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## **Editorial Literacy:Reconsidering Literary Editing as Critical Engagement in Writing Support**

Anna Cairney

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EDITORIAL LITERACY: RECONSIDERING LITERARY EDITING AS CRITICAL  
ENGAGEMENT IN WRITING SUPPORT

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

to the faculty in the department of

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of

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Anna Cairney

Date Submitted: 1/27/2020

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **EDITORIAL LITERACY: RECONSIDERING LITERARY EDITING AS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN WRITING SUPPORT**

Anna Cairney

Editing is usually perceived in the pejorative within in the literature of composition studies generally, and specifically in writing center studies. Regardless if the Writing Center serves mostly undergraduates or graduates, the word “edit” has largely evolved to a narrow definition of copyediting or textual cleanup done by the author at the end of the writing process. Inversely, in trade publishing, editors and agents work with writers at multiple stages of production, providing editorial feedback in the form of reader’s reports and letters. Editing is a rich, intellectual skill of critically engaging with another’s text. What are the implications of differing literacies of editing for two fields dedicated to writing production?

This dissertation examines the editorial practices of three leading 20<sup>th</sup> century editors: Maxwell Perkins, Katharine White, and Ursula Nordstrom. The selected editors worked in three different publishing fields, with three different styles. All were practitioners of editorial literacy supporting some of America’s greatest literary works.

This project demonstrates a lack of understanding of the ways professional writing is editorially supported. Editor and author are two distinct contributors to writing, each with a different objective, each learning from the process. Effective editing is prescriptive, additive critique that fosters collaborative relationships between vested parties. Editing is more than mechanical cleanup, performed in the final steps of writing. This dissertation offers suggestions for the writing classroom, where editing might be

taught as peer review. Positive editorial practices in the writing center might include consultants reading and responding to each other's work as a matter of practice.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
 <b>Part 1</b>	
<b>Perceptions of Editing</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Ch. 1 <i>Edit</i> : A Four-Letter Word in Writing Center Scholarship .....	22
1.1. A Brief History .....	22
1.2. Historical Designations .....	24
1.3. A Shift in Scholarship .....	25
1.4. An Appeal for Consistency .....	28
1.5. Firsthand Observations .....	29
1.6. Narrow Definitions of Editing .....	30
a. Editing is Correction Only .....	31
b. Editing is Not Teaching .....	31
c. Editing is Not Constructive Feedback .....	32
d. Editing is Correcting Standard Writing Conventions.....	33
e. Editing is Not Learning .....	35
1.7. Editorial Needs of Graduate Students .....	35
1.8. Editing is Not Concerned with Development .....	36
1.9. Skillsets for Line and Copy Editors .....	37
1.10. Editing is Not Collaborative Conversation .....	38
1.11. Editing is Proofreading to Be Paid for Privately .....	40
1.12. Editing is Not Writing Center Work .....	41
Ch. 2 Literary Editing in Practice .....	45
2.1. The Anonymous Nature of Literary Editing .....	45
2.2. Specific Editorial Terms and Definitions .....	47
a. The Acquisitions Editor.....	48
b. The Development Editor.....	48
c. The Line Editor .....	48
2.3. The Editor-in-Chief .....	49
2.4. A Brief History of Editing .....	50
2.5. The Emergence of Modern Editing .....	52
2.6. The Writer-Editor Relationship .....	55

2.7. The Focus of This Project .....	59
2.8. Personal Investment .....	61

## Part 2

### Case Studies in Literary Editing .....

Ch. 3 Editing Thrives with Knowledge and Patience .....	64
Case Study: Maxwell Perkins .....	64

3.1. Background and Influence .....	64
3.2. Project Source Materials .....	65
3.3. Editorial Beliefs and Practices .....	66
3.4. The Editorial <i>We</i> .....	68
3.5. Chapter Format and Historical Note .....	69
3.6. Editorial Integrity .....	70
3.7. Editorial Vision .....	72
3.8. Editorial Awareness of Genre and Rhetorical Conventions .....	74
3.9. Do Not Let Mechanics Get in the Way of Voice .....	79
3.10. A Conduit Between Voice and Audience .....	82
3.11. Editing's Reward is Different from a Writer's Success .....	87
3.12. How Maxwell Perkins Reads a Book .....	89

Ch. 4 Editing is Directive Guidance .....	93
Case Study: Katharine S. White .....	93

4.1. Background and Influence .....	93
4.2. Editorial Beliefs and Practices .....	95
4.3. Project Source Materials .....	98
4.4. Union of Editor and Author .....	99
4.5. Raising the Bar for Children's Literature .....	101
4.6. Acumen in Dealing with Difficulty .....	103
4.7. Editing is Brainstorming .....	107
4.8. Finding and Developing New Talent .....	109
4.9. Editors Mentor Editors .....	113
4.10. Steadfast Encouragement .....	115

Ch. 5 Editing is Overwhelmingly Affirming .....	117
Case Study: Ursula Nordstrom.....	117

5.1. Background and Influence .....	117
5.2. Project Source Materials .....	120
5.3. Developing New Talent .....	122
5.4. Guiding Established Authors .....	126
5.5. Supporting Speculative Projects .....	129
5.6. Understanding the Audience .....	131
5.7. Steadfast Encouragement .....	132
5.8. Editorial Integrity .....	134
5.9. The Editor Author Friendship .....	141
<b>Part 3</b>	
<b>Suggestions and Implications .....</b>	<b>144</b>
Ch. 6 Rethinking Editing as Agency .....	144
6.1. Responsible Editing is Collaborative Learning .....	145
6.2. Additive Editing is Guiding .....	148
6.3. Editing is Interpretative .....	151
6.4. Teaching Editing .....	154
6.5. Editing as Peer Review in the Classroom .....	157
6.6. Editing as Additive Support in the Writing Center .....	158
6.7. Editing as Agency for Graduate Writers .....	161
6.8. The Importance of Accuracy .....	163
Works Cited .....	165

## Introduction

In professional trade publishing, Writers House is a well-respected literary agency that blends the creative and professional support needed by a writer to establish themselves as an author. In addition to their expertise with contracts, branding, licensing, and subsidiary rights, the agency provides focused editorial support. This writing advice is unique to each manuscript, depending on the author's vision and goal for the project. The ideology of developing not only the writer, as an agent on their behalf, but their literary product as well, has launched and sustained thousands of fiction and non-fiction authors. Editorial development is provided for all stages of the publishing process, at times even for unsigned writers through extensive reader's reports that may accompany a letter of rejection. One of the reasons Writers House has such a long list of *New York Times* bestselling authors is their commitment to understanding genre in addition to their author's needs. To develop the editorial talents of aspiring publishing professionals, Writers House has a formal 12-week internship program. Part of the curriculum is learning the business side of publishing, and the other part is learning textual editorial development. The interns learn as apprentices to agents and their assistants, most focus in a genre in order to become subject specialists. I joined Writers House in 2014 to learn the foundations of the publishing industry.

Near the end of my internship, I was hired on the operations side as an assistant. The administrative part of my job was managing the contracts as they moved from house to agency to author and back. The other part was as an at-large editorial reader. I read for any agent that requested additional input, improving my editing skills with each read. I learned from the agent and their assistant how to put together suggestive editorial reports

that the author might consider as they redrafted the project. I learned the formula for an editorial suggestion. I thrived in this collaborative environment that met regularly to talk about ways to improve the writing. I learned that much of editing is balancing the author's vision with an understanding of the genre and market in order to advise and suggest solutions to stalls in the text. I aspired to read for each agent in order to learn as much about editorial development as I could.

While honing my editing skills, I continued to work along subsequent classes of interns. I have always enjoyed teaching, and watching the students improve their writing about writing was as equally rewarding as visiting a bookstore to see a fully formed book that once was a query letter. It was working with the interns that inspired me to return to the classroom. I surmised the university writing center was the ideal place for me to blend a love of literature with a desire to improve another's writing. Several interns had worked in writing centers and the experience inspired their future careers in the publishing industry. I joined the St. John's University Writing Center as a Doctoral Assistant to apply my editorial skills and learn about writing support in a university setting. Instead, what I learned about the concept of editing was is direct contrast to what I had been doing as an editorial reader.

In writing center scholarship editing is narrowly defined, it's definition often akin to proofreading. Editing is listed or referred to as part of the final part of the writing process, like copyediting. Frequently, this description of editing as copyediting accompanies pejorative language about the skill that makes the assumption that editing is always already a bad thing or that editing reduces the authority of the author. Language from the webpages of the Northeastern University Writing Center states "What Your

Consultant Cannot Do,” listing in the response, “Edit your paper for you. We believe that the writer should always be in the ‘driver’s seat’ in terms of working on the paper.” As if the act of editing overtakes the act of writing. Likewise, on the Colorado State University Writing Center webpage there is listed the reasons their center won’t edit, “Editing and proofreading involve carefully rereading your draft to ensure that your writing will look and sound “correct” to a reader—in other words, editing and proofreading ensure that your draft meets the standard writing conventions regarding punctuation, mechanics, spelling, sentence structure, and formatting.” The language used reduces editing to a lower order rules-based skill and not part of the rich culture of textual development I experienced in literary publishing.

These conflicting definitions led me to explore the histories and concepts of editing, and to unpack the editorial practices of leading editors who worked with the authors of celebrated works. It is my intention to complicate the term, especially for writing faculty, writing center consultants, and graduate writing mentors who often work like their professional editorial counterparts. The editing literacy of trade professional in the “real-world” reveal a deeply intellectual skill that fosters a writer’s agency. Editors, Agents, and writers work collaboratively on a project, but less in collaboration, as each role has its own identity.

## **Part 1: Perceptions of Editing**

### **Ch. 1 *Edit*: A Four-Letter Word in Writing Center Scholarship**

This project is divided into three parts. Part One examines perceptions of editing in writing center and composition scholarship against the practices of literary editing.

Chapter One reveals the definitions and attitudes with the word and skill of *editing*. Numerous writing centers began as designated places of secondary support, staffed by administrators. This founding ideology contributed to the pervasive belief that centers provided mechanical clean-up, copyediting. When the dominant paradigm of writing instruction shifted in the twentieth century from product to process, the copyediting being done in the original writing centers began to be referred to as, simply, *editing*, and the term and accompanying concept evolved to a definition meaning proofreading. It is within these redefinitions of writing center work that the term *edit*, and thus *editing*, and *editor* came to be viewed differently through writing center scholarship.

The shift in the ideology of writing centers occurred alongside the shift of composition theory to a more liberal or expressivist mode of thinking, which dominated writing studies in 1970s and 1980s. Although there was a call to align the term and skill of editing in writing instruction with the practice of editing applied in trade publishing, the definition of the term was limited even further. The idea of editing was reframed to an action taken by an author, such as recasting or re-seeing their text, and not the descriptive of the work done by an engaged party outside of the author. This key difference in the role of an author and the role of an editor further reduced the importance or crucial input of editing. Ultimately, editing came to mean changing or correcting text, not reading through it from the position of nurturing global writing issues. As such, the literature of writing centers defines an editor as the person physically making the textual changes on a manuscript. Since a dominant belief is that learning does not occur if papers are merely corrected by an outside hand, editing, as defined by writing centers is not constructive.

This chapter draws from the webpages of numerous university writing centers to support its claim. Pejorative descriptions of editing are often deficit based, including what editing is not: not teaching, not learning, not constructive feedback. The globally recognized Purdue Writing Lab posts on its page, “We’re a teaching and learning space; we’re not an editing service.” Other universities who define editing, generally promote editing as correcting standard writing conventions. The writing center webpages from Rutgers offer this, “While our coaches do not proofread or edit papers, they do provide feedback and suggestions on how to write concise sentences, coherent paragraphs, and a well-organized paper.” It appears that a majority of writing centers are aligning the term editing with a specialized form of editing, copyediting. Since undergraduates are often graded on their mechanics, writing centers avoid copyediting to maintain academic integrity standards. Editing for graduate students, who are more aligned with professional writers, is still considered a lower order skill, albeit a necessary one. Many centers, mindful of this need to present polished papers, articles, and publishable research attempt to address the writer’s desire for a clean final document. However, definitions and ideologies of editing as copyediting remain aligned. Some schools list unaffiliated for-a-fee editors to correct and format the work of graduate writers.

Ultimately, this chapter reveals subtle differences in the definitions and purpose of editing as described by university writing center sites. The research reveals the current paradigm that editing does not belong in a writing center, that editing is not writing center work. Although subtle, the differences between copyediting and editing, they are problematic as they reveal an editorial theory that differs from professional editorial

practices. They also miss out on possible editorial scholarship for a field that is heavily based in writerly improvement and support.

## **Ch. 2 Literary Editing in Practice**

In contrast to Chapter One, Chapter Two counters the literature of writing studies with conceptions of editing in the context of literary trade publishing. The practice of literary editing directly contrasts to how editing is defined and practiced in many writing centers and in composition scholarship. In trade publishing, editors work with writers at multiple stages of production. Literary agents, who are often a gateway to publication, also provide editorial feedback in the form of reader's reports and letters. Editing may be the most important skill of a publishing professional, for that engagement and investment in a written product that advances the writing to being read by a larger audience.

A key tenet of professional editors is their relative anonymity for the general public reading the book. This chapter reveals parts of the anonymous nature of literary editing that contribute to a general lack of understanding about what literary editors actually do. Professional editing is in large part a conversation with a writer about what the writer is trying to do and, like most conversations, what's left is the memory, the feeling of the direction the conversation took. Also, editors are not authors; they work quietly on behalf of the author to improve their writing. They do not change the text but offer suggestion and guidance for the author to adopt or discard as they see fit. Further unpacked in this chapter are more specific editorial definitions for professional editors. The Acquisitions Editor decides what manuscripts to take on and seeks out writers for

projects. The Developmental Editor, or most commonly referred to as simply the Editor, is the front facing member of the publishing house who works in close tandem with the author on the draft. After the editor and author have ‘finished’ with the draft, the manuscript moves to a Line Editor who focuses on consistency, reading with a manic attention to detail, making sure each line of text is doing what the author intends it to do and that the content is accurate. Each of these editorial roles operate under the Editor-in-Chief. Editing in publishing holds broad definitions.

A brief history of trade editing is provided documenting the shift from the time publishing was essentially independent publishing, into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, until the corporatization of the last fifty years restructured larger publishing houses into something bigger. It is in the last 100 years that the idea of an editor as a medium to success emerged. With modernism in the 1920’s a shifting literary taste created a need for editors to work at newly founded publishing houses. However, in the early twentieth century, like today, there was little formal opportunity to learn the art of trade editing. Literary editing, and a good part of trade publishing, still operates in a mentor/apprentice relationship. Vital to the industry are the relationships between writers and editors, and editors and their apprentices. Literary editing at its finest is a sustained conversation between a writer and a trusted advisor. Editors may inspire, spur, and create ideas for the author to draw from. Editors have a legitimate creativity of their own, one that few writers have: the skill of critical analysis, detachment, and expression.

While copyediting is certainly a branch of editing. In publishing parlance, an editor is most likely a developmental editor working with the author long before the mechanical cleanup phase of the process. In order to illustrate the ways in which editing

can develop a writer and their writing, I have selected three editors that worked between 1910 and 1982, Maxwell Perkins, Katharine White, and Ursula Nordstrom. During their time, it was mainly the editors who carried the bulk of editorial conversation with their authors, as opposed to today, where literary agents may also work heavily with text production as well. It is my intent to have the reader see first-hand the language and nature of a strong editorial relationship.

## **Part 2: Case Studies in Literary Editing**

### **Ch. 3 Editing Thrives with Knowledge and Patience, Case Study: Maxwell Perkins**

In Part 2: Chapters Three, Four and Five directly draw from the reader's reports and editorial letters of professional editors to convey the rich depth of skill editing necessitates. Maxwell Perkins is the study of Chapter Three. The editorial style of Perkins was that of a paternal compass. From 1914 to 1947, he edited with knowledge and patience, like a fatherly guide who firmly led his writers to produce the best possible work they could. He steadfastly believed in the importance of writing to share competing ideas, accurately reflect society, and to entertain. He felt fiction should be honest and enjoyable to read and non-fiction should not reveal any of an author's bias but provide content that encourages the readers to make up their own minds. It was his belief that writing takes as long as it takes to get it right, he would not rush a project. Perkins embodied the idea that an editor works "in the service of writers and writing" as an invisible force.

The first section of the chapter establishes Perkins' background and reveals the extent of influence he had on American Literature. Perkins renowned editorial influence remains because of the prominence of his most famous writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. However, Perkins inspired and drew the best writing out of many authors. The primary source materials for the chapter draws from, *Editor to Author, The Letters of Maxwell Perkins*. The 188 letters were selected from thousands by John Hall Wheelock and paint a clear picture of his belief in good writing. He was driven to find works that represent a genuine reflection of feeling. He championed writing filled with observation and thinking as forefront to story. Perkins' advice was not limited to narrative issues, oftentimes those he worked and corresponded with sought him out for life's other quandaries. What comes to light is that listening may be the most important skill of an editor, to listen with attentive silence. Perkins would quietly, patiently receive the unburdening of a writer. Perkins was able to reach through this isolation and offer a partnership of thought toward the material, like a professional sounding board for unruly ideas that needed shaping.

Perkins had a great respect for the work in front of him. The *editorial we* is built from the partnership between an editor and author. The relationship usually starts from a textual problem. Editors like Perkins identify unclear moments in drafts and offer literary suggestion for their improvement. Perkins letters also reveal the type of collaborative relationship between the two parties, the friend before the editor. During the drafting phase, Perkins viewed editing as additive, filled with suggestion to "do more of that". But beyond the text, Perkins also regarded editing as a relationship-based business. Authors write alone, but often think in concert with their editor's suggestions. Even while

rejecting, Perkins is supportive. Writing to an author to only consider the change, ultimately for what remains in the text is up to the author.

In working with Fitzgerald, his editing was concerned with higher order issues of narrative development, “the story does not seem to us to work up to a conclusion;-neither the hero’s career nor his character are shown to be brought to any stage which justifies an ending.” Perkins makes it clear that the revisions should not “conventionalize” what Fitzgerald is trying to do. His editorial letters are drafted in such a way to encourage the writers to keep at it while providing them direction. Perkins made similar detailed suggestions to many authors. The editor reminds the author of what they likely know but have misplaced during the writing process. Language is organic, words and phrases and the direction the story will shift during text production; writing takes its own direction once begun, “you can’t see a book before the end. It must be revised in the light in the end.” Perkins guided aspiring writers to be patient and reflective and not let mechanics get in the way of voice. He felt language takes time to percolate and getting that language down on paper, takes even longer. As an editor, he was strongly against rushing writing.

Editors like Perkins yearn for the success of their authors. For the success of the person is a direct response to the success of the writing. The writing is the conduit that formed the relationship between the writer and the editor. Once the editor has committed to a piece of writing, they must at times defend the content, not, per say, the actual substance of the writing, but the author’s right to his own language. As a publisher who put forth writing to the public, Perkins did not censor the taste or morals of his authors. He recognized that trade publishing is, first and foremost, a business. It has to be; the financial success of many types of books is necessary if literature is going to reach a wide

audience. Perkins writes to one author about the importance of being steady with his non-fiction, cautioning the writer against angering his reader. An angry reader isn't open to new ideas.

The chapter concludes with Perkins writings on the role of an editor in the production of text. He felt there was immense worth in the business of bringing writing into the world. He also adhered to the belief that editing should be invisible, cautioning Thomas Wolfe against dedicating a book to him. Perkins' editorial gift came from really listening to a writer to understand what they wanted to do, then critically suggest ways to get there. Perkins editorial comments were "always offered as suggestions merely, in the hope that they might "suggest" to a writer his own solution of the problem involved. It is the art of editorial suggestion that allowed for some authors to fully realize their story.

#### **Ch. 4 Editing is Directive Guidance, Case Study: Katharine S. White**

Like Maxwell Perkins, Katharine White was uncompromising with the quality of work she brought from her authors. White edited for *The New Yorker* from 1925 until 1960. Chapter Four studies her editorial approach, who, like an enforcer and guide insisted on perfection. She deftly navigated difficult editorial conversations with writers who bristled at any suggestion to alter their words. White guided young writers to literary greatness with an editorial eye for developing talent. As an editor for a weekly periodical, she was relentlessly efficient in her production of reader's reports. Her husband, author E. B. White, described her editing as "cheering and steering" an author

toward their goals. She understood that the writing should take center stage, the author close by its side, but the editor must remain behind the curtain.

The chapter begins with White's background. She was a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, spoke four languages, thoroughly knew the bible, had the ability to recognize writing talent, and exuded "uncompromising taste that helped to elevate *The New Yorker* to the near-mythic status it enjoyed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century." Katharine White's influence on twentieth-century letters is evident by the writers she brought to the magazine: James Thurber, Vladimir Nabokov, Marianne Moore, John O'Hara, Mary McCarthy, Clarence Day, S.N. Behrman, Jean Stafford, William Maxwell, Ogden Nash, Irwin Shaw, Nadine Gordimer, John Cheever, and John Updike. With these authors, and numerous others, she believed that her role as an editor was to guide the writers to meet the standard of excellence she had for the magazine's reader. White believed that editors should also write; she published several pieces of her own in *The New Yorker* from time to time and eventually wrote a gardening book after her retirement.

There is no exclusive collection of White's editorial letters to document her contribution to the literary development of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The source material for this chapter comes from passages of her letters in the published biographies of her authors, or in the writings from other staff of *The New Yorker*. E. B. White had published a collection of his own letters and he desired recognition for his wife after she had died. The correspondence in Katharine White's possession was donated to the Special Collection Department at Bryn Mawr College and her personal collection of books written by her *New Yorker* authors were donated to the Rare Books Room. There is a biography of Katharine White, but its focus is on her entire life, not just the editing.

