

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

AUDIO INTERVIEW: TRANSCRIPT

Mandy Brett

Senior Editor

About Mandy Brett

Mandy Brett is a senior editor with Text Publishing, where she has been since 2002. She works across most genres.

Interview

Margot: I've looked up bios for you and they all seem to be really brief, Mandy. Is there something, if you're talking about your career, that you'd add? It would be lots of text, obviously.

Mandy Brett: Yeah, it's basically text. I've been here for 21 years now—no, wait, 22 coming up in January.

I can't remember anything else.

I was in Alice Springs before.

Margot: Yeah, I saw that.

Mandy Brett: Yeah.

Margot: You edited *Rag* with Christos Tsiolkas.

Mandy Brett: Yeah, that was 1987 though.

Jacqueline: This is how we all get experience.

One of our impetuses to start this series was really to speak to other book editors. We want to get a bit of an insight into your career, your expertise as an editor and in acquiring.

I guess we'd like to tease that out a little bit because it sounds like you also acquire at Text. Your job title that we found was Senior Editor, but really...

Mandy Brett: Who knows what that means?

If you talk to someone who works for one of the multinationals, senior editor is not a very senior position, it seems.

I don't really know, but it seems that way.

For us, it's just that I don't think we've got anyone who isn't senior. You just do what you do.

I don't think job title really comes into it at most of the smaller houses. It's more a means of hierarchical winnowing in big organisations, isn't it?

Margot: So you are acquiring, though. Do all the editors at Text acquire?

Mandy Brett: Yeah. We all receive submissions, we all have independent relationships with a lot of agents, we all look at the slush pile, and we all drive the process.

When we find something that we think is of value and should be pursued, it goes through a group process where everybody's input is equally valued, and Michael makes the decision.

Jacqueline: That's the acquisitions committee that we know of.

Mandy Brett: Someone actually makes the decision, isn't there? It's just a matter of how much you have to go through before you get there, I suppose.

Jacqueline: And how passionate that pitch is.

Mandy Brett: Yeah.

Jacqueline: We'll kick it off more formally.

To ease into our list of questions, I'd be really interested to hear what made you want to be an editor, or how you fell into it.

It sounds like in the eighties there wasn't as much formal qualification as there is now. These days you almost need a master's degree before you can get your foot in the door.

How did your journey start?

Mandy Brett: Well, I am a very undirected person, constitutionally.

I realised this when I met my current partner, who was all about goals. "My next goal is..." and, "What are your goals?"

I thought, *I don't think I've actually ever had a goal.*

I was always interested in the nuts and bolts of what became my editorial practice—the grammar, the usage. I would read usage guides for fun because I thought they were interesting.

Yes, I'm that person.

Not having a goal, I sort of fell into student media, then I fell into doing *Farrago*.

At the end of that, everybody was expected to go off and be a journalist, go into publishing, or do something. I had a look at that and thought, *That looks really hard. I'll just get a job in computers. There's lots of them in the papers.*

So that's what I did.

The training course I signed up for had placements, and one of those placements was at Penguin Books.

I ended up working at Penguin Books in IT for about five years.

At the end of that time, my then girlfriend said to me, "If you don't get out of there, I'm going to drop you. You're just too depressed to be alive."

Jacqueline: That's good. I think I know a lot of people whose partners have said something rather similar to them.

Mandy Brett: Yeah.

So I went and asked Bruce Sims to give me a job in editorial, and he refused. He said, "Go and do a course."

So I went and did a course. That was the RMIT Editing and Publishing course, which was reasonably new then. It certainly wasn't the first year, but it was still a reasonably new course. John Curtain was still running it.

It took me another eight years after that to actually end up in book publishing.

I went to Alice Springs at the start of 1998, so that was when I actually got a job in book publishing.

At the end of that time, it was kind of like you either stayed in Alice Springs for the rest of your life or you got out after four years. It's the same with a lot of regional places. You're there for the duration if you don't leave within a limited period of time.

Then the job at Text came up and I applied.

I had accidentally studied Latin at high school.

That was what got me the job, because Michael Heyward is an old Latin scholar.

Jacqueline: So it wasn't about your coursework in the end.

Mandy Brett: No, it's not about anything. It's just all these accidents. This is why I think it's so unfair to make people do higher education to get into jobs where basically everything's accidental.

