

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

WRITTEN INTERVIEW

Linda Funnell

Publisher and editor

About Linda Funnell

Linda Funnell is a publisher and editor, and has taught courses in publishing, editing and writing for UTS, the ASA, Writing NSW and the University of Sydney. She has also been a peer assessor for the Australia Council, and a mentor for the Residential Editorial Program, a mid-career development program for editors run by the Australian Publishers Association. In 2020 she was chair of the judging panel for the inaugural [ARA Historical Novel Prize](#).

For ten years Linda was a publisher with HarperCollins, where she worked with authors including Janette Turner Hospital, Steven Carroll, Colleen McCullough, Jon Cleary, Belinda Alexandra, John Dale, Diane Armstrong, Steven Conte, Jill Roe and Geraldine Brooks. Prior to that she was Fiction Publisher at Random House, and prior to that, Managing Editor at Pan Macmillan. For seven years she worked with legendary literary agent, the late Rosemary Creswell.

From 2012 to 2015 she was chair of the [New South Wales Writers' Centre](#) (now Writing NSW).

In March 2012 she and Jean Bedford founded the free online book review the [Newtown Review of Books](#).

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.

As a freelancer I rarely have face to face meetings with authors these days, though I do occasionally have phone conversations. However, in both cases this would happen after I have delivered a written report.

A key part of my editorial reports is an introductory overview that sets out the context for the editorial comments that follow. I think this is important in showing the author how I see the manuscript, what sort of book I think they've written, so they know where I'm coming from. It also allows scope for noting the things that are working well in the manuscript, which I think is also an essential in setting up the context for the edit.

Generally, I provide written notes alongside the marked-up manuscript. Often the notes focus on big picture things, and I'll note the detail of more minor matters in comment boxes on the manuscript.

I generally send two versions of the file – one with all the track changes showing, so the author can see exactly what I've done, and a 'clean copy' with the changes accepted but comment boxes containing queries retained, which can be less confusing for the author to work on if it's a heavy edit. I also attach a copy of the style sheet, showing how I've standardised particular spellings, capitalisations, italicisations etc. in case the author has particular preferences.

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

Four things:

First, be very clear about the process. Every editor and every publishing house has slightly different ways of doing things, so make sure that if it's a two-stage edit

(structural followed by copy edit, for example) that the author understands that and doesn't feel you've missed a whole lot of things in the structural edit. And make sure they understand track changes and how you're expecting them to make their changes on the edited manuscript.

Second, never make a change you cannot justify. Remember it's the author's voice, not yours, that is important.

Third, you don't have to love a manuscript to edit it well, but you do need to understand what it's aiming to do, and you need to show the author that you understand. If the aim of the manuscript isn't clear, then a preliminary discussion with the publisher or, depending on the circumstances, with the author, is essential before diving in.

Fourth, communication. You can never over-explain. I once heard an editor who became an author say that when she got her first edit as an author, she realised that you could never explain too much in an edit. (She had worried that she sometimes over-explained in her edits.) As the editor you may feel what you're saying is obvious, but it isn't always, so err on the side of over-explaining if you're not sure. And don't forget to praise what is working well.

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?

Technical things:

I used to edit in pencil on hard copy and place numerous post-it notes on the side of the pages with my queries. Now I use track changes, and it's become second nature to me.

Most of my factchecking is now done on the internet, so my shelves of reference books have grown dusty, but I do still find them useful from time to time.

In terms of my editing 'style', I think I have become more confident about structural editing over the years, though I still need to steel myself to start rearranging someone's work.

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

Respect for the author and the work. The need for clear communication – between publisher and editor, and editor and author. The need for clarity – both in the edits and in the manuscript itself.

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

Every completed edit is a highlight for one reason or another, even if it's only the satisfaction of finally seeing the back of it.

Gaining the trust of an author has been quite memorable. By the time I came to work with Robert G Barrett, his relationship with his previous editor had broken down to the point that he wouldn't even agree to have typos corrected in his work, so I had something of a hill to climb to gain his trust. Luckily, I had the help of his publicist and the MD, both of whom he did trust. I knew Bob wouldn't change the way he wrote, and that his fans enjoyed what he did, so this was a case of knowing when not to intervene. However, his books did have fewer typos under my care.

Being sent to Norfolk Island to work with Colleen McCullough was definitely a personal highlight. I earned her trust over a number of books, starting with her biography of Roden Cutler. When I opened the manuscript box I found she had provided a list of her editing requirements – 'gray' not 'grey' was one – so I was on notice straightaway.

There are books I was particularly fond of, and the authors I have become friends with, but those things feel ancillary to this question about the actual edits. I find it quite difficult to recall details of what I did with particular books.

In terms of developmental work, when I was a publisher at HarperCollins I know I had a lot of meetings with Jill Roe as she was writing her award-winning biography *Stella Miles Franklin*, but I think I was simply being a sounding board for her own ideas as she completed the book. The actual copy edit was done by Mary Rennie. Publishing that book was a career highlight for me.

