

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

AUDIO INTERVIEW: TRANSCRIPT

Sophie Cunningham

Freelance Editor

About Sophie Cunningham

Sophie Cunningham is a former publisher/editor and now a non-fiction writer/novelist/ teacher of creative writing. She has written eleven books, as well as editing one and appearing in anthologies. Her most recent novel is *This Devastating Fever*. Her essay collection *City of Trees* ([Text Publishing](#)) was published in 2019. A Member of the Order of Australia for her contributions to literature, Sophie is the Deputy Chair of the [Australian Society of Authors](#) and a non- executive director of the [Copyright Agency](#). You can read more about Sophie here: www.sophiecunningham.com

Interview

Jacqueline: Thank you Sophie, for joining us. Of all the editors we've interviewed, and some of them have had really enormous careers, successful careers, you've had one of the most extraordinary careers, in the sense that you started out as an editor in your first role in the publishing industry with McPhee Gribble, and then you worked your way up to become a successful publisher at McPhee Gribble and then at Allen and Unwin for many years.

You then took off these publishing hats and have become a successful author in your own right with eleven books under your belt. You've done a lot of work around the industry – you've helped establish The Stella Prize, which is an award for Australian women and non-binary writers.

Can you tell us, just to start off with, a little bit about those first editorial roles you had and what you enjoyed about it, and what you found difficult about it?

Sophie Cunningham: This was before formal training was common. To be honest, I didn't really understand that 'publishing' was a thing – much like I'd drink milk without thinking about the cows or how the milk came to be. I was like that with books. I was a huge reader. I'd done an Arts degree in literature and film, but it didn't occur to me there was a job in any of this. My parents were teachers, so I assumed I'd become a teacher. I certainly didn't have a clear sense of what else I wanted to do.

Then, around 1985, I got a job at the Melbourne Times writing arts reviews and real estate. Hilary McPhee – my father drank at a pub with her then-partner, Don Watson – read some of my reviews and asked if I wanted to assess manuscripts, that is, manage the slush pile.

So, I started going into McPhee Gribble. There were hundreds of manuscripts. I helped the senior editors by recommending which ones they should look at. I didn't make decisions; I'd just say, 'These are the ones worth your time.'

Jacqueline: Okay. So, how many, so how many were they getting back then, do you think?

Sophie Cunningham: Oh, a lot. Literally piles. I'd be sitting on the floor surrounded by them – I was about twenty-one by the way – and then Robin Annear, who worked on the reception at McPhee Gribble became an editor.

Then after six weeks she decided she didn't want to be an editor. That junior job opened up; I applied for it and got it. I started working on reprints and new editions – imprint pages and the like. One of the first that I remember working on was a reprint of the fabulous Postcards from Surfers by Helen Garner.

Then I started writing blurbs – I had a bit of a knack for copywriting – under the oversight of more senior editors; Sue Hines was there then. So was Michael Langley. Hilary McPhee also kept an eye on my work to make sure I was on track. Hilary in particular, put a lot of energy into making sure I was good at the job. She understood that editors represent the company: if the people meeting authors weren't competent, it reflected badly on McPhee Gribble.

The first book I copy-edited, beyond proofing and general production, was — I think — *Cocaine Blues* by Kerry Greenwood.

Jacqueline: Wow!

Sophie Cunningham: Kerry wasn't yet known – it was, I think, her first book – and because it was genre and playful, everyone thought it was a safe one to let me loose on it.

I also did several short story collections – Kerryn Goldsworthy's *North of the Moonlight Sonata*, really stays with me. Hilary would always go through the manuscripts I'd copy-edited and give feedback: 'You can't say that!' or 'You didn't pick up this.' So, I got really close mentoring.

It was like an apprenticeship – and labor-intensive for Hilary. In retrospect it probably lasted only nine months to a year. I ended up copy-editing some significant books.

Jacqueline: I guess it's a process of trust too, isn't it? I Hilary probably realised that, you know, once she'd sort of seen what you'd done and you'd learned a little, because that early stage of editorial is very hard. I think there's a real dilemma (for emerging editors) – when are you good to start? When are you confident to go in and have a crack at it on your own? And there's only ever one opportunity.

Sophie Cunningham: Yes.

Jacqueline: So, having someone come back and actually look at your work is one of the best ways to learn.

Sophie Cunningham: Yes – and with authors she'd worked with closely, like Drusilla Modjeska she kept a very close eye on things. But during that apprenticeship period she checked all my work to make sure the less well-known authors were also being well edited.

So, Hilary oversaw my work on fiction. Diana Gribble, as a generalisation, oversaw my work on non-fiction. The first non-fiction book I can remember proofreading – sorry, I'm all over the place – was Peter Cundall's first gardening book, and I can't tell you how many typos I let through.

I still have the first edition. I had a seventies education – it was a bit of a fiasco when it came to articulating grammatical principles etc. – but ...

Jacqueline: Well, I'm sure everybody has a story about that, that feeling of like: 'It's my fault!'

