

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

AUDIO INTERVIEW: TRANSCRIPT

Sandra Phillips

Editor, publisher and publishing scholar

About Sandra Phillips

Dr Sandra Phillips creates knowledge about Indigenous writing, editing, publishing and creative industries at the University of Melbourne through her tenured professorship in publishing and communications in the Faculty of Arts; she is also Associate Dean Indigenous. Sandra has contributed to the Australian literary sector since the 1990s following industry training as a book editor with Magabala Books and UQP. She later managed Aboriginal Studies Press.

A Wakka Wakka and Gooreng Gooreng woman, Sandra occasionally freelances her editorial expertise and has contributed to the sector as a book reviewer, manuscript assessor, commentator/public speaker, peer-assessor/industry advisor, committee/board member, program evaluator and literary judge. Sandra raised her three sons as a sole parent and progressed from full-time lectureship to professorship in twelve years after achieving PhD conferral at the age of forty-four in 2012 for her thesis, 'Re/presenting the Indigenous literary terrain'.

To support her studies, Sandra was awarded the inaugural Oodgeroo Noonuccal Postgraduate Research Scholarship 2007–2010, and in 2016 received the Johnno Award in recognition of her outstanding services to writers and writing in Queensland. Advising on the formation of Angel's Palace at the 2017 Brisbane Writers Festival under the leadership of Zoe Pollock and in collaboration with artists Alethea Beetson and Gordon Hookey was a career highlight.

Sandra believes her editorial training grounds her ongoing track record of achievement, honing her sensibility and ethics of care with story, communication and community. This experience led her to becoming the chief investigator on Australian Research Council Linkage projects – Community Publishing in Regional Australia and Reading Climate – as well as the 2025–2030 project Casting the Net for What Matters: The ALIVE National Consortium for Equitable WellBeing and Mental Health Systems Transformation funded by the Medical Research Future Fund.

Interview

Jacqueline: Well, thank you so much for making this time to talk to us. Can you tell us a little bit about how you first became an editor. We know it's earlier in your career when you were seriously editing and doing more of the book work. Perhaps you made decisions to step away from that? Or perhaps other opportunities became too intriguing? Can you tell us how editing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories has changed and how it could continue to improve?

Sandra Phillips: How I got into it? We could start there like you suggested. Firstly, I'm a Wakka Wakka and Gooreng Gooreng woman and those First Nations on our mother's side are now in the jurisdiction known as Queensland. Today, I'm in Western Sydney on Dharug country. I have lived in various places since leaving home at the age of seventeen and going to the University of Queensland for my first degree – in particular on Yawuru Country in Broome when I worked with Magabala books; on Yagara Country when I worked at UQP; in Canberra on Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country when I worked with Aboriginal Studies Press; and I've also worked a few stints in Sydney on Gadigal and now Dharug Lands.

How I describe my relationship with Indigenous writing in a broad sense is that I've occupied almost every subject or professional position around it – as an in-house Editor, a book Editor in training and then with full wings on as a Publishing Manager at Aboriginal Studies Press in the early 2000s, as a peer assessor of Federal and state-based arts funding and as an industry advisor to parts of the [publishing] network. Also, as a paid reader and as a 'booster'. So, all these roles – around and in relation to Indigenous writing over about a thirty-year period.

Jacqueline: Yeah, it's amazing. So, you started out as a book editor. Can you tell us a little bit about some of those early books you worked on and how you started your training? Did you have some sort of mentorship or did you just kind of have to jump in?

Sandra Phillips: When I lived in Sydney for the first time, I worked for an inner-city education centre, a community organisation that became defunct about the same time as they approached me. They had very little funding, but they had project funding to bring a manuscript forward into publication. And this manuscript had already taken this organisation years to develop.

It was based on the teaching of photography – the Indigenous students who were enrolled in the Certificate of Adult Basic Education worked with fully fledged photographers – not least Australia’s first Aboriginal press photographer, Mervyn Bishop, who was their teacher.

There was a photographic studio at Tranby Aboriginal College [now National Indigenous Adult Education and Training] in Glebe, which is where they were enrolled. So, he was teaching photography skills. A non-Indigenous Anglo colleague from Bristol in the UK, Andrew Dewdney, came and visited and they were great friends. Andrew was working with the students, writing essays about the works they were creating.

