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Developing ourselves, developing our authors – developmental and structural editing of fiction in the US (Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship)

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Given how much has changed about how we market and sell books, has the role of the US editor changed too, especially in regard to developmental and structural editing? How do editors work in the US, how does this differ from how we work, and what can we learn from these differences? How and where do US editors learn to edit? What can we learn from the ‘apprenticeship model’ so prevalent in US publishing? How does this affect freelance editors? What are the big challenges facing US publishers in terms of actually getting books into readers’ hands? Is ‘discoverability’ even a real word? And are there strategies Australian editors can adapt to ensure the books we work on actually sell?

My first thanks must go to IPEd for their sponsorship of this presentation today – thank you. You’re an amazing organisation and this is a great event. But I also must acknowledge Beatrice Davis, Australia’s first full-time book editor – by all accounts she was a somewhat formidable but fascinating character. Someone who, most importantly – and inspiringly – was passionate about Australian writing, Australian writers, Australian publishing, about working with her authors to bring out their absolute best, and about having true and unfiltered Australian voices in our literature. It was revolutionary then – in a time when we were very much a ‘colony’ of the UK in publishing terms – which makes it hard to believe we’re still having to argue about the value of our own publishing for us as a nation now.

The Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship has been awarded every two years since 1992, and I was honoured to have been invited to follow in the impressive footsteps of the 13 previous fellows for the 2016 program. The fellowship is administered by the Australian Publishers Association and runs thanks to funding and support from a range of sources, including the APA, Australian publishers, the Australia Council and IPEd – so it’s pretty unique (and lots of the US folk commented on this) in that it’s an industry-wide program, that findings are shared widely and that the Fellow has the support of so many different organisations working almost as a partnership.

It allows for one extremely lucky mid-career book editor to travel to and live in New York for ten weeks to complete a research project by interviewing and working with editors, publishers, literary agents and others; and to disseminate their findings to the industry upon their return.

So what did I do? I spent almost half of my ten weeks in New York in-house, in placements with editorial departments and a literary agency, and the rest of my time meeting and interviewing editors, publishers, agents and other publishing types.

For various reasons, including the requirements of reporting, I spent the ten weeks in New York from very late August to mid-November – in other words, beginning at the end of the quietest time and into the busy season for US editors. I arrived at the end of a very long, hot

August, and kicked off my research at the Editorial Freelancers Association (EFA) conference, given the Australian publishing industry's heavy reliance on freelancers for editing, proofreading and other editorial and design functions.

It's an exciting time to be an editor – the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee in 2015 initiated many discussions about the role of the editor. That book is now widely accepted as a first or very early draft of the acclaimed classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We now know that Lee's editor worked with her over several years and many drafts to develop the final book – one that has affected so many of us. Readers acknowledge that the original work pales into comparison with the final version.

Genius, a mainstream feature film based on the biography of book editor Maxwell Perkins and starring Colin Firth, Jude Law and Nicole Kidman was released in 2016. Colin Firth!

At the same time publishing seems to be undergoing yet another watershed moment as we see the rise and rise – and fall? – of the 'indie publishers' (also known as self-publishers), the era of the blockbuster, even more mergers and buy-outs, and digital finally seeming to settle down as a format. And so it's an ideal time to relook at the role of the traditional US editor in all this.

I wondered: given how much has changed about how we market and sell books, has the role of the US editor changed too, especially in regard to developmental and structural editing (primarily fiction, since I needed to narrow this thing down somehow!)? How do editors work in the US, how does this differ from how we work, and what can we learn from these differences? How and where do US editors learn to edit? What can we learn from the 'apprenticeship model' so prevalent in US publishing? How does this affect freelance editors? What are the big challenges facing US publishers in terms of actually getting books into readers' hands? Is 'discoverability' even a real word? And are there strategies Australian editors can adapt to ensure the books we work on actually sell?