K. White's first relationship with E.B. White was as his editor. In that role she encouraged him to continue writing when he was feeling self-doubt. She encouraged him to take time away from the magazine to work on a children's book about a mouse-like boy, an idea that he had been developing for several years. Several times she edited before the manuscript had even been started. White worked to raise the bar for Children's Literature. She considered both text and illustrations as equally important; she criticized books that were condescending towards children or that engaged in 'sentimentality, coyness, or moralizing.' She rallied against the trend to protect children from being scared by a book.

Her editorial letters reveal a dogged persistence toward perfection. Nabokov was difficult to edit; he resisted nearly all suggested changes, despite the need to replace words that had not translated accurately from Russian to English. White suggests "simplifying the vocabulary wherever possible and wherever it does not hurt your literary effect." She explains that *The New Yorker* likes unfamiliar words, but there are so many in the piece that it reads more "like academic rather than literary writing." She understood Nabokov's particular writer's need for control and nuanced her suggestions to meet this need. Nabokov trusted her editorial skill so much, she was the only editor at *The New Yorker* to read *Lolita* prior to its publication.

In contrast to Nabokov, short story writer and novelist Jean Stafford was welcoming to the editorial suggestions of White. White described working with her as so pleasant that she would "edit a Stafford story on vacation." Stafford trusted the ideas of White as was willing to try as many times as White asked for in order to get the story to its most effective. Stafford was not the only author who worked with White that benefited

from an editorial suggestion before a word had even been written. S. N. Behrman was a playwright who wrote strong characters that dealt with moral issues. When Berman began to struggle, White suggested he write about his own upbringing in narrative form. He did and credited White with the push he needed to start again. These examples are provided to illustrate how editing can be a form of brainstorming.

White not only found and developed new writing talent, but young editorial talent as well. According to Brendan Gill, one of her editorial protégés, White “gave him the literary courage to go beyond publishing a satirical weekly...under her, we learned to do better than we knew how to do.” White had been told by Harold Ross on more than one occasion that an editor is only as good as their replacement. The apprentice nature of the industry means that in addition to guiding authors to their intended goals, White had to seek and discover editorial talent that would support *The New Yorker*. Several of her assistants went on to become editors in their own right, even becoming her boss. A case study of White reveals the importance for an editor to project steadfast encouragement. The editorial role of the relationship requires praise, which according to John Updike is the *least* an editor can provide. Encouragement gives hope to writer, who draws strength from the support. “Over and over, when I talked to writers who had worked with Katharine White, I heard tales of endless encouragement and support.” Writing is hard, there is an agony to getting it right, White very kindly, but very assuredly, insisted on perfection.

## Ch. 5 Editing is Overwhelmingly Affirming, Case Study: Ursula Nordstrom

Ursula Nordstrom is the study of Chapter Five. She edited from 1937-1982 with an overwhelmingly affirming editorial style. The joy Nordstrom felt as an editorial midwife to children's literature is evident in the tone of her reader's reports and letters. She is a playful perfectionist who sustained lengthy conversations with her authors and illustrators as they created lasting books that shaped generations of children. She encouraged new ideas and viewed editing like a sounding board, writing to one author that she is "just thinking on paper" to spur their genius. Nordstrom editing in additive cooperation with her peers, valuing all ideas regardless of origin. She believed books for children could be complex and challenge the status quo. She staunchly publicly defended her writers against censorship.

The chapter begins with Nordstrom's start in publishing in 1936. There was a tradition of mannerly, polite content in books written for children. According to Leonard Marcus, her biographer, "she was children's literature's Maxwell Perkins, the single most creative force for innovation in children's book publishing in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Books Nordstrom ferried include, *The Runaway Bunny*, *The Carrot Seed*, *Stuart Little*, *Goodnight Moon*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Harriet the Spy*, *Little Bear*, *Bedtime for Frances*, *The Giving Tree*, and she initiated the *I Can Read Books*. Nordstrom's mark is inaudible; like Perkins and White before her, she was an invisible force behind the person and product recognized by the public - the author and their book. She believed that

teachers and librarians shouldn't be the ones to decide what was good; that judgement belonged to the reader.

The primary source material for this chapter are Nordstrom's letters and reader's reports from the book, *Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*. This published collection was selected by Leonard S. Marcus, who combed through "tens of thousands" of letters spanning the 45 years to find the right ones. Marcus recalls meeting many of Nordstrom's authors in person, "Invariably, when the editor's name came up, the first thing said was, 'She wrote such wonderful letters!'" Readers Reports, although helpful aren't necessarily wonderful, as the author must wrestle with a host of suggestions that may reshape the manuscript. One aspect of Nordstrom's editorial input that made her a force was the individualized support and candor with which she bolstered the author.

Many of Nordstrom's authors were unaware of their ability to write for children when she contacted them. Some were young, still in high school; others only imagined themselves creating for adult audiences. Shel Silverstein was an illustrator for *Playboy* when Nordstrom reached out to him to write for children. Maurice Sendak was 22 at the time. For many years, Syd Hoff was an illustrator and cartoonist for *The New Yorker*. His primary audience had been adults when he sent a manuscript to Ursula Nordstrom for a book length work, his first. Nordstrom's editorial literacy means adopting a voice that operates on a sliding scale between the balance of encouragement and suggestion. Younger writers require more affirmation as they make the changes, more seasoned writers can handle direct suggestion. While the majority of Nordstrom's text-focused editorial suggestion worked to draw the writer into more effective writing, sometimes these diplomatic negotiations favored the end user. Nordstrom illustrates the part of

editing that is connecting the industry expectations with the author's desire requires diplomacy.

The editorial vision demonstrated by Nordstrom shows her support for speculative projects, like her work with Krauss on *Is This You?* The book was pitched with blank places for kids to draw in. After thinking about it and discussing the idea with some colleagues, Nordstrom drafted her editorial response, she is aware that Krauss is fairly set with her drawing-in idea and is trying to steer her toward something she thinks the reader and house will be more receptive to. While Sendak was working on the art for *Little Bear's Visit* by Holmelund Minarik, Nordstrom wrote to Sendak about revising an image to reflect a missing important detail. Nordstrom reads the book with a visual, textual, and aural framework to make sure each layer of story is working with the others. As an editor, she has that needed distance from the content to critically examine how it is working together. Conversely, she defended an author who wanted to put only seven tentacles on an octopus so children would be delighted to find the "error."

Nordstrom's unwavering support of her authors is best illustrated through her editing of Sendak. He seemed to need her the most while he was in the development part of the writing process. At a local level, the letters are peppered with compliments, telling him he is a "brilliant young artist," or his work on a project was "the high point of my life." With each book he pitches, Nordstrom supports him with "the idea is wonderful to me," and expresses appreciation for the "WONDERFUL drawings. While Sendak was working on the project that would eventually become, *Where the Wild Things Are*, he was filled with doubt. In a lengthy personal letter to Sendak, Nordstrom works to bolster his confidence. Nordstrom reminds him his talent is an uncommon thing. It would be nine

years from the book's inception to publication. During this time Nordstrom focused on working with Sendak to revise the text, leaving the artwork for Sendak to develop alone.

As an editor, Nordstrom defended several children's books that stretched the boundaries of subjects that were considered inappropriate for children. She put forth the first published young adult book where a character had a homosexual attraction to a classmate, *I'll Get There. It will Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan; she stood behind a book depicting children being raised by a single father, *Daddy Is a Monster...Sometimes* by John Steptoe. She was constantly repeating how adults just couldn't understand some things. She defended realistic topic that showcased diversity to help pave the way for Children's Literature to acknowledge marginalized topics and people. These taboo subjects meant that Nordstrom had to defend books that were steeped in the lived realism of children, and not in the idealistic vision of others.

One objective of an editor is getting a writer to put down what's in their head on paper; it doesn't always work, there needs to be chemistry. Nordstrom writes about her inability to get author, Maia Wojciechowska to write, "She was one of my failures as an editor. I couldn't reach her." But Nordstrom's editing did reach many writers; she listened and advised. She exuded joy in her conversations and letters, which coincidentally, are filled with mistakes in mechanics. She edited at the global level, leaving the proofreading to a copyeditor.

### **Part 3: Suggestions and Implications**

#### **Ch. 6 Rethinking Editing as Agency**

The third and final part of this dissertation places editing back into writing studies. It reexamines some of the key points from the first chapter under the newly provided lens of the editorial practices of literary editors. Drawing from the editorial techniques of the three case studies, the chapter offers suggestions for adopting healthy editing in the classroom and ways to reframe professional editorial practices in a writing center. Additionally, this chapter encourages editing to be listed prior to revision as it represents the input from an outside party, “revision is invariably distinguished from text generation by the fact that it involves some fairly explicit processes of comparison, generally between some segment of a text and some representations of a writer’s knowledge or intention, which results in some attempt to change existing text” (Bartlett 346). The chapter ends with a prompting to rethink the term, *edit*, and the positive implications for accurate editorial verbiage.

Editing is a collaborative endeavor between vested parties on a singular document. It is not a collaboration where each person is working on singular task broken down into smaller parts. Editing and writing are different skills performed by different people. An editor, by simple definition, works with another person’s writing. Whereas a writer can practice the skill of editing by revising their own work, an editor cannot write for someone else. Editing doesn’t end with the editor although writing ends with the author. The final chapter begins with reconceptualized definitions of editing, bolstered by the editorial work of Perkins, White, and Nordstrom. These reframed ways to think about

editing include editing as: collaborative learning, critical interpretation, and editing as teaching. To edit then, with a positive, additive perspective, is to bring forth revised writing from the hand of the writer through the agency of the editor.

Editorial support requires a suggestion to illustrate a possible solution. An editorial reader first identifies a problem, referencing specific passages from the manuscript, then a fully developed description is needed to explain why the problem is a problem. After the writing insufficiency has been established with support and reasoning, then the editorial reader offers a suggestion and explains how the hypothetical suggestion would solve the initial problem. The proposed “what if...” solution is in no way the final word; it is the starting point of a conversation between editor and author. Editors work as guides who really understand how to listen and how to question a writer to learn their intent. In addition to the role of guide, an editor must critically engage with a text through advanced interpretation of a writer’s intent framed within their knowledge of genre.

Teaching editorial skills should not happen as a subset of the writing process, but as a skill (and occupation) of its own merit. To edit is to teach; to edit is to learn about the endless ways writing can take shape. To be an editor is to be an ever-learning expert in the craft of writing; it is also a relationship-based skill, requiring skillful communication. The placement of the term *editing* in the commonly accepted trajectory of the writing process posted in writing center literature does the skill a disservice. Editing reinvigorated in writing studies opens up pathways to explore writing as a career outside of authorship.

Editing reimagined in the writing center means fostering a culture of additive support where writing guidance is encouraged and practiced between consultants and

with clients. It is what should be happening in the writing center already, it is what writing teachers are attempting with peer-editing. I am striving to illuminate the similarities between the writing practices of professional editors with the skills already in play. I would like to shift the terminology to be more specific, to more accurately reflect how writing is supported in publishing. This project is intended for writing center professionals, writing instructors, and those that work as writing advisors to graduate students. There is a need for the nuanced editorial support offered to professionals, outside of the way it is practiced in university writing centers.

## Part 1 Perceptions of Editing

### Ch. 1

#### ***Edit: A Four-Letter Word in Writing Center Scholarship***

*This chapter initiates the problem that is the impetus behind this whole study: how "editing" is usually perceived only in the pejorative within in the literature of composition studies generally, and specifically in writing center studies. Regardless if the writing center serves mostly undergraduates or graduates, the word "edit" has largely evolved to a narrow definition of copyediting or textual cleanup. Evidence is drawn from the websites of university writing centers, as well as published scholarship. The research reveals that editing is rarely considered a developmental, intellectual, educational, or collaborative skill. This ideology is in direct contrast to how editing is defined among writing professional in literary publishing.*

**1.1 A Brief History:** When the dominant paradigm of writing instruction shifted in the twentieth century, *editing* was relegated to secondary cleanup.

The composition scholar's approach to writing support aligns with many of the practices used by professional editors - to work with an author to produce the best possible writing within the defined constraints of genre and time. For the trade editor, providing this support is necessary for both the developing writer and for the seasoned author, just as it is needed for students across grades. At one end of the spectrum of student writers needing guidance, are those in ubiquitous first year composition and other core classes; at the other end, are the doctoral writers striving for their Ph.D. by producing a book-length work from an original idea. These writers need additional editorial encouragement outside of the course professor or graduate advisor. The guidance from outside is key as the person offering support is not the person who will be grading the work. The writing can develop from draft to draft without the self-doubt that

can plague emerging writers. Trade publishing understands this need for polished writing to move through multiple drafts, considering a constructive outside perspective, to mold the language into what the author imagines it is doing. Schools also understand this is a necessity. As a result, to meet this need, a majority of colleges have a place where writers can go to gain agency with their text; “writing centers have been a part of American higher education since the 1930s and have undergone numerous redefinitions in responding to (and shaping) the dominant paradigms of writing instruction in the twentieth century” (Murphy and Law xi). It is within these redefinitions of writing center work that the term *edit*, and thus *editing* and *editor* evolved to be viewed differently through writing center scholarship.

Editing became distanced from development and demoted to the end of the writing process, around the revision phase. Since the term *editing* became associated with mechanical correction, writer centers needed new titles for the people who work with writing. Writing center professionals asked themselves, “Where do I belong when I’m not the author, but still involved in the creation of the text?” (Nobles 21). Writing Centers identify the people who work with a writer and their writing with a variety of terms: *tutor*, *consultant*, and *specialists* appear to be the most common designations. *Tutor* implies a level of expertise and the ability to instruct. However, the label *tutor* could also imply a deficit on the part of the writer, reinforcing the ideology that the writing center is place for students with insufficient skill. *Consultant* is less deficit based, fostering the idea of a writing conversation between interested parties; the term *consultant* implies that the writer will lead the conversation, consulting with the writing guide as needed; the onus of directed support falls on the author. And *specialist* conveys a knowledgeable

writing practitioner with additional training and subject expertise. As a rule, they are not called Editors. However, despite the title, the modern goal of writing center work is the same: to help the writer create more effective writing. Still, some centers emerged not as places of developmental conversation, but as places to fix writing. As such, the reputation as places of cleanup lingers.

**1.2 Historically Designations:** Writing centers emerged as places of secondary support, staffed by administrators, which contributed to the ideology of editing as textual cleanup.

When university writing centers began to appear with more frequency, a problematic ideology emerged stemming from the placement of the physical space of writing support; since writing centers were separated from the classroom that instructed, many were immediately viewed as places that remediated. They were marginalized, othered within the modern language academy as sites of correction, not instruction. The thinking was that papers needed to be fixed, not writers needing to be improved. Michael Pemberton from Georgia Southern University outlines the history of the writing center community: “Writing center work was generally looked upon as a service function, geared toward remediation, and not worthy of much regard academically or institutionally” (1). Writing centers, staffed by administrators, not faculty, furthered this ideology as places to help or to administer a service to the larger writing process. Writing faculty instruct and guide learners toward mastery, so logically if writing centers performed this function, they would be staffed by faculty. Since many writing centers are directed by someone with an administrative designation they are viewed by the larger academic community as a support function to the channel of primary learning. Similar to

this ideological framework, in publishing it is copyediting that is a service in function to the text. It is not considered as critically engaging as editing, since copyediting is a rules-based practice for formatting accuracy, grammar, spelling and structure. A trend in publishing has even been to outsource copyediting. Authors are never interviewed with the copyeditors by their side; they might be thanked in the acknowledgements, for cleaning up “the commas and shit” (Leonard). However, professional authors understand that copyediting and editing are two different things. It is the editor, and their assistants, who frequently receives the accolades in the acknowledgements section of the book, right alongside the author’s spouse<sup>1</sup>.

**1.3 A Shift in Scholarship:** The bias in writing centers against copyediting aligned with the focal shift in composition scholarship from product to process.

As a professor reading a thoughtful paper filled with errors in syntax, are you frustrated with the student’s inability to write? What about those papers with stunning syntax yet meh thinking, are you as judgmental? Since the written product of thinking determines the grade, initially writing centers supported a lot of textual cleanup. Prior to the 1970s, “the writing product was the focus of writing center support. As such, they probably did a lot of copyediting. When things changed in composition theory, the writing center evolved as well” (Pemberton 1). The shift in the ideology of writing centers occurred alongside the shift of composition theory to a more liberal or expressivist mode of thinking; “The expressivist model dominated writing instruction (and therefor writing centers) from the 1970s through the 1980s. Here the emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> Start reading the acknowledgement pages of books, or search the hashtag, #thanksfortyping.

moved from the text to the writer – specifically, to the writer’s intellectual and creative process involved in generating texts” (Murphy and Law xii). According to Michael Pemberton, in the early 1980s there was still broad definitions of what writing centers did and did not do, he asks “just what, exactly, did it mean to be to work in a writing center or to be a ‘writing center professional?’ What was the profession’s ethical grounding? What were the principles of its pedagogy?” (9). A foundational shift occurred when writing support shifted its goal from improving the writing assignment to improving the writer, when it went from product to process.

This shift towards the process of revision over the actual writing product changed the trajectory of how editing was defined, not only in writing centers, but in the larger perception of text creation in composition studies. In the early 1980s as composition research focused not on what students wrote, but how they wrote, scholars like Donald Murray (1979) attempted to identify the difference between editing and writing, “this editing is not proofreading – it is constructive examination of a draft with directions as to how further drafts may be developed” (97). Murray argued that studying professional editors might provide insight into writing instruction, “Editors are highly specialized readers of writing in process who work closely with writers at each stage of the writing process. Yet, as far as I know, there have been no significant studies of how editors read copy.” Other scholars, like Nancy Sommers (1980) and Lillian Bridwell (1980) brought rewriting to the forefront of conversation. They grappled with what to call the process of reading a ‘finished’ text and writing it again before considering it complete.

Academic researchers in writing studies struggled with specific terminology to identify writing and revision, using such terms as recasting, reseeing, and reconceiving.

Terms were used inconsistently from study to study but came under the umbrella of revision (Haugen 1990). Specifically addressing the terminology, John Hayes differentiated between editing and revising; revising is the “recasting” of portions of the text and editing is mechanical cleanup. Hayes’ terminology of editing appears to have taken root in composition literature. During this ideological shift, twenty years later, in 1999, Joan Hawthorne drew from Stephen North’s idea to shift the focus from the writing to the writer but cautioned against too much distance. She writes, “We have all been forced to deal with the reality that language can get in the way of doing. Differences in meaning can actually impede our work if we allow ‘proofreading’ to serve as code for the most negative kind of writing center practice” (6). Hawthorne acknowledges that different types of writing need different types of support.

In the early 1980s when scholars were trying to determine what to call the work done by an outsider with a writer’s text, Gerald Gross, a long-time editor and publishing executive, put out the first professional trade editing anthology. The essays were written by a collection of professional editors to give insight into their profession. Gross writes that editing is not revision, since revision changes the meaning of an author’s text. Editing is working with the author and making recommendations to rewrite, or perhaps pare down, but never revise. The varying terminology and shifting definitions of editing contribute to the confusion and incontinency between what is editing in composition versus what editing is in trade publishing. The differing definitions and practical applications of the term still remain forty years later. Other scholars have tried to call attention to this discrepancy.

**1.4. An Appeal to for Consistency:** There was a published request for composition scholars to expand the term editing to align with publishing practices.

In a 1990 NCTE article in *Research in the Teaching of English*, Diane Haugen from Carnegie Mellon University made a plea for consistent use of the term *editing* between composition theorists and publishing practitioners. She cited the shift in book publishing, when editorial duties moved from a publisher to a dedicated editor within the publishing house, “book publishers have been using the term editing for about 200 years “to describe the process a piece of writing goes through before it is ‘finished.’ Haugen asserts that the term editing is too broad and “lacked the kinds of precision” that composition researchers preferred. Her stated desire was for the academic community to “arrive at some sort of standard set of terms to describe the process...not just within studies, but across studies, and, it would be hoped, even beyond the scope of the composition research community to the workplace, where professionals edit for a living and already use the terms differently than researchers do” (323). In Haugen’s literature review of how the term editing was being used, she found a number of inconsistencies with the definitions, if editing was even defined at all. “As noted in these examples, very few composition researchers attempt to define editing, and when they do, they often consider the term to include varying activities” (325). Thirty years after the publication of her article, editing is still largely undefined, or vaguely defined in writing center scholarship and composition studies. But what is clear in a majority of writing center language is that editing is a punitive part of writing.

**1.5 Firsthand Observations:** I observed the difference between how editorial theory is applied professionally in publishing against how it is practiced in writing centers.

I didn't embed with the St. John's University Writing Center until the second semester of coursework toward my Ph.D. The first semester was spent teaching First Year Writing and refreshing my memory on the nuance of the academic essay genre. The majority of my younger peers were learning to adult, and I was learning to student. I recall my excitement at finally getting into a writing center, the literary agency of higher education! Instead of fantasy, dystopia and young adult literature, I was about to get really good at working with the non-fiction subjects like ethics, psychology, and history. I, along with the other newbies to the center went through the semester long training to learn to work with non-native English speakers, how to ask guided questions, how to let the student writers direct what type of help they wanted in their consultation, how to deflect unwanted romantic attention,<sup>2</sup> and where to find the resources to direct students who were struggling with mechanical conventions. The program was similar to the 12-week internship at Writers House where we honed our editorial skills, except for the unwanted attention and work with conventions part.<sup>3</sup>

During my year in the writing center, I began to notice a dissonance between how editorial theory is applied professionally in publishing against how it is practiced in writing centers. It had been my literary training that editors talk with authors, understand their writing objectives, read their draft, and then question any hazy parts. Editors leave the questions in the air for the writer to answer or choose to ignore. Editing is a lot like

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<sup>2</sup> Not really a problem for me after all.