Sophie Cunningham: Non-fiction taught me to attend to detail – Diana taught me to attend to detail – non-fiction taught me the importance of fact-checking and double-checking spellings in languages or fields I wasn't familiar with.

I worked hard. I had a flair for editing, but not for meticulous detail – that wasn't my instinct. I had to learn to proofread: that visual training of using a ruler and so on.

I got a lot of craft training in a short, intense period. It felt like years – in a good way – but I was only there two years before we were acquired by Penguin, and things changed dramatically.

Jacqueline: More the traditional kind of aspects?

Sophie Cunningham: Yeah. Hilary was more on the creative side – supporting the work to make it as good as it could be. They had very different skills. The training I did with Diana on non-fiction really sticks with me. I think because she also taught me a lot about how to carry myself in the workplace. How to be professional. Even today I find myself thinking: What would Diana have done? She's been such a role model for me. I really miss her [Diana Gribble died in 2011].

And this was the era of paste-up: I worked on Dorothy Hewett's biography, *Wild Card*, and in the first edition there's a spot where she's a little girl skipping to the shop for lollies and then suddenly she's a student in Perth.

There's a massive leap because the cut-and-paste went wrong – paragraphs from a later chapter ended up in the middle of a childhood chapter. We didn't notice, and it went to print.

No one noticed – not just because I hadn't checked the breaks, though checking the breaks was something I was learning. The proofreader didn't pick it up either. It's possible I was the proofreader; I can't remember. And Dorothy's stream-of-consciousness style meant the jump didn't immediately set off alarm bells.

I called her – terribly distressed – and she said, 'Oh, no one will notice, love.' She was the perfect author, and she was right. We fixed it; she didn't demand we pulp. Writers were very good to me.

Jacqueline: That's good. I think learning by mistake is kind of how you do learn a lot in editorial as well. What I say at work: 'You never make a mistake; you make a discovery.' Because you've just got to take something away from the process and try and build a skillset as you go. It is a very human, subjective job.

Sophie Cunningham: And to be honest, I've always worked like that – with my own writing or when teaching. I did theory at uni and was fascinated by it, but professionally I have to figure things out by doing. Even cooking: I don't focus on the recipe. I do it to see how it works. Editing isn't exactly physical, but it is a craft – and that suits how my brain works.

Jacqueline: Yeah. So, from that editorial space, like I think a lot of editors are interested in becoming publishers. There are a lot of editors who are just happy working and doing that book work and loving

that book work. I'm probably one of those, but there are differences between editorial and publishing. It sounds like you had a nice relationship with your publishers when you started as an editor. Then when you moved to Penguin, you became a publisher?

Sophie Cunningham: Yes, but it was more complicated than that. The acquisition was traumatic. Diana left to start a new company with Eric Beecher, and Hilary went with the books and was contracted – two or three years, I think – to oversee the transition of the backlist to Penguin. It was a difficult, unhappy time for her, and therefore for all of us.

Sophie Cunningham: Professionally, she was very frustrated by Penguin. In my naivety, I didn't quite understand how bad it was for her because I was having perfectly pleasant dealings with Penguin, but just because they were nice to me and other junior staff didn't mean it wasn't a nightmare for Hilary. It was.

As I say, that wasn't clear to me – I was twenty-three or twenty-four. For a couple of years, it meant I was working on books because Hilary was less available to me and to authors; she was managing Penguin, the new relationship, quality control, and trying to maintain independence within a larger company. I ended up working on books that became quite significant – Cloudstreet, for example.

Jacqueline: Let's just pause there, shall we? So, you worked on Cloudstreet?

Sophie Cunningham: It was an amazing book to work on, and my relationship with it was a bit like my relationship with books I write myself.

It was interesting to realise a book had got under my skin to that degree. I was dreaming of the characters – all the things that happen when I'm writing happened while I was editing that book. Tim Winton is a very good writer and knows what he wants.

With some books I worked on – like Helen Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino* ...

Jacqueline: Oh my, god!

Sophie Cunningham: I remember conversations with Helen about, 'You need to think of doing this or that,' which was great. Tim didn't really need that kind of input; he needed production support, covers, and a little character work. It wasn't a massive editing job, but I was managing the whole project.

Jacqueline: Obviously, that's quite a momentous start. Most of the editors starting out in publishing today probably don't get thrown quite in the deep end like that. So, it would be good to hear about some of those early experiences, if you're open to talking about them. And the move to becoming a publisher.

Sophie Cunningham: The main thing I'd say about editing Tim Winton is that he taught me a lot about the rhythm of language – useful for editing and for my life as a writer.

He doesn't write poetry exactly, but he has an incredibly strong sense of rhythm. During the copyedit I'd pick up moments where that internal rhythmic logic wasn't quite there or felt a bit forced.

Editing good work teaches you what's possible, so you become more ambitious for other writers.

Related: I got a lot out of editing short story collections – a form I really like. It's almost like discontinuous narrative, even when the stories aren't fully joined up.