I know I went over Roger McDonald's *Mr Darwin's Shooter* with a fine-tooth comb, but I don't think that was why it went on to win so many awards. In my memory it was a

straightforward copy edit. Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia* aroused a great deal of controversy when it was released, but my recollection of the edit is that it was extremely civilised, and Justine and I sat together working away fairly harmoniously.

There is a more recent novel that I am particularly fond of that I did a lot of structural as well as line work on, and it's been satisfying seeing it popping up on various bestseller lists.

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

In terms of where an editor's ultimate allegiance lies, it must always lie with the ultimate reader of the work, ensuring that the writer's intentions – including their intentional ambiguities – are clear.

In a traditional publishing house, the editor sits between the publishing house (usually embodied by the publisher or acquiring editor who bought the book) and the author, working to a brief – and a budget – set by the publisher. If the edit needs more time and money than the publisher has allowed, this may or may not be given.

For freelance editors, it might be the author who has commissioned the edit, either to assist them in finding a traditional publisher or in the course of publishing the book themselves.

In both cases the core editorial role remains the same – ensuring that the manuscript is the best it can be, and that the reader's experience is what the author intended.

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'?

There are a few factors at play here, I think.

First, the ethos most of us work with is that the book has the author's name on it and the author has the final say over the edit. There are times when an author doesn't take an editor's advice. In those cases, the editor may well prefer to distance themselves from the project. This is, of course, what is so galling when lazy reviewers blame 'the editor' for a book's shortcomings, rather than the author.

Second, trust is important to the relationship between author and editor. If the author doesn't trust the editor, why would they agree to any changes? Part of this is the author trusting that the editor won't publicise the problems the manuscript had. If an author wants to admit that their manuscript was a mess and the editor sorted it out, that's one thing, but for an editor to claim that they 'saved' a manuscript – or even fine-tuned it – is another.

It's an interesting question: who owns the story of the edit? The author or the editor? Can both own it and talk about it without breaching confidences or one upsetting the other? I don't know that there's a standard response you could make to that question.

Third, there may be changes made to the ms after the editor has completed their part. The author might rewrite sections at proof stage. A publisher might intervene at the last moment (as a publisher I have been guilty of this). So is the finished product one editor's work?

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?

Well, you do get acknowledgement, but it can be a bit haphazard. I can think of some particularly tricky edits where there was no thank you in the acknowledgements page (indeed no acknowledgements page at all!) so you can't expect thanks from an author. One author memorably thanked me in their acknowledgements by saying I was 'mostly' right, which seemed a bit backhanded. Others have been quite humbling.

What sustains my practice is simply the process of discovering a new story, discovering new ideas. It sounds a bit hackneyed but it's true: every book *is* different, and there is a different challenge in every edit, even with authors you have worked with before.

And I do find satisfaction in finding the right shape for a story or even finding the right shape for a sentence. Sometimes it is a matter of just finding the right question to ask of a manuscript that does not yet know quite what it is.

In terms of sustaining my career, I have had long stints as a publisher as well as periods where I was working purely as an editor, and being a publisher certainly made my career more sustainable financially, as well as providing the satisfaction of bringing books to readers while continuing to do some editorial work.

But it is the satisfaction of working with different stories that I find most sustaining. What will land on my desk next?

What makes Australian writing so unique?

I think that is the subject of a doctorate yet to be written, and not by me.

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

In terms of craft: read as widely as you can, and question your responses to what you read – why did you like or dislike something?

And – this is terribly important – when you have a conversation about something with an author or a publisher or anyone else relevant to the edit, make notes. Put everything in writing – keep a file note for yourself and send a quick confirming email. No matter how well you are getting on, don't assume the other person will come away from the conversation with the same impression you have, and don't let there be misunderstanding. Yes, this is the voice of bitter experience.

Related to this: when editing, always check. Don't assume.

In terms of getting work, be prepared to work on books that aren't necessarily your cup of tea. The book you don't expect to like can be the most rewarding. The size of the Australian market tends to favour the generalist editor who can work across different types of books rather than the specialist editor, but like all generalisations this one has many exceptions.

There will be times when you will want to bang your head against the desk because either you cannot work out what needs to be done (a long calming walk or some time away from the ms can help here) or the author has failed, for no discernible reason and despite your advice, to do what needs to be done. Depending on the schedule, the budget and the publisher's brief, in the case of the latter this can mean upping the level of editorial intervention and/or going back to the author again – or simply sending it to the typesetter, grateful that your name does not appear on it.

Yes, you will encounter authors who don't want to have a bar of you, and there are the ongoing problems of ridiculous deadlines and poor pay and the lack of understanding of

the editor's role, particularly when it comes to management in publishing houses. But the burgeoning studies of publishing and editing in universities, and indeed programs like this one, do give me hope that greater understanding of the importance of editing might be possible.

And above all, enjoy it! When to intervene, when to leave something as it is, understanding an author's voice – getting to know authors! – it's a wonderful way to spend your time, really.

How would you define a successful edit?

I think editing can be a bit like what someone once said about the process of psychoanalysis: if you continue to dwell on it afterwards then it probably wasn't successful.

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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