
CELEBRATING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Editing Books for Young People



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What does an editor of books for young people do? Well, that all depends. It depends on the type of house with which the editor is associated, his or her relationship to the management, the type of management, and the current state of the economy. Above all it depends, of course, on the editor's temperament, stamina, and flexibility. It is not work for someone who demands a structured daily schedule. The editor must be open to new ideas, and must be as available as possible to the creative author and artist and to the department's staff.

An editor may be an acquisition editor, one who approaches someone with a famous name and then turns a possibly unpublishable manuscript over to another editor to try to turn into a book. (This seldom happens in the junior book field, fortunately.) An editor may be someone who works with a manuscript accepted and contracted for by the department head. Ideally, an editor loves creative persons who write and illustrate for children and is also insatiably

curious about every single thing concerning anyone who seems to have the slightest drop of talent. Curiosity—in-tense interest—is very important if tactfully expressed. An editor can be so honestly curious that there will be no hesitancy in asking questions, often intimate personal questions. Of course, the editor must try to figure out which author may be offended by intimate personal questions, and which author may finally be so convinced of the editor's absolutely honest and sensitive curiosity (read *interest*) about every single thing about the author's past, present, and future personal likes, personal hates—indeed, the entire background—that the author will grow to trust the editor. Then the creative person may open up, and sometimes the pearl that has formed around that grain of sand will be discovered. This analogy is banal, and it is banal because it is often true.

Curiosity is not limited to personal inquiry. It is a good idea for an editor to ask questions and keep asking them if there is a place in a manuscript that doesn't seem to be exactly right. There once was an author-artist who was working on the words for a book about a boy named Max who went where the wild things were. At a certain place in the text, toward the end, the author-artist wanted to get Max home again. He couldn't find exactly the right way to say it. He sat in the editor's office and the editor said, "Well, why did Max want to go home?" "I guess he didn't care any more," the author-artist said, "but that's not it." "Well, why do you suppose he did want to go home right at that point?" the editor asked.

The editor kept asking him, and the author-artist didn't get irritated because he realized the editor was trying to help him come out with what was really in his head, deep in his

head and heart. But he somehow couldn't quite bring himself to say it. He twisted around and grinned in self-derision. "He just wanted to be with his *mommy*," he said, in a mock-babyish way, "but I can't say *that*." "Well, you can't say just that," the editor agreed. "But really, why did he want to go home right then?"

There were a few more joking tries that both shook off. Then the author-artist looked away and said again tentatively, very softly, "Well, he wanted to be where someone loved him best of all, but I couldn't really say *that*." "Why not?" said the editor. "It's absolutely perfect, and it is exactly what you mean, but for some strange Sendakian reason you couldn't bring yourself to say it. But it is perfect." And it was, and it is. And it came out of the author-artist's head and heart. The editor just kept asking questions until Sendak could bring himself to admit it, bring himself to say the actual words.

Editorial interest reaches even beyond submitted projects. When a dear and valued author is between manuscripts, either blocked completely or working on a new idea, it is necessary for the editor in some cases to make a friendly phone call, or drop a friendly note, to ask how things are going: "Not to pressure you. Just wanted to be in touch and see how you are." Some authors want and need that. It makes them feel loved. But some authors absolutely hate such inquiries, consider them prying and nagging, and tell the editor so in no uncertain words.

Some authors and artists want and need a firm deadline for the delivery of manuscripts or illustrations. They consider a deadline a great help. Others, though given a deadline, absolutely detest being reminded of it, no matter how

gently and, again, consider the editor to be nagging and thus making creative work practically impossible. It is important but not always easy to know the difference.

One occupational hazard for an editor is to be cast by the author or artist in the role of mother or father. Often an author welcomes suggestions for possible improvement of a manuscript. But sometimes if an editor suggests a lot of cutting, or the strengthening of a characterization, the author feels mother is nagging and really means the equivalent of "Now get this room cleaned up at once!" The finest authors have their young selves emotionally and easily available to them, and that doesn't always make for an emotionally mature and reasonable person. (It doesn't do a bit of harm if the editor is a little nuts, too.)

Often an author will start a manuscript with a certain idea for a book but wander away from what the original idea was. Here an editor can tactfully try to bring the author back to the original vision. And always the editor must be sure the author knows that the editor wants what is in the author's head, not what is in the editor's head. The editor can point to places where the action drags, where the author has included an extraneous passage just for the sheer self-indulgent pleasure of writing it. One editor, reading an exciting chapter in a manuscript about a mother who had mislaid her small child in a shopping mall, was treated, as the mother hunted in panic for the child, to a fascinating, meticulous, and endless description of the shopping mall. The author had absolutely loved writing two marvelous pages about the sights, sounds, smells, and ambience of a shopping mall. But of course it would have stopped the action and the readers cold. In a case like this, an editor can be helpful in pointing out affectionately but *firmly* that no one cares at that point

for details about a shopping mall. Please find that child! (And rest assured that the two fine pages about the shopping mall will eventually be used to excellent purpose in a later book by that author.)