Not in the way that, say, Frank Moorhouse creates relationships between his stories. As a writer, the discontinuous form is one that I like – rather than a homogeneous, seamlessly coherent narrative. I enjoy having contradictions and ideas in play. My main memory of editing Helen's work, other than the force of her personality, was ...

Jacqueline: I was going to say, she's a formidably beautiful writer. I've got such admiration for her. Was that intimidating?

Sophie Cunningham: I probably managed what I did because I wasn't intimidated. I was accidentally privileged in that I ended up working with authors who are now very well established and famous.

Even though Helen was well known back then, she wasn't Helen as she is now – this was almost forty years ago, so I wasn't as intimidated as I might have been. With her, it wasn't about length or sentences; with Tim, I'd occasionally talk about sentences.

With Helen it was more about internal logic. I use this example when I teach: the main character in the novella walks into the backyard, puts out the washing, and doesn't bring it in for about six months.

That happens because themes have moved around. In general, writers move themes or beats as they draft, and vestiges of earlier drafts or timelines remain.

We did a lot of work with both Tim and Helen on covers, with the designers. The first Cloudstreet cover was pulled together at the last minute. I don't remember why it was such a chaotic process.

It was evocative, but not a classic; it didn't pass the test of time and was redesigned once the book took off. Helen's had a really beautiful cover. I don't have a copy with me. I've always been very interested in that side of things.

You can probably tell from my office that I'm interested in painting and art. One of my talents in publishing was being able to look at roughs and think, 'That'll make a good cover,' or, 'That won't.' I related well to designers and had a feel for design – Hilary and Diana did too; they were, as I keep saying, formative influences.

So, it's not just about words for an editor; having a sense of the whole matters – especially if you're going to become a publisher, which is what happened to me. Maybe that sense of overview is why I made that shift. I'm not totally sure.

Jacqueline: So, can you tell us – were you aspiring to be a publisher at that point?

Sophie Cunningham: No. I didn't really understand what a publisher did – honestly, not even when I became one. It was a traumatic period, partly because I had a relationship with Tim Winton as his editor.

When Hilary's contract ended – two or three years after the buyout – I assumed I'd go with her, wherever she went. I think it became public quickly that she was going to Pan. I can't remember the order of events.

Penguin were concerned they'd lose significant authors such as Tim and, to my surprise, offered me the publisher job to replace Hilary. It hadn't crossed my mind until a week or so before I got the offer that it was even a possibility. I was in my late twenties. I'd picked up some sense of the role from working closely with Hilary.

I think I'm a good editor, but I couldn't spend my whole life focused on detail and embedded in other people's material. I started wanting to do other things so, in that sense, I was ready for a change, in retrospect. I really like thinking about how a book is marketed – the covers, as we were discussing, as well as the text.

Jacqueline: Well, as you were saying earlier, you did have a lot of experience assessing manuscripts up-front. So, in terms of having those instincts, I'd be fascinated to get your thoughts on this, but one of the big differences is that attention to detail. I love being immersed in the book work. That's where I kind of go into my zone and feel quite happy and pleased. And I love that kind of detailed problem solving and deep level kind communication, which is not to say that you don't do that as a publisher, but you've really got to be a lot more vocal and winning in your pitch, and a lot more sort-of extroverted in terms of building strong connections, identifying the manuscripts, but also kind of championing those in-house, don't you?

Sophie Cunningham: Yes. I had that kind of personality, but I didn't fully understand that was the publisher's job versus the editor's. The real advantage of McPhee Gribble was that everyone worked on every aspect of a book.

So, I probably had the ideal training to become a publisher quickly. But it only dawned on me a few days before it happened – after a conversation with Bob Sessions – 'Oh, this might happen.'

I had a couple of days to decide whether to avoid the conversation or embrace the opportunity, knowing it would be hurtful to Hilary.

Jacqueline: Yes. Right. So, one of those bittersweet moments.

Sophie Cunningham: Yes.

Jacqueline: An opportunity, but also, yeah ... fair enough. That's hard.

Sophie Cunningham: What I didn't quite understand was Hilary's frustration: she had years of experience and I did not. I was honest about not having all the experience I needed. I was on a steep learning curve. Bob Sessions – a very different person from Hilary – was very patient about teaching me publisher skills. He and I didn't really talk about editing. Most of the staff resigned as soon as I was appointed and went to work with Hilary.

Jacqueline: Yeah. That's not unusual for big company turnovers, is it?

Sophie Cunningham: I now see that's not unusual. It was a bad day, though. I'd just ...

Jacqueline: Yes, I can imagine, very dramatic. But seeing how sweeping changes go through the publishing industry and authors move and shift as well, with publishers, so ...

Sophie Cunningham: So, I had to build my own team, quickly. I'd met Meredith Rose, who's always been clear she wants to be an editor, not a publisher – one of Australia's best, I think. She'd just done the publishing editing course, in her thirties, after other careers. I remember meeting her at Marios and agreeing we'd work together – I can't recall who suggested it. I think she did. Anyway: I couldn't have done it without her. She's extraordinary.