There are many differences between the role of an editor in a publishing house in Australia and the US. I know a lot of you know this but it's worth spelling out again: broadly speaking, in the US the editor is the one who receives submissions from agents, negotiates the deal, acquires the book, works closely with the author on the development and structural edits of a manuscript and, in most cases, does the line edit as well – often blurring the lines between these types of edit. (In fact, it's unusual for anyone but the acquiring editor and perhaps their assistant/associate editor to work on that bigger picture edit.) They brief the cover and internal design and work closely with the in-house design team to create a look for the book. They also work closely with publicity, marketing and sales to position and sell the book. They'll brief the copyeditor and work with the author to approve this edit. In short, they are the main champion of the book in-house.

In my experience, although obviously each publishing house works differently, in Australia these roles and processes are split between the publisher or acquiring/commissioning editor and the in-house project editor. Very often, at least some of these processes are completed by freelancers.

Most larger US publishing houses also have a distinct split between the editorial and production departments, but for them the production side includes the functions of copyedit, proofreading and typesetting. I was taken aback, actually, at how dismissive some team members were about 'production editing', and how separately the two parts of the

process were considered, compared to the way we tend to work in Australian publishing houses.

But then, their copyeditors don't work in quite the same way we typically do. (An aside about typical: I think we all know there is no such thing as a typical edit – nor a typical author or a typical book. For this reason, and with apologies, I'm sure you understand that much of my report has had to be generalisations.)

For trade publishers (generally) in-house copyeditors correct spelling and grammar and ensure the text is adjusted to the house style. They also closely manage schedules and ensure deadlines are met. What we usually refer to as a copyedit – which might look at style, syntax, spelling, grammar, but also inconsistencies in plot or character and continuity and picking up any lingering structural issues – would be closer to that US editor's line edit. However, your mileage may vary.

So a US editor really needs to have the personality and skills to fill two roles: that outward-facing networker who's on top of the trends and has a strong sense of their own 'brand' (what we'd likely call a book's 'publisher' here) as well as the perhaps more inward-looking soul we traditionally associate with being the hands-on editor.

Most US editors were surprised to hear that Australian editors don't, generally, commission – lots of my conversations ended up being about how we work, which to be fair would be a very boring report!

But with all this on their plate, do US editors still edit?

Editors edit; agents also edit.

But first, a quick note on US agents: it's extremely rare for larger publishing houses to pick up unagented authors, especially fiction authors. Some of the smaller imprints and independent houses will look at unsolicited manuscripts or have a slush pile, and unagented authors are sometimes picked up at writers conferences, via writing courses or at other events.

As here, US nonfiction is often developed in-house from scratch, but in most cases the author will still be represented by an agent for contract negotiations, etc., even if the agent didn't actually sell the book.

While agents do play a similar role as they do here in Australia – managing their clients' business relationships with publishers and managing their client's careers – in the US they also tend to be much more hands-on in terms of development of individual submissions, particularly for debut authors.

Partly this has to do with economies of scale, of course.

And we come to the point where I quickly bandy round the statistics! In the US last year (2016), BookScan reports total print book sales of 674 million units for 2016, vs. 53.6 million units in Australia. (For the less speedy mathematicians among us – we are word people after all – that's about 12 times the number of sales.)

In terms of potential audience, the numbers also tell a story: at 323 million people, the US has a population more than 13 times Australia's 24 million. Please note these are very round figures. (Actually we do pretty well on the book-readin' front, given their population is 13 times ours.)

But obviously these numbers can't tell the full story – clearly these 323 million people are not all book buyers, for one – but with a bigger potential audience, advances are typically bigger. This quite literally buys time for US agents to do more work on individual manuscripts before submission; at least 2–3 rounds of edits seems to have become standard in the US – including structural and line edits.

Many editors and agents I spoke to felt there was definitely a trend towards agents doing a significant amount of the heavy lifting involved in development of a DEBUT manuscript, before even submission.