It used to really irritate me when John Curtain was running the course at RMIT and he'd reminisce about all the deals that happened over extremely long lunches. We were all like, *Nothing like that happens anymore. It's not the old boys' network anymore, John. It's all very hard.*

But we had it easy compared to the young people coming through today.

Jacqueline: One of our questions—we won't ask you this now necessarily—but we do have question marks over this.

Certainly, some of the editors we've talked to who started their careers in the eighties had no formal training. They went in as secretaries. That was the equivalent set of skills they needed.

There's this idea that you can learn the nuts and bolts, you can know your usage, you can do an editing test, but then bringing that training into book editing, where you've got an author and an actual book to work on, there are all these different skills that come into play that are almost impossible to measure.

How do you quantify it? How do you qualify it?

Editors are expected to have a master's degree now, but the wage just doesn't justify it.

Mandy Brett: It's a shockingly badly paid job.

Jacqueline: Given how much intelligence you have to bring to it.

Mandy Brett: Yeah. And I'm not convinced that doing a master's actually helps you learn to edit. I think...

Jacqueline: What do you think is the best way then?

We have this conversation all the time. We've talked to a couple of editors and they've said they got their start in publishing houses, but they had a fair bit of guidance—a little traineeship or cadetship almost—before they jumped into their first manuscript.

What do you think is the best way to learn?

Mandy Brett: I think to be a line editor you have to have been reading forever, and you have to have a sort of visual memory that just makes you go, *That's not right*, when things aren't right.

I think it's almost as simple as that.

You also have to be interested in the way language works and why it works that way.

At the kind of editing where you're working on narrative forms, particularly fiction where voice is really important, knowing almost intuitively when language works, as opposed to when it's merely correct, is hugely important.

I'm not sure how you would learn that through a course.

What I found intensely valuable when I did my course was realising that I wasn't as good as I thought I was. There was certainly a corrective to that sense that you had everything under control. It made you very aware of what you didn't know.

But I'm not sure that anyone who went into one of those courses without knowing what to do with apostrophes came out knowing what to do with them.

For all the problems with how we learned English when we were kids—and didn't learn it, and all those sorts of things—I think if those technicalities are important, which is a very big *if*, but they're kind of the watchword for our professional lives, then you either grasp them fairly early or you're not going to.

I think it's really an education system issue.

The problems with what we traditionally deal with in editorial—particularly line editing, rather than acquisitions or sales or publishing more broadly—are that the things we value and take pride in are all things that have traditionally been used to slap people around who didn't have the chance to learn them very early.

That's intensely problematic. You've got to be really alert to that.

I think there's a lot of rebellion against preserving those standards and that knowledge, fundamentally because of the historic abuse of power.

I'm actually quite sympathetic to the loosening of rules, the loosening of language, and the insistence on judging writing by effectiveness of expression rather than correctness.

At the same time, I read all sorts of things where I genuinely don't know what the writer means.

I'm sorry if it's my grasp of these arcane and abused rules that allows me to express myself clearly and to know when you are not, but I genuinely do not know what you're trying to tell me.

Jacqueline: Do you think that's part of this idea of what is considered literary and what isn't?

Mandy Brett: Whether you can understand it or not?

Jacqueline: Well, how well it works. You can break the rules if you can take people with you—if readers aren't constantly stopping to ask what's happening.

Mandy Brett: That's right.

The rules aren't important when your command of what you're trying to get across is exquisite.

I tend to think it's a lot easier to achieve that command if you know what the rules are that you're breaking.

Most of them aren't there for a reason, but most of them are.

Margot: Implicit in that is also how, as an editor, you speak to the author.

A large part of our job isn't just correcting commas. It's also how you talk to an author about what you think isn't working.

How do you get the best out of authors? Do you have a particular technique, or does it change?

Mandy Brett: I don't think you have a lot to work with as an editor.

I've known editors—and I think you're speaking with some of them—who are exquisitely diplomatic and gentle and beautiful and affirming. I think, *I bet you squeeze every last drop of juice out of your writers. I bet they love you for it.*

I just slap people around.

I hope I do it in a kind of *we're all in this together* way, but I feel like I haven't got the diplomatic gene. It just feels wrong to try. Everybody knows I'm just being a goose when I attempt the diplomatic approach.

So what I have to work with is frankness.

Over the years I've learned to add a little encouragement along the way.

