

EDITORS' TIPS FOR GETTING PUBLISHED

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STORY SHAPERS

Six editors share what they're looking for, what they're publishing, and what authors should know about the industry.

BY MELISSA HART

For years now, I've been wanting to make a T-shirt that reads, "Be the writer your editor thinks you are." I've been fortunate to have smart, insightful editors in my life who offer candid feedback on my manuscript drafts and inspire me to delve more deeply into subject matter and craft. Without their guidance and their passion for story, I'd be a lesser writer for sure. I've learned that book editors aren't out to get you. They're looking to fall in love with a story – and then help the author make it the best it can possibly be.

For this article, I spoke by phone with several book editors across the country to offer readers a sense of their particular interests, their process of working with authors, and their perspectives on writing and publishing. Some of the editors focus on commercial fiction; some deliberately look for books overlooked by mainstream publishing. Some prefer romance, some like pop culture, and some are devoted to literary fiction. All are committed to helping their clients to become the best writers possible.

IBRAHIM AHMAD

AKASHIC BOOKS

During the publishing industry's economic crisis of the previous decade, senior editor Ibrahim Ahmad wasn't sure how long Akashic Books – an independent publisher based in Brooklyn – could stay in business. “An existential cloud loomed over us,” he says. “We wondered how we were going to keep the lights on.”

Then came Adam Mansbach's comic best-seller, *Go the F**k to Sleep*, translated into dozens of languages with over 2 million copies sold. “This book provided us with a level of stability that allowed us to adhere to our core bedrock principles as a company, giving voice to those writers who might not be able to find homes elsewhere, to take risks, to publish challenging, provocative books,” Ahmad says.

One of these books is Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer*, published in May 2016. Eteraz, a young Pakistani author, writes about what it means to be Muslim in the U.S. in the 21st century. “It's staggeringly funny and supremely insightful,” Ahmad says. “He has this laser-sharp intelligence he brings to dissecting the complexities of race and politics and religion in contemporary America. It raises thoughtful and engaging questions. These are the kinds of books we're looking for.”

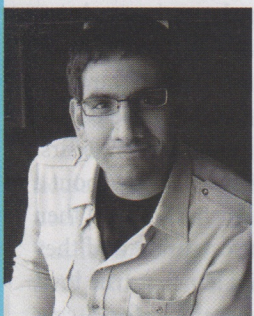
Akashic publishes a significant number of authors from the Caribbean and the African diaspora. Ahmad notes a void of diverse voices in traditional U.S. publishing. “Our desire to have our lists reflect the reality of the world in which our authors are writing has been intrinsic in our company since day one,” he says.

The company recently launched an imprint for younger readers. In October 2016, it published Israeli author Oren Lavie's *The Bear Who Wasn't There* with illustrations by Wolf Erlbruch. “It's an existentialist picture book for kids about a bear trying to find himself,” Ahmad says, “and an example of us trying something new, branching out and wanting to keep our list fresh and exciting and eclectic.”

In October 2016, Akashic published *Ziggy Marley and Family Cookbook*. It's published books by several musicians, from Michael Stipe of R.E.M. fame to singer/songwriter Ryan Adams of The Cardinals. “We have a very strong underground culture focus,” Ahmad explains.

He tells authors interested in publishing with Akashic to educate themselves about the particular tastes and idiosyncrasies of those editors to whom they're submitting a manuscript. “I'm much more likely to respond positively to a query if the person reaching out displays a keen understanding of my tastes as an editor,” he says.

He believes that writers should seek out literary community, attending workshops and bookstore readings and networking online. “If I hear from an author we've published, whose opinion I respect and trust, and they say, ‘Hey, you need to check out so and so's manuscript,’ I do,” he says. “Personal recommendations are really meaningful. Put yourself in a position where you have advocates and allies in the literary world. Make your own luck.”



TARA SINGH CARLSON

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS AT
PENGUIN GROUP USA

Tara Singh Carlson likes to talk with her authors by phone. It's not unusual for her to call up a writer before she acquires a manuscript, to ensure that their visions for the book align. She follows that up with another conversation about the timing of edits, and then calls



to discuss the editing notes themselves – often three rounds before she OKs a manuscript for publication.

“Receiving edits can be difficult,” she says. “Seeing something in writing can feel impersonal,” she says. “I hope that I can be diplomatic in my editorial letter, but it can be easier to be sensitive on the phone than it is in writing.”