So, these essays and these photographs were in this manuscript. Merv had the great idea to invite people like himself, established photographers, to provide an essay for the collection and to give permission for their works to be published in it. So, the late Michael Riley and, in the early stages, Tracey Moffatt, were in it. She got really big and famous in the meantime and withdrew her contribution.

So, they had this amazing manuscript, and they didn’t know what to do next. And they also had project funds. They’d heard that I was teaching at the Eora Centre for Visual and Performing Arts and Tranby College, and other spaces in Sydney.

They approached me and must have thought I had interesting, you know, approaches to things and they asked me if I would edit the manuscript to publication. I didn’t really know what that meant, but I agreed, and it was two-hundred paid hours. It eventually took two years and two babies, and we published it in 1994, just before I had my second child.

The only evidence I can find of the publication now (*Race and Photographic Representation: new Images in Australian History*, 1989) is as a National Library of Australia index entry. I no longer have my copy, although I saw it at Tranby College a few months ago, an actual physical copy. I don’t think we published it all that well, but it’s an amazing thing for its time.

It was my job to help approach the contributors and work with them to update their contributions.

Jacqueline: So, the equivalent of [Editing] an anthology. So, there's a lot of authors to work with?

Sandra Phillips: Absolutely, that's right. I needed a lot of communication skills, oral, and you have to engender trust and confidence in people – rigorous but gentle, is how I describe it. And always respectful of people's voices and choices in what they want to share. One of the students who contributed was Dolly Eatts, whose late husband at the time, David Gundy, had been shot dead after New South Wales Police raided the wrong home. So, you know, I had these really incredible, not just run-of-the-mill stories – you have incredible life events that people are reflecting on. Her photographic work was around that episode, and her feelings and experiences. Then at the other end you had Mervyn Bishop with his most famous image – Gough Whitlam with sand running through his hand into Vincent Lingiari's right hand at Wave Hill. So that image is in it as well.

Jacqueline: Wow!

Sandra Phillips: So that was like an informal formal journey of editing a book, a manuscript to book publication.

Around about the same time I saw an advertisement in *The Courier-Mail* for a trainee editor at Magabala Books. I thought, *Oh, this sounds interesting*. I'd already done an undergraduate degree at UQ. I'd already worked in policy research in Canberra, quite well paid for at that time and for my age, and I'd worked freelance around Sydney. You know, I got the bug of working with writing and writers.

So, I had one baby on my hip, and I was pregnant with the other. And I went for the job! We did a telephone interview – Magabala Books had five people on the panel, and the non-Indigenous industry rep was Rhonda Black, who used to work at Allen and Unwin and later worked at Hale & Iremonger. She wrote the *Australian Guide to Getting Published* under a pseudonym, Samantha Schwartz. I'd highlight that, because she knows her stuff. Anyway, she was on the panel. She later became my referee for various things because she said it was the best interview she had ever heard and been a part of.

But it was on the phone. It was 1994. I was, like I said, one baby was sleeping. I was heavily pregnant with another one. And, they didn't know any of that. So, it goes quite well ... we get

to the end of the interview and they said, 'So, if you were successful, when would you come over?' And then I disclose that I'm having a baby, due in July.

There was dead silence on the phone. But I think Rhonda was quite persuasive and she thought that I would be very good for the place. The rest of the panellists were Indigenous people who'd either helped set up Magabala or who were custodians.

I know there was someone who didn't want me to go over with babies, and I understand that, but I got the job and I eventually went in November 1994, yeah. Hit the ground running. Loved it because I got to go into a workplace, which at that time was a demountable – without the babies who were in family daycare – and sit with manuscripts.

It felt like heaven. It was great. I was still breastfeeding, so I'd go out at lunch and breastfeed and all the rest. But I just loved it because I could immerse myself in all of these different worlds in the manuscripts. And that was when I first started learning actual editorial markup. We weren't using email in a big way in 1994, so everything was done over a fax machine, and I was laboriously working on paper manuscripts, sheet by sheet – learning editorial markup and asking lots of questions. My style as an editor is to read deeply and closely and form a connection with the work and then trust that what's occurring to me is pertinent and relevant. I make notes to myself with questions I have for the author, and of the story that I was experiencing. And then I'd reshape that list of scribbly questions into, you know, diplomatically posed questions to put to authors.