I'll say, "Yes, it was very, very good—but we wouldn't be here if it wasn't very, very good. Here's what you need to fix."

Actually, I don't think you need...

Well, maybe younger writers do.

I have to say I mainly work with middle-aged writers and older writers.

Jacqueline: Are some of them debut authors though?

Mandy Brett: Oh yes. You can absolutely be older and still be a debut writer.

I've found over and over again that people's main reaction to being edited is—I think *joy* is too strong a word—but there's a real pleasure in having somebody engage with their work in a serious, nuts-and-bolts way.

I don't feel like I've ever had to talk people into doing something they really didn't want to do.

It's always been clear in every relationship I've had with a writer that, if they don't want to do something, they say no.

It's their book.

I've always emphasised that.

I'm going to put my position forward clearly, and hopefully you'll agree that it makes sense.

But if you don't want to do it, it's your name on the book.

I'm not going to get stressed about it.

Jacqueline: Absolutely. One of the things is that all authors are different. All books are different. Even working with the same author on a different book can be quite a different experience depending on where you are at and where they're at, how the book was written, how quickly it was written, what the impetus was—all that kind of stuff.

But for you, what are the hardest parts about being an editor, and what's the most joyous thing?

I know we're not all in it for the money. Being on the line, for me, is just a real joy. I think I'm there for 15 minutes and then people are saying, "Come on, it's dinner. Are you going to stop?" And I'm like, "Oh yeah... not really. I'm in the boat."

Mandy Brett: Yeah, I know what you mean about the zone. It takes me a while to get there. I'm kind of the world's worst procrastinator.

Jacqueline: For you, what's kept you going? You've sustained a pretty solid career—22 years in one publishing house is amazing.

Mandy Brett: Well, partly I'm institutionalised. After a certain amount of time in one place, you can't really consider moving anywhere else.

A small publisher was always the place for me because I'm really bad at management. If you want to move on from a place where you're happy doing the work, it's got to be at least

diagonal, hopefully upwards. For me, that would have meant managing people to do the bits of the work that I was best at and enjoyed most, rather than doing it myself—and probably managing them badly.

I just didn't see the sense in that.

If you haven't got some inward sense of manifest destiny—that you have to achieve, achieve, achieve—which is something I've been blessed never to have, then basically stay where you're happy.

I really love that sense of discovery when you read something and think, *Oh no, this has got it. This has got that thing.*

It doesn't happen often enough, but when it does, it's just joyful.

Then there's the moment when you think, *This author has that thing in spades, but this manuscript's a mess. Now what are we going to do?*

That sense of problem-solving is fantastic.

You lie there thinking, *This is the problem, this is the problem, this is the problem*, and then at four in the morning you wake up and think, *What if we...?*

Jacqueline: I know. It's like, *How am I going to deal with this?* It can go on for days. Then suddenly it's, *Oh, I think this is what we need to do.* Especially when it's the neat solution.

Then it's, *How am I going to convince them?*

Mandy Brett: Yeah. Or, *What if we just took it out?*

Often it wasn't necessary in the first place.

Getting to do the work myself, rather than supporting somebody else to do it, is a big part of why I've stayed.

I also really admire anyone who can get their act together to write a book. It's a really difficult thing to do.

To write a viable book that somebody else somewhere is going to want to read is almost impossible.

I love working with people who can do that, and knowing there's a really clear way in which I can contribute to that process.

It feels nice.

Jacqueline: In some ways you've got the best of both worlds.

You've got the ability to engage deeply with manuscripts. You've got the ability to read them and recommend them, so you've got that acquisitions hat on and can be deeply invested, which I think is one of the best parts of being a publisher.

We're also interested in the difference between the editor–author relationship and the editor–publisher relationship, where the boundaries are, how that works best, and when problems creep in around those handovers.

But it doesn't really sound like you have much of that. Once you've got through the acquisitions process, you're pretty much in control of the direction of the book.

Mandy Brett: Pretty much.

Once we've decided to acquire the book, I'm pretty much left alone with it.

We're having a couple of conversations around titling at the moment that are a bit iffy. I can't go into details, but the imperatives around marketing, selling and promoting the book are different from the imperatives the author is dealing with.

Jacqueline: Yeah.

Mandy Brett: That can be tricky, particularly when you feel like you're the only person who's sympathetic to both viewpoints. It can be difficult to navigate.