Singh Carlson looks for women's fiction that walks a line between literary and commercial. Right now, she's particularly excited about Meg Howrey's novel *The Wanderers*, out in March 2017. It's a story about the first three astronauts scheduled to be sent to Mars, and how they have to complete a 17-month long training mission in isolation. “It has some of the oddest characters I've ever met in fiction, and they're brought to life in such a smart, inventive way,” she says. “It's about people and their search for self in the age of space exploration. It isn't really about space – it ends up being about the human heart.”

Thanks to the success of Andy Weir's *The Martian*, she's noticed a trend in books about space exploration. There's also a continued interest in psychological suspense novels. Singh Carlson herself gravitates toward historical novels such as Jackie Copleton's debut novel, *A Dictionary of Mutual Understanding*, published last year.

The story revolves around the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, told by a woman whose daughter and grandson perish in the blast. Forty years later, the woman is living in Philadelphia when a badly scarred man knocks on her door and claims to be her grandson. “It has really beautiful writing,” Singh Carlson says, “and the sense of place is excellent. It's interesting to see a piece of World War II fiction set in the Eastern front and told from the point of view of a Japanese woman.”

MARCELA LANDRES

FREELANCE BOOK EDITOR

Freelance editor Marcela Landres had worked for seven years at Simon and Schuster when she lost her job in a company-wide restructuring. A day after hearing the news, she received a phone call from a literary agent hoping to hire her to edit a client's manuscript. She's had a steady workflow as a freelance editor ever since. "The universe decided my career for me," she quips.

Landres specializes in editing novels and memoir, particularly those by Latino writers. "Part of the reason I wanted to be an acquisitions editor at a large publishing house is that I felt that there weren't enough Latino editors in publishing," she says, "which is part of the reason there weren't enough books by and for Latinos. I identified that that was the job I needed to have if I wanted to change the world and get more Latino authors published."

Landres estimates that 30 percent of the authors with whom she works are Latino, and 20 percent are African American. "I've had a couple of black authors who say, 'I can't find a black independent editor but I found you, and you get me,'" she says.

She met African-American author Natasha Deón a decade ago when Deón hired her to read a manuscript and give her feedback. "She was just so talented," Landres says. "I told her the specific things she could do to build her platform while she polished the next draft of her novel."

Over several years, Deón polished the manuscript, which became *Grace: A Novel*. "She's gotten fabulous reviews all over the place," Landres says of the novel, now in its fourth printing just two months after publication. "It's glorious."

Charles Rice-Gonzalez worked with Landres on his novel *Chulito*, a coming-of-age story about a young Latino man learning about queer youth culture in the South Bronx. Lesley Téllez worked with her on *Eat Mexico: Recipes from Mexico City's Streets, Markets & Fondas*. Landres also worked with Irene Sullivan, author of *Raised by the Courts: One Judge's Insight into Juvenile Justice*. She tailors her editing services to a variety of budgets, providing everything from a 15-minute phone Q&A to manuscript edits and book proposal critiques.

She believes that writing and publishing a first novel takes a decade from beginning to end. "It's not what people want to hear," she says, "but I'm the editor that tells you what you need to know, not necessarily what you want to hear."



SHAUNA SUMMERS

BALLANTINE BANTAM DELL

Shauna Summers finds a great deal of romance writing to be feminist. "It's writing for women, about women," she notes, citing M. O'Keefe's *Wait for It* (February 2017) as an example. "O'Keefe's story is really sexy contemporary romance," she says, "erotic and edgy and dark with a lot of intensity in the relationships. You can't put it down. And it's very feminist in a lot of ways, which I really respond to."

Summers acquires numerous types of romance novels, including erotic. "A lot of times, when people think of erotic romance, they think it's just a lot of graphic sex," she says. "But really, the emotions and the relationships need to be carefully crafted."

Readers invest in characters, she explains, and they're waiting for that scene in which the characters get together. "It's tough to write it so that it doesn't feel like every other romance novel sex scene you've read," she says. "But being able to write a cliché-free sex scene about a character I don't care about? I have no interest in that. It just feels like porn."

One of her favorite aspects of the job is collaborating on revision with her authors. "It's almost like sculpting a block of stone," she says. "You help the author to bring out the story and the characters in a way that they've envisioned. The really satisfying thing is when they take revision to a whole other level that I hadn't anticipated."

She's particularly excited to publish Sarah Jio's first hardcover book, *Always*, in February 2017. "It's about a woman who's built this perfect life for herself, and then she sees a homeless man outside a restaurant and they make eye contact and she realizes it's her first true love, who disappeared from her life a decade before," says Summers. "It's really emotional and fresh."