So, I stayed at Magabala just about a year, and I worked on a number of manuscripts. The main one I worked on was *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance* (by Banjo Woorunmurra and Howard Pedersen), and I write about this in my PhD. In the end, what I was doing was asking a whole host of questions, chapter by chapter, and I'd fax that off to the author and they would receive it, consider it, and then what actually started unfolding is the author found these questions credible enough to rewrite chapter by chapter. So, there was a lot of research in that work – oral history, archival history, cultural permissions. June Oscar, at the time, was the Social Justice Commissioner with the Australian Human Rights Commission. It's her family story as a Bunuba woman from the Kimberley, and June provided cultural reads.

Peter Yu, then Director of the Kimberley Land Council, was also close to the story. So, a lot of really important people were around the story and everyone on Yawuru Country felt a commitment to that story being told properly. The author and a few others – but the author in particular – had heard me doing a radio interview before I went to Broome and thought I was

quote unquote ‘a hot-headed Koori’ who was coming over to throw around a bit of hot-headed Kooriness as a trainee editor!

But, I’ve never particularly been hot-headed and, as you know, I’m not a Koori – no shade on Kooris – but I’m fairly considered in my approach and even though I was twenty-five, or turning twenty-six, I really just asked questions in a way that made the author think about the way they could be crafting this narrative.

Essentially, chapter by chapter the author rewrote, and the chapters would come back to me over fax. So, it was a really interesting process.

Jacqueline: Did you ever get the opportunity to meet face-to-face, or was it always just written communication?

Sandra Phillips: Oh, we met after all of the rewriting had been done, and the book ended up winning the Historical and Critical Studies Award at the 1996 Western Australian Premier’s Book Awards.

Jacqueline: That’s fabulous!

Sandra Phillips: I got about eight shout-outs for it – one from Henry Reynolds. As you know, at that time, Australia’s leading, most radical historian. I don’t know if I got it pre-publication or if it was a judge’s comment. Geoffrey Bolton, who was at the time a conservative historian, and the most radical Australian historian of the time, [they] both endorsed it.

Jacqueline: That’s wonderful. So, you must have felt a real sense of achievement working on a book like that, bringing it to fruition.

Sandra Phillips: That was quite good. And, you know, I had the babies by myself there, when UQP reached out. Then publishing manager Craig Munro, goes, ‘Look, we’ve got a vacancy coming up, an opportunity. We know you’re from over this way. We don’t want to steal you from Magabala, we don’t want to poach you. But it is an opportunity.’

So, I actually went for what was essentially the same role. It was a traineeship funded by the state-based arts funding organisation and maybe a bit of the federal funding – because people wanted to actually help create a workforce. So, I went from Magabala as a ‘trainee editor’; and I put quotation marks around that because essentially my intelligence around that work was as mature as it could ever be.

Jacqueline: So, you were editing and project managing and making it happen, which is, you know, a big part of the job.

Sandra Phillips: Yeah, and Peter Bibby was fantastic. He was the publishing manager at the time. He was keen to retire and just kind of let another generation come in. He was, I don't know if you know of Peter Bibby, but he was one of those ten-pound Poms as a child. He was sent from England to Australia, so he had a history of life experience, of dislocation and an institutional upbringing and stuff. He had a real rapport with Indigenous peoples in the west; a very genuine and nice person. But he was preparing to retire. My now old and long-time friend, Rachel Bin Salleh was there. We would sit in the same little pocket of the demountable and work.

Margot: Oh, so you worked together. That's so cool!

Sandra Phillips: Yeah. That was really cute, really nice. And it was a good experience. It felt good, it felt right. All that kind of cultural protocol preceded the current phase of recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights. So, this was an independent Indigenous publisher whose primary function at the very beginning was to serve the Aboriginal peoples of the Kimberley and the stories of the Kimberley.