Partly, this is because the market for blockbuster books has become such a key one for the larger trade publishers. Adult fiction such as *Gone Girl*, *The Girl on the Train*, anything by John Green, blockbuster series such as the Divergent books by Veronica Roth and, in nonfiction, colouring books and certain celebrity memoirs dominate bestseller lists for such long periods of time that they are seen to suck the air out of the market. Everyone's looking for those very big books, that new, high-concept, category-killing buzz book, and is willing to pay big for it.

This is not a new trend, nor is bemoaning the loss of the mid-list, but many editors and agents felt the situation had become even more exaggerated over the past 12–18 months, that the battle to claim those acquisitions has become even more acute and that advances for those authors are approaching the ridiculous.

But there was a sense from editors that trying to acquire a book without that newsworthy high advance and pre-acquisition buzz can even damage the book's potential – that one way to attract attention in-house, not to mention build an individual editor's reputation, is to acquire at these dizzying levels. But in order to obtain those levels of advance, submissions have to go to market far more polished than they would have in the past.

One experienced senior agent told me that agents feeling they must be the book's first editor is definitely a newer trend. When she started as an agent, there was more of an expectation that the editor would be the person with the vision – and time – to craft the book.

In turn an editor told me that agents will say editors don't edit any more, and so they feel they're being forced to do all the work before even submitting, perhaps even feeling resentful that there's an expectation they will do that work first – but for editors the reality is that you can't chase those 'labours of love the way you could eight years ago ... you can't edit for three years any more'. [I'm not sure any of us have been fortunate enough to have ever had that experience?]

This also means that both sides, agents and editors, take on different books than they might have in the past, because the agent themselves can't spend a year editing any more, and it's competitive for them too – time is very directly money to an agent, when income comes from advances.

So editors still edit? Absolutely. They edit at home, on weekends and at night, they edit on the train, they edit in their offices (if they're lucky enough to have one in this open-plan world) between meetings and phone calls and emails. I even heard of editors who have hired babysitters at their own expense so they could spend their own time working on an edit in peace. We are an industry of passionate, committed workers, that's for sure.

I was impressed, delighted, insanely jealous – and US editors in turn were intrigued and amused by my reaction – to hear just how many rounds of editing an editor *ahem*, typically, does, that is, before the copyedit. Three was the minimum, while some books require many more – and editors will push the boat out to do them. Most editors had examples of a book that went back to an author with major revisions as many as seven or eight times ... but all agree it's important to know just how far you can push an individual author, especially bearing in mind that if it's a debut author the agent may also have done more than one round of edit.

I mean, honestly, the level of resources! This is, of course, partly explained by the difference in the baseline numbers, that is, the size of their market – a market that's 13 times the size of ours allows for budgets and therefore timelines to also be proportionally more generous.

Another of the reasons US editors seem to have the luxury of time to do apparently near endless rounds of editing is the differences in the way they schedule. Some imprints will not even schedule a book until the final manuscript is ready for galleys and to go to copyediting. One very senior editor told me that it would be crazy to attempt to confirm a publication date before a book's been edited through to final manuscript – but acknowledges it's a different situation in the US and, in her case, at an imprint of very large publishing house PRH, and a 'result of us having more books in the pipeline' at any time. Edits that are rushed can be seen in the final result, she feels, that is, in a book that is not as satisfactory for the reader.

Another key difference is, of course, that the US editor is managing their own editorial time and workload of books *they* acquired, and usually manages around 12 books a year (although some editors work on as few as 8 or as many as 20). Meanwhile, the typical Australian in-house editor is managing more books with tighter budgets all the way through the editorial process, including copyediting and proofreading, managing freelance schedules as well as the requirements of sales, marketing, publicity and the acquiring publisher.

Although not prepared to put a limit on the rounds of edits that they were willing to do, all editors agreed there is a limit. Sometimes you just have to admit the author is not capable of realising a book's full potential, or that you perhaps just did not have the same vision for the book ...

But what about the role of the freelancer?

Because we work so closely with our freelance editors, and because the typical career path for an Australian editor so often involves some freelancing, I also wanted to assess the role of the freelancer in the book publishing industry.