<sup>3</sup> We were learning to be editorial readers, not copyeditors. I was instructed to largely ignore copyediting issues.

teaching, but the subject is a specific piece of writing, not a field of study. Both professional editors and writing center professionals ask things like, “What is the purpose of this paragraph here? OK, now this paragraph after it, what is the goal of this one? I am unclear how these two ideas are connected, what should we do to bridge these two? Now, tell me how this section supports your larger purpose.” Both editing and writing center work is phrasing this textual moment of ambiguity so the learner/writer will solve it on their own. Writing center theory is editive, yet a large percentage of writing centers are clear that they don’t edit. Each of the colleges I have worked for, public or private, two-year and four-year, state on their writing center webpage that don’t edit. And yet, that really is what they are doing; editing as it is practiced in trade publishing, editing as it is practiced in the creation of literature.

**1.6. Narrow Definitions of Editing:** A sample from some writing centers describing editorial views and definitions.

The evolution of editing, as defined on writing center webpages, is largely vague with specifics for what the term does, but clear with the editorial intent. In a nutshell, the belief is that, “tutors are supposed to be educators and not personal editors” (Harris & Silva 531). Editing is consistently firmly aligned with grammar and mechanics correction; it is not instructional, or collaborative, or constructive, but reinforces standard American English. Ironically, the term editing is often reduced in importance even further by the descriptor, “simply” or “merely”. As in to *only edit* or *just edit* is not a worthy skill to seek support, or for a writing center offer support. Following are some examples of current editorial paradigms as described on the pages of university writing centers.

### **a. Editing is Correction Only**

On the University of Maryland Writing Center webpage description, it states, “Tutors do not serve as editors or proofreaders and will not make corrections directly on a student’s draft. Instead the tutor provides specific suggestions on several elements of the student’s writing on a form, offering a holistic approach that aims to help the student become a better writer, and not necessarily just improve a particular piece of writing.” It is clear by their use of ‘or’ that editing is not proofreading but remains a skill for correction. The statement also makes it is clear that editing is not offering specific suggestions to improve the writer (but not the text). How then would they define editing if not global or local writing support?

If a client brings in a biology essay with a weak thesis statement does the consultant talk about the importance for writers to have clarity (improving the writer)? Is it editorially problematic to point to the thesis and say, “I am unclear what this sentence is doing” (improving the writing)? The webpage further states, “If your tutor simply located and corrected ‘errors,’ you wouldn’t gain much from the experience.” Then, the webpage provides a hypothetical conversation between a tutor and a writer as they look for patterns and talk about the genre expectations of the professor. The page ends with the statement, “Editing and proofreading can’t do all of that.” Again, there is a difference between editing and proofreading. But what is clear is that editing is not a conversation about writing within the assignment’s conventions.

### **b. Editing is Not Teaching**

The webpages of the Purdue Writing Lab establish that “We’re a teaching and learning space; we’re not an editing service, and we can’t take the place of your professor

and grade your writing.” The idea lingers that the writing center is still in grammatical service to the larger writing community. Further, it designates the professor’s role as judge, not instructor. Purdue’s language is working to make it clear they are not a writing deficit-based center. Yet, isn’t teaching and learning a deficit-based industry?

In addition to the physical writing center, Purdue offers a globally recognized Online Writing Lab. A search for the term ‘editing’ on the OWL pages leads to a handout for the final phase of the writing process– “At the *editing and proofreading* stage of the writing process, we check our work to make sure it’s consistent, clear and error-free.” (emphasis theirs). Again, there is that *and* to identify that editing is not proofreading, but a something else in addition to correcting grammar and spelling, but what? Editing is grouped with the lower order, sentence tasks of copyediting, which differs from proofreading.

It appears that proofreading is identifying the error and editing is physically changing the mistake. On the FAQ section there is this – “My instructors are always complaining about my grammar and punctuation. How can the writing lab help?” The answer, “We won’t proofread or edit your documents for you. In other words, we won’t fix your mistakes, but we can address sentence level concerns such as grammar and punctuation...” Is editing then not addressing sentence level concerns, but the actual changing of text? An editor then, by Purdue’s definition, is the person who swaps out the comma for a semicolon, not the person who explains the difference.

### **c. Editing is Not Constructive Feedback**

Rutgers offers Writing Coaching through the Learning Center which differs from the services of the Writing Center. The pejorative ideology of the concept of editing is the

same. On the coaching webpage it states, “While our coaches **do not** proofread or edit papers, they do provide feedback and suggestions on how to write concise sentences, coherent paragraphs, and a well-organized paper” (emphasis theirs). In a similar vein, on the actual writing center webpages at Rutgers it states, “the writing centers are united by a common philosophy, called minimalist tutoring. Minimalist tutoring strengthens reading and writing skills by asking students to practice under the supervision of a more experienced writer, who acts as a coach rather than an editor.” It appears that editing is not guidance, it is a solution to a problem that provides a quick fix and doesn’t align with current writing paradigms to focus on the writer and their process and not the paper product. Over and over, editing is associated with error not creation. At the University of Wisconsin – Madison, the writing center webpage clearly groups editing and error together, “Twelve Common Errors: An Editing Checklist.” The linking of editing with error affiliates the skill with correction of the product and away from conversation with the creator of the product, the student who is learning to write and revise.

#### **d. Editing is Correcting Standard Writing Conventions**

In an attempt to answer the reasoning behind this ideology against editing, the Colorado State University Writing Centers webpage provides this: “Why the Writing Center Does Not Edit or Proofread:”

Editing and proofreading involve carefully rereading your draft to ensure that your writing will look and sound “correct” to a reader—in other words, editing and proofreading ensure that your draft meets the standard writing conventions regarding punctuation, mechanics, spelling, sentence structure, and formatting. These are important final steps in writing a good paper, and you can effectively

edit and proofread your papers by reading them out loud and paying attention to every little detail—checking to see that all words are spelled correctly, that every sentence is complete, that punctuation is correct, and that no words are inadvertently omitted.

Four times “editing and proofreading” are listed. How does editing in this definition differ from proofreading? If editing is the physical act of changing the language would it not be listed after proofreading? Since it is consistency listed before the reading of the proof, it is unclear how they are defining editing. What is clear is the overwhelming goal of writing centers to move away from word-by-word textual cleanup. Angela Scanzello “admitted the difficulty of defining just what a writing center is, but argued that it, ‘can no longer be limited to a ‘place’ where underachievers may be taught to write better by using programmed materials with the help of tutors” (8). Here, the term editing has come to embody punctuation errors. Additionally, the inclusion of the word *underachievers* reinforces the false belief that advanced, accomplished, and even celebrated writers of high achievement do not make errors in punctuation. It is almost as if punctuation is then is a higher order skill than developing the ideas in the content; underachievers get the punctuation wrong while overachievers use mechanics correctly but need help with development?

On the Georgetown University Writing Center webpage it states, “we won’t edit or proofread your paper for you, but we will help you improve your own editing and proofreading skills – enabling you to become your own editor”

(writingcenter.georgetown.edu). In the Frequently Asked Questions on the Harvard College Writing Center at Harvard University there is this, “Will a tutor proofread my

paper?” The answer, “We cannot proofread or edit your work, but we will be happy to point out problems with grammar and syntax as we discuss your paper.” At Boston University Arts & Sciences Writing Program, listed on their writing center webpage under what **not** to expect during a writing appointment, “Someone to merely edit or proofread your work.” That modifier, *merely*, hurts. What hurts more is the spreading ideology of editing defined only as correction in a field that specializes in writing. That an editor edits by physically altering writing.

#### e. **Editing is Not Learning**

Compositionists understand that during the creation of text, intellectual contributions are essential in advancing the writer’s thinking. Invention occurs through receiving a myriad of ideas and filtering through them to find a writing path to follow: “All writers, good and bad, new and seasoned, benefit from editing. But should students, whose primary role is to learn and demonstrate learning, be able to use the service of an editor? (Beam in Wollard 2). With editing inconsistently defined, what specific editorial skill is problematic? Is learning demonstrated if the writing received intellectual contribution from a peer? What about from a professor during an office hour conversation about the assignment? There remain ideologies of writing as a finite summary of learning and not a process-based demonstration of thinking where editors support the writers in trying to accomplish their critical objective, literary or not.

**1.7 Editorial Needs of Graduate Students:** Advanced writers are more aligned with professional writers thus need clean copyedited proofs.

Writing centers that focus on graduate students are as unique in their methodology

as those that concentrate on undergraduate students. Some are an extension of the undergraduate services, some align with graduate support services, while others are their own entity. Many recognize the higher stakes writing that directly impacts the emerging professional, they are trying to reach graduate students working on proposals, dissertations, seminar papers, conference presentations, professional articles, and teaching materials. If the undergraduate's improved writing skill leads to better grades, the improved graduate writer leads to profiting from establishing a professional voice. Doctoral writers are not looking for an *A*, but for *A Job*, or at least professional advancement. Many centers, mindful of this, attempt to address the writer's desire for a highly polished final document. According to the Hofstra University Writing Center, "if a writer is told to procure an editor, we cannot offer this service", The directive from Hofstra's page is clear: "Here are examples of the kinds of work Hofstra University Writing Center tutors CANNOT help with: Dissertation editing, General editorial work." However, definitions of editing at the graduate level still remain a lower order thinking skill, albeit a necessary one for those advanced writers looking to publish.

**1.8 Editing is Not Concerned with Development:** To edit means mark up a finished paper with sentence level corrections.

Syracuse University offers editorial services for graduate writers. The school differentiates between the services of the Writing Center and the Graduate Editing Center (GEC), even providing a matrix for students to determine if they need writing support or editing support, "because the difference between services offered at the Writing Center and GEC are not always intuitive." For the students then, what an editor does, is not clear

against what a writer does. According to the definition on their page, the writing center develops ideas, organizes, leads writers to sources, and teaches documentation. The editing center is “for help with editing and proof-reading of: papers complete or nearly complete in the final stages of drafting before submission or publication, papers that have already been seen and responded to by advisors, instructors and/or peers.” Editors then edit only as part of the last step, their input not part of literary formation.

Syracuse is not alone in separating editing and development. At the Penn State Graduate Writing Center, the difference between tutoring and editing is directly addressed with the question, “How is tutoring different from editing?” In the answer, it is explained that they will not “mark-up” papers, they will not go line by line to point out mistakes. Instead they will explain grammatical concepts, evaluate a range of grammatical functions, and work collaboratively so the writer can strategically apply what was learned in the discussion to the writing task. “We are here to improve your abilities to write and to edit your own writing. We hope to empower you throughout your writing process.” It is as if academic places of writing are sweeping the very occupation of professional editing aside as a skill that should belong only to writers, even writers who are seeking publication.

**1.9 Skillsets for Line and Copy Editors:** There is some acknowledgement that proofreading is a skill too, but this is a fee-based off-campus service.

At the University of Connecticut, all graduate students need to meet with the Coordinator for Graduate Writing support prior to using the writing center, “because the Center is primarily designed for and staffed by undergraduates. Graduate writing projects

are longer and more complex than those for undergraduates, and we want to make sure that any one-on-one tutoring is tailored to these challenges.” After explaining how the meeting will result in a custom tutoring plan for the graduate student, the page asks the graduate to be mindful, “rather than line editing and proofreading, tutorials are geared toward improving your writing skills and developing strategies to meet your writing goals. Graduate writers who need copy-editing services are encouraged to hire an editor.” The school provides a list of “local editors” who are not employed by the school and charge a fee.

The examples above group editing and copyediting together; copyediting and proofreading are procedure-based skills, the copyeditor and proofreader bound by rules of mechanics and layout. There is an idea that copyediting, akin to academic citation, is a necessary afterthought to the real work of writing. Those who work with language know the value of appropriately placed punctuation. *Let’s eat, Grandma, OR Let’s eat Grandma.* Copyediting takes years of learning to understand the nuances of English. There are writing centers that refuse to touch mechanics and then there are those who, understanding the need, provide a path for writers to have the work proofread.

**1.10 Editing is Not Collaborative Conversation:** When editing is defined as copyediting, the need for conversation between editor and author is reduced.

At Washington State University there is a Graduate Writing Center (GWC) that will copyedit, but it is not part of the stated purpose of the writing center, the “mission is educational, which is why we don’t proofread or copyedit student work.” Instead they provide a fee-based Professional Editing Service with a stated mission:

Proofreading and copy-editing are necessary services in the field of academia and have almost as much importance outside academia as well. This work is demanding – asking proofreaders and copy-editors to draw upon a vast array of knowledge and experience to navigate the conventions of the text as well as maintaining the voice and presence of the author – but can be invaluable as it allows the author the confidence to know that his/her piece is as strong as possible in these complicated areas.

The mission concludes by stating how the specialized field of copyediting requires competitive pricing to find a high-quality copyeditor. There is a Type of Service Menu that breaks down proofreading and copy-editing into four categories: Formatting - \$30 per hour; Proofreading - \$30 per hour; Copy Editing - \$35 per hour; Structural/Conceptual Editing - \$55 per hour. Notably, even here, according to their menu, the copyeditors work with the concept and structure of the writing, “reorganizing paragraphs, sections or the entire document for improved logic, flow, and emphasis, and for length” (writingprogram.wsu.edu). Immediately below the menu of services the webpage remind the reader the “Writing Center is *not* a proofreading service. Sessions are based in collaboration and conversation between writer and consultant, and while we can offer *tutoring* in areas of grammar, consultants are not trained as editors and we value education over editing” (emphasis theirs). How is the \$55/hour conceptional editor not collaborating with the author? The idea of paying for copyediting is not unheard of, even Thomas Wolfe was charged extra for the copyediting he refused to do to make his work publishable (e.g. to capitalize proper nouns). Is it hard, or is it harder because we don’t know how to do it? Copyediting is the math-like part of writing.

**1.11 Editing is Proofreading to Be Paid for Privately:** Writing centers don't correct work, so writers should seek this service elsewhere.

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill also offers "Help for Hire Editors." In the FAQ section it is asked if the tutor will proofread "my essay / paper / dissertation / article?" The answer is of course, no, "If you're asking whether we will go through your draft and mark (and perhaps correct) all of the errors, no, we won't. We will help you develop the skills you need to be successful at Carolina, including writing, grammar, and proofreading." The webpage provides a list of editors, who have no affiliation with the school, but will edit for a fee. There were 37 listed in August 2019. I guess the question is, will these unaffiliated editors correct papers?

The modern work of writing centers is to help students navigate the writing process on their own. In the evolved ideology from basement fix-it shops to places of writing literacy, the noun and verb, *editor and editing* is a casualty. It is not only defined differently in writing centers than in professional publishing, it is mis-defined. In the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, the Writing Center webpage states "What Your Consultant Cannot Do", listing in the response, "Edit your paper for you. We believe that the writer should always be in the "driver's seat" in terms of working on the paper" (cssh.northeastern.edu). Professional editors, those who foster development of texts for a living, should always leave the author in charge of their creation. Editors are not ghostwriters, they do not write in the place of the author, editors, even copyeditors, must understand the writer's intent. This understanding comes from conversation.

Largely, writing center services directed at graduate writers continue to associate editing exclusively with proofreading. The webpage of the Graduate Writing Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, uses asterisks to call attention to the advanced writer seeking grammatical support, “\*We do not offer proofreading or editing services, no exceptions\*” At the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University, writing tutors “will discuss style, language, and rhetorical choices. But tutors are not editors – they cannot correct grammar, syntax, punctuation, or typographical errors.” On the bottom of the webpage there is a link to pdf to further explain the editing policies of the university writing centers. In a large graphic resembling a yellow notepad, written in red all caps, “TUTORS ARE NOT EDITORS.” The webpage explains how tutors can help graduate and post-docs, “get started with writing projects and teaching artifacts by brainstorming organizational schemes, evaluating materials, defining research questions.” Additionally, the tutors will work alongside the writer to, “consider questions about depth of analysis, organization, thesis statements, paragraph development, audience expectations, style, sentence structure.” Then, the graduate writing section of the larger university writing page informs potential clients that they will, “identify patterns of error in grammar or usage in order to develop efective [sic] strategies for line editing” (<https://knight.as.cornell.edu/gws>). I imagine the misspelling is to emphasize the need for line editing...

**1.12 Editing is Not Writing Center Work:** The always already narrow definition of editing means it has no place in a writing center.

The Indiana University of Pennsylvania offers a Graduate Editing Service as part

of a joint effort by the School of Graduate Studies and Research and the Kathleen Jones White Writing Center: “The service is designed for graduate students whose complete draft of their thesis, dissertation, or proposal has been reviewed by their advisors.” Ideally the drafts are submitted before being submitted to the entire committee. The center uses the iThenticate plagiarism detection program to identify problems in “sentence structure, grammar, mechanics, and punctuation.” Editors also use Track Changes from Word to “mark problems of clarity and consistency”. The language explains that editorial suggestions are subjective and the responsibility for revision lies with the graduate student and their advisor. In addition to the editing service, the language on their writing center page clearly aims to reach the graduate writing population by stating how the tutors can help graduate students by...providing feedback on theses, dissertations, cover letters, by allowing the student writer to explain their project in order to gain a deeper understanding. Tutors will also point out issues with grammar or ambiguity that are unclear or seem unprofessional; they will guide the writer through the professor’s expectations and perspectives. The tutors will help “prepare publications and materials for career or academic advancement.” The center endorses the work of undergraduate tutors on graduate projects by explaining that all tutors “are trained to listen to writers’ needs and provide solutions that equip the writer to tackle his or her own work.”

Anyone who has worked in a writing center understands that the student, the client, often doesn’t know what their own writing needs. Students desire to talk about their writing. Language on the page can become clearer when spoken aloud and heard by the ear. This need to talk is vital; the language interaction produces better writing. In a

2016 *WLN* article, Michelle Miley writes, “Our writing center tutors were not editing students’ papers for them. Rather, under my leadership, tutors were simply talking to students about their writing” (17). The conversation exchange, as described by Miley, is not editorial in nature; she is clear that rather than editing, there is conversation.

If visiting the writing center is voluntary, then it is important to understand the impetus that drove the student to seek support. It is important to talk with each writer that comes through the door to fully learn what it is they are trying to accomplish. Most likely, they have read through draft and something is nagging in their mind that they can’t identify. Joan Hawthorne of the University of North Dakota believes that students ask for editing (for proofreading) because the clients lack “the vocabulary and/or experience to know what they really needed or the kind of help they wanted” (2). To counter the student’s ignorance of professional editing, the language of writing centers claims to not edit, when instead they should be educating on the different types of editing.

The narrow assumptions of editing in writing center scholarship is problematic, the pejorative prejudice prevents opportunities for a rich exchange between two interested parties. Are writing centers to promote writing only for academic purposes, or could they expand to teach about the writing practices of trade professionals? Larger conversations are needed within centers and among writing center scholars. “The small change in language became the impetus for several conversations about the purpose of the writing center itself” (Hawthorne 2).

Personally, I moved from professional trade publishing to academic writing support; I went backwards. But working and learning at the writing centers at a lot of schools would not have prepared me to talk about the types of writing support used by

those who write books. In fact, if my perception of editing had been established in school and not in actual trade practice, it would not have served me well and prepared me to advance. The next chapter explores how editing is viewed in professional writing support. It will examine the history of trade editing and define the multiple types of editorial work performed in the production of texts. Most importantly, the chapter should illuminate what exactly an “real” editor does.

## Ch 2

### Literary Editing in Practice

*The practice of literary editing directly contrasts to how editing is defined and practiced in a majority of writing centers and composition scholarship. In trade publishing, editors work with writers at multiple stages of production. Literary agents, who are often the gateway to publication, also provide editorial feedback in the form of reader's reports and letters. That editorial feedback is filled with additive suggestion. Editing may be the most important skill of publishing professional, for it is that engagement and investment in a written product that advances it to be read by a larger audience.*

**2.1 The Anonymous Nature of Literary Editing:** The lack of awareness of the skill editors bring to literature contributes to the lack of awareness from the public.

The trouble with editing is that it is unseen. Successful editors, like tailors and stagehands, leave no trace of their contribution to the creative product at the center of it all. In an editor's case this creation is the imagination of a writer made visible through language and molded into a book. It is the book that is the marvel that is celebrated. As a writer becomes an author through the act of publication, they receive the accolades of literary achievement. Michael Pietch wrote about editing Donna Tartt as she released *The Goldfinch*, he states "The editor works in disappearing ink. If a writer takes a suggestion, it becomes part of her creation. If not, it never happened" The editor is largely forgotten, if the reader was even aware of their existence at all. And this is generally how editors prefer to work, invisibly.

How then to know what an editor actually does. Professional editing is in large part a conversation with a writer about what the writer is trying to do and, like most conversations, what's left is the memory, the feeling of the direction the conversation

took. An editor offers a knowledgeable outside perspective that can subtly, or dramatically, refine the writing into something more. This guidance is commonplace in an editorial position. Just before she died, Harper Lee revealed that it was her editor who suggested she rewrite *Go Set a Watchman* from Scout's point of view as a girl (Siegel on NPR). Undoubtedly, this idea by Lee's editor, Tay Hohoff, redefined the content and purpose of Lee's most influential work. The editor guided and supported Lee for an extended period of time as she revised her early draft into what would become *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a staple of American Literature classrooms.

