

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

WRITTEN INTERVIEW

Jacqueline Kent

Publisher and biographer

About Jacqueline Kent

Jacqueline Kent was born in Sydney and grew up there and in Adelaide. After completing an arts degree she returned to Sydney and worked as a journalist, radio producer and scriptwriter for the ABC; she then changed direction and became a book editor, at first in house and then freelance. She has worked with a wide range of authors of fiction and non-fiction and was the 1995 Beatrice Davis Fellow, spending several months as a guest of publishers in New York.

She has written books of social history, general non-fiction and biography. *A Certain Style*, *Beatrice Davis A Literary Life*, won the National Biography Award and the Nita B. Kibble Award; *An Exacting Heart*, *The Story of Hephzibah Menuhin* was shortlisted for the Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria Premiers awards as well as the Magarey Medal. She has written biographies of Julia Gillard, Vida Goldstein and UK trans pioneer April Ashley, as well as a multiple biography of radical Australian women writers and a memoir of her marriage to Kenneth Cook, author of *Wake In Fright*. She has also reviewed books for *Australian Book Review*, taught editing and creative writing and holds a Doctorate of Creative Arts from the University of Technology, Sydney.

Interview

When working as an editor, how do you approach changes with authors?

I've always been in favour of organising an in-person meeting, if at all possible, rather than communicating online, even via Zoom. It's a lot easier to find some kind of rapport if you are face to face. In any case, it's good if you can meet each other somehow *before* you get to the changes-you-need-to-make stage, so you can gauge any level of resistance. This isn't always possible, of course, and sometimes a carefully written report has had to suffice, but it's frustrating if you don't know who you're dealing with.

How do you get the best out of authors? (Practical advice and editing tips)

Enthusiasm works every time, but it *has* to be genuine. You can usually find something to praise without resorting to compliments on the author's typing or spelling. Praising aspects of characterisation (novel) or courage (memoir) or ability to marshal facts and explain them clearly (non-fiction) is always useful. But don't push it. You don't want the author – ever – to think, *Well, if you think it's so good, why do I need an editor?*

Soft-pedal criticism, though make it plain that you think something needs fixing, and suggest ways this can be done. And it's amazing how often you as editor pinpoint a problem that the author recognises but has chosen to ignore; that's always good because you can both address it. And above all, you must emphasise that you're not handing down the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. You have to show that you and the author are working together, collaboratively, in order to make the book as good as it can possibly be (within the usual constraints of time and money).

Has your editing style changed across your career, because of experience, author relationships or industry changes?

Yes, I think it has. I used to be a real grammar Nazi, fiercely correct in expression at all times. Now I think that sometimes the perfect is the enemy of the good. I'm much more aware, now, of the rhythm and flow of sentences, quality of expression, ease of argument, perceptiveness of characterisation, largely because – I think – I have written books of my own. And as I'm the kind of writer who needs to have a solid structure before I begin work, I'm hyperaware of structural issues in manuscripts (although some grammatical usages still make my hair curl). Having been on the receiving end of editing, I'm also very aware of how I speak to authors whose work I'm working on: when I started, I think I was so eager to get the message across that I could be abrasive. And it's a pity that we all must do so much work so quickly ... I always want to spend time going through and checking my editing before handing a manuscript in, but that's not always possible of course.

What job aspects have stayed the same?

Oh, that's easy. Dealing with the author, finding a level of communication, discovering the ways you can collaborate and getting satisfaction from the work you do together. Working with words, your own or other people's, can be the most joyfully human and satisfying job around.

Career highlights as an editor?

Winning the Beatrice Davis Fellowship and living and working in New York, working with Lindy Chamberlain (possibly the most challenging book I've ever done) and being a mentor to several young men and women who have gone on to be successful editors. I still enjoy mentoring.

What is the role of the editor?

A hardy perennial question, this. You can answer it by talking about quality control, and that's true, but I think it's also to be the mouthpiece of the author to the publisher and vice versa. Explaining each to the other in case of problems need not be difficult: in my

experience both sides will try to iron out difficulties as effectively as possible. And if as editor you can't do all the work the manuscript needs because the schedule is ridiculous, you need to make very clear to both author and publisher that you have been as helpful and committed as you can possibly be under the circumstances. You should always be very clear where your responsibility to author and manuscript begins and ends. You're not the author, you're not responsible for scheduling. It's often true that authors and editors become friends, but the editor should never slip into the role of father or mother confessor. I think we should offer friendliness without friendship, i.e. keep a bit of professional distance.

Why aren't editors more celebrated? Why is editing called 'invisible mending'?

This phrase – one of Beatrice Davis's I think – has always annoyed me because of its girly servant-like connotations. (On the other hand, editing *is* like invisible mending: it's underpaid, done mostly by women and noticed only when done badly.) I think those who take the risks are the ones who should be celebrated – and that's the author and the publisher, not the editor. On the other hand, there is the occasional sow's ear that you have made into a glorious silk purse, and you should be acknowledged for that. Publishers are usually aware of this: authors less often.

Has it been hard to sustain a career as an editor? What keeps/kept you committed to working in a job where your work is largely unacknowledged?

I was lucky when I started as an editor in a publishing house and later as a freelancer because there weren't too many of us around. That meant it was easier to get your name up, I think. And as I said before, I like working with words – mostly my own these days but also helping craft those of other people. And I like feeling that maybe a book wouldn't be as good without the editorial work put into it.

What makes Australian writing so unique?

Well, obviously the fact that our writers have found so many ways to evoke life on this island continent. I'm thinking specifically of our Indigenous writers, of course, but those who celebrate our unique environment. But that said, marketing issues and the proliferation of media, plus the need to publish more and more to maintain the same

levels of profit, can result in a sameness in quality and voice and form in publishing that seem increasingly obvious. We are in danger of having new, imaginative voices smothered beneath the Spakfilla of conservatism.

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

Read, for God's sake. Know what's around, who the writers are. Talk to established editors or mentors about what the job entails and ask advice from anyone you respect. Learn from your mistakes (and not in the Peter Cook sense ... he once said, 'I have learned from my mistakes, and I think I could repeat them almost exactly'). Bring curiosity, empathy, learning and knowledge to your work.

How would you define a successful edit?

If the reader of the book finds it fully satisfying and well-constructed, with an interesting and possibly provocative argument or storyline and no obvious mistakes in grammar or vocabulary, or typos, to snag the eye. The angst involved in making sure all this works, the editorial scars, should be silently borne.

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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