I also met – again, at Marios – with Miranda Salt, who now owns a gallery in Paris. She became my assistant, effectively the office manager at the reduced McPhee Gribble.

And Nicky [Christer], who was a senior editor at Penguin, asked if she could come across to work on the McPhee list. I can't remember who approached whom in that case either, but I'm so pleased she joined us. I do remember her asking Bob Sessions, saying, 'I don't want to leave Penguin, but I'd like to work on this list.'

That was the team we pulled together. Then I had to find books. I can't quite understand how I managed it, but Fiona McGregor and Christopher Cyrill were the first two fiction authors I commissioned vs. inherited.

I had friends in publishing – who shall remain nameless – and when their houses rejected something, they would say: 'We're mad to knock this back. Are you interested?' People did me favours and sent good work through.

And, of course, the slush pile was still there. I also drew on my experience of journalism, and my interests in music, for instance. I started working with a designer, James Devries, who redesigned our logo and created a new look.

That rebranding helped – an important emotional step: saying it’s not what it was; this is a new phase in the company’s history. It was actually Diana Gribble who suggested I do that. She contacted me – and I loved this about her – saying I was in danger of thinking being a publisher meant copying what she and Hilary did. Not her exact words, but the gist: ‘You’ve got to do your own thing.’

Rebranding was part of that. I started commissioning friends – people like Tim Conigrave, who wrote *Holding The Man*. It’s probably the best, or at least the most successful, book I’ve ever published – still in print after more than twenty-five years, probably thirty now. He was a friend of a friend; we met at a party. Do you know *Holding The Man*?

Jacqueline: I don’t know it, but I’m going to go and read it.

Sophie Cunningham: It’s a gay classic. He was a young man dying of AIDS who’d met his boyfriend at a private boys’ school in Melbourne. His partner, John, had already died. It was a love story. The school was accepting of their relationship. Tim died during production. The book became a stage show and a film and has sold around the world. It’s still in print.

Jacqueline: Wow! That’s huge. Did you do the developmental work as the publisher at the time?

Sophie Cunningham: Yes. Well, sort of. We had a lot of conversations as he was writing. But it was complicated because he was dying, and we weren’t sure he’d live long enough to finish the memoir. He was getting more and more fragile. Robust conversations became difficult. He asked to work with the playwright Nick Enright, a friend, who did a lot of the early developmental work and then helped pull the manuscript together. Tim trusted Nick more than me. They had a long-standing friendship. Tim and I did not.

I can’t really talk about this without getting emotional. He handed me the manuscript and died a day later. I read it outside his room while he was in the hospice. Long story short, after he died and the manuscript was in production, I went to Allen & Unwin, and Meredith Rose oversaw the book through the line edit. There was no author to work with, and Nick Enright died soon after as well.

Jacqueline: Oh, wow. So, you felt a, a real ... apart from your own emotions ... I guess it was a real honour ... a legacy piece. So, you would want to treat it very carefully and, and just respectfully. That’s amazing.

Sophie Cunningham: Yes. I also did a book on the AIDS Quilt Project. I cared deeply about the losses in my community, and the book documented quilts made to honour people – by themselves or by their families. Bruce Sims was very supportive of those kinds of books.

Jacqueline: I’ve heard a lot about Bruce Sims, yes.

Sophie Cunningham: There was a lot of goodwill. Another story: Martin Flanagan was one of my early authors, and he said, 'You should talk to my brother.'

I read *Death of a River Guide* and contracted it, but I left just as it was coming out. Again, Meredith Rose did a huge amount of work on that project. She was the editor in the end more than I was.

Jacqueline: Yeah, right. But that would've been hard bringing those in and then sort of segueing across and not being able to finish them?

Sophie Cunningham: With quite a few of these projects – like with Richard – I didn't do the fine editing, but I read the manuscript and said, 'There's a whole section that feels like a different novel – you need to lose it.' Editorial was my background, so I had a lot of input at a high level, but not the fine detail.

And then, because of Tim Winton – *Cloudstreet* had become huge, and Tim had another book. Hilary and I were both competing to get the rights; I was sent to Perth to bid for that book and try to keep him with Penguin. I now realise this was basically why Penguin appointed me. He went to Pan Macmillan. I think Penguin misjudged it – there were meetings where they said, 'We'll make you a great literary figure,' and he was like, 'I don't want to be a literary figure.'

He wanted Pan, not Picador. He's very smart and had a strong sense of his career. I was sad but I understood. Tim wasn't much older than me. We were both navigating complicated emotional and professional territory at the same time.

It was partly loyalty to Hilary, and partly that Pan Mac, and Hilary, read him better. Penguin didn't quite understand the emotional territory or the loyalty to Hilary. Long story short: when *Cloudstreet* took off, Penguin wanted to put a Penguin logo on it and take the McPhee logo off. It became clear to me that successful books would be moved into Penguin, and that McPhee Gribble would be a kind of ghetto imprint. Also, when I got the job I'd asked for separate premises – we were happy to work with Viking O'Neil but not be out at Penguin Ringwood – and we were all moved to Ringwood.