Rebecca Saletan, vice president and editorial director of Riverhead Books, said in an NPR interview that editors today still ask writers to make changes to their manuscripts in the way Lee was encouraged to do so. Or, conversely, she adds that although there are writers who are naturally gifted and don't require much editorial help at all, that doesn't matter. Ultimately, "readers shouldn't know exactly what role the editor played in shaping the final book." The editor should be a bit like a mystery, a literary apparition perhaps. In Saletan's opinion, "The editing shouldn't be show-offy in any way. And I always cringe a little and feel a little sympathetic for the editor when a review says this wasn't well-edited because it is very hard for people outside of the process to know what went into it." Like the believability of ghosts, people are aware of the lore; there are sightings even, but mostly their presence is transparent to a reader absorbing a story.

To illustrate just how much editors operate in a shadowy existence outside of field of publishing, one simply needs to read the titles of the scant literature on the process of literary editing. There are only a few books available on the skills needed for trade editing, the most recent by Peter Ginna is titled, *What Editors Do*. Another one written by

Dorothy Commins about Saxe Commins, editor to Eugene O’Neil<sup>4</sup> and Dr. Seuss, is similarly titled, *What is an Editor?* One of the founding anthologies on editing begins with the essay, “*What is an Editor?*” Even NPR’s Robert Siegel broadcast a *Fresh Air* segment about the industry named, “*What Exactly Does an Editor Do?*” Another bit of trouble with the occupation and actual term, *editing*, is that editing is many things; the definition is broad and dependent on the field of context. Film editors adjust visual footage into sequence, genome editors manipulate the DNA of a cell, and computer programmers edit textual code. However, to examine editing and the role an editor might have for advanced composition, this dissertation draws from a trade publishers’ definition of editing, where the editor’s title is dependent on the task to be accomplished. Generally, book editing falls into three categories: editing that finds, editing that refines, and editing that finishes.

## **2.2. Specific Editorial Terms and Definitions:** Acquisitions, Development, Line, and Copy.

There is nuance with the term editor even within the three categories depending on the publishing house where the editing is occurring. What is interesting however, is that the majority of skills that take writing and improve it so it can reach the widest audience all have edit in their titles. Editing describes working with the language that belongs to someone else.

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<sup>4</sup> Who refused to sign a contract unless his editor had the right to review it.

- a. The Acquisitions Editor decides what manuscripts to take on and seeks out writers for projects. They are avid readers with an instinct for what an audience will respond to; they have a deep understanding of genre.
- b. The Developmental Editor, or most commonly referred to as simply the Editor, is the front-facing member of the publishing house who works in close tandem with the author on the draft. Frequently the role of acquiring and developing belong to the same person or a set editorial team consisting of several people.
- c. The Line Editor begins after the editor and author have ‘finished’ with the draft. The Line Editor focuses on consistency, reading with a manic attention to detail, making sure each line of text is doing what the author intends it to do and that the content is accurate.<sup>5</sup> Then there is a proofreader who scours the text for appropriate punctuation and grammar usage. The final act of editing belongs to the Copyeditor, a technical expert who formats the copy to design specifications and prepares it for typesetting. What is key to the definition is that all of the people who work on someone else’s writing in order to make it more closely align with the author’s intention are editors; almost everything that is done with an accepted manuscript is a form of editing.

In his 2017 book about the role of an editor, *What Editors Do*, Ginna describes, “working through it [the manuscript] with close attention both to what is on the page and to the author’s vision, and bringing them back together when they diverge – is still the essential and defining task for members of our profession. We are called ‘editors,’ after all, not

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<sup>5</sup> Errors still happen, because humans. The first edition of Harry Potter listed “1 wand” twice on the Hogwarts supply list. Although probably a more egregious mistake is when an edition of the Bible was printed and a very important “not” was missing, which left the commandment reading, *Thou Shall Commit Adultery*. (Ahlin)

‘acquisitionists’ or ‘flap-copyographers’” (9). The industry terminology for consulting with writers to improve their meaning is editing, although this process may technically be titled Developmental Editing; generally, the person who is doing this is simply known as an Editor. The other types of editing: acquiring, line, and copy are usually qualified with their extended titles to clarify their difference from editing. Editing, or developing the content of a manuscript is the most prestigious position in the field.

**2.3 The Editor-in-Chief:** The highest position in literary publishing has edit in the title, to edit is to be critically engaged with a text.

Editors love books, they thrive on a story well-told. Their actual job is working with an author’s product to make it the best it can be and get it into the hands of as many readers as possible. In an essay, Nancy S. Miller, Editorial Director of Bloomsbury Publishing, writes, “But it is the editing, the work with their authors, the birthing of new books, that brings many editors the greatest pleasure” (59). The highest role of publishing is the Editor-in-Chief. While this person is also responsible for managing the business, their ability to find and develop authors is the skill that allowed them to rise to the top of their profession. “To be a book editor is to work at the intersection of art and commerce. Editors are passionate about reading, about books – and yet their job not only involves falling love with an author’s work and working with that author to make the best book possible, but also selling the book to colleagues and to the world” (Miller 59). Does it matter how good a book is if no one reads it? If writing were its own reward, then authors would not necessarily need a publisher. An editor is helpful to build the strongest bridge between producer and consumer; to bring readers to the writer.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines early usage of the term as, “to publish, give to the world a literary work by an earlier author, previously existing in manuscript” (“Edit,” OED 71). An editor can mean the difference to having a piece of writing read and appreciated by an audience, to having it remain in obscurity. The word *edit* has a Latin origin, *edere*, meaning, ‘to bring out’ or ‘to put forth’. From its origin, editing is the conduit between a writer and their intended audience. “*Editors take the work of authors and put it before readers.* Another word for that activity, of course, is publishing, and another instance of our fuzzy professional vocabulary is the overlap of ‘editing’ and ‘publishing’ (in some languages *editor* and *publisher* are the same word)” (emphasis his, Ginna 3). But generally speaking, editors pick the manuscripts and publishers pick the editors.

#### **2.4 A Brief History of Editing:** Publishing a book preceded editing a book.

At one time, trade editors were not as focused on developing submitted work as they are today. Prior to 1891, American publishers tended to reprint British writers, largely employing freelance readers to help with acceptance and rejections. The earliest American editors were more concerned with marketing to the public and publishing books with strong moral content.<sup>6</sup> The industry was very much formed by small self-governing houses. “All publishing was once more or less independent publishing, into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, until the corporatization of the last fifty years restructured larger publishing houses into something else, something bigger” (Shotts

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<sup>6</sup> “Editors used what they presumed to be the virginal sensibility of the typical teenage girl as the gauge for publication” (Aronson 13).

141). Publishing, in the years leading up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century was more like a professional field made up of small houses of like-minded men who put out books that aligned with their own ideals, sort of like the independent publishers of today.

History scholar, Dr. Marc Aronson wrote his dissertation on the publishing industry during the turn of the century, specifically on William Crary Brownell, who was Edith Wharton's editor and also Maxwell Perkins' boss. While Aronson was a senior editor at Henry Holt Books, he wrote an essay on the evolution of the American Editor. According to Aronson, modern editing began when Ripley Hitchcock, an editor at Appleton, read a manuscript and realized Chapter 6 should really be Chapter 1. Hitchcock moved the section then made some other changes, since the original five chapters had to be revised to accommodate the change in narrative sequence. Until those edits, the author had been unable to sell the work, but after Hitchcock's input, *David Harum* became a number one bestseller in 1899:

The work Hitchcock actually did on the manuscript was not unusual – other editors had also made suggestions for radical cuts and had turned rejected manuscripts into hot sellers – but there were two crucial differences this time: the book sold at a record breaking pace, and people found out what the editor had done. (11)

Over the next few decades, the idea of an editor as a medium to success emerged, “Between morals and market, people began to develop the idea that a house needed editors as well as publishers and that editing was a craft that could contribute to the success of a book”

(Aronson 14). Publishers became not only responsible for making books available to the public, but for working with the content and language to make the book the best possible version of itself.

**2.5 The Emergence of Modern Editing:** Learning to edit is still very much an apprentice model more than a skill learning in school.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century another shift occurred in the production and distribution of books. A debate over in what type of language books should be written. Should books be produced in the more formal academic English of the elite, or should they more accurately reflect the colorful language of the masses? A series of new publishing houses appeared that would later become Alfred A. Knopf, Simon & Schuster, Random House, Viking, and Farrar, Strauss, Giroux. These houses were founded by Jewish graduates of Columbia who moved publishing to greater acceptance of free speech, “toward a public that had been disdained or ignored by the Protestant elite” (Aronson 16). The emerging publishers looked to Greenwich village to find avant-garde writers. Subjects that had been considered ‘middlebrow’ in culture, books that included sexual situations and verbal obscenities<sup>7</sup> began to overtake ‘highbrow’ books with their strong moral storylines. “In the 1920s a brilliant generation of young American publishers fell heir to the cultural transformation that became known as modernism and nurtured it with taste, energy, and passion” (Epstein 2). The shifting literary taste created a need for editors to work at these new publishing houses. However, in the early twentieth century, like today, there was

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<sup>7</sup> Although filled with obscene, “unparlorlike” language, the trial judge determined that reading *Ulysses* is not an aphrodisiac.

little formal opportunity to learn the art of trade editing. As a result, smart, well-read people were hired, and they received their education while on the job.

Due to the lack of widespread editorial curriculum in academic programs, an editor's job is often learned by watching, reading and writing under the tutelage of a senior member of the profession. "A small but increasing number of universities offer publishing classes for undergraduate or graduate students, or intensive summer courses for aspiring editors<sup>s</sup> (Ginna 4). Even though there are few formal programs in the United States that teach future editors, "...there are virtually no textbooks or manuals for book editors, not counting those covering specialties such as copyediting and proofreading" (Ginna 4). It would be practically impossible to learn the editorial trade without interning in a literary agency or publishing house, without guidance from an editorial mentor. The most common path from threshold to corner office for any aspiring publishing professional is to start at the bottom, regardless of the credentials that came through the door. "Some aspects of publishing remain little changed since the nineteenth century, such as the way people in the industry learn their craft. Almost no American publishing house has any formalized instruction program. Training for most publishing jobs, certainly those in editorial positions, is in effect a classic apprenticeship system where junior people learn on the job by working as assistants to more experienced professionals" (Ginna 4). This lack of accessibility to an industry contributes to the ambiguity about editorial roles.

The editor is responsible for a host of tasks that require very different skill sets. Trade publishing is a business bridging creative production with commercial success. As

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<sup>s</sup> Columbia, New York University, and the University of Denver have the best-known programs.

such, an editor must forecast the Return on Investment and analyze detailed Profit & Loss statements; they must understand and argue in dense legal language that grants the author North American English versus World English rights, per say. It is very administrative at times as editors manage large scale projects that move through departments both in and out of the house. Although outside of publishing, “What the word editing connotes to most people – correcting and improving an author’s text – is only a part of what book editors do” (Ginna 2). An editor also needs to be passionate about books and understand and work in genre and its nuance. And an editor must be a stellar communicator, negotiating the success of their author’s manuscript from first acquisition to the award season.

Despite these other business obligations, it is actual textual editing that drives people to the position. Above all else, editors love books. They love to talk about them, they thrive to experience the conversation of two highly invested people working together on a piece of writing: “Editing is time-consuming, labor intensive work, but it is at the heart of an editor’s job, and most editors find it tremendously rewarding, both because of the satisfaction of seeing a book achieve its potential and because of the gratification that can come with the close work involved in the author-editor relationship” (Miller 59). The relationship can be very personal between the parties involved on a book project. Vulnerability inhabits the mind of the writer at the time of submission, especially the new writer, unpublished and untested. The most effective editors understand not only how to draw out the words on the page, but understand the motivation behind them, and perhaps most importantly, they understand how to communicate with the author of those words.

Where some authors are readily open to suggestion, others feel any change to the text at all is a personal affront.

**2.6 The Writer-Editor Relationship:** the dynamic between an editor and author is very collaborative, they are focused on a singular goal.

While writing what would become *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys reached out to her editor to with worry over Part Two, the section after Mr. Rochester marries Antoinette. Rhys was exhausted with the project, originally titled '*The First Mrs. Rochester*,' but knew it needed something more to bridge the West Indies childhood of the protagonist with her ensuing English madness. Her editor, Diana Athill suggested that the fictional couple spend some time in love after the wedding instead of writing the relationship to immediately turn sour. Rhys followed the suggestion, understanding how the loss of love felt would increase the narrative tension. Both Harper Lee and Jean Rhys trusted their editors' ability to understand the stories they were trying to tell. "Writers must realize that editors are really necessary to inspire them, spur them, sometimes push them to write at the top of their form. And that editors have authentic creativity of their own, one that few writers have: the gift of critical analysis, detachment, and expression that is there for the writer to make the most of" (Gross xviii). An editor can offer an outside perspective that remains close to the center of writing while keeping that necessary distance to see the larger arc. "The editor must learn to edit in the writer's voice, think the writer's thoughts,

achieve the writer's perspective" (Gross). To edit a writer is to adapt to the individual writer's needs. Strong editors have the editorial literacy to listen and adjust their expertise to a specific rhetorical situation.

Although there is much spoken conversation between editor and author, there are also written exchanges, lengthy letters and readers reports. One of the first documents created when a manuscript is submitted is a reader's report. These letters from the editor are filled with constructive scrutiny. Their impact on literary production is undeniable, yet they are largely unstudied. Perhaps because they reveal the unfinished thinking of a writer who was at a beginning point with their book. Although not all manuscripts receive these reports, the majority of submission that go on to publication do.

After manuscripts are submitted to a literary agency or publishing house, those that show promise rise through the hierarchy until they reach the desk of the decision maker. Accompanying these hopeful drafts are editorial reader's reports, lengthy and detailed analyses of the text that offer advice to advance the writing toward trade publication; the content is not negative criticism, but additive suggestion for the author to consider as the writing is redrafted. "The reader's report is the most silent of literary genres, its existence publicly acknowledged only in attacks or parodies" (Allen 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph). The reports carry weight, normally concluding with a suggestion for or against publication. The reports, along with the manuscript, are reviewed by the senior editor, and he or she drafts an editorial letter to the aspiring writer. Nearly all trade writing, read by the public, has been shaped or molded by such letters. These letters begin a partnership working toward one goal, literary success.

The writer-editor relationship that is the most productive is the one where each party respects the position of the other. During the course of the editorial process, they are in a symbiotic relationship, each benefiting from the other's talent. "Editors can diagnose the positive and negative elements of a manuscript and prescribe a possible cure to what ails it in the same way that a diagnostically talented internist can read an X ray and discern the trouble in the patient's lung or chest and prescribe a course of treatment to eradicate the trouble" (Gross xviii). The written report leads to a conversation between editor and author, where respect of each other's purpose and skill is paramount. Susan Bell, author of *The Artful Edit*, writes, "the mutually active editorial conversation demands high concentration from both parties, a relinquishment of ego. A writer whose words are priceless possessions to be protected from what he perceives as an editor's insensitive hand should not try it" (28).<sup>9</sup> Authors need to understand why an editor is asking for clarity on a section and editors need to completely grasp what the writer is trying to accomplish in order to help them most effectively.

Betsy Lerner has authored several books, including one focused on an editor's advice to writers. In her essay for *What Editors Do*, she reveals a key factor of the relationship. While reminiscing about conversations with rejected authors she noticed a trend in their complaints. The rejection letters often said the editor passed because they didn't love it, or they didn't fall in love with it. One writer she spoke with said, "why can't they just say no instead of bringing love into it?" Although it may seem odd in a professional relationship to make love a prerequisite, books take a great deal of passion to

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<sup>9</sup> According to Stephen King, "When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be done."

move from page to shelf; it can take years to move a draft to completion. Lerner surmises that acquisitions editors are “in it for the high,” they don’t acquire books that are pretty good, or good enough. “The author-editor relationship begins on the page. The first sentence. The first paragraph. Does it hold up twenty pages in? Fifty? A hundred? It is quirky or elegant, funny or baleful, familiar or just strange enough? Is it deceptively simple or brilliantly complex? Does it move you?” (Lerner 69). Crying is usually a good barometer of living, emotional content. Although a mutually earnest relationship isn’t a requirement, liking the person you are working closely with can really help spur the writing/editing process. In 1962, Diana Athill wrote this about the relationship between a publisher and a writer:

It is an easy one, because the publisher usually meets his writers only after having read something they have written, and if he has thought it good it does not much matter to him what the man will be like or who is about to come through his door. He is feeling well-disposed for having liked the work; the writer is feeling well-disposed for his work having been liked; neither is under obligation to attempt a closer personal relationship beyond that. It is warm and at the same time undemanding beginning, in which, if genuine liking is going to flower, it can do so freely. (131)

She reflected on this comment nearly 40 years later while writing her memoir and observed, “although the beginning is, indeed, nearly always easy, the relationship as a whole is quite often not” (132). She further mused that true friendship between a publisher and writer is rare. The writer longs for a reader and comes to view the publisher as a cumbersome middleman, forgetting the necessity of manufacturing, distribution,

advertising: “When the ending of the relationship causes no serious personal disturbance it cannot be called a friendship” (133). If the author develops a long-lasting, sustained writing career. Lengthy contract obligated editorial relationships can lead to lack of faith. Authors, once they are established break from their agents and editors for various reasons, including a feeling like they don’t need them anymore. But not all, Ian McEwan has worked with Nan Talese for over 40 years. While reflecting about their relationship in relation to the larger publishing house, he said that appreciated “that there is one person there who is your person.” (Video). A publishing house can seem like a behemoth institution and having a sustained relationship with an editor can personalize the experience. “The editor, then, is a connector – a conduit from writer to reader – but also a translator, improving the communication from each to the other” (Ginna 3). McEwan said he still relies on Talese to help him with titles, the cultural differences, and for the line editing to “catch the moments of inconsistency.” In addition to his primary editor, it also seems to him that despite how carefully he and Talese have read the pages, the line editors “make sure there is balance.” Many conversations occur between many different editors on the creation of one text, all vital to producing a cohesive, well received book.

**2.7 The Focus of This Project:** To show my reader how editing is rich with critical textual engagement.

This project focuses on the editorial content of the communication of three influential editors that worked between 1910 and 1982, Maxwell Perkins, Katharine White, and Ursula Nordstrom. At the time, it was the editors who carried the bulk of editorial conversation with their authors. Editorial insights are revealed through their

correspondence and readers reports. Today, a portion of that editive labor has shifted to literary agents, who, in the hopes of submitting the best possible manuscript have taken on a larger role of text development. This wasn't always the case "... forty years ago, agents were mere peripheral necessities, like dentists, consulted as needed, not the dominant figures in the lives of authors that many of them have since become" (Epstein 6). Although Thomas Wolfe had a literary agent, Elizabeth Nowell, who shaped his short stories just as Maxwell Perkins worked with his longer books and is certainly worthy of editorial study; for my project I selected three editors: two in trade publishing, Maxwell Perkins and Ursula Nordstrom, and one in periodical publishing, Katharine White.

Perkins was largely selected because he is often described as one of the most influential editors of all time. It would seem shortsighted to write a research paper on effective editing techniques without studying Maxwell Perkins; it would be like studying the epic tale without mentioning *The Odyssey*. Ursula Nordstrom is the Maxwell Perkins of children's literature. To make the point that editorial support has similar parallels regardless of audience, Nordstrom's letters and advice reveal a playfulness not seen in Perkins. Her inclusion offers a pleasing counter to Perkins' straightforward prose.

Katharine White worked in the shadow of her more famous husband, E.B. White. I initially selected E.B. White as my third case study since he bridges adult and children's literature. It was in learning about him that I discovered Katharine, an editorial force in her own right, content as an unknown behind the authors she guided. White was perhaps the most prolific of my three choices; as an editor of *The New Yorker* she had to bring forth ample quality writing within a very specific timeline. White offers a nice balance to the literary book editors, as she mostly worked with shorter articles and poetry.

**2.8 Personal Investment:** I had to learn about editing too.

When I once said my perfect career would be to read books and then tell people what I thought about them, a friend who worked in the industry suggested I find a job in publishing. I protested that I didn't have any formal editorial training, but she told me almost no one does at the start and directed me to a well-respected intern program at Writers House, a large and highly successful literary agency. Writers House has developed the careers of Jonathan Franzen, Neil Gaiman, Stephen Hawking, Michael Lewis, Leonard Mlodinow, Paula Hawkins, Nora Roberts, Laurie Halse Anderson, Dav Pilkey, Sharon Creech, Christopher Paolini, Dan Santant, John Green, and hundreds of others. My fears of being the oldest intern in the room were assuaged when I realized many adults turn to publishing as second careers. My mentor, Joe Volpe had himself left a fruitful career as an attorney before he too went through the intern program and became the assistant to Simon Lipskar, the agency president.

Through participation in this well-developed intern program, I learned about the business of publishing along with my cohort of about 12 college-aged peers. We started before our first face-to-face session by reading three manuscripts and preparing reader's reports. We read the reports aloud to each other, all of us filled with the anxiety that comes from having our writing publicly judged. After lengthy discussions about the good and bad parts of each, we all had to rewrite them and read them again in the next session. After reading our writing about writing, we would then write about the reports we had heard and what made some of them more effective than others. This writing about writing about writing completely refocused how we approached manuscripts with an editorial

perspective. The program expanded from the reader's reports to cover flap and back jacket copy, as well as the various levels of rejection letters<sup>10</sup>, we learned about marketing, branding, legal contracts, subsidiary rights, royalties, and eventually professionalization to help the interns transition to their first job in the industry.

