

Beyond the Margins

Australian Editors in Conversation

WRITTEN INTERVIEW

Teresa Pitt

Publisher and editor

About Teresa Pitt

Teresa began working as a trainee book editor in 1980, at the age of 35. Her first job in publishing was at Sally Milner's Greenhouse Publications. She then worked for various Australian publishing houses including Lloyd O'Neil Pty Ltd, Penguin Books Australia (twice), William Heinemann Australia, The Macmillan Company of Australia, Melbourne University Press, Simon & Schuster (Australia) and Lothian Books. Her roles have included editor, senior editor, commissioning editor, senior commissioning editor and publisher. She retired in 2007.

She was President of the Society of Editors (Vic) (now Editors Victoria) from 1983 to 1985, and was made an Honorary Life Member in 1987. She also taught Editing 2 in the Associate Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing and Editing) at RMIT from 1991 to 1995.

Since retiring, she has been working as a volunteer tutor, running courses in Australian Literature and Film Studies with U3A Yarra City.

Teresa has three children and nine grandchildren, and is about to become a great-grandmother for the first time.

Interview

I should start by saying that my main experience has been with narrative non-fiction. I've edited children's and YA books and adult fiction, but I've principally worked in adult non-fiction for both general and scholarly markets, in fields such as Australian history, Australian politics, psychology, sociology, the environment, literature, biography, autobiography and memoirs. My comments about editing should be read against this background. I have no experience in educational, technical or scientific editing. I got my first job as a trainee editor in 1980, and have been an editor, a senior editor, a commissioning editor and a publisher. I retired from the publishing industry in April 2007.

When working as an editor, how do you approach changes with authors? (E.g., Do you prefer to give editorial feedback via a report, notes on the manuscript, over the phone or in person?) Tell us a bit about your practice and how you like to work.

With broad developmental and structural feedback and suggestions, I preferred to give these during an in-person conversation, either IRL, by phone or on Zoom. I then summarised the gist of the conversation in a confirmatory letter or email.

When it came to detailed line and copy editing, I preferred to write a general report noting the main types of edits, corrections or queries made, and provide detailed edits and queries on the manuscript itself. (Note: this was in the olden days! Digital editing had barely arrived when I retired.)

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

For me, the most important thing was always to establish a supportive, collegiate relationship with the author right at the beginning. This is still true, whether you are a commissioning editor, a structural or developmental editor, a line editor or a copy editor. If you have direct contact with the author, in whatever capacity, the first thing you should do after receiving and examining the text is to write an initial appreciative email,

complimenting them on the work and saying what interests and impresses you about it. It may be even better to convey these matters in person during a friendly personal conversation.

I would never, ever begin an author-editor relationship with a list of corrections and criticisms. If they are going to trust you, the author needs to know:

1. That you are interested in what they have written, and why
2. What elements you like or admire about it
3. That you appreciate and understand all the work they have put into it.

You should also make it very clear that your first priority is helping them make their text as good as it can possibly be, and that you are willing to discuss and negotiate on any issues that may arise.

Unfortunately, some (very few!) freelance editors omit this crucial first step in the relationship, and leap right into corrections and suggested changes. This leaves the author feeling criticised, ignored and unappreciated, rather than grateful, supported and satisfied. Several authors complained to me about one highly-qualified freelance editor who seemed to be totally unaware of the importance of this initial process.

I often likened the role of an editor to that of a counsellor, and I found my training and experience as a counsellor very useful in my editing career.

Has your editing style changed across your career? If so, has it changed because of experience you've gained, specific author relationships or industry changes?

My editing style, of course, changed with changing technology. And, as I progressed from a copy editor to a commissioning editor and publisher, I had to learn how to manage many projects at once rather than focusing on a one manuscript at a time; how to build a list that had a distinctive flavour, with coherence and direction; and how to engage and communicate with my publishing colleagues to ensure that each book was designed, marketed and publicised to reach the widest possible readership.