If an editor thinks a manuscript seems to drag, that the action seems too slow, it is relatively easy to spot the problem on a manuscript for nine-year-olds or older. "That eighth chapter seems to be a bit slow. Won't you reread it and see if it can't be shortened?" Or "The character of the grandfather doesn't seem convincing here. Would he have bawled out the boy in quite such a hostile fashion?" But when it comes to suggesting possible cuts in a picture-book manuscript, or in a book of poems, the job of the editor is much more difficult and full of danger. I do not exaggerate. Once an editor told the author of a book of poems that they were all simply wonderful, varied, full of humor, full of emotion. But "perhaps you could omit a few of the poems? The book does seem a little long. What do you think?"

It did not take long for the editor to find out. "What do I think!" the author exploded. "I think that, gosh darn it," (not his exact words) "I think you love to say cut, cut, cut. I bet that if Moses had brought you his Commandments you'd have said, 'Oh, thank you, Mr. Moses. I like these tablets very much. These are good Commandments. But aren't twelve a bit too many? Couldn't you cut these Commandments to ten?'" At this the editor roared with laughter: she had thought that perhaps bits of *Moby Dick* might have been shortened but had never considered trying to help Moses work on the Commandments. Her appreciation so pleased the poet that he thriftily used the general idea in his next adult book.

When a picture book is in rough dummy form, the

editor will go through it to see how the pages turn. Perhaps a word or a phrase placed at the bottom of a page should be transferred to the top of the following page. Sometimes such a seemingly minute change can be dramatic in improving the pace of the book, and thus in holding the child's interest. Going through the dummy, the editor and the author may see that some few words are not really needed any more, that the drawings will take care of what a few of the words in the original manuscript indicated. This is a difficult moment for the editor and a tense one for the author, every word of whose manuscript is precious. Some examples are still too painful for this editor (not to mention the authors) to discuss. But every word in a picture book is or should be perfect. The really great and lasting picture books are the closest art form to the finest lyric poetry.

Unless the author is also the artist, the editor has to be sensitive to the problem of using exactly the right artist for a particular manuscript. This is not always easy. One editor worked on a picture book with Author A and Artist B. The relationship between A and B was one of terminal Hate. B actually did a beautiful set of pictures, and when the final book was published none of the blood shed in the editor's office showed at all. Sometimes, of course, there is mutual respect and appreciation and great creative contribution to and from author and artist. But when there is friction it is the editor who must try to make things a little easier for both creative persons. It is said that Lewis Carroll was highly critical of some of Tenniel's pictures for *Alice*, pictures that now seem perfect.

One editor, when hostile author and hostile artist arrived for a session over the artist's sketches, tried to make

a little (very little!) joke about the increasing friction by saying, "Well, now, we have a beautiful book being developed here, and any disagreements can be quickly settled." Whereupon the editor placed a tiny pair of perfect leather boxing gloves on the desk with a nervous and hopefully mollifying smile. The "little joke" turned out to be not little, but invisible. Anyhow, one of the editor's most interesting responsibilities is to find the right artist for the work, to be sure that the author approves of the selection, and then to see that eventually the collaboration results in a picture book good enough for children.

When a fine artist does a set of illustrations for a book, particularly if the pictures are in full color, there is great tension for the artist and the editor while the plates are being made and when the proofs are pulled. If the budget allows (and ideally it always should), the printer sends a set of proofs to the editor or the production manager to go over with the artist and let them indicate necessary corrections. "Register bad here." "Black line in corner too heavy, as marked." "Blue is too pale." And so forth. The tension a fine artist feels over the reproduction of illustrations cannot possibly be exaggerated. Infrequently the first set of proofs is perfect and everyone is relieved and delighted. However, an editor may often receive a set of proofs that needs perhaps minor corrections, but that on the whole are a pleasant surprise to the editor and the production person. And the editor *thinks* that on the whole the artist will be pleased.

In a case like this an editor might telephone the nervous artist (who picks up on the first ring!) and say, "Well, the proofs are here. Can you come right away and go over them with us?" "Oh, my God," cries the artist. "How are they?"

Are they awful? What do you think?" The editor need not say, "They are really quite good. You'll be pleased. We just need minor corrections." The editor might rather want to say, "Well, they're not perfect, but they can be made much better." "Oh God, you mean they are terrible?" "No, they're *not* terrible. They do need correction. Now don't get so upset. After all, this is why we pay extra, to have these proofs pulled so we can all go over them and get them right."