I was offered a permanent position in the business depart as a contract's liaison, the hub of a project, to inform, nudge, and keep up to date all interested parties. My administrative duties were only part-time, the rest of my day was spent as an editorial reader, reading manuscripts for any agent's assistant that wanted additional input. I sought to read for everyone and in every genre, with the idea of determining what (and with whom) I'd like to spend my editorial apprenticeship. I also continued my relationship with the intern program as a mentor, getting to know subsequent classes as they learned to work with writing.

I loved working with these student writers; it was a perfect combination of two of my favorite things: teaching and seeing writing take form. I acted as a mentor to subsequent classes of interns. I was paired with a rotating pool of interns to teach and guide. I was not formally offering editorial instruction, as much as how to manage the contracts for the large-scale projects. It was through conversation with a fellow intern, Natalie Hallack, I learned of the Writing Center at St. John's University. A place very much like a literary agency, operating at the intersection of the writing arts while meeting institutional objectives. According to Hallak, writing came to the table in every genre and

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<sup>10</sup> There are really about three: 1. The flat out no, the reader probably decided within seconds to pass. 2. The no with pause, where the reader at least read it and probably includes one detail from your story to let you know they read it, but they are still passing. 3. The qualified no, they really kind of liked it, but not quite enough to move ahead. This can be golden because the reader often includes a lengthy report full of suggestion. Oftentimes, they ask the writer to resubmit if they revise the draft. Stephen King writes that a rejection letter changed his whole writing formula into a successful one (King 222).

agents, or ‘consultants’ worked with the authors to understand their meaning. They would offer input on the writing to ensure it was doing what the writer needed it to be doing.

Hallak said that her writing center was not a place of deficit, where punctuation remediation occurred, but a culture of conversation to develop writers through improving their writing. In other words, editing. After receiving a Doctoral Fellowship from the former Institute of Writing Studies at St. John’s University, I decided to make a life change and stepped into the work of academic writing instruction.

If one were to compile a list of the most oft-used writing advice scribbled in the margin, “*show, don’t tell*” would surely be on it. This adage scribbled by countless writing instructors is similar to what Maxwell Perkins wrote in his reader’s reports, encouraging his writers to “avoid exposition.” Perkins felt writing was more effective when the forward momentum comes through conversation and action. Maxwell Perkins is the first case study and focus of the next chapter. As you read through the editorial letters of Perkins, be mindful how his editing guidance aligns with the work of writing scholars and writing center professionals. Be mindful of how editing is less an afterthought when the writing is “finished,” but more of an inspired conversation.

## Part 2 Case Studies in Literary Editing

### Ch. 3

#### Editing Thrives with Knowledge and Patience

##### Case Study: Maxwell Perkins

*The editorial style of Perkins was that of a paternal compass. He steadfastly believed in the importance of writing to share competing ideas, accurately reflect society, and to entertain. Fiction should be honest and enjoyable to read, while non-fiction should not reveal any of an author's bias, but provide content that encourages the reader to make up their own mind. Writing takes as long as it takes to get it right, he would not rush a project. Perkins embodied the idea that an editor works "in the service of writers and writing" as an invisible force (Wheelock).*

### 3.1 Background and Influence

In 1936, after the successful publication of several books, Thomas Wolfe published a short account of his writing process. In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe sets out to explain what happens to a story and its writer in the making of a book. He describes the process in this biography as the "the story of an artist as a man and a worker" (Wolfe 55). The telling detail about his description of the writing occurs in the very first paragraph, where he chooses to lead by describing how Maxwell Perkins felt about the editorial process of working with Wolfe to shape his manuscripts into a publishable form.<sup>11</sup> Wolfe recalls Perkins, "the editor remarked that some of it was fantastic, much incredible, all astonishing, and he was kind enough to say that the whole experience was the most interesting he had known during the twenty-five years he had been a member of

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<sup>11</sup> They were too long. Wolfe was inspired by Joyce's *Ulysses* (262,222 words); originally his submitted manuscript had about 350,000 words. Perkins and Wolfe paired down the total to 228,810. The removed writing was saved for later publication.

the publishing business” (Wolfe 7). Essentially, when Wolfe started to describe how he writes, the first thing that came to mind was his editor.

Perkins renowned editorial influence remains because of the prominence of his most famous writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. However, Perkins inspired and drew the best writing out of many authors. For 37 years he worked for the publishing house, Charles Scribner’s Sons beginning in 1910; during this time, he wrote countless readers reports and editorial letters to both aspiring and established authors. Marcia Davenport was one such writer who described him this way, “Max saw more clearly what a writer meant to do than the writer could see himself.” She goes on to describe his ability “to evoke from people of talent the best they had in them” (Davenport Introduction, *Editor to Author*, xiv). The advice and encouragement provided by Perkins are recorded in his own words through his correspondence. The majority of his letters were dictated to Irma Wyckoff, his longtime secretary. Copies of these letters were kept for years in the archives at Scribner’s before being moved the Special Collections at Princeton University.

### **3.2 Project Source Materials**

The majority of my analysis refers to Perkins’ editorial letters from the book, *Editor to Author, The Letters of Maxwell Perkins*. The collection was first published by Scribner’s in 1950, just three years after Perkins died; the relatively short time frame between his death and anthology of correspondence is a testament to how influential he was on American literature. The 188 letters were selected from thousands by John Hall Wheelock, who also provided commentary to establish context, for some of the

correspondence. Wheelock, a poet, was working as a senior editor at Scribner's when Perkins died. The two men met in while at Harvard and worked together on many of the manuscripts referred to in the letters.

### 3.3 Editorial Beliefs and Practices

In the original introduction to the collection of letters, Wheelock describes Perkins as a man of passion for good writing, driven to find works that represent a genuine reflection of feeling. He championed writing filled with observation and thinking as forefront to story. If the writing wasn't honest, if it lacked imaginative creation, Perkins had no interest in pursuing it for publication. If the manuscript showed promise, Perkins showed devotion, "The recognizing, the encouraging, the guiding of talent – this, in his view, was a sacred task worth any amount of effort, of risk, of time expended" writes Wheelock (Wheelock's Introduction in *Editor to Author 2*). Perkins unwaveringly defended the talent of his writers, frequently directly to them. When other publishers initially passed on working with both Fitzgerald and Wolfe due to the amount of editorial work their manuscripts needed, Perkins offered them contracts and devoted months to refining the sparks of brilliance he detected in their drafts. His passion was for the well-told story, his belief in developing potential is a testament to those who nurture words by trade. As an editor, Perkins felt it was his job to inhabit the intent of the writer, then query and prod until the finished writing closely resembled what the artist has set out to do.

Perkins' advice was not limited to narrative issues, oftentimes those he worked and corresponded with sought him out for life's other quandaries. According to

Wheelock, “his gifts of temperament and equipment made him the ideal father-confessor, the listener, wise and sympathetic, whose understanding, often conveyed without words, acted as a catalyst, precipitating in many a writer the definite self-discovery which till then had been vast but formless aspiration” (Wheelock’s Introduction in *Editor to Author* 3). Wheelock theorizes that the most important skill of an editor is to listen with attentive silence; “Most writers are in a state of gloom a good deal of the time; they need perpetual reassurance.” Perkins would quietly, patiently receive the unburdening of a writer. He worked to remove a sundry of obstacles that blocked his writer’s ability to focus on their craft, even paying a dental bill dispute for Wolfe and arranging for a vet to visit the sick cat of another author. Wheelock shares an anecdote, after one exasperating day, Perkins yelled, “What sort of madhouse is this, anyway! What are we supposed to be – ghost writers, bankers, psychiatrists, income-tax experts, magicians?” (Wheelock’s Introduction 4) Professional editorial support comes in all forms. Encouragement is a pivotal trait for the editor in a sustained writing relationship with an author who is concentrating on the world in their head and suffers setbacks when the outside world infringes on their creativity.

In 1976, when Scribner’s reissued Perkins’ collection of letters for a second printing, they asked Marcia Davenport to write a new introduction for the book. Davenport had worked with Perkins on her first fictional novel. Prior to that, she had written a biography of Italian musician, Arturo Toscanini, with whom she also had a working relationship. Davenport draws a connection between Perkins and Toscanini, “both possessed the ability to evoke from people of talent the best that they had in them; the ability to get out of them better work than they ever otherwise did.” Toscanini and

Perkins thrived on the success of others, each in his own way, working to nurture the glimpse of talent that caught their attention in the first place, “the mysterious spell of personality which gave performers (writers too in this sense) confidence, and encouraged them to do what, they often said, they did not know that had it in them to do” (Davenport’s Introduction in *Editor to Author* xv). Writers create from memory, from lived emotion; It is an occupation of separateness that begins and resides in the author’s head alone; “Writers are egocentric. What happens to a writer happens to him and nobody else” (xiv). Perkins was able to reach through this isolation and offer a partnership of thought toward the material, like a professional sounding board for unruly ideas that needed shaping. His steadfast belief in the author and his embodiment of editorial literacy is revealed through his letters.

### **3.4 The Editorial We**

The author/editor relationship often begins with a textual problem. In modern publishing, it is the rare a submitted manuscript is published without developmental suggestions. Typically, the editor reads the words from a not yet known person and sensing promise, feels a compelling desire to see the script to advance into a fully formed narrative; but as the story is not the editor’s to tell, a relationship with the writer becomes essential. Although Perkins’ letters reveal problematic moments in drafts and his literary suggestion for their improvement, the letters also reveal the type of relationships he had with his writers, his preferences, directional choices, and personal convictions. Perkins frequently affirmed the difficulty of their task: “It is a good book that gives a writer trouble.” “All you lack in regard to this book is confidence.” “Writing a novel is a very

hard thing to do.” “Don’t lose courage.” According to Davenport, “he stayed with you, with me in this instance, in the long dead intervals between books, reassuringly the friend before the editor” (xi). Writing with Perkins meant having a quiet ally, an editorial muse if you will. It meant knowing someone was always in your corner and willing to offer a kind and guiding word.

Perkins would often write to his authors about his other authors. He would encourage them to meet up socially, even arranging dinners. He would send them each other’s books in an effort to foster appreciation for each other’s stories. While Davenport was preparing the new introduction for *Editor to Author*, she asked other writers who had worked with Perkins what they thought made him different from other editors. She determined, “what he did was *be with us*, in mind, in mood, in the commonplaces of existence as much as in the notable experiences. He was with us in retrospection when we dealt with remembered experiences, and in anticipation when we were grappling with the still unformed mass of what we aimed at” (Davenport’s Introduction xvi). Perkins embodied an editive relationship of support and development, the concept that editorial literacy is to be *in presence* with a writer as they find, form, and put forth the thing they are trying to do. During the drafting phase, Perkins viewed editing as additive, filled with suggestion to “do more of that.” But beyond the text, Perkins also regarded editing as a relationship-based business. Authors write alone, but often think in concert with their editor’s suggestions.

### **3.5 Chapter Format and Historical Note**

The following textual analysis of Maxwell Perkin’s editorial letters is divided by

the nature of the needs of the writer. Although the letters were published chronologically, I have culled the threads into categories supporting the focus of this project- the guiding nature of the author/editor relationship, and examples of supportive suggestion. I would like to note however, for those interested, that the letters reveal a unique timeframe in history. They were written between 1914, when World War I began, and 1947, just three years after D-Day and the conclusion of World War II. As such, they offer a reflection of the American experience during the years of those wars, and the years in between. Perkins often writes to his authors and friends about the political environment. The collection would be an interesting read for any person interested in the social and political makeup of this time.<sup>12</sup>

### **3.6 Editorial Integrity**

In addition to the editor/author relationship, Perkins also reveals his ideology for the role of a publisher through several letters written to members of the public who took offense at the content in a book he had edited. He believed in the free exchange of thought; Scribner's, like most publishers, put out books that affronted the morals and ideologies of some people, books that addressed politics and religion, books with profanity and descriptions of sexual experiences. Perkins defended the content of the books, and by extension the author, because they were reflective of realistic human experiences. He felt the publisher's job was to put forth accurate, developed works and it was up to the public to judge; industries founded on communicating with the public

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<sup>12</sup> I once asked a senior person at Writers House why popular fiction was overtaking literature, he replied very straightforwardly, that books have become shallow because they are not written in war time.

should not obstruct, but foster accuracy. Perkins began his writing career as a journalist. Perhaps that foundation spurred his belief that the editor should have no visible bias but work with a writer and their writing to put forth what the author, the artist, is trying to say.

Before Perkins revolutionized the role of an editor, it was less commonplace for publishing houses to work closely with an author to revise a single manuscript for a sustained period of time. Before the role of editing became more of a prolonged conversation, the submitted manuscript was generally accepted as submitted or rejected as-is. There wasn't a lot of development at the house level when Perkins began in the advertising department at Scribner's. As he moved into an editorial role, one of his first responsibilities was to write rejection letters. Sometimes the rejection was of the complete piece, and sometimes it was just of one section of the work. In one such letter to an author, who desired to publish a collection of short stories, Perkins writes to him regarding a couple of the submitted stories, "we suggest their omission, but mainly to the impression that their retention would tend to detract from the harmony of the narrative, and that they are not so thoroughly successful as to be on quite the same level with the rest of the book: they would prevent it from being portioned, harmonious, and unified as it otherwise would be" (Perkins to Sothern, 1916). Even while rejecting, Perkins is supportive. He goes to compliment the overall work as "charming" and expresses his "pleasure in the material," offering assurance in the face of a partial rejection. Perkins closes the letter directly by reminding the author that his advice to remove some of the stories is just a suggestion; his only wish is for the author to consider the change, ultimately for what remains in the text is up to the author. In this letter, written early in

his career, Perkins was just beginning to exercise his editorial strengths in the development phase of a writing project.

### 3.7 Editorial Vision

Very early in his editorial position, a manuscript came across Perkins' desk that would reshape the editor/author relationship. However, its birth wasn't straightforward. Scribner's had decided on a full pass of piece titled, *This Romantic Egoist*; Perkins was to draft the rejection letter. Perkins felt the manuscript had promise and could be publishable with some revision and reorganization, but he was too junior an employee to go against the direction of senior staff. Perkins drafted a rejection letter expressing his desire to edit the manuscript. Upon receiving the rejection, the young author chose not to work with Perkins to revise it; instead, he made some small revisions and asked if Perkins would submit it to some other publishing houses. According to Wheelock, Perkins hoped "the manuscript would not be accepted, because he was aware of its extraordinary quality and felt that with further, more complete, rewriting it could be a work of real importance and distinction" (to Fitzgerald 19). No other house accepted the manuscript, so the young author revised it a bit and resubmitted it to Perkins under a new title, *The Education of a Parsonage*. Perkins then worked in collaboration with the 22-year-old writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald who reshaped the manuscript into *This Side of Paradise*. In a letter to Fitzgerald during the revision, Perkins encourages the unknown author, "The book is so different that it is hard to prophesy how it will sell, but we are all for taking a chance and supporting it with vigor" (Perkins to Fitzgerald, 1919). More than once during the redraft, Perkins offers praise and reassures the writers, even after it is finished and Scribner's is

set to publish the book. Perkins writes, “Viewing it as the same book that was here before, which in a sense it is, though translated into somewhat different terms and extended further, I think you have improved it enormously” (20). The book has stood the test of time as representative of the experience of American youth just after the first World War; it is still in print today. The success of this book, after being rejected by all of the publishing houses, speaks to the importance of editorial work during development. However, Perkins in no way should receive the authorial credit for the book, he is not its author. He should receive recognition as an editor, his direction unquestionably shaped the content into a lasting piece of literature.

Largely, editing to Perkins was concerned with higher order issues of narrative development, “the story does not seem to us to work up to a conclusion;-neither the hero’s career nor his character are shown to be brought to any stage which justifies an ending” (Perkins to Fitzgerald in Bruccoli and Baughman, 2004). Perkins acknowledges that although in life there aren’t always neat conclusions, in narrative, there is an obligation to a reader to have an ending. Perkins considers the audiences’ expectations in his editorial report, “the story does not culminate in anything as it must to justify the reader’s interest as he follows it.” He suggests that Fitzgerald remove any unnecessary scenes that don’t directly relate to or drive the narrative toward the conclusion. When Perkins makes it clear that the revisions should not “conventionalize” what Fitzgerald is trying to do, he demonstrates a keen understanding of the author’s intent for the work. His understanding of the writers’ vision acts as a bridge that allows the artist to respectfully consider the editorial suggestion. After the successful acceptance of the completed manuscript, Fitzgerald writes to Perkins, “I feel I’ve certainly been lucky to

find a publisher who seems so generally interested in his authors. Lord knows this literary game has been discouraging enough at times” (Fitzgerald to Perkins in Kuehl and Bryer, 23). Support and advice befitting the author’s intention enabled the literary career of one of America’s celebrated writers. However, Perkins editorial reach went far beyond canonical writers, with many aspiring authors, he wrote similar detailed, encouraging advice.

### **3.8 Editorial Awareness of Genre and Rhetorical Conventions**

Mainly, editorial feedback comes after the manuscript is completed. Once a writer feels they are done with a project, they may need additional encouragement to get back into the text. Absence from writing can beget absent writing. In one supportive note to an author who needed to revise, Perkins writes, “Having borne the heart of the battle, you must not fail it now” (Perkins to Davenport, 1947). While certainly there are editorial conversations that occur during the construction of text, for the most part writers submit a draft once she or he feels it is ‘done.’ Writing a book length work takes an inordinate amount of time and commitment. As manuscripts are the physical embodiment of years of labor, it is imperative for anyone who reads them in an official capacity to understand and respect the creator and the content. Editorial literacy means inhabiting the lived experience of the writer. It means to be mindful that offered suggestions may take months or years to complete. The initial editorial letter must be drafted in such a way to encourage the writers to keep at it while providing them direction. Respect for each other is vital.

When Wheelock undertook the job of selecting Perkins' editorial letters from the Scribner's files, he chose one from the "many instances in which Perkins made similar detailed suggestions, to a great variety of writers," but he felt the one to Marcia Davenport "exemplifies the kind of detailed and constructive criticism which only an editor of unusual perception could offer" (286). Perkins begins the letter by reassuring Davenport that, "it needs, as any book, to be revised. The revision should almost only be a matter of emphasis, for the scheme is right." After a brief plot summary to establish context for the author, he suggests, "In telling of these you should always keep the reader aware of New York, as you mostly do: when Jessie recalls the past, she should still be aware of the present, in motor cars, cabs, or walking, or in a bed, or in a bath – as people always are." He reminds Davenport several times that she is already doing much of this in her writing, she just needs to expand on what she has started. Perkins is specific, "For instance, you tell of her in a taxicab as being *oblivious* to the ugliness of the street. I think she should be *aware*. People are oblivious only momentarily" (emphasis his). Perkins reminds her that New York functions as a character on this story and therefore must be present through the protagonist's arc.

Perkins identifies the problem with the character development and makes an editorial suggestion that typifies the type of direct solution that may remedy narrative stall. "Jessie is real and not unhuman, but she is too much always in the right and Brandon too much in the wrong. About that I don't know what you can do, except by having Jessie realize that in some ways she had been exasperating, and by the use of two more outside scenes." Perkins reminds Davenport what countless editors have reminded their authors; the character must change in the course of the fictional narrative. They

cannot end up the person they were when the story began. “But the great thing is to have Jessie come out of this book as a woman different from when she went in. That you must do...It must end, must indicate a changed life for Jessie. Must be conclusive.” The editor reminds the author of what they likely know but have misplaced during the writing process.<sup>13</sup>

Language is organic, words and phrases and the direction the story will shift during text production. Wolfe was notorious for following the rivers of story down subplot tributaries that lead away from the main arc, instead of into it. The editor is aware of this plasticity with words and language and redirects the author to the central idea, to the author’s original intent. But to do so, they must get their editorial hands dirty and inhabit the purpose of the writer.

Effective editors also need to be able to discern the emotional needs of a writer, when a nudge is needed versus a shoulder. At this point in his editorial letter to Davenport, Perkins shifts from broad advice about the plot and character to more specific details about the comments he left in the margins of her manuscript. “some of the speeches were too long to be natural,” “Generalizations are no use – give one specific thing and let the action say it.” “When you have people talking in a scene. You must interrupt with explanatory paragraphs, but shorten them as much as you can.” “Dialogue is *action*.” Perkins encouragement to add dialogue is a testament to the writing adage, show don’t tell. It is also good advice for writing that has stalled; a reader is less apt to put down a story in the middle of a conversation. Editing as Perkins applied it, is to be a constant instructor.

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<sup>13</sup> Chances are the fiction manuscript you’re working on is slugging with a Passive Protagonist. Are they causing the action or responding to it?

In narrative, everything can't be ended before the final pages, there must be a question that needs answering in the reader's mind. Perkins argues that exposition stops action. He uses the analogy of a duel to explain how dialogue is an improvement over description. Would you prefer to watch a duel or listen to someone explain the duel? As if aware that his critique may be closing off instead of opening up paths for the author to proceed, Perkins reiterates to Davenport that writing takes its own direction once begun, "you can't see a book before the end. It must be revised in the light in the end." He suggests going back to the part where she explained who a character was and instead, let them enter the scene and reveal themselves through dialogue. "Make the people come out through talk and act, just as far as you possible can. Avoid all possible exposition." He restates this suggestion several more times in the letter.

