



A Place of Satisfaction

Jane Rosenman

Sam Osherson is an acclaimed author of five nonfiction books, including *Finding Our Fathers: the Unfinished Business of Manhood* (over 100,000 copies sold). Published by both Ballantine and Harcourt, and repped by a major literary agent, Sam — an eminent psychotherapist — has had the kind of nonfiction publishing career anyone would expect, and perhaps envy. When it came to his debut novel, though, things took an unexpected turn.

Sam approached me in 2012, wanting a thorough edit before he went looking for a new agent; his agent does not handle fiction. I thought the novel was marvelous. *The Stethoscope Cure* is about a young psychiatrist in a VA hospital during the Vietnam War who is thrown into crisis when he mishandles a patient. It's insightful, funny at times, and so smart on the question of whether civilians can fully understand the stresses veterans carry with them. Sam started reaching out to agents he knew through writer friends and professional colleagues. After a few months of rejections, including unanswered phone calls and emails, Sam was frustrated. He was confident that insights in the novel might help vets. But as he told me, "At my age I did not want to go through fifty agents." So he decided to self-publish through Amazon CreateSpace. An independent production company designed the book, and Sam commissioned a beautiful cover. *The Stethoscope Cure* was published in June of 2014.

I called Sam to ask him what it had been like to go from being an established author to a self-published one. Sam was, not surprisingly, able to set up a good number of readings at well-known independent bookstores. The novel has been embraced by veterans' organizations. In addition, Psychology Today now features [Sam's blog](#), which explores what it means to really listen to and hear each other in relationships of all kinds.

What resonated most deeply, however, was Sam's psychological experience of self-publishing. "Was this a vanity project?" he often asked himself. And at times he felt overwhelmed and missed the institutional cover he had enjoyed. But he also felt "enormous satisfaction" when he heard from readers about the ways the novel touched them. Sam was previously used to measuring success by how many copies he sold. Now he has refocused on what readers' reactions have given back to him. The experience has also been a calling card, opening new professional doors for him.

Ultimately, Sam feels very positively about the experience. He wrote a novel he's proud of; people have benefited from it. He stresses — and you can hear the therapist in these words — that writers should "find within themselves a place of satisfaction." There is no one right path, no one perfect solution. But for Sam Osherson, his decision to be proactive, rather than stew in envy or bitterness, turned out to be spot on.

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>.



Love, Your Protagonist

Judy Sternlight

Dear Author,

Thanks for inviting me to serve as the protagonist in your novel. Before we embark on this intimate relationship, I hope you won't mind answering a few questions.

Are you willing to throw me into the story, maybe in the middle of a high-stakes scene? Seriously, readers don't need to see me waking up in the morning to start my day, or taking a long plane ride and looking out the window and thinking. Trust me when I say that they'd prefer to see us jump right into something interesting.

Do you plan to make me likable? It's okay if you do, as long as you don't make me too good to be true, and a master at avoiding conflict. A couple of flaws would be appreciated. It's fine if readers don't want to take me out for a beer—as long as they find me entertaining, inspiring, compelling, or even diabolical. Which brings me to intentions.

Could I please have a strong intention to drive the plot? A friend of mine, from another novel, is working with a writer who gave him a Fantastic Premise and left him there, wandering around with no sense of purpose. He has no idea what the end game is, or how he'll know when the story is over. He talks a lot. And often, he repeats himself. Could we avoid that, please?

I know this is your book and I'm only your fictional creation, but if you want me on board, I'll need a conflict and obstacles to fight against. I'd like to engage with other characters who also have strong, emotionally grounded intentions. That way, we can surprise and challenge each other, we can move the plot along, and readers will feel like they're living with us, in-the-moment.

One more thing: Could we agree that you won't show me off to any editors or agents until I'm fully baked? It's embarrassing to have the door thrown open when you're only half-dressed. And you know what they say, you only have one chance to make a great first impression.

If all this sounds reasonable, then yes, I'd be honored to be your protagonist. Where do you want me?