I started looking for other work and was offered a good job with a multinational in Sydney, but after interviews I wasn't convinced by their commitment to Australian literature. So that wasn't going to work. However, on that trip I had lunch with Patrick Gallagher and Paul Donovan, who I really hit it off with, and ended up going to Allen & Unwin.

It was a good fit – but inevitably different. At McPhee Gribble, for two and a half, three years, I was left to it and could fly under the radar – until things took off.

Jacqueline: Autonomy, yeah.

Sophie Cunningham: After two or three years: 'Oh, she's doing quite a good job,' then, 'Maybe we should incorporate the list into Penguin.' We'd been left alone for a couple of years – exciting, a great honour and Penguin were supportive. But there was going to be a requirement to fold into the bigger corporation – which I understand now.

At the time I didn't ... it wasn't unreasonable, but I thought: I don't want that. I also didn't want the ongoing weight of 'honour the independent press' and deal with the grief for not doing my job the way people – including Hilary – thought I should. I cared too much about her goodwill, which was not ideal, to be honest. I needed to grow up, and I couldn't do that at Penguin.

I thought if I went to Allen & Unwin I could do my own thing. However, it was a much flatter structure; I didn't have as much autonomy, and there wasn't as much money for advances. That said, I liked being there a lot, and I learned from every publisher I worked with – Hilary, Bob, Patrick – all very different. At Allen & Unwin I distinguished myself more in non-fiction. I think I published some really good non-fiction; I was probably more a non-fiction publisher than fiction in the end.

Jacqueline: So, two questions. One is: in terms of advances for publishers, how much do you think it's about money – it's really hard to compete if you haven't got the same funds, right? I mean, this is a big issue for authors and it means a lot to their continued work and career, which I'm sure you appreciate as an author as well. Do you think that money is the sole factor or what are the things in that publisher role that count?

Sophie Cunningham: No. It's not the sole factor.

Jacqueline: So, you do think the relationship and the understanding of the work ...

Sophie Cunningham: I don't know how much it holds now, but across the houses I worked at – and later, Lonely Planet – whenever an author said, 'I'll just sign; I trust you,' I'd say, 'Don't.' I could get hit by a bus or change jobs – you need to be happy with the publishing house. Things happened at Allen & Unwin that I'm sure would've happened at Penguin too; I was simply there longer.

You make promises you can't always keep. You say marketing will do X; marketing doesn't do X – sometimes for valid reasons.

Jacqueline: Mm. And that is, that is the pressure, isn't it? The delivering of the entire thing. Yes. It's one thing to produce the book and deliver on that creative piece and make the work itself; it's the whole other end of the package too.

Sophie Cunningham: You're only as good as your team. You can't make promises on other's behalf. As for advocating for authors – I managed that at McPhee Gribble through sheer force of will. I'm a mix of extrovert and introvert; I blew all my extroversion by about thirty-five. When I was young, I was very assertive in meetings; people thought, 'She's new, we'll trust her.' It was harder at Allen & Unwin with more publishers. Books on the Vogel shortlist were coming through, and Patrick and Paul would say, 'We need the sales team behind you.' They were right. It took me a while to get that.

At McPhee Gribble I was the new kid – and the only kid. By the time I was at Allen & Unwin, others – Jane, Nikki, Chris – were making a real impact. It changed quickly. I might have been early, but it soon became a crowded room.

Jacqueline: Yes. And I mean, it does seem to be quite a competitive industry, which I'm sure is true for other industries like advertising, for example, and communications industries. But publishing is a competitive space.

Sophie Cunningham: Yes. At Allen & Unwin I learned I couldn't take a book on just because I loved it. The company had to love it too. Publishing purely to my taste wasn't commercial enough, so I got better at buying books I believed would do well, while still liking what I acquired. Rather than publishing only what I felt in my bones – like with Tim Conigrave – I learned you can't build a list or a career on personal passion alone.

You need expertise and a more mature approach. I'm grateful I learned those skills at Allen & Unwin. But I also realised that without a real connection to a book, I was less interested in the job. Patrick wasn't going to throw money at a new list the way Penguin had. I also wasn't buying books that needed big advances – many were debuts – though at Allen & Unwin I was offered bigger books, too.

I have to say that there were times when Patrick did back my books properly, in terms of money. And sometimes I was flat out wrong. I remember a non-fiction title going around – I was desperate to get it, and everyone in Sydney publishing seemed hysterical about it too. The price escalated. Patrick talked me off the ledge and said, 'Calm down; other books will come.'

That book wasn't going to make hundreds of thousands anyway. The market was overheated. Those reality checks were invaluable, and I'm grateful to all the people who gave them to me along the way.

By the mid-to-late nineties, with agents' ascendant, it felt like my skill had to be winning auctions. Authors were moving houses more. The job became more about courting agents – 'like me best' – than meeting the authors. It felt transactional.