In the new introduction for *Editor to Author*, Davenport tells that it was merely coincidence that the letter selected as the "perfect example to Max in action after he had read a completed but not yet a finished manuscript" was written to her. Davenport felt that the letter clearly cut through the haze surrounding what she was trying to accomplish in her story. She felt that Perkins' perception identified, "the central theme of the whole book, and the details of characterization, action, dialogue." Perkins fully inhabited her story, being mindful of the author's intent, while offering suggestion and asking questions to spark further writing. He edited as the word is defined in the OED; the conduit that brings the writing to the reader.

Wheelock affirms what Davenport felt toward Perkin's editorial role, "to serve as a skilled objective outsider, a critical touchstone by recourse to which a writer is enabled to sense flaws in the surface or structure, to grasp and solve the artistic and technical

problems involved, and thus to realize completely his own work in his own way” (Wheelock’s Introduction, *Editor to Author* 5). It is easy enough for an individual to decide if narrative, image, music, movies or a host of other art forms are “good” or “bad;” everyone’s a critic. The genius comes from understanding the structure and movement (or lack of) behind the flaws, not be critical, but to critique in a way that inspires the artist to continue with the narrative. This critical analysis epitomizes additive editorial suggestion, how to nudge the writer in the direction of a resolution. Editorial literacy takes a keen understating of the rhetorical situation and a respect for the artist bringing forth the work.

The editorial letter and readers report to Davenport was the last one Perkins ever wrote, it represents years of editorial honing. At 62, Perkins unexpectedly died from pneumonia, just six weeks after writing to Davenport. Many of Perkins authors, including Davenport, initially felt they could not write once Perkins had died, so strong was his connection to their craft. However, many did write after Perkins’ death as illustration of what Perkins had been telling them all along, it was they, not he, who was doing the writing. “For only you can write the book, and you must – and I know you will – do only what you are convinced of; and what I say must be no more than suggestion and just ‘for example’”(Perkins to Rawlings, 1940). It is a keen editor who inspires and simultaneously disappears to create a space for writing to take place.

Although they may have presence in absentia, an editor like Perkins continuously reinforced to his writers they were doing it all on their own. This ideology of measuring success privately, through the public success of a book from one of their of authors, is a trait of Perkins. In a letter to another author, Nancy Hale, upon her book’s successful

publication he writes, “But I am getting more satisfaction, and just as much pleasure from your triumph, even upon egoistic grounds alone – for, from the very beginning, I believed in you and said so...So don’t thank me for any pleasure. It is I who must thank you” (1942). Writers and editors both love books, they seek a writing life, but their attitude, their very personality and affinity for attention makes them more suited to different roles of text production. Writers tend to be more focused on their own words, editors have an affinity toward another’s creation. Perkins supported aspiring writers who were years away from anything.

### **3.9 Do Not Let Mechanics Get in the Way of Voice**

During World War II, Perkins received several letters from active servicemen who desired to be writers. Not all of them had manuscripts to submit, but all were seeking advice on how to write. In the editorial spirit of encouragement, Perkins lets one man know that he will be happy to read his story when it comes. However, he advises him to wait and let the story unfold in his mind, “I do not think you need to be impatient to put it in writing. I think, in truth, that the best writing of all is done long after the events it is concerned with, when they have been digested and reflected upon unconsciously, and the writer has completely realized them in himself” (Perkins to Mulliken, 1945). He concedes that although journalism requires a quick turnaround for writing when everything is fresh and new, the best books take time. He writes to another, “What really makes writing is done in the head, where impressions are stored up,

and it is done with the eye and the ear. The agony comes later, when it has to be done with the hand..." (Perkins to Boyd, Jr., 1945). Perkins encourages lengthy reflection as a vital writing skill.

The editor draws a parallel between the serviceman's current experience in wartime to something he learned about writing from Hemingway, which must have been affirming for the hopeful writer. Perkins writes to the young man about visiting Hemingway in Key West, while taking in the fishing, the deep-blue water, and the wildlife, he asks Hemingway why he doesn't write about all of this. Hemingway pointed to a pelican and said he couldn't until he understood even the pelican's part in the scheme of things. "I will in time, but I couldn't do it yet." Although Hemingway could factually write about the things around him, he chose not to even start putting it on paper until "it all had to become so deeply familiar that you knew it emotionally, as if by instinct, and that that only came after a long time, and through long unconscious reflection" (Perkins to Mulliken, 1945). Perkins was not merely reassuring a young man who may have felt the future was uncertain; his letters are evidence of Perkins belief that good writing cannot be rushed.<sup>14</sup> To the aspiring writer, he wrote "the real writer must wait and reflect – and probably most of his work, before actually beginning to set down the words, is largely unconscious. I do hope, though, that nothing will keep you from writing in the end" (Perkins to Briffault, 1938). Great writing is evidence of sustained thinking. In all of his letters, Perkins never rushed an author to meet a deadline.

In a congratulatory letter to Hemingway after *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was submitted, Perkins reflects on the speed at which the book was completed. "I just want to

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<sup>14</sup> If a rejected manuscript comes back with revisions too quickly, chances are it will get rejected again.

say that I think that to have written this book in fifteen months' time was miraculous...If you had taken five years to such a book, nobody could have thought it was a long time – apart from the fact that there isn't anybody alive who could have written such a book anyhow” (Perkins to Hemingway, 1940). He unwaveringly encouraged and supported the expanses of time needed to absorb life before writing about it. Time, to Perkins was an essential part of the drafting, so much so that when a book was rushed, he felt the need to mention it. In a letter to an unnamed author, he writes, “We ought to tell you at the outset that we think you are both creating and writing too hurriedly, which is not fair to your unquestionable talent (Perkins to Anonymous, 1936). Language takes time to percolate, getting that language down on paper, takes even longer. You can't rush effective writing and a skilled editor will allow for time.

Perkins felt for the primacy of lived experience over formal education for creating great writing. This belief is reflected in his advice to feel the story, more than to think about it, writing, “and turn things over in your mind, and reflect upon them and all, is something that a writer ought to have to do in quiet circumstances once in a while. That is one of the troubles with writers today, they cannot get a chance, or they cannot endure to do this” (Perkins to Anonymous, 1941). He writes to a soldier that while college has advantages, “don't try to learn great writing there, learn something else.” He goes on, “Very few of the great writers had that formal education, and many of them never mastered spelling or grammar.” Perkins is not a proponent of learning about writing by reading only canonical authors: “it results in one getting into the habit of seeing everything through a kind of film of past literature, and not seeing it directly with one's own senses.” This in turn doesn't allow the writer to see characters as they really are,

around them or in their mind, because the caricatures have already been stamped in. In every letter to a young and aspiring author he tells them to read and observe, “seeing, hearing, and reading” as the most important form of professional practice if he aspires to be an author. (Perkins to Boyd, Jr., 1945). Perkins believed that new experiences had far greater benefits to aspiring writers than textbooks. Perkins believed that to edit was to set aside conventions and focus on content.

### 3.10 A Conduit Between Voice and Audience

Although Perkins’ best-known authors are considered the writers of American Literature, Perkins affinity was for the story, he defended manuscripts that other editors felt were beneath established literary traditions.<sup>15</sup> Perkins, “loved the best but was no literary snob.” His colleague Wheelock writes, “His appreciation found room for the story well told, the narrative with a primarily popular appeal, the novel that gave pleasure to the less critical taste.” When Perkins was campaigning for publication of *This Side of Paradise*, he had to convince the older staff that the story was more than a fleeting youthful perspective, but something new and worth promoting. Scribner’s had a history of putting forth serious books and the senior editors did not find Fitzgerald worthy. Wheelock, in his biography, *The Last Romantic*, describes the editorial meeting where Perkins championed Fitzgerald. Perkins told the senior editors that Scribner’s might as well close up shop if it wasn’t going to publish anything other than the genre it was so well known for, telling them the house had to move ahead with the times. He felt, “the

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<sup>15</sup> As an editorial reader, I floated between many agents. The first time I read for any of them I always asked what they considered the most important thing to look for; they all said, “story.”

great books he used to say, stand somewhere between the precious and the trashy, between what speaks to the literati only and what appeals to the masses. The great books reach both” (Wheelock in Perkins, 7). The conviction of a supportive editor goes beyond manuscript advice; professionally they must put their own skill and reputation on the line when they argue for their employer to commit to a project.

Editors like Perkins yearn for the success of their authors. For the success of the person is a direct response to the success of the writing. The writing is the conduit that formed the relationship between the writer and the editor. Once the editor has committed to a piece of writing, they must at times defend the content, not, per say, the actual substance of the writing, but the author’s right to his own language. At times, “literary editing is a test of character. Perkins’s loyalty to his authors and to their work is famous. He believed in the supreme worth of great literature” (Brucoli and Baughman, xxvii). If Perkins felt his author was wronged, he wrote in defense of them to members of the public. At the first printing of *Editor to Author*, many of the non-publishing industry recipients of Perkins letters were still living, so their names were omitted for publication to avoid embarrassment. Perkins’ language clearly defines his position as an editor and a representative of publishing. I believe Perkins uses the term publishing and editing interchangeably, “...a publisher – unless he chooses to be a purely person one, and so not fulfill the larger function of publishing – must take a very different attitude from that of personal preference or taste” (Perkins to Anonymous, 1933). The editor creates a space for what the author is trying to say.

The editor must not insert their own preference if they are to be an editor, “As a publisher he is not a censor of taste, or of morals, though as a man he is likely to have the

common human impulse of wishing that his own ideas or taste could be generally imposed” (81). A part of editorial literacy means the function of an editor is put forth a wide array of materials without controlling the content, without correcting the content. Perkins writes about the role of an editor to be outside of the voice of the author, “the true artist has always insisted upon making his work what he wanted, and it is our opinion that it would be an extremely bad thing for literature if real writers did allow themselves to be censored by their publishers...we are of the very strong opinion that the intelligent and discriminating public does not rule in these matters” (82). That is not to say the Perkins didn’t have strong suggestions to his authors regarding the content of their work. But the majority of his editorial suggestions were tempered with the balance that Perkins felt as the intermediary between the writing and its reception. As an editor, Perkins felt he should be unseen, his role in the background to support the writer whatever their belief, “In a republic people are entitled to express their opinions if those opinions are worth consideration, and that it is the duty of a publisher, when it is practically possible, to enable them to do it” (Perkins to Anonymous, 1942). An editor may shape the content; ultimately however, the writer is the author.

In a letter to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings as she was forming the idea and story for *The Yearling*, Perkins implored her to take his developmental suggestions lightly as the idea and ownership of the eventual product would be hers alone. “It has always been my conviction – and I do not see how anyone could dispute the rightness of it – that a book must be done according to the writer’s conception of it, as nearly perfectly as possible...The publisher must not try to get a writer to fit the book to the conditions of the trade, etc. It must be the other way around” (113). While Perkins insisted on the

development of a story, he was not committed to ideologies of genre or to imitating writing that had come before. He desired to foster what had inspired a writer to begin a specific project, “I do think that a true writer should trust most of all their own instinct” (to Dorrance, 1939). He writes to another, “writers should express what they feel like other artists” (to Thomason, Jr., 1940). And again, “I do think that the author, or course, best knows his book and that suggestion can only be valuable to him as showing how a reader, if he understands the author’s purpose, reacts to it” (to Stannard Baker, 1941). The editor must demonstrate an understanding of the writing, for the writer to consider what the editor is suggesting.

For an artist whose medium is words, writing is a very personal business. The author’s connection to the story and its characters can become personal. The oft quoted advice for a writer to ‘kill your darlings’<sup>16</sup> comes to play in the editor-author relationship. The writer’s view of what is important can conflict with the editor, who is looking at the project, not only from an outside readers perspective, but from a professional standpoint; trade publishing is, first and foremost, a business. It has to be; the financial success of books is necessary if literature is going to reach a wide audience. If a book doesn’t sell, is the narrative content less worthy? Not necessarily, but who will ever know about it? A successful editor must understand the needs of the governing institution - the publishing house - and weigh those needs against the artist who passionately desires his writing to be read. An editor must be aware, not of the literary tastes of a few, but of many. Perkins understood the conflict between the author’s need to their unique voice and the necessary

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<sup>16</sup> This quote has been attributed to almost every major 20<sup>th</sup> century English author at some point, most commonly Faulkner, but also Ginsberg, Wilde, Welty, and Chekov. Stephen King wrote, “kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart, kill your darlings.”

needs of the industry. He advised against any unnecessary offense for the sake of offense, making the observation to Hemingway, that if Tolstoi was able to write *War and Peace* without one four-letter word (Perkins to Hemingway, 1940) he too could avoid unnecessary profanity. Perkins belief in his author's work meant he was not wholly driven by financial success; "The business of literature is to reveal life" (Perkins to Hale, 1955). Perkins explained to Hemingway how his realism would temper the reception of his writing, but then supported his author's decision to include potentially offensive material, writing to another that, "good writers like Hemingway sacrifice sales for frankness, and know it" (to Train, 1937). If a writer is convicted, Perkins usually supported them over potentially better sales, but not always.

In writing to an author, in 1942, who wished to publish a work reflecting the current political climate, Perkins offered his editorial advice to remove two chapters that felt like propaganda. He offers this to the anonymous writer, "You may not care so much whether it sells, but you do care whether it is read. It must have readers." Perkins is not against the content; he is trying to advance the author's purpose and feels like the two questionable chapters detract from the main argument. He is trying to help the author have his voice heard and offers a strategy for effective writing that will reach a greater number of people, "there is no sense in throwing all that away for the sake of saying some things that will turn people against you, if you can say them in effect in ways which would not turn people against you." Perkins then restates the main points the author is trying to make to demonstrate understanding of the material before he reiterates his point several times, "If you make your audience mad, it doesn't make any difference how cogent is your reasoning." "You can't make people mad and convince them." "If you

antagonize them in little things, you lose all the big things as well” (to Anonymous, 210). In the letter, Perkins acknowledges that he agrees with some of the passionate points the writer is making, but in order for those points to be heard, the prejudice that comes through in the tone must be removed. Perkins was known for his unemotional analysis of text. The success of his authors during his tenure was a testament to his straightforward advice. However, the editor-author relationship is a human one and, as such, emotions get involved.

### 3.11 Editing’s Reward is Different from a Writer’s Success

Despite Perkins editorial advice and the accomplishment of Wolfe’s books. After several successful years, Wolfe chose to break editorial relations with Perkins. Perkins perhaps anticipated the break while he was working with Wolfe on *Of Time and the River*. In a letter to Hemingway, Perkins lets him know he is unable to visit him in Florida because he is completely tied up with Wolfe in daily editorial meetings. They are working to organize the book, but Wolfe’s impulsive nature makes committing to structure difficult. Perkins describes Wolfe’s nature to Hemingway; when he suggests that a key moment in the story is clouded by unnecessary, superfluous detail and should be removed, Wolfe sat silently for an hour deciding. Wolfe agreed to remove the section and told Perkins that he was personally responsible for its loss. Perkins acknowledges his responsibility, adding, “I will be blamed, either way” (91). Perkins is aware of the truth that editors are often to blame when a work doesn’t succeed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> But mostly invisible when they succeed.

In a testament to the editorial role Perkins had in the success of, *Of Time and the River*, Wolfe decides to dedicate the book to him. Perkins writes to Wolfe against the idea, “a reader is meant to enter into a novel as if it were a reality, and so to feel it, and a preface tends to break down that illusion and to make him look at it in a literary way.” He then hopes to convince Wolfe not to include the dedication by reminding him that he felt Perkins “deformed” his manuscript and if he truly felt that way, the dedication would be false. Perkins also reminds Wolfe that editing is its own reward, “But the plain truth is that working on your writing, however it has turned out, for good or bad, has been the greatest pleasure, for all its pain, and the most interesting episode of my editorial life” (Perkins to Wolfe, 1935). Wolfe choose to publicly thank Perkins by including the dedication.

Wolfe’s break from Perkins is well documented in the correspondence and in other published studies. What is tantamount to this project is Perkins attitude throughout the split, his assertion to Wolfe that he keeps writing. Letting him know that whatever happens to their friendship, “My belief is that the one important, supreme object is to advance your work” (Perkins to Wolfe, 1937). Wolfe was concerned that he wouldn’t be able to write without Perkins; evidence to the generosity of his support, Perkins writes to Wolfe downplaying his own role while building up the emotionally fragile author, “the writing is so important that it had to be done, and, I know, at great cost to you.” Perkins loved his vocation and believed books were more than stories for amusement, but realistic human reflections of life. He desired to become an editor to work with all types of writing, not just his own, as an author does.

Perkins felt there was immense worth in the business of bringing books into the world. His conviction, perhaps, drew him to the profession. In a letter to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings he reflects on his founding ideas of working with writing, “the truly important men were the school-teacher, the newspaper editor, and the clergyman. The doctor, too, was more respected than the business man. These people were supposed to have made a sacrifice because they cared more to serve their professions, and what they meant, than for money” (Perkins to Rawlings 1940). The last thing Wolfe ever wrote just before dying, and against doctor’s orders, was a letter to Perkins acknowledging his selfless and skillful aid. Perkins was not selfless; Wolfe was projecting his own perception onto him. Perkins did not seek the fame of authorship, he desired to work with writing behind the scenes, he wanted Wolfe to succeed. Although editors and writers both bring forth texts, they are entirely different creatures with entirely different functions.

### **3.12 How Maxwell Perkins Reads a Book**

Editors are a means to an end. When the end is successful, it is glorified through praise, lauded with awards, and studied in schools; the means of its production is largely unnoticed. Conversely, when the end is not successful, people tend to blame editor. Perkins liked the anonymous nature of literary publishing, “It is my conviction that an editor should be even more obscure than a child, who should be seen. The editor should be neither seen nor heard, or so I think” (Perkins to Cowden, 1945). Editing is an intellectual contribution to someone else’s writing. It is not authorship, but literary support.

The editorial literacy of Maxwell Perkins, revealed through his own words, illustrate an editor whose focus is channeled through to the intent of the writer. Perkins is specific with his conviction that editors do not revise. Awhile after Wolfe left the publishing house of Scribner's, a book was published that largely blamed editors and publishers for ruining authors like Wolfe because of forced revision requirements they had to meet in order to be published. According to Wheelock, Perkins was outraged at the blatant misunderstanding of the role of an editor and was compelled to write the book's author in order to educate him about the role of an editor: "Editors aren't much, and can't be. They can only help a writer realize himself, and they can ruin him if he's pliable;" "The editors I know shrink from tampering with a manuscript and do it only when it is required of them by the author;" "When an editor gets to think differently from that, to think he knows more about a writers book than a writer - and some do - he is dead, done for, and dangerous" (to Anonymous, 1943). Perkins takes umbrage with the idea that editors "discover" anyone. After all, it is their very job to recognize and foster talent, "was a jeweler ever praised because he knew a diamond from a lump of glass?"

In a letter to a friend complaining about the misinformed book blaming editors, he writes, "The trouble with reviewers, and with editors, is so simple that nobody gets it. They ought to just take a book and give themselves to it, and read it like a regular citizen and see whether they like it or not. They ought not to apply their standards and frames and reference. And all that, to it, until afterwards" (to Pennell, 1944). Perkins worked to read a manuscript with an open mind, to absorb only what is in front of him, to see writing as its own thing, not a replication of anything else. He praises anything that is original, anything that cannot be compared to something that came before. He desires for

people to “judge books the way they judge people. When they meet a person and talk to him, they do not say he does resemble some other person...they just size him up on his own terms. That’s the only way to judge...many a reviewer and editor is nothing like he has the abilities to be” (to Pennell, 1944). Perkins feels that most book reviewers and trade editors sell themselves short because they’ve been taught to gage quality against some past measure of success.

Perkins felt an editor should trust their own judgement, not compare the text in front of them to another writers. He reiterates to Pennell that an editor needs to trust himself, “I know that, because of editors that have a magnificent equipment and appreciation too, and yet when it comes to some book that needs to be revised, they can only think of its revision, not in terms of the writer’s intent and capacities, but in terms of some classic that they measure everything of that kind against” (1944). Perkins’ editorial gift came from really listening to a writer to understand what they wanted to do, then critically suggest ways to get there. His colleague Wheelock felt the same about an editor’s supportive role. “The ideas and theories of an editor should not be obtruded; a writer must not substitute them for his own solution” (Wheelock’s Introduction, *Editor to Author*, 5). Wheelock describes how Perkins editorial comments were “always offered as suggestions merely, in the hope that they might “suggest” to a writer his own solution of the problem involved. It is the art of editorial suggestion that allowed for some authors to fully realize their story. Perkins is commendable for his willingness to entrench himself in a project for the sake of bringing forth a memorable story.

Not all editors of the time had the inclination or capacity to embed with a writer who, although creates moments of brilliance, has seemingly insurmountable difficulties.

Perkins thinks, “the percentage of the very good books – the really notable books – that are declined is higher than the percentage of the highly competent mediocrities. The reason is that the books of the greatest talent are almost always full of trouble, and difficult, and they do not conform to the usual standards. They are often strange” (to Bond, 1944). An insightful editor appreciates what is on the page of the submission, while thinking about the things that are not. As a skilled objective outsider, a person with editorial acumen has the ability to really hear what the author is trying to do and offer suggestions that ignite writing. They are intimately aware of the intellectual and physicality of the writing process; as such, editing is diagnosing and prescribing a suggestion for the writer to make their own. Perkins mourned the brilliant books that will never be read by a large audience because their writers lacked an intermediary to direct them to where they desired to go.

Maxwell Perkins edited in a collaborative conversation with a writer to help the writer get on the page the ideas in their head. Editing to Perkins was not mechanics, not textual cleanup, not void of intellect. His letters reveal an ideology of teaching a writer effective ways to strengthen the story at hand. One editorial luxury Perkins took was time; he felt writing blossom in its own speed. Writing Center work doesn’t always have that time; more than one student enters with a paper due that same day. The next chapter focuses on Katharine White. She edited a weekly magazine that required a stricter adherence to supporting writers on a deadline. Despite the urgency, her editorial letters adhere to the same encouraging support. Many of the writers she “discovered” went on to literary greatness.