On issues where the book itself and the sales side of the book come into question, that can be tricky.

It's really a case-by-case basis.

I'm dealing with the same publisher I've been dealing with for 22 years, so there's a lot of history. There's quite a bit of shorthand. We know where we're both coming from, and we can speak reasonably frankly with each other. That helps.

Margot: Something else we're interested in is how the job has changed over the years.

Working in the same place for so long, do you find yourself doing something different now than you would have 22 years ago, or is it pretty much the same?

Mandy Brett: I always used to edit on paper.

Margot: Not anymore?

Mandy Brett: It's highly unusual now.

I got out of the habit over COVID.

Margot: Really?

Mandy Brett: Yeah. We couldn't do bulk printing because we weren't in the office. It was hard to print things out.

If somebody really needed something on paper, we'd have to order it from Officeworks and have it delivered. It was just a pain.

The mail wasn't reliable either, so anything you needed tomorrow would probably arrive in a fortnight.

I slipped over almost imperceptibly to doing pretty much everything electronically.

I've always maintained that you edit better on paper, and if somebody was much more comfortable that way and time wasn't an issue, I'd be happy to go back to it.

But editing electronically saves everybody a lot of keystrokes.

I know that's the standard in most places now. I think paper editing is quite unusual these days. A couple of my colleagues still do it.

Apart from that, I remember coming into commercial publishing thinking, *How on earth does anyone stay in business when they sell so few books?*

We're selling fewer now. I haven't done an apples-to-apples comparison—we're a bigger publisher, so we are selling more books overall—but the industry is really struggling at the moment.

It's very hard to turn a dollar.

Jacqueline: Print prices.

Mandy Brett: Print prices. Oh my God.

Jacqueline: So, future-wise then. We've had lots of questions around AI. That's sort of the newest thing.

Mandy Brett: I saw your question: *Do you think editing can ever be done by AI?* Of course it can. Writing can be done by AI. God, they're going to take over and kill us all. I give it about five minutes.

Jacqueline: What does it look like? Who's left? We're looking into it in a bit more detail. It sounds like the jobs that will go first are more the administrative, media releasing-type roles. What would you say to people coming into the industry now? Do you think it's going to be a viable career?

Mandy Brett: Look, I'm one of nature's pessimists. I'm just not an optimistic person. I've been predicting the death of this industry for at least 15 years and it hasn't happened yet, so I wouldn't be the person to listen to on this topic.

I wouldn't be advising people to come into it. Who knows? The hunger for narrative hasn't abated. The hunger for the written version of those narratives seems to have dropped off.

I've noticed nonfiction has completely broken its mould. It used to be the place where you could say, "That's a known subject that people will want to read about, done in a well-executed way," and you could rely on a certain level of sales. That's not the case anymore. Literary fiction has shifted too. Books that you thought you understood in terms of their market don't behave the same way anymore.

One of my theories is that people have lost their appetite for getting factual information from books because they get it from the internet now. If you're going to sell nonfiction, it's got to be strongly narrative—memoir, for example, though I don't really see memoir as nonfiction. I think they're making it all up anyway.

Jacqueline: What is the truth?

Mandy Brett: If you're editing anyone's memoir, you're telling them to make it as much like a novel as possible. It needs a strong narrative through line. It needs to do all the things a novel does.

Jacqueline: It needs a plot. It needs some narrative.

So I want to hear about the highlights. What are your favourite things you've worked on? If you could hold up three books—and I know that's hard because you probably do eight or ten a year...

Mandy Brett: Probably about that. I mostly do originating edits rather than books brought in from outside, so it's a fairly small list but it's all pretty heavy-duty work.

I'm really proud of the work Claire Wright and I have done together on *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* and *You Daughters of Freedom*. She's written a new book about the A K petitions that won't be out until late next year. It's a phenomenal piece of work.

We have a really lovely working relationship. She's phenomenally talented and diligent, and she trusts me with her work. It feels like a privilege to work with somebody like that. Relationships built on trust and mutual respect can become genuine friendships.

I loved every book I did with Jock Serong, although he's no longer with Text. With the first book he was really soaking up how to do it, and over time he became such an accomplished craftsman and artist. I felt a little swell of pride about that.