Long story short: *typically* US trade publishing houses don't tend to use freelance editors for the same kinds of work Australian fiction publishers do, that is, everything from developmental work to the nitty-gritty of copyediting and proofreading, since their level of resourcing means often this is done in-house. Opportunities for US freelancers seemed to me to be much greater in nonfiction where editors are buying from a proposal, and therefore the readiness of delivered manuscripts can vary wildly. Freelancers act as nonfiction 'book doctors', developmental and structural editors, ghostwriters and co-writers – since, as one editor says, you simply can't be an expert in every field. These are usually experienced freelancers who have spent significant time in-house and often already have a relationship with the author, subject or genre.

Getting started as a freelancer seems to be much more competitive in the US too, particularly in fiction – because the acquiring editor tends to be so hands-on, there is little development/structural work available to freelancers from the trade fiction publishers, and even experienced former editors find they are competing on price with much less experienced editors. (Balancing this out, of course, is that there are many more staff positions for editors than in Australia.)

The rise of independent publishing has created a huge new area of work for US as well as local freelancers – with all the pros and cons that can involve, including scope creep (where the author expects more or far different work from the editor than was briefed or indeed was paid for), difficulty in extracting payment when you're working with an individual rather than a company, and working on less curated texts that may require a huge amount of work and be expected to be brought to print-ready stage. (It's worth acknowledging here that I suspect most freelancers have probably had similar experiences with big publishers too.)

But again, freelancers in the US seem to enjoy a level of resources Australian freelance editors can only dream of. There are several big freelance organisations – including the EFA, the Editorial Freelancers Association (<https://www.the-efa.org/>), and ACES, the American Copy Editors Society (www.copydesk.org/) – offering professional development, companionship (even if only of a cyber nature for much of the working year), forums, local branches in population centres around the US, well-organised conferences, and resources in the form of books, style guides, job boards, newsletters and more. Some of this is relevant to Australian editors, but sadly much of it is not.

I was also interested to hear the breadth of freelance roles in the US. For example, Harlequin freelances out their cover copy!

Another aspect of my research was 'development of the editor'. So I thought I'd begin at the very beginning. There are very clear paths to becoming an (in-house) editor in the US, and most of the people I spoke to had followed a fairly similar road, with slight generational shifts. I thought it might be worth breaking these down a little.

Most senior editors had landed an editorial assistant role early in their working lives, sometimes straight out of college – this makes it sound easy; but then, as now, getting into publishing was intensely competitive.

Younger staff tend to have come through one of the many publishing masters qualifications or certificates. Some editors commented on the self-filtering nature of these courses: most are postgraduate, so an applicant needs to have completed a college undergraduate degree first and needs to be able to afford the cost of tuition and of living in one of the most expensive cities in the world while doing the course. The Columbia course, for example, is six weeks long and costs US\$8575 (although this includes room and board). They then need to support themselves while seeking work, which, to a huge degree, filters potential editorial staff on a socio-economic basis.

Editors also tend to have completed one or more internships of three months and sometimes more. As in Australia, these internships often lead directly to jobs – the contacts and experience are invaluable and are highly regarded on your CV. But the internships seem much more formalised than those at many Australian publishers – there is a set workload and the interns are given distinct responsibilities, which includes many of the less glamorous but essential tasks of publishing, like changing the toilet roll in a literary agency (no, I'm not

joking: interns literally work from the bottom up and I just wish I'd taken my phone to the loo so I could show you a photo: 'If you are sitting here and the toilet roll is empty ... '). And it's not up to me to comment on the ethics of an industry that relies so heavily on an unpaid workforce, although some publishers, especially smaller ones such as small indie OR Books, do pay their interns a nominal wage. In the case of OR this is around \$50 per day – not enough to actually live on in New York but still something.

Getting into the right internship is in itself incredibly competitive – Writers House, for example, runs such a comprehensive internship program that one junior agent joked, 'It's harder to get into an internship here than it is to get into Harvard'.