## Ch. 4

### Editing is Directive Guidance

#### Case Study: Katharine S. White

*Katharine White was uncompromising with the quality of work she desired from her authors. Her editorial approach was of an enforcer guide who, with kindness, insisted on perfection. She deftly navigated difficult editorial conversations with writers who bristled at any suggestion to alter their words. White guided young unknown writers to literary greatness with an editorial eye for developing talent. As an editor for a weekly periodical, she was relentlessly efficient in her production of reader's reports. Her husband, author E. B. White described her editing as "cheering and steering" an author toward their goals.*

#### 4.1 Background and Influence

Katherine White came to *The New Yorker* in 1925 as part-time editorial reader. She was hired at \$25 a week; two weeks later she was offered a full-time position for twice the salary. The publication was founded by Harold Ross as a sophisticated humor magazine, just six months before White started. She championed the inclusion of serious fiction and was appointed the first fiction editor. Although some of her own writing was published in the magazine, it was as an editor that she extended her influence on contemporary literature; "As William Shawn, the editor of the magazine after Ross's death, in 1951, wrote in White's obituary in 1977, 'More than any other editor except Harold Ross himself, Katharine White gave *The New Yorker* its shape, and set it on its course" (Hess). Brendan Gill, in his memoir detailing his time at the magazine, also credits her with helping invent the publication; he called her Ross's "intellectual conscience." White was a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, spoke four languages,

thoroughly knew the bible, had the ability to recognize writing talent, and exuded “uncompromising taste that helped to elevate the magazine to the near-mythic status it enjoyed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century” (Ojala). Yet, like a majority of editors, it is hard to find details of her handiwork, although her fingerprints linger everywhere.

So ghostly is Katharine White as an editor<sup>18</sup> that descriptions of her and evidence of the degree of influence she had on literature come through third parties, from the biographies of the authors she guided. A lengthy biography in *The New Yorker*, written by Nancy Franklin nearly 20 years after White’s death, offers insight to her role as an editor. In the piece, Scott Elledge, E. B. White’s biographer, “acknowledges Katharine White’s influence on twentieth-century letters by listing the writers she brought to the magazine, ‘James Thurber, Vladimir Nabokov, Marianne Moore, John O’Hara, Mary McCarthy, Clarence Day, S.N. Behrman, Jean Stafford, William Maxwell, Ogden Nash, Irwin Shaw, Nadine Gordimer, John Cheever, and John Updike” (Franklin). “Under her guidance, *the New Yorker* established itself as a vehicle for fiction. To prosper as a woman in a man’s industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century required a commanding presence. It required a self-assuredness that enabled White to argue for or against authors in editorial meetings. Harrison Kinney, in his biography of James Thurber, writes “nearly all description of Katharine sooner or later includes the adjective “formidable”” (in Franklin). Perhaps her intimidating demeanor stemmed from her complete conviction in the talents of the authors she was promoting. Third party description of her are mixed; to those who worked with her in the capacity of a colleague she is portrayed as abrasive. To

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<sup>18</sup> She is not even listed on the Wikipedia page for *The New Yorker* as of writing this in July 2019. Not that one should cite Wikipedia in their dissertation, but still.

many, those who worked with her as an author, she is described as nurturing and even maternal.

#### **4.2 Editorial Beliefs and Practices**

If a piece of writing didn't meet the standard of excellence she had for the magazine's reader, she would not recommend it for publication, even if the author was already well known. Further rejections from White came from an author's unwillingness to fit the writing to the rigid column space; a magazine, unlike a book, is very much structured by layout. The editor of a magazine must both work in development and mechanics. More so than her counterparts in trade publishing, White operated as an acquisition, development and copy editor. White's editorial guidance flourished, even within the rigid parameters of magazine. John Updike describes her at work, "To say that she took to her editorial work here like a duck to water would be an understatement, since heaven provides water whereas she to a marked degree had to create the element she prospered in" (for *The New Yorker*). She had an unyielding commitment to standards which contributed to her reputation for being standoffish. Conversely, by many accounts she was considered a kindhearted person. According to Updike, in his book, *Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism*, "the memories of most who knew her even slightly, is how much warmth she did convey, above and beyond as well as within her editorial duties" (850). Described in her biography, *Onward and Upward* by Linda H. Davis, White's son-in-law, Louis Stableford, portrays her as "a velvet hand in an iron glove" (144). Her initial impression was of confidence and dominance. Yet her letters reveal true affection and even friendship.

White believed that editors should also write; she published several pieces of her own in *The New Yorker* from time to time and eventually wrote a gardening book after her retirement. In college, White wrote actively and contemplated a career as writer until she discovered editing. According to Davis, White considered herself a more skilled editor than writer, “She was a natural editor, in her feeling for literature, and in a complex, inborn need: to be challenged, intellectually and creatively; to work with people; to nurture others. In her contact with writers, whom she endlessly reassured, counseled, encouraged, and comforted, and to whom she was always available...” (73). White’s affinity for fostering language suited her desire to work with young authors; she took a personal interest in their progress. According to her husband, E.B. White, “Katherine S. White was of the opinion that “a writers is a special being, as fascinating as a bright beetle”” (Davis 180). During the majority of her time at *The New Yorker* she was married to E. B. White,<sup>19</sup> who was hired as a staff writer on her recommendation.

Katharine White recognized the writing talent of E.B. White<sup>20</sup> early on. By several accounts, E.B. White was particularly sensitive and needed time away in solitude to create. Katharine White’s attunement to the needs of writers bolstered her defense of their unique methods for creative production. Her time as a writer prior to her editorial career allowed her greater understanding of the writing process, “Katharine White, who was Katherine Sergeant Angell at the beginning of her *New Yorker* career, had an editor’s life too, she knew the stories that might not work and that writers might be unpredictable

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<sup>19</sup> Of *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte’s Web* and Of Strunk & White to my fellow word nerds. Here’s a fun fact - “Until the 1999 updating of the fourth edition of *The Elements of Style*, the Whites wedding day was memorialized as an example in Chapter 1, Rule 3, ‘enclose parenthetic expressions between commas’: ‘Wednesday, November 13, 1929’” (Garvey).

<sup>20</sup> He was never referred to as E.B. (Elwyn Brooks) by anyone who knew him, always Andy.

and unreliable, but she worried more about her writers' disappointments than about her own; to her, an editor's life was one of constantly renewed fulfillment" (Franklin). The personal blending of writing and editing kept White fluent in the languages of both fields.

White's nature was a private one, adhering to the editorial affinity for mostly public anonymity. According to Davis, "she scorned publicity, not out of shame but in aesthetic distaste; when, in 1937, she was invited to be included in a book called 'Women of Achievement,' she declined, saying, 'I can't see any reason for such a book, other than to satisfy the vanity of the ladies described in it. (119). She understood that the writing should take center stage, the author close by its side, but the editor must remain behind the curtain. Several of the people that write about her, describe how much of her time was spent alone in a room – reading, writing, and editing. Her personality is perhaps finally understood in this context: as one who needed this kind of solitary activity, and consequently more replenishment than the ordinary person needs from the world outside.

John Updike, who was edited by White, expands on the idea that her creative medium was improving the text of others. He writes, "the satisfaction Katharine White took in her work focused on the product and did not ask that she herself be made widely visible" (in *The New Yorker* 76). She was a prolific editor, dedicated to the success of the magazine. She even read manuscripts on vacation and while living on a farm in Maine with E. B. White during the time he was writing *Charlotte's Web* and *Trumpet of the Swan*. She sent and received daily packages from her Manhattan office, keeping up nearly the same pace as when she was in the city, "her creativity expressed itself not only in her own slight, through confident and lively, literary output, but in her endless editing" (Updike). It is as if she could never stop editing, she returned to the main office, stepping

out of semi-retirement after the Second World War, when a managing editor after Ross died unexpectedly.

### 4.3 Project Source Materials

There is no exclusive collection of White's editorial letters to document her contribution to the literary development of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Passages from her letters can be found in in the published biographies of her authors, or in the writings from other staff of *The New Yorker*. Much of the correspondence from her early years was not kept, as the success of the magazine was uncertain. The one formal biography dedicated exclusively to Katharine S. White, *Onward and Upward*, covers her entire life span, tracing the family's history, exploring her childhood, and revealing details of her personal life, both domestic and social. After Katharine White's death, E. B. White cultivated a working relationship with the biographer, Linda H. Davis, because he wanted "people to know about the important work she had done (as a writer, he had always been the center of attention) and to rescue her from the shadows that editors work in" (xxiii). In Davis' book there are excerpts of editorial letters pulled from the archives.

E. B. White had published a collection of his own letters<sup>21</sup> and he desired recognition for his wife, something she may not have allowed if she were still alive. The White's wrote to each other with great regularity when they were apart. There are only hints of Katharine White's editorial position in the E.B. White collection. After her death, the correspondence in Katharine White's possession was donated to the Special

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<sup>21</sup> At the encouragement of his children's book editor, Ursula Nordstrom.

Collection Department at Bryn Mawr College. Her personal collection of books written by her *New Yorker* authors were donated to the Rare Books Room at Bryn Mawr.

#### 4.4 Union of Editor and Author

In 1925, E. B. White began to send in short prose pieces to the magazine, “the writing was beautifully clear and relaxed, in the style that appealed to Harold Ross. After the magazine published about a dozen of these contributions, Katharine Angell<sup>22</sup> suggested that Ross offer White a job as a staff writer. Ross invited White to drop by the office. When he did, he was met in the reception area by Mrs. Angell” (Davis 77).

Although White was hesitant to accept the position because he didn’t want to be tied down by full-time employment, he did. E. B. White moved into an office with fellow writer James Thurber, who became a lifelong friend. Katharine was editor to both of them.

K. White’s first relationship with E.B. White was as his editor. In that role she encouraged him to continue writing. She bolstered his confidence, writing, “I’ll bet on you whatever you do” (to E.B. White, July 1929). Prior to the time period when they were married E. B. White was feeling “morose and surely” from his full-time job and thinking of quitting. White’s biographer notes, “that summer he had turned thirty and reached a crisis of indecision about his future” (Davis 91). He was contemplating giving up writing. In a lengthy letter written in July of 1929, Katharine offers a glimpse of the

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<sup>22</sup> Katharine was already married. The marriage was failing due to Mr. Angell’s infidelities, but blamed anecdotally later by Katharine White because Mr. Angell didn’t find anything redeeming in *The Great Gatsby* (Davis 84). Most likely however, it collapsed after Mr. Angell hit Katharine during a fight; she walked out, flew to Reno and got a divorce. It was 1929.

personal editorial support to which many of her authors describe, “You feel that in thirty years you haven’t produced a really important book, poem or piece of prose – Most people haven’t by then. It seems to me, though, that you are preeminently a writer – everything you do has a certain perfection that is rare.” She goes on to describe the intellectual success of his section of the magazine. She reminds him that the accolades for his writing have come from others as well “now I quite understand why you don’t want to go on writing what you call ‘palpitating paragraphs’ all your life and appreciate your feeling that writing is fun when you don’t have to do it, when you do it as an amateur and not because you have to sit before a typewriter and turn out so many words a week.” K. White implores him to really consider the hardships of the physical trades, of the bleakness of life as a vagabond, and in comparison to other office jobs, writing for *The New Yorker* isn’t that bad. She suggests he work just three days a week and write or not:

For you to give up writing now would be like a violinist so good that he could always be the Concert Master of one of the four or five leading orchestras of the world, giving up fiddling because he could be Heifetz. Perhaps you’ll never be a Heifetz, perhaps you will, I can’t say...But it doesn’t seem sensible for a concert master to throw over music, the thing he loved most on the world, because he can’t be a Heifetz. The least you’ll ever be in my estimation, is a concert master (ellipsis in original, K White (nee Angell) to EB White July 1929).

E.B. White continued to write for the magazine, and with the encouragement of his wife, he took time away to work on a children’s book about a mouse-like boy, an idea that he had been developing for several years. In the postscript of a letter to Katharine, E.B. White calls her his “best friend and severest critic” (Davis 117). One can speculate on the

myriad of editorial conversations between the Whites. However, in an interview for *the Paris Review*, E.B. White describes Katharine White's expanding editorial responsibilities for the magazine. What is revealing however, is not that she had a hand in all aspects of production, but how she operated as an editor; "Katharine was soon sitting in on art sessions and planning sessions, editing fiction and poetry, cheering and steering authors and artists along the paths they were eager to follow" (Davis 114). It is the cheering and steering that emerges as constants in the available correspondence. Her unwavering belief in the writer's ability and her gentle nudges for a writer to adjust something in the text is demonstrative of her editorial literacy.

#### **4.5 Raising the Bar for Children's Literature**

In 1933, A couple of years after the Whites had a son, K. White began to review children's books, "which had not been taken seriously at *The New Yorker*. She considered both text and illustrations as equally important; she criticized books that were condescending towards children or that engaged in 'sentimentality, coyness, or moralizing.' As fiction editor, White convinced Harold Ross to publish submissions he was prone to reject, such as stories by Eudora Welty and John O'Hara. She also persuaded him to permit, possibly offensive language in the dialogue of stories in which the words were used to create character" (Ojala). She believed that children were underestimated in their ability to comprehend more complex terms, writing in a *New Yorker Review* in 1935, "children can take subordinate clauses in their stride" (Davis 105). She reviewed children's books in addition to her full-time editorial work, feeling the need to "keep her hand in formal composition" (Davis 104). She rallied against the

trend to protect children from being scared by a book, “the monotony of little pioneer after little pioneer, of stories so continuously placed in the quainter periods of American history, is appalling” (Davis 105). White also challenged the industry to apply robust critique to works for children.

In the published review in *The New Yorker* in November of 1939, she challenged her fellow reviewers to not assume there is good in every book for a child as they assume there is good in every actual child; “they seem to regard books for children with the same tolerant tenderness with which nearly any adult regards a child.” For fifteen years, White provided approximately 50 concise summaries, twice a year, on new books available for children.

During this same time period White began to work with Clarence Day on what would become his *Life with Father* series. In only two years, from 1933 – 1935, the magazine would publish more than eighty of his short stories and poems (Davis 112). There are copies of some of the editorial letters White wrote to Day; some reject a submission, some reject with the future possibility of acceptance, and some make suggestions to alter a piece for current publication. The Day letters offer a glimpse to White’s personal recipe for the editorial letter, a combination of news, business, and personal information. White often begins her letters with publishing logistics, due dates, layouts, and perhaps references to the content of current issues. The middle section is where the developmental suggestion appears. With a skilled writer like Day, White doesn’t actually offer a recommendation, but leaves the critique open, “Somehow in tone it is more of a quiet childhood story than a character piece or an amusing anecdotal narrative.” In this particular example, the story was not being accepted: “The reason I am

asking you to hold it is that it seems more of a personal reminiscence and less of a Father story than some others” (White to Day 1935). White ends the letters with personal news about her family. She manages a tone of professionalism and friendly affection that typifies the editorial *we*. The feeling conveyed is one of alignment with the author, but constrained by business procedures. If a piece had been purchased for printing, White continued the editing as a proofreader and her focus shifted to the sentence level: comma usage, verb tense, and occasional word choice suggestions. Day was appreciative of the precision and accuracy with which White and *The New Yorker* insisted on perfection. Not every author White worked with found her attention to detail inspiring.

#### **4.6 Acumen in Dealing with Difficulty**

Nabokov and White worked together for many years. They had been introduced by Edmund Wilson, who worked as an editorial colleague and author for Katharine White. Nabokov was difficult to edit; he resisted nearly all suggested changes, despite the need to replace words that had not translated accurately from Russian to English. He learned English by reading the Oxford English Dictionary and some of his word choices affected his intended meaning.

In an editorial letter to Nabokov regarding his submission, *Portrait of My Mother*, White wrote a detailed letter with suggestions and, more importantly, she reveals the reason the suggestions are needed. She begins the letter by complimenting the work, apologizing for the letter as she knows it will “fill you with despair.” She asks for his cooperation “simplifying the vocabulary wherever possible and wherever it does not hurt your literary effect.” She explains that *The New Yorker* likes unfamiliar words, but there

are so many in the piece that it reads more “like academic rather than literary writing.” She provides a reason for him to latch onto to why he does this, which is an editorial skill that shifts the negative focus for the author. White writes, “I think it happened only because it must be sometimes impossible for you to know which of your unfamiliar English words send an English speaking and reasonably well educated person to a dictionary and which don’t.” She references the Editor-in-Chief, Harold Ross, and the position that *The New Yorker* strives for writing complex things with direct simplicity. She provides the example that while to him, “words like *synesthete*, *palpabral*, *photism*, and *asemia* are as familiar as *cat* and *dog*” most readers would need to consult a dictionary to understand them; “and if one must seek the dictionary it mars the pleasure of reading your story.” White ends the letter by reminding him that these “penciled changes are *merely suggestions*” but she would hate to lose this piece (all italics in original letter). White “got into the habit of sending Nabokov a Varitype or typescript copy of his manuscript, a step omitted with most *New Yorker* writers, who were usually sent only the final, ‘author’s proof’ (White to Nabokov 1957). White’s methodology includes asking permission to edit, asking for help with her suggestions, and gently leading him toward the editing needed for publication. She understood Nabokov’s particular writer’s need for control and nuanced her suggestions to meet this need.

In a book about Nabokov by Andrew Field, the uniqueness of the White/Nabokov, editor/author relationship is described, “it is characteristic of the relationship between Nabokov and *The New Yorker* that he accepted occasional emendations, something he has never done for any other publisher or journal” (265). Letters between White and Nabokov are filled with arguments over usage and style, each

a perfectionist adhering to the grammatical foundations they were taught; Nabokov's English is rooted in Latin, White's in Anglo-Saxon. In a letter to her husband, White describes the challenge of editing Nabokov who does not want to be edited, but whose story needs to be turned into English (as cited in Davis 147). In addition to the word choice, White rejected some Nabokov stories based on content. Despite several rejections, "When Katharine finally retired from *The New Yorker*, she had edited about thirty-five of the forty-five Nabokovs published by the magazine" (Davis 151). In a letter to White, Harold Ross laments Nabokov becoming a Professor of English in reference to all the behind the scenes editorial work that went into getting his writing readable for a larger audience (1948). Ross felt that White and *The New Yorker*, in general boosted him into the position.

While Nabokov was teaching at Cornell in the early fifties, he wrote his seventh book, *Lolita*. He was afraid he would lose his teaching job if the book was published in the United States, so he arranged publication through Olympia Press in Paris. However, he wanted his trusted editor's opinion before sending it out. Without warning he sent the book to White's home on a Friday, with instructions to read it over the weekend as he had arranged for it to be picked up by Western Union on Monday morning. According to White, the instructions said she was not to show it, or even speak of it to William Shawn, the current *New Yorker* executive editor. Nabokov didn't have the same trusted Editor / Author relationship with him. White was unable to read the manuscript over the weekend as she had a house full of grandchildren and was hosting a dinner on Saturday night. It was picked up Monday, unread.

After its publication, Nabokov sent her a copy. White wrote to Nabokov while on vacation in March of 1957 with her editorial comments post publication (Davis 4-5). She writes, “I couldn’t put it down once I started it, which is a real tribute for no one can put a novel down easier than I can, and this is an extra tribute in this case because the book colored my days so darkly that I could well have avoided it in my escapist vacation mood” (1957). White explains to Nabokov of her difficulty with the subject in part because she is vacationing with her five granddaughters, one of whom is of similar age and description to Lolita. Concluding, “you will gather that I don’t like the book. It wouldn’t be honest of me to say that I do, in spite of my constant recognition of its great virtuosity. It isn’t because it shocked me and I don’t think the book should be banned. That is all wrong.” White next offers the editorial commentary she might have offered if she had been able to read the book prior to publication as Nabokov had wanted, “It is just that I have never been able to feel real sympathy and identification with psychopaths. To me they seem in the realm of medicine rather than in that of humanity and I’ve never liked fiction that is all out pathological.” What is notable is that White had no logical cause to offer criticism. She knew how sensitive Nabokov was at being critiqued. The book was already published, and she was risking offending Nabokov and losing future submissions to *The New Yorker*. Aware of this she writes in her letter that she may be behaving, “as a fool to go out on a limb like this for you are sure to be angry with me. But I like you too much and admire you too much to just pass it over politely with little or no comment.” Although the book was considered obscene for the time, Nabokov sought the input from his editor as he knew her focus would be on the craft of narrative, less on the moral implications experienced through the content. White abhorred

censorship and felt regret *The New Yorker* wasn't able to be the first to publish parts of the book. In part of her letter she praises Nabokov, "The second volume even aroused to a small degree my sympathy for Humbert. So you see you really completely achieved what you set out to: you raised my hair, gave me the horrors, stimulated my mind, aroused my antagonism and, grudgingly, my admiration." Although considered a refined individual, White was not prude. She ends the letter with humor, "Reading the book is something I'll never forget though it made me thoroughly miserable and failed to elevate me, as it seems to have elevated many of your readers." Wink wink. (March 1957)

#### **4.7 Editing is Brainstorming**

In contrast to Nabokov, short story writer and novelist Jean Stafford was welcoming to the editorial suggestions of White. So much so that White changed her editorial tactics to leaving the suggestion wide open for the author to decide, "Of course you yourself can decide better than I" (Letter Stafford, 1951). Also in contrast, was the type of editing Stafford needed. Whereas White and Nabokov debated words and structure to increase meaning, White and Stafford exchanged suggestions regarding "character, or plot development, clarification of certain details." Stafford was edited with ideas. Their relationship was filled with conversation, in the office, at lunch, and through their letters. White described working with her as so pleasant that she would "edit a Stafford story on vacation" (Davis 155). Stafford trusted the ideas of White and she was willing to try as many times as White asked in order to get the story to its most effective. In a letter to James Tanis, White explains that Stafford was "a remarkable reviser. Stories would come in with very hopeful material that hadn't quite jelled; and...over and over

again I [would] ask her to rewrite a story, and over and over again she [did] so successfully” (1975). Stafford trusted the process of rewriting, she blossomed under editorial guidance. She sought it out when creativity stalled.