By the time the artist arrives within the hour to look at the proofs, he is prepared for something much further from perfection than the rather good proofs with which he is presented. The artist is therefore pleasantly surprised and relieved and says, "Why, these are much better than I thought they would be. I'm really pleased." This little editorial deception thus makes the artist happier than the artist had expected to be. And, after all, making authors and artists happier than they expected to be is one of the things an editor gets up in the morning to try to do.

The editorial/artistic relationship can't always be personal. An editor may have started in a department so small that the editor was able to read all the submitted manuscripts personally. But as a department grows the editor/publisher must be as perceptive and sensitive in the selection of readers, assistant editors, and associate editors as in the publication of manuscripts. The editor/publisher (and author!) may often be at the mercy of the first or second reader. An editor/publisher is wise, if time forbids the personal reading of every manuscript, at least to try to find the time to read the reports submitted by the reader and glance at the actual manuscript to see if the original reader has caught or missed the true flavor of the work. If even that is impossible, an effort must be made by the editor/publisher to be as close

and available as time and temperament permit to those who read the manuscripts. They must be alert to a paragraph, a page, that shows freshness and originality—and then new talent can be encouraged.

Readers and editors are not always perceptive to quality in all the various kinds of manuscripts. The reader may react creatively to young adult novels but be unable to visualize a picture book from a one- or two-page script. Once there was something about a brief report, derisively dismissing a manuscript, that puzzled the editor. The report said, "Here are a couple of pages by a lady who thinks a tree is nice. Birds sit in it. Cows lie under it. Who cares?" The editor has always been thankful that the manuscript was immediately reread and published as *A Tree Is Nice* by Janice May Udry, and illustrated by Marc Simont, who then won the Caldecott Medal for his illustrations. Janice went on to write many other books, including *Let's Be Enemies* and *Moon Jumpers*, both illustrated by Maurice Sendak. An interesting footnote is that the reader who dismissed the "tree is nice" idea came rushing into the editor's office a little later crying, "You have got to take this manuscript." It was a long book for an older age group, and it became a prize-winner and the first of many fine books by a hitherto unpublished author. So some good readers and editors will have blind spots for potential picture books, some for longer books. Some fortunate editors can perceive talent in both.

An editor of books for young people must not only help the creators turn talent into books but also protect the department's turf. These days the junior book department is usually a separate entity, with its own staff, its own advertising and promotion group, its own production manager. It usually has its own figures on inventory, royalty outstand-

ing, advanced royalties on manuscripts never delivered, and profit and loss statements. If the bottom line shows a good profit, that's great, and it is also—alas—an important time for the junior book editor to look out for the department's continued independence.

One has heard (not often, but one *has* heard) of the heads of adult trade departments who have suddenly thought to themselves, and repeated this thought to the top management, "Hey, why don't we put the junior books and the adult trade into one department? Really, that would make more sense. They're all trade books, actually. The same salesmen sell them, and I just think the junior books and their profit should now become part of the regular adult trade department." (Note: Throughout the above, the publishing head of the adult trade department probably referred to junior books as "juvies," which is salt in an easily opened wound.)

Well, when this happens, it is time for the editor to fight for the department's turf. It is important for those departmental figures to be kept separately, and to show that the department is making money. (If they don't show a profit, of course, the conversation between the adult trade editor and top management will never take place.) If the department shows a healthy profit, top management must admit that "they must be doing something right" and keep hands off.

The "bottom line" phrase irritates a lot of editors, but it is extremely important to keep that profit healthy. In a book column, on a business page, appeared this statement: "The bottom line impacted negatively." Such a poetic way of explaining why a department was being liquidated. Junior

book departments are best run by one person, responsible for the publishing of the books *and* for the bottom line of the department's profit and loss sheet.

An editor responsible for the bottom line as well as the activities of the junior book department is often in a tough situation. An editor can be sitting in the office talking to a valued and temperamental—and often screaming—author, trying to placate, explain, express love and understanding to that distressed and miserable person. The editor will try to appear calm and reassuring, but at that very moment may be fifteen minutes late to an important financial meeting to go over the inventory, the unearned royalty advances, the general overhead of the department. So, when and if the unhappy author is made somewhat happier, the editor arrives late at the important meeting, with a splitting headache and a muttered reminder to the bruised self that no one ever promised any editorial rose gardens.

Above all, the junior books editor must remember the young person for whom the book is intended. Editors try to look out for a writer's occasional temptation to toss in a little adult-appearing touch, a sort of patronizing adult wink over the child's shoulder to another adult. It is the wise editor who will catch that and warn gently, "Oh, there. Stop winking at some stupid adult to get a cheap smile. The child will be aware of it and may be put off." Between the creative author and the creative young reader stand so many adults—editors, reviewers, librarians, parents (oh, parents!)—sifting their own adult reactions to books meant for brand-new people. Ultimately, it is the child to whom editors must be responsible through their fascinating, often maddening, but greatly rewarding profession.