But does any of this help potential editors learn to edit?

US editors and agents have traditionally followed an informal apprenticeship model to train up staff – which still exists, although seems to have become just that much more competitive and challenging.

Once an assistant role is secured – and assuming the person has the stamina to stick it out, since these jobs are overwhelmingly busy, poorly paid, and any editorial work or networking is done on your own time – there is a clear career path towards editing. As assistant to one or, more usually these days, two or more editors, and after building a level of trust with them, the assistant will usually start reading and reporting on submissions, acting as a filter for the editor. For this reason, Emily Bestler, who has her own eponymous imprint at S&S, would 'only hire someone who wants to be me some day' – that is, they really want to be an editor, can't wait to start editing and are prepared to do all the work required. Most importantly, they have a similar taste to her. In some cases, and especially when the editor still edits on paper – as a surprising number still prefer to – the assistant will take in those edits to the digital file using track changes (in some cases interns are asked to do this too).

Eventually, the editor will have the assistant work more closely with them on a specific edit – in some cases doing a 'shadow edit' where they both do an edit and compare notes, or even doing the second pass edit or final line edit. A trusted assistant can act as a valuable fresh eye at that second or third round of edit when fatigue sets in, or, as Susanna Porter called it, 'the challenges of seeing the forest for the trees', and just giving a new perspective.

It used to be that at this stage assistants were often given the chance to acquire a book or take on a client for themselves, to champion it through the entire publishing process. But in many houses and literary agencies, the path has been formalised and assistants don't acquire anymore, I was told.

And even for an editor who is committed to mentoring, as staff numbers diminish and yet budget expectations still grow, the editor needs to find space in their workload to share their edits and give the assistant those opportunities.

The next step in the career ladder is associate editor. This role usually combines the assistant role with an acquisitions load and can be hugely challenging – basically two jobs in one. As Judy Clain, VP and editor-in-chief at Little, Brown, says 'it's not the business for you if you expect weekends off'. (Added to that most US companies only offer two weeks of annual leave and – certainly at Harper US and I am sure at others – that does not roll over to the next year!)

That said, in many houses the role does not come with a specific budget or acquisitions target – so there's no pressure financially. It's more a personal challenge, to develop one's

own tastes, to develop that one-on-one relationship with an author and relationships with agents, to start to build a list and to get some runs on the board. Of course you need to be able to do this while still working closely with the editors you work for, with a significant editorial load from them as well as administrative responsibilities.

From associate the next step is usually editor, senior editor, executive editor and so on ...

The limitation, of course, to the apprenticeship model is that you learn only how *your* boss edits, and, as one senior editor commented, 'to a degree you already have to get it'. She sees another issue is that 'you won't know [if you're any good at it] until you've been doing it for five years' – that is, you've edited and seen several books published, and you know if they've worked. I'm not sure how we can apply that to the Australian editor role – how do we know if we're any good?

Bearing in mind again that in the US editing is inextricably bound up with acquiring, I had a lot of conversations about the challenges of teaching developmental editing where, so often, there is no right or wrong, especially compared to copyediting. One senior editor commented that 'some people just have a gift or an eye for editing', while another felt that rather than being able to be taught, editing at this level is very intuitive, although she feels you can definitely hone your craft with direction and mentorship. But, she says, there's just 'a gut feeling that you have a good project', and how do you teach that without giving people that experience themselves? But given we can't give every hopeful editor the task of acquiring and developing a book in real life, how do we give students the opportunity to do this in a safe space such as an educational institution?

One editor commented that you 'can't teach taste' – although you can mould the way an editor works, and you can educate them in *your* taste so they work well with you and on your books.

Another editor and publisher who also coordinates one of the big courses compares learning editing to learning to drive: you can go so far with theory, and that's important too – but in the end you get better at it by doing it and learning from your mistakes (although presumably a slip in POV is slightly less fatal!).