Judy Sternlight, a former editor at Random House, Ballantine, and Modern Library, is the founder of Judy Sternlight Literary Services. In addition to editing [The Brown Reader: 50 Writers Remember College Hill](#), Judy has worked with many acclaimed authors including Rita Mae Brown, Gwen Florio, Bret Anthony Johnston, Peter Matthiessen, and Daniel Menaker. For more information, visit www.JudySternlightLit.com.



The Big Picture

Joan Hilty

Four months after the January massacre by extremists of nearly 20 people over cartoons in the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, I'm still looking for a literary way forward out of tragedy. A written work that will somehow make it all more comprehensible; something to help prevent it from happening again.

I'd like it to be a graphic novel, and not just because cartoons were involved. Here's why.

The cartoons, as everyone knows by now, depicted the Prophet Muhammad satirically and mocked many aspects of Islam. Afterwards, artists and writers either stood with the "Je Suis Charlie" movement that affirmed freedom of expression above all else — or argued that the cartoons and their defenders fed the currents of racism, inequality, and political conflict that often divide Western and Middle Eastern thought. Above all, it became clear that there were deeper issues at stake involving freedom of speech, racism, immigration politics and national identity. We are still waiting for the works that will speak to all this, capturing not just the current state of angry, alienated young immigrants, but also the state of Western European society, struggling with a watershed moment between historic ideals and modern reality, with cultural clashes that span generations. Several books tackled this at the turn of the 21st century: *White Teeth*, *Brick Lane* and, of course, *The Satanic Verses*. Word out of Cannes is that the film *Dheepan* may help advance this dialogue from *Brick Lane* to the *banlieues*, but let's get this world onto paper, too.

From the legitimate fall of Boss Tweed to the horrible outcome of *Charlie Hebdo*, visual expression packs a huge sociopolitical punch. Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Maus* was both a first graphic novel experience for many prose readers and a first political novel experience for many comics readers. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* articulated the dual stresses of life under the Iranian Revolution and expatriate European life to an enthralled audience. More recently, Nina Bunjevac's graphic novel *Fatherland* recalled her troubled father's evolution into a radical Serbian nationalist.

G. Willow Wilson's dazzling output speaks closely to the scope I'm suggesting here. In her graphic novel *Cairo* and prose novel *Alif the Unseen*, she challenged both the Middle Eastern security state and Western ignorance; in her prose memoir *Butterfly Mosque* and her groundbreaking superhero comic book series *Ms. Marvel*, she's explored her complex Muslim identity and contemporary East-West culture clashes.

First-generation American, graphic novelist, and National Book Award finalist Gene Yang has [spoken eloquently](#) about writing to diverse identity in the Internet age, as only someone born into that age can. But there's also something about a visual narrative that has special power to cross cultures and cultural divides. All I know for certain is that when that book comes along, I'll stand in line to edit it.

Joan Hilty is an editor specializing in graphic novels, illustrated books and transmedia; her clients include Farrar Straus & Giroux, Abrams, Viacom Global Publishing, and Inkwell Management. Previously, she was a senior editor at DC Comics and syndicated cartoonist. She is a member of Powderkeg Writers and teaches at the School of Visual Arts in NYC and the Maryland Institute College of Art. For more information, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgturn.com.



Reading Impatiently

Patricia Mulcahy

I am a somewhat impatient reader: if a book doesn't grab me in the first thirty pages, fifty tops, I put it down.

As a kid, my reading list was dominated by the Nancy Drew books and the comics. I was raised in a noisy, busy household where the bookshelves held volumes of *Reader's Digest* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* rather than James Joyce. No one had time to sit down in a quiet corner with a volume that required extensive concentration. There were no quiet corners. Did these physical circumstances lead me to books with strong plots that hold your attention amid myriad interruptions? Or were my tastes unduly influenced by my favorite action-packed TV shows like *The Untouchables*, and later *Homicide* and *The Wire*?

When I went to lunch with agents as an in-house editor, often they'd ask, "What kind of fiction are you looking for?" I'd reply: "I value narrative momentum, charismatic and/or flawed characters, and settings that take me somewhere I haven't been before."