I should also say that I don't agree with those who believe that a commissioning editor should also be able to copy edit and even proofread the manuscript. In my view these are different roles requiring very different approaches and skillsets, and should be kept separate.

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

Looking after and supporting your author remains a key element of the editorial role. Other key elements include high-level English language and editorial skills; excellent communication skills, including tactfulness and empathy; strong analytical and critical skills; a habit of reading widely; and learning how to work as a member of a team.

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

One career highlight was working with Barry Humphries on *The Life and Death of Sandy Stone* (Pan Macmillan, 1990). Barry and I were chatting at Macmillan's Melbourne office one day, and I happened to mention that my favourite of all his characters was Sandy Stone. He said he'd love to compile all the Sandy Stone scripts and put them in a book, and I said, 'Yes! Let's do it!' Working with Barry on that book was enormous fun, and we both kept falling around laughing. It wasn't just the scripts – Barry kept coming up with hilarious annotations and marginalia, funny stories, and hysterically witty puns and jokes. It was certainly the best fun I've ever had with an author.

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

An editor's role is to make the author's book as good as it can possibly be. This includes a lot more than correcting the grammar and spelling. It's understanding the author's intention; maintaining respect for the author's voice; ensuring that the tone, register and language is pitched to the intended audience; paying attention to structure and logic; picking up inconsistencies and repetitions; fact-checking (although strictly speaking this is the author's responsibility); and following the publisher's preferred style guide.

An editor is in a tricky position between the author and the publisher. I've always believed that the editor's first loyalty must be to the author and the book, but given that the publisher is paying them, they must also take the publisher's wishes and directions seriously. The editor may find themselves in the position of a mediator between the author and the publisher, a situation that requires careful judgement and a great deal of tact.

Why do you think editors aren't more celebrated as part of the book process? What makes the industry/society keep this part of the process as 'invisible mending'?

Ooh, I hate that term 'invisible mending'! But of course, that's exactly what an editor has to do.

The thing all editors must bear in mind is that it's NOT THEIR BOOK. It's the author's. And if the author chooses not to acknowledge or even admit to the help an editor has given them, that's their prerogative. (In my experience this is very rare.) The notion of an editor as a silent, invisible handmaid working behind the scenes is sad and, in my view, outdated. They are really a partner in the process, but in the end it's up to the author as to whether the editor's contribution is known to others.

Has it been hard to sustain a career as an editor? What keeps/kept you committed to working as an editor in an industry where your work is largely unacknowledged? What is it about the job that makes/made this 'invisible' career fulfilling?

For me, the hardest period was when I worked as a freelancer and had to hustle for work. I hated that part of it. But for me, working on books was a joy and a pleasure. It played to my temperament, interests, skills and strengths, and I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else.

What makes Australian writing so unique?

I don't know that Australian writing is particularly unique, except in the broad sense that it reflects the character and people of this country. Since retiring, I've been teaching Australian Literature as a volunteer U3A tutor, and the thing that keeps striking me (and my students) is the enormous range of different subjects, styles, backgrounds, attitudes and interests of the Australian writers we study. We now have voices coming from all the various parts of our multicultural country. Australian writing and publishing have flourished in the most incredible way since I first joined the industry, which makes me very happy.

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

When I started working in publishing (my first job was in 1980) there were no training courses for editors. I did a Graduate Diploma in Secretarial Studies in 1979, and one of the elective units was called Editing and Publishing. I did the whole course just for that one elective. Today there are certificate, diploma and degree courses for would-be editors, and I would advise anyone who wants to be an editor to enrol in one of these.

Learn everything you can about the technicalities of editing and read as widely as you can in as many areas as possible.

How would you define a successful edit?

A successful edit? One that leaves the reader unaware of all the work that has gone into making the finished work; one that produces the best possible result; and one that leaves a happy author.

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.

Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd)

www.iped-editors.org