Intrinsically tied up in our jobs as editors, of course, is considering the reader. So I asked editors about finding readers: platform, discoverability and breaking out.

When I started working in rights it was a rule of thumb that nonfiction authors looking to be published in the US needed a platform, ideally somewhere at the Oprah end of the scale. Platform, very simply, is an ability to sell books because of who you are or who you can reach. But is it possible for a publisher to *create* a platform for a fiction writer? Whose responsibility is it to guide an author on all things platform-related? What kinds of platform work better in terms of finding an audience for a book?

'I hate to say it,' said one editor of literary fiction, 'but even literary authors do need a platform'. She used recent literary star Garth Greenwell as an example: he's a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop; he's well connected in the literary scene, and he came to his publisher with a huge platform because of his existing writer network, his prolific Twitter account, his reviewing and his being published in literary journals. '*What Belongs to You* is a great book, but its success was definitely helped by his platform,' she added.

Agent Dan Lazar described how the kinds of platform authors might require have changed – from the heady days of Oprah's book club, now it might be a podcast or a popular Instagram

account. (Although many editors acknowledge that raw numbers of followers/subscribers are never an indicator of sales.) But he sees the publishing house's role as to create a platform for them too – including via reviews and blurbs. Even for fiction it's easier and more effective to say, 'This is the new book from X' than 'Here's a new book'.

Blurbs – as in the kind of prepublication review quotes from other authors and sometimes literary publications like *The New York Times*, that appear on the jacket of a book but also, importantly, in marketing and sales material – seem to have become a huge part of the editor's job. It's quite a process: tapping into your network of authors, agents and colleagues for authors who might be appropriate and willing to supply a quote, but without overusing any one reviewer or pushing a favour too far. The book's author can help, but as one editor points out, it's vital to ensure you are on the same page. Will a blurb from that person help position the book correctly? Do they have a high enough profile for their words to make a difference, or are they just a supportive friend?

There was much debate over the value of these for readers – given the considerable resources getting them in the first place takes (one editor described some borderline nefarious techniques she'd once used to get a galley into a particular author's hands – finding their home address via some deep internet research and finally finding her partner's name at the title deeds office. Author not impressed!) – but on the whole editors felt they were more about internal and bookseller positioning, and the earlier you have them the better, so sourcing them begins sometimes before a book is even acquired. They can then become part of the agent's pitch.

But regardless of who benefits, these blurbs ultimately end up helping with the lifting of the book both in-house and in the market.

Another obsession of US editors is finding the perfect 'comp' or comparison title. As here, these are used to position books for sales, marketing and booksellers. One editor pointed out that the passion for finding that ideal comp title is problematic, because the more interesting books don't actually *have* comparisons, they're not like anything else – that's the reason you acquire them, and that's the hook for readers. Another put it that comps can be useful and an important selling tool, but for 'truly fresh and original books there are no comps, so [the obsession with them] can limit those new voices from being published'.

I also asked publishers whether it's possible to make a break-out book, or whether it's more organic than that.

One editor felt that 'unfortunately, it's not the publisher', despite much analysis of how and why books do break out and considerable resources put towards trying. It's definitely something to do with a spark created by word-of-mouth and readers themselves. Although, she says, that flame does need to be ignited somewhere, and often that comes from publishing house support. Another editor agreed: 'Certainly internal support helps but isn't the whole story – somewhere along the line there needs to be some kind of pixie dust'.

But others felt that that kind of buzz *does* start in-house – if you can't break it out in-house 'the writing's probably already on the wall'. Dan Lazar agrees – his sense is that it comes from the top down in a publishing house, that it's decided as a company that they'll prioritise this book, and then the company as a whole will champion it and, importantly, invest the necessary resources in it. Many publishers now have their own in-house programs to start that buzz early.