This translated to a publishing list – and now a personal library -- full of novels, memoirs, and the occasional "zeitgeist" book that sums up an era or an intellectual or artistic style through the lives of a set group of people. Not unlike *Mad Men*, come to think of it. Lately, my attention span may have been affected by riveting programs like *Homeland*, *Spiral*, and *Orange is the New Black*. Given the plethora of sophisticated and well-acted serial dramas available now on multiple screens, a novelist in particular has to be aware of the increasing competition for eyes.

This doesn't mean that every book has to have a sweeping or propulsive plot; but ask yourself if you would have stuck with *The Goldfinch* for nearly 800 pages if a grand theft hadn't kept you wondering. If I hadn't cared about the fate of a priceless Dutch painting, I might have used the volume as a doorstop. I know I'm not the only one.

I never stopped to analyze the way in which dramatic and literary structures overlap until I worked with *Masterpiece* Executive Producer Rebecca Eaton on her memoir. Just as a good serial drama leaves you at the end of an episode clamoring for the next one, Rebecca cleverly parsed out her story and that of the programs she's produced with cliffhangers at the end of almost every chapter.

All those years of analyzing scripts adapted from classic British literature made her acutely aware of elements shared by good stories: "love, betrayal, money, infatuation, infidelity, family love and family deception...our own stories writ large, in times and places much more exotic and melodramatic than our own."

Throw in pacing, depth of characterization, and insights into human psychology and you have the stew that's our collective memory, whether on the page or on a screen. But even in a grand endeavor, your crucial first pages should compel the reader to utter the magic words: "What happens next?"

A former publisher, Patricia Mulcahy is an editor, "book doctor", and 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 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.



Plus ça Change Marjorie Braman

A winter blizzard provides the perfect opportunity to organize office files, which is how I stumbled across a 1990 article from *Seven Days* by Fran Kiernan. The title of the article was “Who Killed Publishing”. The tension that fueled this particular argument, Kiernan explained, was that publishers were cutting their own throats with high advances. She used the \$250K Harcourt Brace Javanovich paid for Mark Helprin’s *Winter’s Tale* as an example. By 1990, the high advances of the extravagant ‘80s were catching up with publishers.

Publishing has been teetering on the abyss since I got into the business 30 years ago—and probably before. But somehow it continues to adapt and grow, despite the dire predictions. In the ‘90s, with corporate overseers scrutinizing the bottom line, publishers paid more attention to the acquisition P&L, not an entirely bad thing. And publishers survived—again. Then along came the big bad wolf—chains and superstores like Borders and Barnes & Noble, with their deep discounting and vast shelf space, and bias towards bestsellers, all of which seemed to predict the doom of first-time novelists and mid-list books. But publishers found ways to satisfy both the chains, on whom they relied to help establish their “big” books of the season, and at the same time satisfy the independent bookstore crucial to the hand-selling and word of mouth that can make a first novel, or a mid-list book, work. By the early 2000s, superstores had become the major arena for the “big” books, while the best independents stayed afloat and established even tighter bonds with their customers. Then a bigger and badder wolf arrived on the scene—Amazon—with even deeper discounts and exposure to customers who weren’t regular bookstore shoppers. Publishers loved this cute little upstart, and the chains didn’t see what a major innovator and threat it would soon become. Today, Amazon accounts for 41% of all books sold in the U.S. and 67% of all digital books. Their tough negotiations with publishers on pricing and cooperative marketing are legendary. The struggles with Amazon may be responsible for the biggest changes publishers have made in their approach to business. Let’s face it, publishers have never been ahead of or even close to the curve when it comes to technology; my first exposure to working with a computer was in 1987, almost a decade after most industries had incorporated computers into their daily operations. But the threat from Amazon’s escalating dominance pushed publishers to become tech-savvy and find ways to capitalize on the e-book market. They also began to use technology to offer subscription services, direct-to-consumer sales and even online courses taught by their authors.

Yes, the enemy has become more formidable and the battles more sophisticated, but that has led publishers to become more formidable and sophisticated. They have risen from the ashes again and again. Underlying the literary community’s ability to keep one step ahead of the undertaker is the large number of committed readers who think the world would be a poorer place with books. Some things never change.

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>.