

What do Editors do?

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I have to admit to having a good old chuckle to myself when I read the topic for this panel: What do Editors do?

For this is the very question I asked myself when I was offered – very unexpectedly – the job as Children's Editor for Banana Books the children's imprint of Otford Press. You see, I had never even contemplated being an editor. I was trying to forge a career as a children's author and came to being an editor by extreme accident – I subbed some manuscripts to a small new press and came away with the job of setting up the children's list. Bizarre, I know and for the first few years in the role felt such a fraud I cringed every time I signed a letter Sue Whiting, Editor.

What I discovered though as I ascended my extremely steep – nearly vertical – learning curve, is that an editor's role is extremely diverse, even more so if you are working for a tiny new press. So in my first year, not only did I unfold the mystery of how you take a manuscript and turn it into a book, but I learnt a whole new curious language: I

into a book, but I learnt a whole new curious language: I learnt the difference between the em dash and the en dash, the difference between RGB colour and CMYK, about press ready PDF files, imbedded fonts, DPI, orphans and widows, pagemaker, quark and photoshop and the list goes on.

Now as many of you would know, Otford Press has had a rocky time and my role has changed with the various ups and downs of the company. When Otford Press was sold about twelve months ago, and James Herd appointed as Publishing Manager, my primary role became that of Commissioning Editor. And this is the role I would like to share with you today – to try to give you a picture of what goes on in the head of an editor – this editor anyway – when reading manuscripts and considering them for publication and how this has influenced my own writing.

When manuscripts arrived at Otford Press their first port of call was my desk. I read each and every – though not all in their entirety – manuscript subbed to BB over the last four years. Now in the early days, one of my fears – and as you have probably gathered, I had many! – was:

- Would I recognise an excellent manuscript if it slapped me in the nose?
- And worse still would the manuscripts I recommend stand up – would they be good enough?

Well, what I discovered as I waded my way through swamps of stories is that a really good manuscript sparkles like diamonds in sludge.

Now I'm not suggesting that all the manuscripts we passed on were sludge – don't get me wrong, don't be offended – but there was most certainly those that stood out and demanded attention. Those that made you tuck your feet up under you backside, snuggle back in the sofa with a cuppa and enjoy a great read. The times you smile and think: "Hey, and I'm getting paid to do this."

Now the sixty-four *million* dollar question I'm sure you are all asking yourselves is: what makes a manuscript stand out in this way? Well of course there is no easy answer, and I have thought about this long and hard – but the first and most important thing for me is the voice: ***it is all in the telling***. Now this is neither startling nor surprising.

But a manuscript that has a strong voice tends to grab you from the first page and compels you to read further. Those without, come across as wooden or forced, lacking in rhythm, energy or individuality.

As a writer you must allow yourself to tell your story in your own unique way – to let your personality, the way you view the world, the way you think and talk to spring from the page.

The other aspect of writing that would set one manuscript apart from another was

Where the point of view character told their s tory from deep

within the child's point of view, so much so that you really believe the story is being told by a ten year old or a five year old as the case may be; where everything is seen through the eyes of the child – the thoughts, emotions, dialogue were all authentically those of a child, not an adult pretending to be a child.

Now of course there are lots of other important features of a good manuscript (and I don't have time today to discuss them all in detail): original living breathing characters which the readers care about, pacey page turning plots, imaginative and original concepts, important and relevant underlying themes, authentic dialogue etc. You know them all and it is the manuscripts that have the whole deal – all bases covered –which keep you reading to the end. And this leads me to the category where many manuscripts fall: the *almosts*. The manuscripts that have a strong voice but a slim plot, the ones with an exciting plot but dull lifeless characters and so forth. You need to check every box. Of course it is rare to find a manuscript that is flawless, but it must show that the writer has covered all these bases and covered them Well.

Now the aspect of manuscript assessment that surprised this editor was the issue of market. If I like a manuscript and want to take it to a publishing meeting, well I have to not only be able to espouse the virtues of the writing

and story but I also have to convince the publisher that this manuscript will appeal to the market for X Y and Z reasons and most importantly it will sell! Bottom line - Publishing is a business. Publishing houses must make money. So once a manuscript is interesting me, I start thinking, even before I have finished it:

- How can we sell this?
- What readership would it appeal to?
- Will it appeal to a big enough market to make it viable?
- What sets it apart from the rest of the market?
- What would the cover look like? What is the angle or selling points and so on?
- How can we make it stand out?

All very important questions and if I can't think of a hook or selling point, it is unlikely the manuscript will go much further. Sad but true.

Now once I had sorted out the yeses, nos and maybes, I take the manuscripts to a publishing meeting and there they were discussed in depth and the ones that the committee which in Otford Press consisted of myself, James Herd and Jude Jones could see had potential were then sent out to other independent readers or to Jude or James or all of the above for their opinion and recommendations and discussed again at the next meeting. Sometimes, we conducted a bit of market research or required more opinions before a final decision was made. A lengthy but necessary process.

I'd like to finish briefly by sharing how reading and assessing all those manuscripts has impacted on my own writing.

After about a year of working as an editor, for some reason or other, I had a couple of weeks where editing work was slim and I was able to concentrate on my own writing. I had been writing a novel called "Battle of the Rats" on and off for a number of years and this is what I dragged out to work on. Now, I have to say the following fortnight, was probably the most exciting and important for me as a writer. Suddenly after reading all those "failed" manuscripts I knew with amazing clarity what I had to do and it was the most liberating experience. I raised the bar. I was not going to be an "almost" and then I gave myself to permission to be me; to write the way I wanted to write; to take risks and let my voice come through. I discovered that I had been too cautious and careful worried if I could say this or that or if my writing was correct or good enough. I pushed all those worries aside and told my story in the most powerful way I knew how. I was bold. I was cheeky and daring. If I was tossing up about whether my character should do this or THIS I chose THIS. It was soooo exciting. I remember ringing a writing buddy of mine up and saying: "I'm writing! And I'm having so much fun!"

Not long after this, Cathie Tasker of Koala Books asked me to send her a range of my work. I'd been so busy with editing, I didn't have much to send, but I gathered up a few suitable chapter books and picture books and threw in those chapters of the unfinished Battle of the Rats I had just written. Well, soon after I received a letter from Cathie saying thanks but no thanks on the chapter books and picture books I'd sent BUT she'd love to see the rest of the novel. Well that got me writing! And the novel that had hung around on my desk was finished in a matter of

that had hung around on my desk was finished in a matter of weeks. And as they say the rest is history! And as an interesting aside, those same chapters I wrote during this period, are the same chapters I read and perform when visiting schools etc interesting, eh?

Now my final words to you are this: Be bold, be brave, don't make your readers chuckle make them laugh out loud, don't make them sad make them sob, make them worry their pants off, make them cringe and read through their fingers **MAKE THEM FEEL!!**

And finally have something important to say and say it well.
Good luck.