



The Mid-List and the Grocery Store

Marjorie Braman

Oh, that dreaded mid-list, the bane of the publishing world. But sometimes publishers fail to recognize that there are two kinds of mid-list novels.

The first kind: books that by their very nature are the avoidable kind of mid-list submission. They're very often readable but in the end, not necessary. That's when an agent or an editor will say the book is "too small, destined for the mid-list". As well-done as the novel might be, it doesn't offer either an emotional pull or a compelling narrative, or it's missing some other element that readers will respond to. It's a book agents and editors can live without and which they suspect the reading audience will decide to live without also.

The other kind are novels an agent or editor feels are necessary, but for which there might not be a high demand. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't get published.

I look at the *New York Times* bestseller list and every week I see a book, often in its paperback edition, that I wouldn't have pegged as a bestseller. But there it is. *The Light Between Oceans* or *Me Before You*, or *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* (an epistolary novel!), strike me as books for which large sales weren't obvious—no commercial high concept, no well-known author—just great, satisfying books that found their audience. The kind of book that publishers sometimes fear, once they've identified them as possible mid-list books, but the kind of book their readership—and publishing overall—can't, and shouldn't, live without.

If commercial novels and books by established, bestselling literary writers are the mayonnaise of the publishing world—popular, liked, and used almost every day—then you might consider the necessary mid-list novel as the mustard of the market. Fewer people use mustard, less often, than those who use mayonnaise but what's a hotdog without mustard?

The necessary mid-list novels should exist not because their commerce is instantly obvious but because an agent and editor couldn't walk away; couldn't say no. Because everyone needs to spice up their hotdog, even if they don't eat one that often, and besides, you never know; one morning everyone wakes up and has a taste for something that cries out for mustard, and then you've got yourself a bestseller.

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>.



God Is In The Details

Jane Rosenman

In the last year I've edited a number of memoirs; it's a genre I enjoy both as a reader and as an editor. Done well, it affords many of the pleasures of fiction—a well-evoked world, an absorbing storyline, characters you grow to care about—but also makes you feel that you're learning about life in a more objectified way.

Someone asked me recently if there were major challenges in editing memoir that don't present themselves in fiction. It was an arresting question because on the one hand, there is significant overlap for an editor: making sure the narrative arc works, keeping the prose consistently smart. But there are also key differences. In fiction, no one is going to ask, "Why should I read a novel about X subject?" With memoir, it's easy for a potential book buyer to ask, "Why should I read about the life of someone who is not famous, I never heard of, and don't care about?"

Yet there is no shortage of non-famous writers whose stories have captivated readers. The vast majority of fans of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* are not going to traverse the Pacific Coast Trail. Most readers of Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle* did not grow up in households with that level of chaos around them. But large audiences connected with these stories. Personal experiences became universal ones through the authors' fine writing, but also because readers found references to their own lives through the alchemy of exactly what such fine writing can and must do.

Jennifer Fulwiler's *Something Other Than God: How I Passionately Sought Happiness and Accidentally Found It* was published in April 2014 by Ignatius Press. Jennifer grew up as an atheist and was utterly surprised by her attraction to Catholicism. When her agent asked me to work on the manuscript, I said, "But I'm Jewish. I met my husband in temple. I'm not sure I'm a perfect fit for this book." He pointed out that the publisher was looking for a secular audience as well as a religious one. Since I had sought meaning and connection through a very different faith, I was able to help Jennifer sort out what was gloriously specific to her story as well as what was needed to be made more universal in appeal.

We've all been to weddings where the toast revolves around a drunken evening in college when something "hilarious" happened but only a handful of people have any recollection of the event. We've also all been to weddings where one anecdote rooted in specificity magically opens up universal truths that will be remembered by everyone in attendance years after the last of the champagne bottles has been consumed. That's what successful memoirs do.

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/in/janerosenman>.



Travelling by Arc

Joan Hilty

The first client was a publishing veteran outlining her first graphic novel, an action-adventure for kids. It had a jam-packed plot: corporate spies, ancient guardians, and youthful heroes struggling to master brand-new mystical powers. It still needed an artist, and hadn't yet been pitched anywhere. But a bigger issue needed to be tackled first: the story seemed too adult, too dark for a young audience, even by today's standards.

The second client, a first-time author, had scripted and vividly illustrated 60 pages of a literary graphic novel in which a transoceanic getaway becomes a budding romance. It was clearly for adults, but past that, the audience appeal wasn't clear. The characters felt distant and indistinct, the stakes low. If anything, the story wasn't dark enough.

Two different authors, two very different works, but in both cases the same thing was missing: narrative growth.

In the literary project, little was happening. The heroine appeared to be secure, successful, and indifferently content with a current relationship. True, it all came under threat as she travelled towards a long-planned dangerous outdoor adventure and an unexpected possible new lover.

But the new attraction wasn't consummated or even contested, and the adventure was cancelled. There was much contemplation and, at the end, certainty that something profound had taken place, but as readers, we never found out what it was.

In the action-adventure, plenty was happening, but the young protagonists weren't truly part of any of it. Their powers were actually painful to use, and they never seemed to master them. Grownups threw heavy responsibilities and revelations at them with little or no explanation and, even as the conflict peaked, largely fought their battles for them. They were bystanders in their own tale.