She also looks forward to introducing readers to Samantha Sottero's *Love and Gravity* in February. It's the story of a contemporary cello prodigy and her time-travel relationship with a young Sir Isaac Newton. "It's very romantic and clever," Summers says. "She does a lot of really interesting things with science and parallel dimensions. I'm irrational in my obsession for this book."

JULIE MATYSIK

RUNNING PRESS KIDS

One of the things Julie Matysik likes best about her work as editorial director for Running Press Kids is how picture books and middle grade/young adult literature allow her to forget her adult concerns for a time and remember what it was like to be a child. "I put myself back into the eyesight of a younger person, which helps me to feel more grounded and gives me new perspective on how I see things as an adult," she says. "I like to get back into that space where I can be a kid again."



She's excited about two picture books that launch in spring 2017. *The Blue Songbird* by Vern Kousky follows the world travels of a voiceless bird who wants to sing along with her sisters and sets out to find her perfect song. "It's a wonderful mesh of text and artwork," Matysik says. "It's one of those books you could read and reread as you get older and find something that will speak to you. It may become a timeless classic."

She's also eager to introduce Thrity Umrigar's picture book, *When I Carried You in My Belly*, about a mother noticing the characteristics (laughter, kindness, etc.) she exhibited while pregnant that have manifested in her daughter. "It's a very powerful, sweet, loving story – one of those books you'd give to any new mom or for Mother's Day," Matysik says.

She notes that stories about female empowerment are particularly popular right now in the children's market, both in nonfiction and fiction. Running Press Kids will publish Rachel Bateman's YA novel, *Someone Else's Summer*, in May 2017 with a female protagonist who finds a summer "bucket list" from her deceased older sister and decides to complete as many of the items as possible in tribute.

"It's not just a summer romance, road-trippy story," Matysik says. "There's self-discovery as the narrator figures out what path she herself wants to take. It's lighthearted, but there's a bit of an edge. It's not just a summer beach read."

The best way to get Matysik's attention is to craft a query letter written in a unique voice with an intriguing preview of your manuscript. She suggests that potential authors also run their work by published writers skilled in crafting stories for children, with a request for candid feedback. Once she's accepted a manuscript for publishing, she works closely with authors on revision, focusing in particular on strong and consistent characterization.

"I'm not one of those editors that will force my edits on an author," she says. "My notes are more guidelines. I want to make sure the book that's published and ends up on a shelf is one that the author can be proud of."

COLIN DICKERMAN

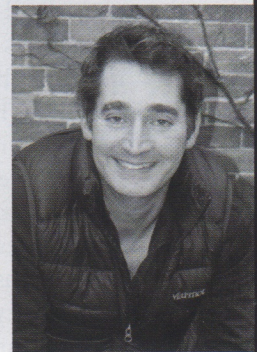
FLATIRON BOOKS

The editors at Flatiron look for relevant voices and ideas in nonfiction and literary and commercial fiction, including young adult crossover novels, books that "have the potential to break through the considerable cultural noise and hopefully help start conversations," says editorial director Colin Dickerman.

In 2017, they'll publish Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich's *The Fact of a Body*, which weaves together the story of a murder and the author's own complicated family history, as well as Elizabeth Winder's *Marilyn in Manhattan: Her Year of Joy*, which Dickerman calls "a wonderfully poetic and intimate look at the icon's joyous year in New York." *Slate* columnist Rebecca Schuman's first book, *Schadenfreude, A Love Story*, about her obsession with all things German, comes out in the spring, along with Mark Frost's *The Secret History of Twin Peaks*, "a very, very cool novel," Dickerman says, "which will have fans clamoring."

Daniel Lowe's debut novel, *All That's Left to Tell*, will appear in February.

"This is a stunning novel about a man, his adult daughter, and how both of them come to terms with their relationship that brings to mind Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as well as Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*," Dickerman says. "Daniel is 60 years old, and this is his first novel. It's clearly been worth the wait."



His relationships with Flatiron authors vary according to their individual needs. Some send him paragraphs or chapters when they're feeling stuck, and he talks with them often. "And I have writers who go away and do a ton of work before I hear from them again," he explains.

If he believes in the premise or idea for a book, even if the writer's voice needs work, he's sometimes willing to take a risk. "Or if the voice is unforgettable, but the plot needs work, I'm not afraid to roll up my sleeves," he says. "The goal is to have a common vision for the book, and to figure out the best way to achieve it." **W**

Contributing editor Melissa Hart is the author of *Avenging the Owl* (Sky Pony, 2016) and *Wild Within: How Rescuing Owls Inspired a Family* (Lyons, 2014). Web: melissahart.com.