Jacqueline: So, that framework for ICIP has been going strong for quite some time, but it's only been in the last couple of years, really, that a lot of that awareness has grown in publishing industry more broadly. I'm really keen to hear about your time at UQP.

Margot: Was it quite different when you went to UQP?

Sandra Phillips: Yeah, it was interesting. So, as I said, I only stayed at Magabala about a year in-house, but I've maintained that relationship and been a manuscript assessor on and off for years, and Rachel and I have kept in contact on various things.

Coming into UQP was fascinating. The Unaipon Award was conceived in 1988, and we have to recognise that Laurie Muller as the general manager of the time, Craig Munro as publishing manager of the time and Sue Abby as a senior editor of the time with academics, Adam Shoemaker and Steven Muecke put their heads together in 1988 to go, well, you know, the bicentennial is here. What's UQP going to do, to make sure that this triumphalism doesn't just get repeated?

You know, as a publisher you've got a cultural responsibility. So, the David Unaipon Award was born and had been run a few times before I arrived at UQP. The foundation judges, of course, are all now deceased – Oodegeroo Nunnucal, Mudrooroo Colin Johnson and Jack Davis. So, Mary Graham as an Elder philosopher and Kombumerri woman from the Gold Coast also provided advice. So, I did come into a publisher that for seven years had been building a tradition of Indigenous leadership and decision making over the publishing. So that's very strong, and Sue Abby was a big part of that. She was generally the in-house person and was leading the series that was called the Black Australian Writer Series at the time. So it was, it was different, but it had some of the threads of recognition of Indigenous authority, which is very good.

Um, so I read manuscripts, including those that were submitted to the David Unaipon Award, manuscripts authored by non-Indigenous people with Indigenous subject matter. And I think I also dabbled in the little room that had the unsolicited manuscripts as well.

Margot: The little room?

Sandra Phillips: It was a very little room, on campus at that point.

I got to work closely with Indigenous authors through the Unaipon Award. My in-house time was about two years at UQP, and I can refer to, I know exactly the reason I left. I could get much more money working at the Dean Australia Council for the Arts than I was getting at UQP.

Jacqueline: Yeah, this has come up a few times. It's hard to sustain a career in editorial. I think that it requires, as you've said, considered intelligent, thoughtful work and you're bringing a lot of different skills to it, and it just doesn't seem to be kind of as valued as it is in other organisations or industries.

Sandra Phillips: Yeah, that's right. So, my first job out of uni was \$29,000 a year, and that was in 1989. When I went to Magabala, I went onto a \$21,000 salary six years later. So, it wasn't about, you know, the money. Then coming to UQP, I think it was on \$24,000. The job I got at the Australia Council in 1997 was \$59,000, and where I ended up on salary at UQP was around about close, close to \$40,000. And you know, there was no room to move. I talked with Laurie. I said, 'Look, I'm interested in this work', and I must have gone for the other job and had an actual offer. And I said, 'What can we do here at UQP?' He said, 'Well, there's no room to move on salaries.'

So, you know, if that's what an organisation says ... they're then being prepared to let go of the talent.

Jacqueline: Yes, I think that's true. I think a lot of editors have gone elsewhere because it just simply wasn't sustainable despite being very talented at the work and really enjoying the work and engaging with authors.

Margot: But it's a pyramid. There are fewer positions at the top. So, would you have been interested in being a publisher at UQP? If there'd been space there or ...

Sandra Phillips: Oh, I think so, yeah. Sue and I got on very well, but I remember a bit of fracas created by me when page proofs came back, and instead of coming to me and I was managing that title. The person brought them up from wherever – the floor downstairs – and took them to Sue and when I realised this and went into Sue, I said, 'Am I managing this title or aren't I? Why have they come to you?' So, you know, I think Sue found it a little hard to let go, on the one hand. On the other hand, she was very good and I learned a lot from her, and I loved working with her.

And Rosie, the late Rosie Fitzgibbon, I thought Rosie was incredibly talented. At the time, Leonie Tyle was the children's book editor, and the late Barbara Ker Wilson was often around as well. So, there were amazing people in the building. And then every now and again, you know, Mary Graham would come across. So, I got to work on the late Doris Pilkington Garimara; the title at that point was *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (UQP, 2002).

