



The Art of the Sell

Patricia Mulcahy

As a young editor eager to see how things worked in the Real World of books, I accompanied a sales rep named George Czernovics, who'd supposedly learned English from reading Penguin paperbacks while tending sheep on a hillside in his native Hungary.

We met the Barnes & Noble buyer, a skeptical-looking woman whose cluttered office screamed, "We are on a tight budget here," a fact reinforced by her decision to skip entirely the two first novels I'd championed. In his charming continental accent, George urged her to take one, and completely ignored the other -- triage, literary style.

From then on, I concluded rejection letters: "I'm just not enthused enough to send this out into the cold, cruel marketplace."

Today it may be easier to access a publishing "platform," but it's still hard to attract a critical mass of readers. As much as most writers hate the idea of "selling," only Thomas Pynchon can hide and still move copies.

First step: acknowledging that a book is a product that requires payment, like a box of soap or a bag of groceries. Well-regarded novelists Ann Patchett and Louise Erdrich have embraced the supply chain by [opening their own indie bookstores](#). Few will have the desire, or the resources, to take things to that level; but there is no escaping the need for writers to look into the maws of the marketplace and take its measure.

If you're publishing on your own, or if your publisher isn't going to bat for you, how do you attract buyers? Even seasoned writers now publish stories as "shorties" for \$.99 on sites like Amazon Singles to cultivate an audience for longer work. An author website is de rigueur, as is a Facebook page, and a Twitter and Goodreads account. Getting out the word might encompass participation in online book clubs and chat rooms, or appearances at your local independent if the folks there invite you. It might be worthwhile to introduce yourself electronically to popular lit-world bloggers like Maud Newton. And is there a topic for [Salon.com](#) that might be up your alley?

Cruise bookstores, and offer to sign copies of your opus for local outlets, or for organizations or clubs if your subject matter lends itself to a "special sales" opportunity. Everyone you've ever gone to school with is also within reach through alumni offices and publications. Does your local coffee shop/dive bar/college campus have a reading series?

Look on the bright side: after all those lonely days at the computer, writers now have the chance to embrace a community of readers, and to try and perfect the art of the sell alongside that of the perfectly turned-out sentence.

*Patricia Mulcahy formed the editorial consulting service Brooklyn Books in 1999 after over twenty years in book publishing. She started as a temp at Farrar Straus and Giroux and left as Editor in Chief at Doubleday. She is the co-author of *It Is Well with My Soul: The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year -Old Woman*, by Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson (Penguin, 2010), and of *Making Masterpiece: Twenty-Five Years Behind the Scenes at Masterpiece and Mystery!* on PBS by Rebecca Eaton (Viking, fall 2013). See www.brooklynbooks.com for more information.*



The Long-Distance Romance

Marjorie Braman

Other people—people who just read books and don't edit them—might find it odd that sometimes an editor's closest confidants are people she's never met. All my professional life, I've been introduced to strangers through their writing. A book has served as not only introduction, but as a window into some of a stranger's most intimate thoughts or experiences.

In many cases, we've exchanged pictures of our lives (my gardens, her cats, his classic pick-up truck), talked about husbands and kids (or lack thereof) and grandkids, careers and most of all, writing. Ideas. Emotions. What drives people to do what they do; the horrors that can happen while you're just walking down the street; the joys that certain moments bring us. We talk about how to get some of that down on paper in a way that resonates with another human being, because even when it's fiction, when it's done right, it comes to life. It may be make-believe but it all originates in personal experience and is informed by personal beliefs. Friendships don't get much more intimate than that.

When I moved from in-house editor to independent editor, I wondered if it would affect this kind of friendly intimacy; if, when authors turned into clients, the relationship would continue as I'd known it or if I would be more like a paid date to the prom. From the very beginning, I sensed that things would remain the same. When one of my first clients sold her book and let me know I was the third person she'd told (husband and best friend first, as it should be), I knew nothing had changed. And when she got her first pre-pub review—a starred Booklist—again, I was among the first she shared it with. I know when I see her book in my local bookstore, the thrill for me will be just as great as ever.