Jacqueline: And further away from using your instincts to identify talent and then championing that talent.

Sophie Cunningham: Yes. And to get back to editing – being a good editor sometimes means saying the work isn't good enough and standing by it. It took me a long time to own that. Later, when I was editing shorter pieces at Meanjin, I became much better at saying 'no': 'If you're not prepared to fix that, it won't work.' I wish I'd said that earlier, when I was trying to establish a list. I didn't want to upset authors but that's not doing them a favour. I learned to say, 'Better to hear it from me than from a reviewer.' But it took too long to learn that lesson. I let things through I shouldn't have – in part because I wanted to be liked and in part because I wasn't comfortable with difficult conversations.

Jacqueline: Well, and sometimes it's about, uh, it's about keeping the peace.

So, in terms of skills, you obviously do have the technical skills to be an editor, even though that's not your preference. Where you find your zone now is obviously more in the creation, given that you now spend your time being an author. But in terms of editorial, what do you think those skills are? Like, for me, I guess it was time. It has been experience – just trial and error, learning by sometimes making a mistake – you kind of go, okay, well I'd probably do that differently; reflecting on your own practice and your own work ...

Sophie Cunningham: That's all true. Two things: I had strong instincts, and Hilary taught me to trust them – you'll find out if they're wrong; authors will tell you, I will tell you. You need self-confidence; your brain is the tool.

If you're continually wrong, you're not good at the job. Then you learn the rest: marketing effectively; that too many similar novels means several will sink, and the best one may not be the one that floats. Authors' personalities matter. The book has to be really tight. And today, I don't think there's enough editing of books.

I used to be irritated by that claim; now I find myself repeating it. I stopped copyediting early but did a lot of big-picture work. At Penguin we had in-house editors – a strong editorial culture. They valued it.

Allen & Unwin already used the now-common freelance model. Back then budgets felt reasonable and I was also editing – so two people touched the text. These days, it can feel like, 'You've got five days; fix it,' then straight to production. I've asked to speak with a copyeditor of one of my own novels and been told, 'We'll see if she has time,' which meant that the editor wouldn't be paid for her time with me. It's ... constrained.

Jacqueline: So, that kind of model, in a sense, curtails your ability to spend time on a manuscript. Time does seem to be probably the biggest thing that's changed in the industry. Also, the technology itself changed.

Sophie Cunningham: Time is what you need as a writer. It's not hard to fix a problem; it's hard to know how to articulate that at times. Learning that skill takes time. Publishers also take books on too early – and I was likely that kind of publisher at times.

Authors offer too early; books get contracted before they're ready. People redraft under contracted deadlines and constraints. Some of my books as well, I'm sure.

Jacqueline: Yeah, I think it's industry wide. I don't think it's specific to any one house, and there is such competition out there now to secure authors and get the work contracted early, but then probably not enough time in development because, as an author, of course, it takes time to write and respond to an edit. And it's that response that matters, isn't it? It's like, you've got one chance to fix an issue or make changes. So, it's like, what is the best fix? You know, you sort of have to have a go to realise what a potential change might make. I feel like it's the same with editorial – it takes time before I can suggest a change; I've got to try it to see if it will work first. Otherwise, why would I recommend a suggestion? Do

you know what I mean? You need time to ensure the change is good so you can back in the work you're doing.

Sophie Cunningham: Marketing and reading-copy schedules have got much stricter; there's far more process than when I started, so there's no elastic left in the timelines.

Jacqueline: So, I mean, that's definitely true on the editorial side. I think every editor who will listen to these interviews will go, 'Oh gosh, if we could only have more time!' And I do think a lot of publishers also need to really reflect on that. Yet, it doesn't seem to action any change.

Can we talk ... can you talk to me a little bit about why you ended up exiting that publishing role? I mean, the role would've been highly respected and still is today. At what point did you know: I don't want to be in this role anymore; I really want to have a crack at writing.

Sophie Cunningham: I started to feel jealous. Authors would ring: 'I've got the Paris residency' or this or that. I thought, that's not cool, feeling in competition with your authors. My personal and professional lives bled together. Every week – most weekends and evenings – events. You become friends with people who will inevitably get pissed off with you. It's relentless and tiring. Too much alcohol; I couldn't keep up.

I'm not being facetious – I was exhausted. It began to feel like a popularity contest. And the books I loved most weren't necessarily the ones that did best, so I started doing books I thought would do well, and they did better. The idea that the list was an extension of my sensibility no longer held. I also wanted to move back to Melbourne for personal reasons.

So, I went part-time. Also, I'd taken on too many books – twenty or twenty-five a year – trying to edit them. Patrick tried to tell me to focus on fewer, bigger books, the way Julie Gibbs did at Penguin – publisher as curator, strong design sensibility, doing fewer titles.

I had a different approach. I was taking on heaps of fiction and non-fiction – being a generalist, which Allen & Unwin needed. I'm not a good generalist; I'm good when I'm passionate. I began to think I was in the wrong role.