Jacqueline: Just a small title ...

Sandra Phillips: That little title ...

Jacqueline: That bestselling title – still a bestseller, still in print! You know, when we were discussing who to interview for this series we were like, who should we be talking to first? And in the back of my mind I'm like, well, I do know Sandra's made little squiggly marks on that particular manuscript that is sitting in the Fryer library, and I'd love to talk to her about that. What an opportunity?

Sandra Phillips: Yeah. And Warigal Anderson, his novel. I forget what it was called now; I can see the cover because we chose Ian Abdulla art. It's art I love, I think it's called Naive Art. Big, bright colours, and it was based on the Murray River; it was a lot about Ian's upbringing as a child. Really beautiful art. So, you know, all of this – you get the choice of artwork, the choice of designer and design to some extent, as well as the writing, supporting the author throughout and ensuring that their work continues to get priority. So, you're the advocate, and therefore

the author once it is made public, and if there is involvement at writer's festivals and stuff like that, you're involved there as well.

So, I did that kind of end-to-end stuff for those years I was at UQP and really enjoyed it. Also worked on Alexis Wright's debut novel *Plains of Promise* (UQP, 1997), and Melissa Lucashenko's debut novel *Steam Pigs* (UQP, 1997).

Jacqueline: All, again, pretty impressive, people whose works are still in circulation and being reprinted today. So, it's really wonderful to have contributed to something that lives on. And I think, I guess that's kind of the quiet glory in the work, isn't it? That you sort of contribute to something that is meaningful and can continue to inspire and inform and educate other people, you know?

Sandra Phillips: Yeah, for sure. And you know, certainly in the case of both Melissa Lukashenko and Alexis Wright, you know, they were changing what people could expect from a novel and continue to, you know, however many years later that is ... I lose count ... I think it's twenty-eight or something.

Margot: So, did the way you approached editing change over the course of your career? Like, did you find yourself doing it quite differently later on?

Sandra Phillips: Um, yeah, I think I'm a big questions person and I'm a pedant as well. So, you know, I think you do need to be pedantic. I can work at the line level, have an intuition around a good sentence. Although, Alexis, I mean she's been heard to say in front of me and at the book launch of the current work, *Praiseworthy*, that her publisher was keen to make some of her sentences shorter. He said that, and she retorted from the crowd, 'Oh, good luck with that!' So, on one hand, I think I know a good sentence, but Alexis Wright, of course, even now is challenging her publisher on what she thinks a good sentence is. And she has a kind of, it's a kind of lyricism, it's how she wants to kind of coax people into thinking differently – to read off the page quite differently, too.

Jacqueline: Yeah. A different rhythm almost, isn't it? You have to sort of buy in, don't you? When you're reading things and you sort of want to stop or pause, you've got to kind of just find their [the author's] music.

Sandra Phillips: Yeah, a real surrender. So, I think asking questions is a big part of my practice, as well as being the pedant about how things are sitting on the page. I can do that as well and be a very strong advocate for the writer and the work. Always.

Jacqueline: Well, I know through IPed, but also through *Black+Write!* – with your influence and connections – I guess a lot of younger First Nations editors and writers have at least been able to learn some of those ICIP protocols probably before we even knew to, um, even identify them as that. It would be really interesting – because you’ve had so much experience and understanding and probably been quite formative in developing those – do you think that there has been improvements in that space in the industry?

Like, there’s been a huge, turnaround in the popularity and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders writers, and the readership has grown and they’re winning awards. They’re commercially successful in a way that probably forty years ago it was more of a rarity than an actual reality for a lot of new and emerging talent. But in terms of the industry and being an editor, I guess there’s obviously still work that needs to be done in terms of ... Did you have any like First Nations editors who sort of worked before you, or do you think that maybe you and Rachel were the first?