Once in a while, a client lives close enough that we get to meet in person. Recently, I had lunch with a woman whose memoir I edited almost two years ago. We've kept up with one another, mostly through emails and phone calls. When my husband published his second novel, she came into the city to attend his reading and was one of a handful of guests at the celebratory dinner. I know what her husband is up to, the details of her mother's move to assisted living, and she knows what's been going on in my life. We had a wonderful lunch where we discussed all these things. Then—of course—we talked about her next book.

After a 26-year career in publishing, most recently as Editor-in-Chief of Henry Holt, Marjorie Braman now works independently with writers, agents and publishers. Some of the authors she's worked with include Michael Crichton, Elmore Leonard and Sena Jeter Naslund. She most recently worked as a strategic advisor at Open Road Integrated Media. For more information, visit <http://www.marjoriebraman.com>.



Voice Lessons

Judy Sternlight

I recently worked with a mystery writer who felt trapped by her choice of first-person narration. Crucial plot developments were happening in places where her intrepid investigator couldn't plausibly appear. So we discussed the benefits of choosing first or third (limited or omniscient) points of view. Should this writer stay inside her appealing protagonist's head, or occasionally heighten the suspense by visiting the mind of one of the ominous villains? And what would happen if she moved into a third-person narration?

When I read a fiction manuscript, some of the questions that roll through my mind are about narrative voice and point(s)-of-view. Does the narrative voice ring true? If the narrator is subjective and involved in the plot, who is she talking to, and for what compelling purpose? If there are multiple perspectives, are they working together to propel and deepen the story? Even a powerful plot can be derailed if these elements are off.

I'm currently reading a manuscript by a talented novelist and one of his main characters is foreign. Can the author sustain this "other voice" in a plausible way? What linguistic quirks and cultural influences come through in this unique voice? And, if it proves too hard to sustain, are there other options for getting this character's story out? Of course there are—and they include switching points-of-view.

Often, one set of options will jump out as the right choice—but there are times when playful experimentation is called for. It's much easier to see if something works by putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and giving it a shot with some sample pages. This part of the creative process is often illuminating. Even if an author ultimately returns to his original choices, the rejected scenes may have valuable insights on character, plot, setting, etc., that can still be incorporated into the story.

Just imagine Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* or Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* told from a single point-of-view instead of the powerful alternating voices that introduce surprises and shed light on what's really happening. Or Eudora Welty's hilarious "Why I Live at the P.O." told from Poppa-Daddy's more somber perspective.

If a book is already under contract with a tight deadline, this kind of experimentation may not be possible. But in an ideal world, it's worth playing with different voices and points-of-view. Because sometimes, a change in one key element can make the whole story click.

Judy Sternlight, a former editor at Random House, Ballantine, and Modern Library, has worked with numerous acclaimed and bestselling writers and translators including Marie-Helene Bertino, Rita Mae Brown, Edith Grossman, Bret Anthony Johnston, Mark Kurlansky, Meera Nair, Peter Matthiessen, Joyce Carol Oates, and Kwei Quartey. Specializing in literary fiction, her books have won the National Book Award, the Commonwealth Prize, the Sophie Brody Award for Excellence in Jewish Literature, the PEN Beyond Margins Award, and other accolades. She also edits commercial fiction, including mysteries and thrillers. For more information, visit www.JudySternlightLit.com.



Open to Interpretation

Joan Hilty

There are thousands of books out there that will tell you how to write a novel, play, screenplay, comic script or children's book. And yet there are few, if any, that explain how to go from one to the other, let alone how to toggle between the real and the imagined.

What happens when that novella finds a second life in one's brain as a comic book? How to deal with memories that are too fraught for memoir, and must become fiction in order to see daylight?

Yes, the ever-expanding "other media" section of book contracts offers hope for prolonging a story's life across multimedia and merchandising. But that requires getting the contract in the first place, not to mention haggling over subsidiary rights and the author's involvement in the new version. So it's key to be open to interpreting and reinterpreting ideas creatively.