The book that astonished me most was Kate Cole-Adams' *Anaesthesia*. I think she spent more than 15 years writing it, and we'd been talking about it for at least ten. When she finally submitted the manuscript that was published, I thought, "I didn't think this was possible, but you've done it."

Margot: That was a beautiful book.

Mandy Brett: Too few people read it. It fell into the trap of not being journalistic enough for readers who wanted straightforward answers, instead of taking them down this wonderfully literary path exploring consciousness. It's beautifully written.

Jacqueline: It sounds like it was ahead of its time.

What do you think is the hardest aspect of being an editor?

Mandy Brett: Every job. I've talked about being an arch procrastinator. Every single job I think, "I don't think I can do this." Every time. You'd think I'd be able to shortcut that by now, but apparently I have to go through the psychological process before I get there.

Jacqueline: It's a bit of imposter syndrome. You almost have to doubt yourself before putting on the editor hat.

Mandy Brett: Yeah. It's even worse the more you admire the writer. You think, "What can I possibly tell this person?" Sarah Krasnostein is like that. She's incredibly intelligent and knowledgeable. But once we get into the work, she finds it valuable and I think we do great work together.

Jacqueline: We talk a lot about "invisible mending". Editors often prefer to stay in the background, but there does seem to be a lack of recognition for what editors do. Designers get credited, but editors often don't. Where do you sit on editors being acknowledged on the imprint page?

Mandy Brett: I don't have strong feelings either way.

It's a double-edged sword. People think they know when a book is badly edited, and there you are, getting blamed for things you may have had no control over.

At the same time, the idea of the invisible editor feels very nineteenth century. Back then everybody already knew who the editor was, so it probably seemed a bit *déclassé* to credit them.

These days, I like being acknowledged in the author's acknowledgements. My friends actually look for that. In some ways it feels more appropriate because editing is more of a creative collaboration than a technical process.

I don't know. Design is creative too and designers just get a technical credit. I guess I don't have a strong position. I feel like I get recognition, and I like it. For people who don't, I'd recommend holding out for it because it's nice.

Jacqueline: It's good to hear you feel recognised. You're very well respected in the industry.

Mandy Brett: Only by those who don't know me.

Margot: Your articles were what got me started.

Mandy Brett: Oh my God. It's the only thing I've ever written. I literally have nothing else to say.

Jacqueline: We'll make sure we include a link to it.

How do mid-career editors stay relevant in the current Australian publishing industry?

Mandy Brett: It's interesting because editors tend to like staying within the lines. We're often a bit old-fashioned and insular. Those qualities are useful for doing a technically good job.

The trouble is, the technically good job is becoming less valued. I think younger writers probably want something different from their editors.

I was talking to someone at a book launch the other night, and she said she keeps hearing writers complain that their editor doesn't know how to spell. I said, "Well, that's bad," but surely there's a proofreader too.

What she really meant was that the writers didn't feel held. They didn't feel confident in their editor. I wondered whether younger writers even care about technical perfection as much. I suspect they're looking more for support, encouragement and the feeling that their editor has their back—that they're not going to let them go out into the world in their underwear.

Jacqueline: Mm-hmm.

Mandy Brett: I think that probably manifests differently across age groups. I don't know how I would be working with a lot of much younger writers.

Your own age is inescapable. I'm 61 in a couple of days, and that shapes you. I think it's really important as an editor to recognise that who you are shapes your response to the work.

I also think it's really important to stay abreast of what language is doing. I find it endlessly fascinating—how language changes, how it works, whether it's still doing the jobs we expected it to do when I was younger, or whether it's doing something different.

People are endlessly creative with language, and it's often delightful and funny to see what's happening on social media. But it moves so fast. That's where you lose your grip on whether it means what you think it means, whether it's controllable, whether it does what you want it to do in the right hands.

So it's really important to stay on top of that and not become the stereotypical old woman complaining that she no longer understands the rules people are playing by.

Jacqueline: Start a new style guide.

Margot: Well...

Mandy Brett: Yeah. It's like, "Whatever, mate. Just do whatever."

Jacqueline: IDK.

Margot: I just use the Macquarie Dictionary because I get so annoyed...

Mandy Brett: Just tell people what to do. Somebody's got to.

Jacqueline: Well, thank you. It's been so lovely to talk to you.

Margot: Yeah, it's been great.

Mandy Brett: Yeah, I really enjoyed the conversation.

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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