I've always thrived in smaller environments. Allen & Unwin was big – even as an independent. I loved McPhee Gribble because it was small; that's why I later went to Text and then Ultimo. I like small publishers. It suits me better in every way – working there, or on boards like UQP. I'm uncomfortable with the corporatisation of publishing.

I understand they have to make money – I may sound naïve – but it became a different industry over the years I was in it. One big shift while I was at Allen & Unwin was Harry Potter.

Jacqueline: Oh, yes, of course. Well, that changed the landscape somewhat, didn't it?

Sophie Cunningham: It changed the landscape. I remember pitching novels at 3,000 copies – 'good book, important writer, we can build them.' Ten years later, after some underperformance, those conversations

got harder when Harry Potter was doing 100,000 to 300,000 copies and soaking up paper supply. It all changed. Around then, partly for personal reasons, I thought, I want to be a writer.

I was about to turn forty; I had to take the chance. I went part-time to finish books in train, then stepped back altogether – doing the part-time gig for another couple of years in Melbourne.

Once I moved to Melbourne, I wasn't part of the company in the same way – no longer a real player – but I continued to work with Allen & Unwin. Patrick's version – which could be right – is that I said I was going to Melbourne for a few months and would be back full-time. So, he may feel I slipped out the back door. In fact, he's said as much!

I'm not sure how well I communicated. It was a difficult time: I had endometriosis, surgery, and needed a lot of time off work. In fact, if I'm honest, I can see I didn't communicate with Allen & Unwin well enough at all.

Allen & Unwin were amazing – exceptional at supporting staff, very loyal.

Jacqueline: Well, I mean, people who go to Allen & Unwin never seem to leave ...

Sophie Cunningham: Because it's a good workplace.

Jacqueline: Yes.

Sophie Cunningham: Which is separate to my reasons for leaving publishing. My reasons for leaving were frustrations with publishing, not with Allen & Unwin. I have nothing but admiration for their work.

Jacqueline: Oh, they're so successful. And I was just going to say, you probably felt like your books weren't selling, they weren't as successful [after Harry Potter]?

But I mean, that piece, continuing that history has been a real cornerstone of the industry in terms of what they publish and what they provide. And they're so very well known for ...

Sophie Cunningham: I did some really good books there. And some definitely sold well. I didn't mean to suggest otherwise. But I also did books simply to meet a quota. Whereas at McPhee Gribble/Penguin, I could stand by every book on my list.

Jacqueline: Yes, and I do wonder whether that's just a natural result of working for such a long time in the industry – you realise after a while there are a number of books and it's hard to be proud of all of them in the same way.

Do you think that a lot of emerging editors are also emerging writers? They [writers] want to work in publishing. I never quite know what to tell them, but you've got experience in both. Do you think you can do both?

Sophie Cunningham: I tell people who want to be writers that they shouldn't work in publishing.

Jacqueline: It would be really hard.

Sophie Cunningham: They should make money elsewhere. I met a writer who painted roofs and houses six months a year – hard, physical work – and spent six months on his own projects. I’m about to turn sixty [in 2024], I don’t have enough super. I juggle four or five jobs and earn less than average. Without a partner I couldn’t do what I do. That links back to rushing: writers as well as publishers move too fast. You’re desperate to get the book out, to make an income and a career. It happens for some – Trent Dalton, Tim Winton – but not for 90 per cent of people. There’s no point rushing a book out. I keep writing because it matters to me, but financially it was a rash move. It’s why I went back to Meanjin – I needed more income, though I also loved the three years I was there.

It was theoretically part-time; I have no regrets. I think another reason I left publishing was that I was scared of becoming ‘management’, but looking back I might have done interesting work in that path. I had a youthful contempt for management over hands-on work.

I don’t regret my professional life, but I do think I might have done interesting things if I’d stayed on the inside of a publishing house. I admire people who remain in one place long enough to make a difference; I was too impatient to mature my career within publishing.

Also, I genuinely wanted to write. I wrote *Geography* – my first novel – relatively quickly once I went part-time, and auctioned it. Penguin offered more money, but because of history and because it was a two-book contract, I had reservations.

I went to Text, which was a great publisher for me. Mandy is a very good, very hands-on editor. My work wasn’t freelanced out for copyediting. I was privileged to have that level of care. I’ve also done commercially successful books with other publishers who used different models. Melbourne was a great publishing idea. Working with Phillipa McGuinness taught me a lot – a clear series vision and long-term view. She picked slightly quirky, not-obvious authors; the books [in the City Series] are all strong. I’m pretty sure it’s my best-selling adult book.

But the freelance model for editors and sometimes publicists meant people don’t always have enough time. That said, I have nothing but high praise for Brigid Mullane at Ultimo. She published *This Devastating Fever* but she also gave very strong editorial feedback on the book. But as a generalization, these editorial limitations have been an issue when it comes to my Adult books — with every publisher other than Text, that’s been an issue. My relationship with Albert Street Books (Allen & Unwin) who publish my children’s books has been different. All in house, and incredibly hands on. It’s been incredibly collaborative.