Sandra Phillips: Oh, Rachel and I were definitely some of the first. There’s one woman who’s an old mate of mine, Jacqui Katona, who worked at UQP before I did. Jacqui was working there when I was doing my undergraduate studies on campus, so we became friends. Um, and years later when I was there in-house, people were calling me Jacqui. Um, as often happens, unfortunately. So, Jacqui preceded both Rachel and I, and Jacqui also worked at Aboriginal Studies Press (AIATSIS), in probably the early 1980s. So, she proceeded all of us in a sense. She didn’t stay in connection with books, particularly, except as a reader, which is great. So, yeah, I’d probably date Jacqui, then Rachel, then myself, in terms of ... the foundation editors who worked in-house.

Jacqueline: You’ve obviously made steps away from desk editorial work, but as you’ve said, have been working pretty closely with writers and writing and, and certainly been really supportive in the industry and within the industry to educate and inform and improve accessibility, understanding, all that kind of stuff in and around cultural sensitivities. It’s something that I’ve had to learn in my journey at UQP, but often just by not knowing what to do and doing the wrong thing and then just having to listen and hear and know ...

Sandra Phillips: Good on you; and being open to it.

So, to your question, you know, and how you’ve set it up, it’s really significant that the success has taken off on Indigenous authored works. Critically, and to some extent for some authors commercially, certainly in terms of school listings and in terms of reader popularity, you know, in media and for writer’s careers, it’s more possible [to make a living]. But any depth and growth

in cultural capability within the industry has not gone anywhere near that. So, it's almost like it's the author and editor relationship in all of these hotspots that has generated knowledge and deepened capability. Absolutely. But there's been little to nothing systematically.

And the industry, you know, the industry talks about employment. It talks about ambition, but it rarely gets to employment because, as you're saying, you know, because there's so few actual positions in-house. So, the kind of employment profile, the workforce profile remains a very strong challenge, as does systematic cultural capability inside of the industry. I think people, you know, I'm mid-fifties now and I'm the demographic, the middle-aged woman who is very caring, very experienced, very skilled. I would say [people in the industry are] reluctant also to change their practices.

You know, I encountered that a little bit. I spent a half day inside of a commercial publisher for a different project, and I won't specify, but there was, on the one hand antagonism to formal learning around editing and publishing – like a real antagonism towards master's programs, in part because they're saying the jobs aren't here. People are getting qualified and there's no jobs at the same time, yet they don't reflect that they're sitting in one of the jobs and that maybe the job's profiles could be different.

So, in answer to your question, I think there's some level of corollary, capability, strengthening when there's authors and editors are working closely together. But on an industry-wide basis there's little to no systematic commitment to cultural capability. And also, how do you formally operationalise protocols based on recognition of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP) rights?

Jacqueline: Mm-hmm. I feel like those questions are now being raised and certainly even by a younger generation, who have a voice and who I think are aware of it. And everyone is sort of struggling with what, and how, does this actually happen? Because the industry itself, even when you can't get the wages that you know you deserve, how do you then sort of ... I guess there's a bit of a powerlessness sort of feeling in there as well. But, um, what would the ideal look like?

Sandra Phillips: Mm. So, you know what we have now and what I see, and what you both probably see, is a kind of cohort of younger Indigenous people – more often women or non-binary, with the occasional men – who are both creative writers, as well as honing editorial skills. As with the younger generations overall, there's more of a portfolio approach to their career build. So, you know, you'd know that now, too, working at, um, did you say *Griffith Review*? Yeah. I know that some of the editorial interns through *Black+Write!* have a publishing

partnership and *Griffith Review* have had roles in commissioning new writing from Indigenous people.

So, there's this cohort of younger people who are doing work on a contract basis. Which some of them may well be happy enough with, but my response to that kind of position is: they're not being presented with an alternative are they? Which is a full-time job somewhere, a publishing role somewhere. What Creative Workplace is considering the idea of various arts organisations working together to create whole jobs (whole jobs made up of multiple smaller arts or arts worker roles)?

Even if each organisation has a particular relationship with the worker, it shouldn't be all on the shoulders of the independent contractor to just wear the fluctuations of income and, you know, the precarity that goes with it.

Jacqueline: Yeah, because even if it's just a one-year opportunity, in an industry like publishing it still isn't enough. You've got to keep your training wheels on because you've got to have time to work across a variety of projects so that you can test your instincts and your confidence, and it's a process of trial and error, kind of like a cadetship. So, you've got to have time to get a couple of books under your belt to go, 'Oh, I think I'm getting kind of good at this' or 'I think I know what I'm doing now'. You can't just go in blindly. I think that, um, you need to be supported.