I asked Liane Moriarty's US publisher Amy Einhorn what she thought was the secret behind Liane's apparent overnight success in the US with *The Husband's Secret* – her first *New York Times* bestseller. (Liane's most recent book, *Truly Madly Guilty*, was a bestseller while I was in the US.) Amy says that because of that exposure, there are lots of people who think *The Husband's Secret* was her first book – in my experience it is the same in Australia, where a lot of readers hadn't heard of Liane before her US success. Amy reminds me that the first of Liane's books she published, *What Alice Forgot*, sold 20,000 copies in hardback – a fair but modest quantity – but around 80,000 ebooks. So part of what broke her out was actually an existing large and established market of readers and fans, built and developed over time. The success of *Husband* was partly this backstory of hard work and growing an author – plus of course an iconic cover and a dash of right place, right time as domestic suspense as a genre really found a big market. Liane also writes 'acute social commentary but is never mean', and that appeals to readers who then want to talk about her books – so a lot of her success is down to word-of-mouth.

But what can the publisher do to make a book break out? 'Well,' says Amy, 'I could describe what we did on one book that worked, and we can do exactly the same for another book and it won't – it's completely unpredictable'. But what they do have in common, she says, is that 'they are books that people want to talk about'. One young but successful agent describes it as 'that magic X-factor', adding that platform helps but the book needs to be unputdownable and to really grab the reader, and after that everything else [about creating buzz] is negotiable. She suggests debut authors set aside five to ten per cent of their debut advance to invest in marketing and brand development for themselves – beyond what a publisher can (or will) do. She tells them 'you're always going to wish your publisher would do more for you', especially given that, in most cases, the publishing house won't have budget for trade advertising. She emphasises that she suggests authors not spend money on publicity – that doesn't do much for sales vs. the cost of pursuing it – but to invest in *marketing*, that is, advertising. This is how discoverability starts, she says. The other key to discoverability is 'serious, old-fashioned talent' which creates word-of-mouth. There's no way of buying that, since it comes from that X-factor which in itself 'is a product of talent plus hard work'.

Editors tended to agree that it all begins with the quality of the book. There may be increasing pressure to acquire that 'hot new thing with the high-end pitch' – but the reality is that the books that continue on and build after the first flash of the release are the ones that are actually really *good*. 'The odds of success are really poor, so the book itself has to be excellent.'

More cynically, one editor at a small independent press told me that it's as easy as paying Barnes & Noble to make a book break out, if you have resources.

Corporate publishers in the US are finally looking beyond their sales teams and key accounts and realising they need to know how to get books directly into people's hands too – and are investing by hiring digital marketers in an effort to catch up to readers, to speak directly to their readers in a way they didn't before, the way successful genre and indie authors do – and I think Australian publishers have had to for a long time, given our limited resources including a smaller media and lower budgets.

After 'discoverability', 'inclusivity' came up a lot. This means looking at who acquires and who is being acquired – and these are being intensely debated in the US at the moment

while publishers and the industry in general look at strategies for making their staff as well as their publications more diverse. But to zoom in a little more closely, as editors we're tasked with keeping an eye on the inclusiveness of the text itself. At a fantastic and lively session on the topic at the EFA conference, award-winning freelance editor Sarah Grey suggested that no one is the true authority on inclusiveness – no one knows everything – but we have a duty to *try to* get it right. It's not political correctness, she says, it's about ethics, etiquette, accuracy and customer service.

Language is a tool that's here to serve *all* of us, and making everyone feel welcome and bearing in mind how our language choices affect this is just plain good manners. Her basic principle: don't be a jerk! Pressing buttons is fine, as long as you know the buttons you're pressing and why you're pressing them and are prepared to accept the aftermath of said pressing. It's part of our job as editors to keep authors up to date with changes in usage/terminology in general. Assume the best intentions, and communicate with authors tactfully: 'I'm worried that your readers – or worse, reviewers – might wrongly take your wording here to be to be sexist in nature. Let's rephrase!'

There was also much discussion around Lionel Shriver's controversial Brisbane Writers Festival speech on cultural appropriation, especially among students of writing and editing programs. While the answer to the questions raised by these conversations are far more complex than Lionel might have implied, it's great that we're having these conversations.

