ve done it, and it only works with certain kinds of people and certain personalities.

I think they have to know that you really love their idea. They have to trust you because you have a warmth towards them.

I’ve also got professional distance, which I think is terribly important. You can’t be best friends with everyone. That can be a really dangerous trap. Even though I would call Lee a friend, because we have worked together for years and years, we don’t socialise that much. If we do, we say, “Right, we’re not talking about work. We’re just gossiping.” We keep it very professional when we’re working.

The quote I always go to is what Steven Roxburgh said to me. He was an amazing American publisher I spent time with on the Beatrice Davis Fellowship. He said it's about being the ideal reader. You're trying to be the author's ideal reader.

You're really on their side. You're seeing what they're trying to do, and you're not trying to fight what they're trying to do. You're trying to allow it to emerge and allow them to make the crucial creative decisions that will help it get better.

To illustrate that, I illustrated my very first book this year as well, *Hope Is the Thing*, and I experienced being edited. I had done some pictures and thought, *These pictures are great. They're finished.* Then I paid for Marta Lamond to look at them with me because I really respected her as an art director.

She had wonderful things to say, but she was also quite stern. It was professional. We had one hour. She had looked at it. She didn't give me notes or anything; we just talked. She did tiny little pencil sketches. I felt that she wasn't pandering to me. She wasn't overpraising, but she understood what I was trying to do and was helping me make it better.

The editor I had at Allen and Unwin, Sophie Splatt, and the publisher, Anna McFarlane, gave me really good feedback as well. That's when you think, *Thank you. Thank you for telling me that, because I didn't see it. I'm really grateful that you saw it.*

There are two things. I think what Lee is talking about is the coaxing out of the story. You can only do that by working very intensively with someone to draw out the ideas. That's very time consuming, so you can only do that with one, two or three authors at the most in a year if you're trying to do 20 or 30 books. It takes too much time.

Other people just need to be left alone. It depends on the nature of the person.

How do you get the best out of them? I think it's trust. Then I think it's honesty, and kindness.

It is really nice to say nice things about what you like, because as the author or creator, you're desperate for good feedback, but you have so many doubts yourself. You look at it and think, *This is crap.* If someone says, "That's really good," you think, *Phew, someone thinks that's really good.*

It's honouring the fact that being a creative person and making something out of nothing is really hard. It's having respect for that as the editor. Because as the editor, you're busy and trying to get things done. You think, *For heaven's sake, I've told you a hundred times not to do this, and here you are doing it again.*

That's where we've got to be kind.

Jacqueline: I think that's the way editing is though, isn't it? It's psychoanalysis. It's creative.

Erica Wagner: Yeah.

Jacqueline: It's this funny balance. I always say to a lot of the interns that we get in, you've got to be very humble and never assume that you are right. But at the same time, you've got to know what the answer is. You've got to back yourself once you've made a decision about something, and be able to really explain it to people.

They're really different ways of balancing a working relationship.

Erica Wagner: It is. I find it endlessly fascinating and mysterious.

Time is another way. When you're spending time with that person, make sure you really are spending time with them. Don't look at your phone or read other things at the same time. Be fully present when you're with them. That helps.

Sometimes it's just the end of the road. That also happens. It's sad when you've worked with someone for a long time and the spark, rapport, or whatever it is, isn't quite there anymore.

Or there's the death knell of being a publisher, where the sales have gone down and you've got to make a choice: are we going to keep backing that person, or do we walk away now? I used to hate that—saying no to people, having those difficult conversations. That is my least favourite part.

I also really learned to follow my instincts. Whenever I have a funny feeling and think, *I'll just let that go*, it always comes back to bite you.

Jacqueline: That's something you learn over time though, wouldn't you say?

Erica Wagner: Yes, I really have learned that.

If you've got those little misgivings, you can say to the person, "I've just got a little misgiving about this." It's about the words you use. Then you can both decide what to do. Or it might be the editor and publisher deciding, "I've got this misgiving." Then you might decide whether to ask the author about it.

You can work out what to do, and then you test it.

For a long time I felt very protective of all the things I was working on and was probably a bit too attached to them. What I've learned over a very long time is that healthy detachment is very, very good.

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.

Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd)

www.iped-editors.org