Sandra Phillips: Yes.

Jacqueline: It can take two or three years before you can feel confident to, to sort of step in and lean into any kind of genre or, you know, feel like you've even understood the process – because it is a lot of, you know, back and forth, a lot of conversations.

Margot: And you need to feel security in your job to be able to do that.

Jacqueline: Yes. And you need to have the time to get those books under your belt because it's such a slow-moving process – it's six months, three to six months to sort of even get one book to completion.

Sandra Phillips: Yeah. So, it's tricky for the current generation of publishing professionals, I think.

Jacqueline: Yes. And having to not necessarily choose a specific direction because they've got to keep all their options open, maybe?

Sandra Phillips: Yeah, that's exactly right. So, Alison Whittaker, who's a UQP poet and an anthology editor as well as being published with Magabala through *black&write!* for their first poetry collection. Alison's an amazing talent. They are employed full-time at Jumbunna with a UTS Master of Law and possibly going into eventually a PhD doing vital research, and a poet on the side and an editor of collections on the side. So, you've got someone like Alison, you've got people like Ellen van Neerven, who is equally amazing and talented, clearly doing all sorts of things. Even at one stage, someone said to me, 'Oh, and then I saw Ellen in the bookshop!' They were working at the bookshop.

Jacqueline: But do you, okay, so we have asked this, and this has come up a bit and it does come up a lot in interviews – do you think, or did you have any writing aspirations when you started editing? Because they're very similar in a lot of ways. They require the same kind of skills base, I suppose, and you have to understand storytelling and words, but I know personally that once I've put on the editor hat, maybe that's my place. I did have aspirations to write, but the more I edit, the more I'm thinking, *no*, I just don't know if I could write anymore. It's such a different mindset. Do you think we can hold both and do both and make a good career out of both?

Sandra Phillips: Um, I think people are holding both and I see several members the First Nations Australian Writers Network, the younger cabal if you like, they're all creative writers and do editing contracts and sensitivity reads and all sorts of things. Uh, that makes me think of a couple of things. A fair while ago, Melissa Lukashenko said to me that when she's writing, when she's in the throes of writing a manuscript, she doesn't read anything else because she's worried about, you know, perhaps by a process of osmosis or an unconscious process of bringing something else into her story. So, as a writer she stops being a reader for a while, which I think is ...

Jacqueline: That's a good way to put it!

Sandra Phillips: But on that, too, I haven't got a book with my name on the front. In some books I am a named editor, but most of my work has been of that invisible kind of labour – it doesn't appear on any of those books that I would've touched and had some influence over. I enjoy writing and I think I'm a very good writer and I've got academic work now published and work also in *The Conversation*. I was very pleased when my review of Brenda Matthews's *The Last Daughter* (Text, 2023) made it into the 'best of' annual collection of *The Conversation*, so that's around, it's a kind of literary scholarship around that work and the reading of the work and the political, social, legal and historical context to the work. I think this is a particular style that is newish, and I think it was selected in that collection because it had an affective impact on the

editor; they felt that they'd learned something that they had never known before. So anyway, long way of saying, I think I'm a good writer.

I like writing, I want to write more, but I've never been a published writer, or the author of my own entire book.

Margot: Mm.

Sandra Phillips: I think that's what's next. That's my next challenge.

Jacqueline: Oh, that's great. I love it. Look forward to it!

Well, thank you so much. I feel like I've got about twelve more questions, but we don't have enough time. We've probably got about five more minutes.

Margot: So, are you doing any more editing now, Sandra? Or is it kind of all in the rear-view mirror?

Sandra Phillips: Um, it's fascinating. It's a great question because it reminded me of what I've very recently said. So, I just finished a full-time academic job by choice. The environment was not what I expected it to be and what I was encouraged to believe it would be, and I was not able to do the role for which I was employed. So, I didn't want to waste my time there.