Jacqueline: Okay. That’s really interesting to hear. So, from an author’s point of view, you actually think it is better working with an in-house editor? You get more priority, I suppose?

Sophie Cunningham: Yes – I definitely think in-house is better.

Jacqueline: Mm.

Sophie Cunningham: That's not to dismiss freelancers: a good proofreader can make amazing observations and profoundly improve a project. But—

Jacqueline: I guess there's a finite amount of time, whereas if someone's working on it in-house all the time, they're there to support all the way through – to have those conversations and to follow up and to say, I'm going to be with you the whole way ...

Sophie Cunningham: It's very hard for one person to be both a fantastic publisher and a hands-on editor with enough time. Mandy has a publisher's sensibility, but she does a huge amount of text work.

I don't criticise individuals; companies are trying different models. But outsourcing all editing isn't best for books – though it may suit the bottom line.

It's also not good for training. I had patient mentors; I probably didn't know what I didn't know. It's harder to pick that up when you've done a course and then suddenly are just sent manuscripts and working on those on your own. You have no one to ask: 'I don't like this manuscript—how do I edit a book I don't like?' Those conversations are complex.

Jacqueline: Yes. That collegiate relationship in-house helps. And I noticed that some editors are being sent manuscripts to work on and then once the author responds, they don't even see it again.

I think personally, as an editor, the job is not complete until you've had the opportunity to revisit the manuscript and respond to the author's work: 'Great!' or 'What about this now?' It really does take time and there's no cutting corners. I think maybe that's one of the things out of this entire discussion that needs to be reiterated for the entire industry, in some ways.

Okay. I've taken up heaps of your time. Just quickly, how do you see the future of this industry? How do you sort of see it playing out?

Sophie Cunningham: I don't really know. Since the late eighties I've heard endless pronouncements, sometimes mine, sometimes others. I'm tired of forecasts. I feel a bit negative now – but after forty years, that's human.

More money needs to be spent on editorial again – it can't just be about marketing. The swing concerns me. The 'every book must make back its money' model has implications. I understand why; I've seen what happens when it doesn't and the consequences can be dire.

I don't want to sound naive, but there is such a thing as building a writer – and it barely happens now. This isn't new; in the nineties there was a lot of money thrown around, big first books, then disappointing second ones – The River Ophelia comes to mind – followed by a parting of ways.

I don't want to misspeak – it's just an example of debut hype followed by a fade. Tim Winton had five or six books before Cloudstreet; that used to be normal.

Jacqueline: Yeah. It's a slow burn career, isn't it? Not every book can be a success, or a success in the same way.

Sophie Cunningham: Yes. There's too much focus on debuts – understandable, because you need readers – but it makes long-term careers harder to sustain.

I also think too many books are being published. I'm very active in the industry and cannot keep up with what's coming out at any given time.

Jacqueline: Especially if the quality is compromised.

Sophie Cunningham: Even when quality isn't compromised – there's simply so much. By my bed I've got Christos Tsiolkas, Melissa Lucashenko, Richard Flanagan, Charlotte Wood, Catherine Lumby on Frank Moorhouse. And these are all writers of my generation. There are amazing writers coming up.

There are so many books I want to read, and I can't keep up. I don't quite know what to do with that observation, which is why I resist making pronouncements.

Jacqueline: And maybe that is, you know, maybe that is partly this fatigue. I do wonder ... it's like there's a lot of energy and a lot of positivity coming through in younger generations. And there's still this real desire for people to want to write and express themselves and want to work on books. Maybe part of the answer is sort of letting that (new energy) come in. But it has to then be, you know, people taking on that mentoring role and that chaperoning, teaching and training and ...

Sophie Cunningham: And understand you might publish books that sell only a thousand copies, but you know why you're doing it. Better that than throwing mud at a wall to see what sticks.

Jacqueline: Yeah.

Sophie Cunningham: There are a lot of very good people in the industry – there always have been. I've heard 'the industry is about to die' since I started; I don't take it seriously.

Maybe it won't. There are many good small presses, even within larger companies, that are allowed to express their own identities.

Jacqueline: Yeah, it's wonderful. Well, we've probably got to wrap up. I know you've got to get on with your day and continue writing, but I would just really like to say one of the things that has really shone through for me today, is that you have had the courage and the commitment to just continue to do things that you get a lot of intrinsic value from. You are obviously very talented in the sense that you've been able to trust your instincts and move through all of these different roles and had an incredible career. It's the stuff of publishing legend, Sophie, and you can still say, 'I want to write, that's where my pleasure is now.' And that's what you're doing. And, you know, nine or ten books later. Are you on the, what, ninth or tenth now?

Sophie Cunningham: Ninth. I'm working on the tenth.

Jacqueline: Working on the tenth. There we go. So, we look forward to seeing that coming out. And thank you very much for your time.

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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