So, final thoughts:

One of the delights of my conversations and interviews was the emphasis on the value of the editor and of *their* investment in the book as both a work of art and a saleable product. I certainly don't dismiss the invaluable contribution sales, marketing and publicity teams make to our acquisitions – nor did any of the editors or agents I spoke to, of course – and I do acknowledge this would be a very different report if I WAS a marketer or salesperson. It might seem obvious, but it was inspiring to hear many editors prioritising the quality of the writing and the experience for the reader, even within the hunt for that next big blockbuster – something that the editor is uniquely positioned to recognise and champion.

US editors seem to have more ownership of their work (although I don't mean to imply above and beyond the author's ownership ... or perhaps I do?) and a much higher profile; to some extent, they create their own brand, distinct from that of their publishing house, which they take with them to a new house (along with many, if not all, of their authors) if they leave.

In the US there is an expectation that the acquiring editor will edit, and only that editor – there are clear career paths from assistant to senior VP and publisher. As editors in Australia, we have less of a defined career path – and, realistically, it's unlikely the system here will change to the extent of editors becoming acquisitions people – but at the same time we have more opportunities here in Australia, both in-house and as freelancers, to work more broadly on texts and across different kinds of edits and styles of book – but less opportunity for mentorship, and, especially if one pursues a freelance career, it's harder to find professional development and you receive little in the way of feedback on your work. Budgets and schedules limit the time an editor has working directly with the author, so we aren't able to form the same kinds of relationships with them and earn their trust (or otherwise!) to the same degree.

On the other hand, as the in-house editor I can give both freelance editor and author somewhere safe to ask questions and to disagree with an editorial suggestion, and I can allow both parties to retain face and not risk damaging their relationship in the heat of the moment.

But if editors are doing eight rounds of edit, AFTER an agent has had their input, where does that leave the author? Are US editors just more interventionist than us? IS it just the difference in resources and time, or is something more ... cultural? One editor who has worked with both American and UK publishers put it to me that perhaps we do actually have a different editorial style in Australia from the US, suggesting that perhaps the culture of the UK and Australia was more about stepping back and letting the author prevail, a 'politeness' about our editing style, if you will, whereas a 'brash American' will step in and feel free to suggest significant changes – à la Maxwell Perkins as described in *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius* by A Scott Berg, refining *The Great Gatsby* down to the minimalist masterpiece it is today, or the evolution of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Is it as simple as this difference in resourcing? Is it an editing culture that perhaps inclines more towards prescriptivism vs. descriptivism? Is it something in their culture that means that authors are happier to have their books reworked and reworked? To be fair, I am not privy to what goes on inside an author's head. Do we give our authors more space to be themselves, or do we not push them far enough?

These are questions I still don't have answers to, although one perceptive interviewee pointed out that the potential financial rewards are so much greater in the US for writers that perhaps the craft is seen as more collaborative, in the way, say, film-making is.

Thanks for listening to my very much whistle-stop tour through my time in the US and my findings – our time is limited and I'm not sure I've been able to adequately express just how fascinating, how confronting and yet how comforting my time in the US was. SO MUCH TO TELL YOU!

But please do check out the fuller version of my report, and also the small number of 'on the road' blogs I wrote and that the Australian Publishers Association have kindly hosted, on the APA website:

- final report: <https://www.publishers.asn.au/documents/item/510>
- blogs:
 - [Hello, an introduction to Beatrice Davis and thank you](#)
 - [An editor conference, my fangirl moment, and pencils and things ...](#)
 - [A week of contrasts](#)
 - [No sleep till Brooklyn](#)
 - [Breaking out?](#)
 - [The big questions?](#)
 - [#70NewYorkDays](#)

But to sum up, at last, at one of my very first meetings in the US a young editor said to me that 'publishing is definitely an industry of ups and downs, but it is all worth it because the highs are so high'. I can't agree more.