I'm moments away from written offers from other universities, so that's not a problem. In the meantime, I'm a Senior Associate with Outside Opinion, which provides strategic advice on all sorts of things for higher education. So, I'm being paid as a consultant – I can refuse work, accept work. It's high intensity, it's highly paid. I'm giving advice, which you would normally give when you're on a payroll to colleagues. And in the providing of the advice, which you know, you have to cast in certain ways, I've said to several people now, this is a really comfortable mode for me because I'm a trained book editor. This is exactly the mode of providing editorial advice.

So, what I've been doing is giving advice on grant applications to the Australian Research Council – a whole host of colleagues, peers in the sector who are highly educated, working on really tight deadlines, really passionate about their work. I'm able to get inside of that work, inside of their heads and provide written advice, which they're going, 'Wow, this is great!' And, and it's all because of my editorial training.

Margot: That's really good to hear.

Jacqueline: Good to hear, because a lot of editors think: What else could we do? How do our skills transfer? You know, I can write a smashing email. Or persuade someone to do something that they might not have thought about doing. But, yeah ...

Sandra Phillips: Jacqueline, absolutely. It's that like! For years, people go, 'Oh god, that email, it's just superb.' And I'm thinking, yeah because I take time and care. Crafting the communication – that is all the editorial skillset, that's the editorial competencies. It's being able to connect with people in meaningful and very authentic ways – giving concrete advice, not taking over the work, respecting everyone's autonomy in the process. And, you know, it's a horrible expression but you're constantly leading horses to water and they're constantly drinking.

Jacqueline: Yes!

Sandra Phillips: Exactly. So, advice to the current and future generations? I'm very concerned about precarity and conditions for prospering. I'm very concerned about that. So, what might feel like freedom now won't feel like freedom when you're forty-five, when you're sixty-five, and looking at your superannuation. Yeah? So, those are really important and striking issues in this space, and to not be that person on the other end of the phone all the time. You know, so many younger people get called up to give advice on things and it's like, you're giving advice to paid workers. You are unpaid, yeah? So, you know, my advice would be to be less liberal and open about giving advice every time it's asked for.

Jacqueline: Mm-hmm.

Sandra Phillips: But that's up to us to actually redesign what employment can look like. Yeah?

Jacqueline: Yeah. Okay. Well, that is a fantastic note to end on. I think you've touched on all of the really important issues that are sitting behind a lot of these conversations. This series is mostly because we want to celebrate the kind of work of editorial and make people who work in editorial feel proud of the skills that they've got and what they're doing. And hearing about how some of the books you've worked on early in your career are still standing the test of time is sort of, yes – all credit to you. But also, the best kind of way of celebrating.

Um, but there are some quieter things, I think, within the industry that are concerning. I feel a real duty of care thinking, as you said, you know there are kids paying for Master's degrees who are never going to see return on that money in any way, shape or form, um, for years.

On the wages that we are being paid, you're expected to have a Master's qualification when you come in. But, um, I think it's sort of taken for granted because, like a lot of Arts there's just this endless amount of people who want to do it and who like the idea of doing it but ...

Margot: Aren't looking forward to super ...

Sandra Phillips: And I know we're out of time, but on the question of AI – at Book Up, the APA annual conference, at which I chaired a panel, the AI session was really interesting and I think there's potential. Therefore, you know, the generation of copy and marketing, even though people don't want to hear that, I think AI is proving very useful across various industries.

I think maybe there are some very rudimentary things, but we all are familiar with auto spell checks and they're never correct. So, you know, you'd be a bit concerned about just that correctness of things, accuracy. I think, well there probably is some way in which people are going to generate manuscripts using AI, then editing and publishing needs to address it just like higher education needs to – they really need to get in front of how they're managing that. And it can't be by ignoring it. Yeah?

So, discerning, you know? It might mean that we'll have greater discernment about what good writing really is. It's not rote written, it's not cliches, it's incredible stories that can't rely on old tropes. So [we'll be looking for] who's original, who's creating that original writing that AI can't yet do? Maybe that will lead to greater discernment about what is truly good writing.

Jacqueline: Yeah, that's a beautiful note to end on. Yeah? Because the readers will always be human.

Sandra Phillips: Yes, that's right.

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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