Novelist Sheri Holman (*The Dress Lodger*) has experienced both. "Every once in a while," she says, "an idea comes along that wants to be more than one thing. About a year ago, I had an idea based on human experimentation on the American homefront during WWII. The subject, which involved systematic starvation, was so visual, I felt it needed a different treatment — so I pitched it as a graphic novel. The graphic novel pitch became a short story that has since been anthologized.

"More strikingly, after writing *Witches on the Road Tonight*, which follows an Appalachian mountain witch; her son, a campy TV horror host; and her granddaughter, a fear-mongering TV news anchor, I felt I'd only begun to know this family. Perhaps because their story was so steeped in the media, if we were to continue following them, I felt it should be on television. *Witches* felt like a TV series to me, and with the help of a marvelous producer, that's what I'm developing now. The trick for me is to listen to my material. It usually tells me what it wants to be."

There's also the example of Sherman Alexie, who's used his life experience on the Spokane Indian Reservation to create fiction, poetry, screenplays, and — in an especially exciting departure from convention — a YA novel illustrated by the brilliant cartoonist Ellen Forney that [won a National Book Award](#).

In comics, where an original contribution might take the form of writing, co-writing, art, or some combination thereof, we've come up with a catch-all term to describe those who work in more than one: creator. I feel that's the best way to think when considering how any idea might ultimately be realized.

Joan Hilty has 15 years' experience at DC Comics editing and acquiring and editing Eisner —and Harvey Award-winning comics and graphic novels. As a Senior Editor there, she worked with comic writers, novelists, journalists and screenwriters. She is currently an editor and packager specializing in graphic novels and illustrated books; her clients include Farrar Straus and Giroux, Viacom Global Publishing, Forbes, and authors published by Hachette, Tor and First Second. For more information, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgtturn.com.



Writing The Book Is (No Longer) Enough

Jane Rosenman

I recently sat down for a talk with my old friend Charles Salzberg—writer, editor, and teacher extraordinaire. *New York* magazine hailed Charles as one of “New York’s Great Teachers” based on his many years of working with both fiction and nonfiction writers at the Open Center, Writer’s Voice, Sarah Lawrence College, The S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, and the New York Writers Workshop which he co-founded. His former student Lauren Weisberger (of *The Devil Wears Prada* fame) even gave Charles a [major shout-out](#) for helping put her on the path to the New York Times Bestseller List.

Given the shifting landscape of our business, I wanted Charles’s viewpoint on how the teaching of writing has changed over the years. Before the question was fully out of my mouth, Charles jumped in with one word: “Platform.” He explained that the need for a platform, the need for the writer to inject himself into the commercial aspect of publishing comes up right away in his courses. It is his job, as mentor and teacher, to make it clear that the days when “writing the book was enough” are long gone.

He cited a fascinating example from an advanced nonfiction class. He urged a student—and he does this all the time—to think about writing an essay for *The Huffington Post*. Through Charles’s contact at the website, a piece was published. Charles then posted the article on his own Facebook page, where it was seen by a literary agent who is now in conversation with this author about representation.

Charles emphasizes how important it is—both in fiction and nonfiction—to find material that can be excerpted. “Part of what I must do as a teacher in this new climate is to keep an eye on how writers can get their work onto social media, into speeches, or other avenues where their words will be noticed.” Charles summed up this line of inquiry by explaining that he’s not teaching the actual writing any differently; those eternal verities do not change. But he is encouraging students to be far more proactive in how they use their writing skills.

There’s a tendency to bemoan the loss of the days when writing a strong book was all a writer had to do. But Charles went on to say that he finds this new climate “kind of exciting.” A certain democratization has set in. We ended our conversation on a note of optimism. It’s optimism that I — and my colleagues in 5E — share.

Jane Rosenman has been an Executive Editor at Houghton Mifflin, Scribner Publishing, and St. Martin's Press. Prior to that, Jane worked as Editorial Director of Washington Square Press as well as a Senior Editor at Pocket Books. From 2008 through 2009, she worked part-time acquiring titles for Algonquin Books while also starting to work as an independent editor for literary agents and individual writers. For more information, visit <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/jane-rosenman/40/591/a2b>.