The moral's the same across all genres, and has two parts:

First, make sure something happens. Atmosphere is a crucial element of story, but it's not the story.

Second, it's not enough to just establish obstacles; you've got to let your characters engage with them, grow, and emerge in a different place — for better or for worse. A good narrative takes its characters on a journey, and brings readers along for the ride.

Joan Hilty is an editor and packager specializing in graphic novels, illustrated books and transmedia; her clients include Macmillan, Viacom Global Publishing, Forbes Media, many comics publishers, and authors published by Penguin, Tor and Rosetta. As a Senior Editor at DC Comics, she edited many award-winning comics and graphic novels, working with novelists, journalists, screenwriters, animators and illustrators. She is a member of Powderkeg Writers and the Illustration faculty at the Maryland Institute College of Art. For more, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgtturn.com.



Someone Else's Story

Patricia Mulcahy

Eight eager, curious faces, all women: "Why did you sign up for this workshop?" I ask. For a three-day session on collaborative writing at the Miami Book Fair, I'd envisioned a class eager for the lowdown on how to co-write a celebrity's life story. I imagined it all wrong.

"I'm a biologist, and want to expand my writing beyond the scientific," said a slim blonde, always willing to sit by herself in the front row. "I write poetry and a newsletter for my church," offered a soft-voiced African American. "Maybe a novel's next." A poised, neatly-dressed attorney: "I write all day, but they're just legal briefs."

Since the workshop is about collaboration, I explain, they'll all interview a partner, and then compose her profile. Later we'll contrast the results with the next assignment: self-profiles that stress defining characteristics. I use myself as an example: "I'm always early." The oldest of six children, I always worry I won't live up to my responsibilities.

The third-person pieces read like articles for a local paper, or even premature obituaries. The first-person portraits are idiosyncratic and engaging. Stuck in traffic, the African American student dictates her self-portrait and plays it the next day for the class from her phone -- a spoken-word performance. But it's the final exercise suggested by a novelist friend that proves the most provocative: "Write in the voice of your oldest living ancestor."

Newly comfortable with first-person narrative, they present a mother-in-law from Trinidad who practices a form of nature worship; a twin voicing regret that he didn't leave Cuba in the boatlift, as his brother had; an aunt detailing a knockabout life as a rancher in the West.

A father who worked in a Havana cigar factory had died of lung cancer right before our workshop started. He speaks through an initially shy, increasingly confident young woman in a leopard-skin jumpsuit: "She kept asking me, 'Papi, why don't you go to the hospital?'"

"I tell her, 'You have to wait too long there. I am too old. There is nothing to be done.'"

I can barely hold back tears. As an editor, I look for grammatical errors, places to tighten prose, ways to juice up plots in fiction. The basic impulse is supportive, but within a fault-finding, mistake-fixing mental framework. In Miami I do the opposite: dare students not only to show respect and gratitude to those who set them on their path, but also to search for a real voice, in characters inhabited authentically.

A musician friend once asked about a colleague's latest composition: "Is it necessary?" I congratulate my students: their collaborations with their forebears fit that bill.

*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.*



In the Author's Shoes

Judy Sternlight

I can remember the crazy pride I felt as a young book editor, walking into a bookstore and seeing titles I had edited tucked amidst other real books and available for purchase. To be honest, it still gives me a thrill. But it's even more exciting to open a box from Simon & Schuster and see a big stack of bright yellow books with my name on the front cover.

Now that *The Brown Reader: 50 Writers Remember College Hill* is on sale nationwide, it's exhilarating and a bit terrifying to be front-and-center. Most book editors prefer to remain hidden, supporting our authors from the sidelines. But in the case of anthologies, the editor who curates the collection is a visible champion of the book and its illustrious contributors.

Working on *The Brown Reader* for the past two years has given me a fresh look at the publishing process from the writer's point of view, and here are some things I've learned:

- It's wise to cultivate a circle of smart, experienced peers with whom you can trade feedback and ideas. I consulted several smart editors including my 5E colleagues at several stages, from original book proposal to finished manuscript, and the book is better for it.
- When writers deliver material to their publishers and don't hear back immediately, dark thoughts loom: "Maybe they hate it and are debating how to break the contract!" As an editor, I'm now more sensitive to this, letting my writers know when they can expect to hear from me.
- A writer's work is never done: Promoting *The Brown Reader* online and at live events, I'm reminded of the writer's dual roles. Books are created in solitude but to get the word out, a creative and social side has to kick in. And now, when a writer comes to me for promotional ideas, I will probably have more of them.

As a veteran book editor, I've always sympathized with the needs of the author. But there's nothing like borrowing someone else's shoes to understand on a deeper level what their trek is like.

*Judy Sternlight spent nearly a decade editing books at Random House, Ballantine, and Modern Library before founding Judy Sternlight Literary Services. In addition to editing *The Brown Reader*, she has worked with acclaimed authors including Marie-Helene Bertino, Rita Mae Brown, Gwen Florio, Bret Anthony Johnston, Peter Matthiessen, Daniel Menaker, Patricia T. O'Conner, and Amy Rowland. For more information, visit www.JudySternlightLit.com.*