In 1948, Jean Stafford was suffering from severe writer’s block. In an effort to spur writing, White freely shared with Stafford a story from her own life in the hope of unblocking the creative dam. White described a time in her childhood when, while vacationing at a lake, she was searching for and found the bodies of two drowned maids; she shared the details of what would become Stafford’s “*The Mountain Day*.” The story appeared in Stafford’s *Collected Stories*; a book dedicated to Katharine S. White that earned the Pulitzer Prize. According to Davis, “Katharine herself always wanted to turn it into a short story, but she realized that she never could – perhaps because she had long since decided she was an editor, not a writer, perhaps because she lacked the necessary distance to write about it” (Davis 8). Years later, White wrote that “Jean took this dreadful story and made it completely her own.” She also felt that the stories from Stafford’s own experience were better, and she was pleased her shared personal experience got Stafford back to writing. Part of editing for professional literary editors is helping their artists regain their voice. If there is an established relationship, this unblocking might come through a direct path of suggestion. The editor is aware of the skill of the author and provides a seed for the writer to nourish into their own story.

Stafford was not the only author who worked with White and benefited from an editorial suggestion before a word had even been written. S. N. Behrman was a playwright who wrote strong characters that dealt with moral issues. When Behrman began to struggle, White suggested he write about his own upbringing in narrative form.

He did and credited White with the push he needed to start again. Behrman “felt that she [White] alone was responsible for his recent memoir, *The Worcester Account*, which he had written at her suggestion (Davis 3). Both Stafford and Berman trusted the insight of White who knew their literary skillset and subjects that would appeal to them. Both took another’s idea and made it their own.

#### **4.8 Finding and Developing New Talent**

After publishing in the Harvard *Lampoon*, a young author, John Updike, started writing for *The New Yorker* under the editorial direction of Katharine White. His initial submissions were light verse. Later he wrote fiction under White’s editing. White was convinced of his talent, “In twenty-two-year-old John Updike Katharine realized that the magazine had hold of something special. She was at her attentive best, answering his questions patiently and in detail, quickly acknowledging the receipt of his manuscripts, whether or not they had been accepted or rejected” (Davis 164). Updike, like the majority of prolific authors have pieces outright rejected, or rejected with suggestions, and accepted with only a need for proofreading. The care White took is revealed in an excerpt from a letter for a piece, *Burning Waste*, that had been rejected, but with the condition of reworking it:

The lines at 1), we feel are not quite as good as they might be and we wonder whether they could be improved. They might even be expanded to a whole stanza since the wife seems to be a bit unceremoniously sandwiched between the light filament and death – so much that one editor felt she sounded like an object, not a person. However, if you can do it without adding, that would be even better.

At 2), the adjective down-directed seems a bit awkward.

At 3), we feel that this should be changed to “tossed in magazines.” Most people do not burn uncut books as trash and the words bring in a new element, or red herring of a sort, suggesting book-burning or that this man is unbalance or something not quite right, which we feel you do not intend. And we feel that “flipped,” though a more unusual word, was perhaps not quite as good as the more usual “tossed” here.

These are all just suggestions, of course, but I send them along for what they are worth and to show you that the poem interests us (July 21, 1954).

Updike’s good nature and appreciativeness is evident in in his reply, “I will try to do better.” (In Davis 164). In the subsequent published poem, *Burning Trash*, the wife gains humanity by being asleep and breathing low, down-directed is absent, and it is used-up news that is tossed into the fire. While the suggestions are taken, their authority remains with Updike.

Updike’s affection for White lasted his lifetime. As he was getting started as a writer, he wrote a letter of appreciation to his new editor, “I don’t know much about editors, but you have a freshness of reaction to printed words whose effect on me has always been tonic. I’ve enjoyed everything we’ve done together” (Updike’s Letter to White, 1959). Almost 30 years later, in another piece for *The New Yorker*, Updike writes again about the importance of the editorial work of Katharine White, “to the born editor, it must be, the mass of manuscripts looms as nature and experience do to the writer – as a superabundance to be selected from, and refined, and made shapely and meaningful” (76). Updike’s appreciation was in spite of differences he had with his editor. When

Updike's work went into the proofreading phase, he and White struggled more over the particulars of punctuation, especially colons, dashes, and commas.

Despite the disagreements on grammar, Updike wrote this to White, "The patient and abundant attention you have paid to my offerings this summer is one of the nicest things that had happened to me in my brief and luck life" (September 1954). Years later, White wrote to Updike, apologizing for her insistence on perfection with grammar and punctuation. She came to the realization that poetry should be afforded leniency against the strict rules of style (footnote in Davis 166). When she retired, she received a letter from Updike, "I am very sad, for myself, and for the magazine, for I think as an editor you are irreplaceable, and probably personally responsible for a giant part of the magazine's excellence in the last thirty years" (1959). Updike's writing earned him two Pulitzer Prizes, his literary accomplishments unquestionable; despite the accolades, he treasured the direction of his first editor. He was not the only one.

According to Davis's research, Nancy Hale, Whitney Balliett and S.J. Perelman were all writers who felt "sustained by Katharine's letters." As writers are developing their voice and influence, it is imperative they receive the affirmation from an authority that they are on the right track. Davis writes how the American poet, Marianne Moore observed White's "New Yorker protégées clinging to her like opossums" (160). White's guidance was a balm against the doubt that creeps in while drafting language together, "Joseph Mitchell kept one of her letters in the top drawer of his desk 'as a kind of touchstone' to reread when he became discouraged" and Robert Hale wrote, "I think I shall have your letter buried with me" (1972). Insecurity is a common plague for artists; a

stalwart tether of support in a letter is an insider's reminder that the creative path they are on is a good one. White helped new writers and she helped writers yet launched.

In a letter in 1953 to novelist Joel Sayre's daughter, while she was still in college, White offered her some advice and plenty of encouragement to keep writing, "I thought I'd give you a steer" (1953). She complimented the young woman on her story that appeared in the *Advocate*<sup>23</sup>. "Andy and I read it aloud one night and liked it so much that it made me hope you would have some short fiction to send to the *New Yorker*. It is certainly the best piece of writing in that issue of the *Advocate* and it made me hope that you would continue to write" (1953). Although White tells the girl the magazine wouldn't have bought the piece, she reassures her that it is not because of the quality of the story but because it is written using a first-person perspective in soliloquy form. White explains that the magazine published too many factual first-person accounts so including a fictional one would confuse the regular readers. Ending with praise and reassurance, White asks Sayre to see if one of the other women who submitted a poem for the same issue would send her something too, "I want to remind you that many of our writers sold us their first manuscripts while they were in college" (1953). Nora Sayre went on to have a career as an essayist, film critic for *The New York Times* and writing teacher at Columbia University.

Not only were Whites letters appreciated by her authors, she, herself kept letters as reminders of the literary relationships that sustained her. Katharine White kept, in her home in Maine, a letter on her desk; it is from one of the many authors she supported and directed. A passage reads, "To have your affection and warm letter made me feel

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<sup>23</sup> A literary magazine published by Radcliff College, the women's counterpart to Harvard until its full integration in 1999.

nurtured, as you did indeed always nurture me” (Davis 252). White as an editor was able to perceive the needs of the individual authors and mold her editorial role to meet those needs. To have the editorial literacy of Katharine White is to be warm and nurturing, to encourage, but also to uphold writing expectations.

#### **4.9 Editors Mentor Editors**

White not only fostered the careers of talented writers, but aspiring editors as well. Several of the young editors she mentored wrote about her guidance, Gardner Botsford, an Editor at *The New Yorker* described White as “someone whose standards and capabilities were so much higher than your own that you just sat down and shut up” (Franklin). According to Brendan Gill, one of her editorial protégés, White “gave him the literary courage to go beyond publishing a satirical weekly...under her, we learned to do better than we knew how to do.” She had a very genteel methodology when she worked with an author, a style that sometimes clashed with the way Harold Ross worked with an author and their writing. There is a description in the files of *The New Yorker* from a former colleague about the editorial differences:

There was a long memo to Ross about the editing of fiction: she listed twenty-seven names, all of the contributors who had complained, with varying degrees of vehemence, about being overedited, and she urged Ross to go easy with his queries, and told him that several important writers, including Faulkner and Hemingway, refused to submit their fiction to *The New Yorker* for fear of Ross’s tampering (Franklin).

White had a cultured diplomacy that soothed skittish authors while leading them toward editorial changes. William Maxwell, another editor of fiction for *The New Yorker*, and a colleague of Katharine White's for twenty-five years said this of White, "What was remarkable about her was that she was always reaching out toward writers who were not characteristic of the magazine. If there was a distance they couldn't quite bridge – he cites Nabokov, with his fondness for neologisms and archaisms – she always found a way to bridge it" (Franklin). White had been told by Harold Ross on more than one occasion that an editor is only as good as their replacement (Davis 159). The apprentice nature of the industry means that in addition to guiding authors to their intended goals, White had to seek and discover editorial talent that would support *The New Yorker*. Several of her assistants went on to become editors in their own right, even becoming her boss.

In a letter to Matthew Brucoli in 1971, White reflects on editing the stories of John O'Hara, which began to appear in the magazine in 1928. Throughout the course of his career, O'Hara had earned a reputation of being difficult. However White appears not to think so. She writes in her letter, "Like every good writer, he welcomed questions if they made sense to him and he was glad to have his very semi-occasional errors of syntax, style, or lack of clarity pointed out" (1971). White did not revise the writing, instead asking "that he make any rewordings himself." White, like the majority of editors avoid making changes directly on an author's piece. The ownership and authority belong to the author to accept, revise, and ignore the editive direction. Incoming O'Hara stories were first read by White's assistant, Wolcott Gibbs, who wrote an opinion on them and passed them along to White; White then read the submission herself, took Gibbs reader's report into consideration, added her own opinion, and sent all of it to Ross who had the

final say on publication. The editor/author relationship of Gibbs and O'Hara developed into friendship; several O'Hara stories were set in Gibbsville, a nod to his editor. The editor leaves behind books with no trace of their input, a better editor leaves behind more editors to quietly carry on shaping writing.

#### **4.10 Steadfast Encouragement**

The importance of encouragement for a writer should not be underestimated. Some writers thrive knowing that there is at least one completely invested reader who will positively respond to their text. Even established writers benefit from words of encouragement, as much as editorial suggestion. Updike reflected on the importance of this reassurance, "the attentive editor shapes, or at least pats, the writers" (Updike 851). The editorial role of the relationship requires praise, which according to Updike is the *least* an editor can provide. Encouragement gives hope to writer, who draws strength from the support. "Over and over, when I talked to writers who had worked with Katharine White, I heard tales of endless encouragement and support." (Nancy Franklin, *The New Yorker*). Writing is hard; there is an agony to getting it right. The role an editor plays in the production of text motivates the writer to work harder. It builds confidence for a person who may be plagued with doubt about the project or their skill. White, who was a stickler for perfection, was also generous in sharing her belief in her writer's skill.

Whereas Perkins edited with guided patience and White with an eye toward perfection, the next case study is of an editor who approached writing support as an enthusiastic catalyst to spur the best out of writers. The quirks of editors are as unique as the writers the bolster. Editorial literacy is reading the writing situation and drawing from

a skillset to support the writer in the best way possible. Editing is so much more than mechanics. In trade publishing or in a writing center, the alignment of editor to author can sometimes make all the difference to a fruitful partnership.

## Ch. 5

### Editing is Overwhelmingly Affirming

#### Case Study: Ursula Nordstrom

*The joy Ursula Nordstrom felt as an editorial midwife to children's literature is evident in the tone of her reader's reports and letters. She is a playful perfectionist who sustained lengthy conversations with her authors and illustrators as they created lasting books that shaped generations of children. She encouraged new ideas and viewed editing like a sounding board, writing to one author that she is "just thinking on paper" to spur their genius. She believed books for children could be complex and should challenge the status quo. She staunchly publicly defended her writers against censorship.*

#### 5.1 Background and Influence

When Ursula Nordstrom entered publishing in 1936, there was a tradition of mannerly, polite content in books written for children. Nordstrom's distaste for the precious, sentimental books written for young adults is evident in the projects she championed and through her epistolary correspondence; she disagreed with the rigid world of good and bad that permeated books for the young, persistently defending the validity of children's ideas. The openhearted respect for the opinions and perspectives of others, including of children and the authors who wrote for them, is a tenet of her literary editorial ideology. According to Leonard Marcus, her biographer, "she was children's literature's Maxwell Perkins, the single most creative force for innovation in children's book publishing in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century"(xvii). As an editor, Nordstrom managed to inhabit two key roles, the wants of the plural public and the needs of a singular author. Her guidance undoubtedly shaped the literary beginnings for many American children and offers a template for aspiring editors.

Nordstrom was a groundbreaking influence who worked to change the status quo in publishing. Not only did she play a hand in the evolution of appropriate content in books for children, she flourished on the business side of literary production as well. She was the first woman elected to a major publisher's Board of Directors. Then again, she was the first woman elected as vice president at Harper & Brothers. She was also the first woman, and the first person ever from the field of children's books, to win the Curtis Benjamin Award given by the Association of American Publishers in recognition of innovation and creativity in publishing. Nordstrom was responsible for many familiar children's classics including: *The Runaway Bunny*, *The Carrot Seed*, *Stuart Little*, *Goodnight Moon*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Harriet the Spy*, *Little Bear*, *Bedtime for Frances*, *The Giving Tree*, and she initiated the *I Can Read Books*. Editors leave their mark inaudibly, operating as an invisible force behind the person and product recognized by the public - the author and their book. Nordstrom's silent influence on children's literature, publishing, and how an editor can support her authors is remarkable.

Nordstrom had a knack for thinking on behalf of the young; she drew from her experience at boarding school and from her shame as a child of divorced parents. Her authorial guidance often encouraged more emotion in the text. She felt there was a lack of honesty in young adult books, eventually championing stories that broke with the established traditions of teen literature. She put forth stories in a gritty urban setting and stories that addressed taboo subjects like menstruation and homosexuality. Not only would she defend these topics that were considered impolite, she would defend the authors who wrote them. When a picture book of author and illustrator Maurice Sendak

featured a naked toddler cooking in a kitchen, Nordstrom publicly rebuked the librarian who cut out the boy's offending parts from every page of the book as not to upset the readers. In a Press Release from Harper, Nordstrom denounced the scissor destruction as an "act of censorship by mutilation rather than by obvious suppression" (in Marcus 334). She believed that teachers and librarians shouldn't be the ones to decide what was good, that judgement belonged to the reader. Nordstrom's strong editorial presence permitted her authors to focus on the writing and their creativity, while she took care of business end of getting books to a wider audience.

While in secondary school, Nordstrom aspired to be a writer, but she was encouraged by her mother to take secretarial courses instead of attending college, humorously telling a friend later in life that it wasn't just any college she didn't attend, but Bryn Mawr. Nordstrom never married or had children of her own. Asked what qualified her to edit children's books, she replied, "Well, I am a former child, and I haven't forgotten a thing" (Natov and Deluca 122). Nordstrom reveled in her exchanges with authors, both aspiring and accomplished, with whom with she corresponded up until her death in 1988.

If the author's medium is the book, the editor's is the letter. Her missives indicate overwhelming admiration and support for the people who brought these worlds to life. According to her biographer, "Whether in person or by letter, she coaxed authors toward perfection by a dazzling variety of means, including flattery, exhortation, extravagant praise, outrageous wit, guilt, self-parody, and self-deprecation" (Marcus xxix). Nordstrom wrote letters to inspire artists to create. Even when she was declining a manuscript, she hoped to frame the editorial rejection in a way to encourage the writer to

keep trying. When one of the editorial readers on her staff asked what to look for while going through manuscripts, Nordstrom replied, “if there is a really funny phrase or adroitly drawn character, I want to know it. Then when I turn down the manuscript, I can put something encouraging in my letter and maybe get something good” (Bader 635). A large portion of the letters reveal praising encouragement, even more than editorial suggestion, reinforcing the position that writers need an ally as they invent. Nordstrom cherished the “genius” authors who wrote books for children.

Part of the editorial legacy she leaves is the editorial position of keeping an open door. Not just physically<sup>24</sup>, but metaphorically for her authors to feel encouraged to seek her out with undeveloped, fledgling ideas. She strongly mentored ideas, as well as people, cultivating relationships that thrived with the “what if” questions that often start books for children. She was an editor steeped in speculative projects and embodied the nurturing support needed for writers to take risks.

## 5.2 Project Source Materials

The majority of references to Nordstrom’s letters are taken from the book, *Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*. The letters in this published collection were selected by Leonard S. Marcus, who combed through “tens of thousands” (xi) of letters spanning the 45 years from 1937 to 1982 to find the right ones. Marcus selected 270 letters and ordered them chronologically for cohesion and readability. All but a few of the

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<sup>24</sup> When my stepfather was just starting his career as a children’s book author, he crossed the threshold of Nordstrom’s open door and sold her a manuscript. She took pride in always being accessible to the potential talent that showed up in person.

letters are published unabridged; minor spelling mistakes were corrected by Marcus. Nordstrom's hand-written marginalia is identified as well as words or phrases in the letters that she underlined, capitalized, italicized, or put in quotes for emphasis. The only names redacted are those from persons who were not a part of professional publishing, children and general readers. Mostly, Nordstrom wrote the letters from her office at Harper, they were transcribed for print publication from carbon copies in the HarperCollins archives.

Nordstrom understood the appeal of a collection of letters, it was she who encouraged E.B. White to publish his own correspondence, *Letters of E.B. White*. Then after he successfully did so, she joked with her other authors on the importance of writing letters back to her so they may one day have another book to publish. Marcus writes that Nordstrom read the published letters of Katherine Mansfield, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and even Maxwell Perkins. In the limited communication options of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, letters were a consistent and reliable form of communication. Nordstrom frequently notes in her letters how, as she was unable to speak to the author through the phone, she wanted to get down her thoughts while they were fresh in her mind. Although there are letters that are detailed reader's reports, a majority of them she wrote spontaneously; they acted as an extension of her thinking, jumping from topic to topic. In the Acknowledgements section of the book, Marcus recalls meeting many of Nordstrom's authors in person, "Invariably, when the editor's name came up, the first thing said was, 'She wrote such wonderful letters!'" (xi). Readers Reports, although helpful, aren't necessarily wonderful, as the author must wrestle with a host of suggestions that may reshape the manuscript. One aspect of Nordstrom's editorial input that made her a force, was the individualized

support and candor with which she bolstered the author. The developmental portion of her letters reveal a keen memory for the author's purpose, stated at the beginning of a project. If a manuscript fell short of what the author was trying to accomplish, Nordstrom reminded them of their narrative intention and sustained the position that they were gifted enough to get the project closer to perfection. This refusal to accept anything but the very best caused some writers to seek another editor to work with. Nordstrom mostly accepted their departure as part of the unique dynamic of the author/editor relationship.

What follows are the results of an analysis of the 270 letters featured in *Dear Genius*. I have organized the examples of Nordstrom's editorial style into author profiles; this approach allows for greater illustration of how Nordstrom handled a variety of editorial situations. The focused study pulls forth threads of support and consistencies in the developmental guidance. A proponent of collaborative efforts, Nordstrom relishes to the input of others she trusts, valuing their suggestion more than her own at times. Nordstrom's view on the importance of encouragement is thickly woven throughout her letters. She embodied an editorial doctrine of esteem for her authors, holding them in the highest regard. Her supportive approach was the same for an unread young writer or an award-winning author. Editorial literacy for Nordstrom is deeply human. She strongly values the person behind the craft.

### **5.3 Developing New Talent**

Many of Nordstrom's authors were unaware of their ability to write for children when she contacted them. Some were young, still in high school; others only imagined themselves creating for adult audiences. Shel Silverstein was an illustrator for *Playboy*

when Nordstrom reached out to him asking if he would consider writing for children. She saw talent in the travel cartoons he produced and worked through another one of her authors, Tomi Ungerer, to meet him. Her letters to Silverstein reveal a dogged belief in him; he resisted her request for him to try his hand at children's literature several times. Nordstrom felt similar towards a young Maurice Sendak. This confidence certainly acted as a guy line to support and launch Sendak into an esteemed career as a creator of make-believe. Nordstrom coached him to expand his medium to include words that worked in concert with the pictures to create original narrative with strong emotional appeal for children.

In 1948, high school graduate Maurice Sendak started working part-time designing the storefront windows of F.A.O. Schwarz, a large toy store in New York. His delightful visual creations caught the attention of Frances Chrystie, the book buyer for the children's book department. Chrystie knew Nordstrom was always searching for talent, so she showed his portfolio to her. After meeting Sendak talking with him about his ideas and seeing some of his sketches, Nordstrom immediately hired him to illustrate *The Wonderful Farm* by Marcel Aymé. It was the spring of 1950, Sendak was 22 at the time. Sendak had been drawing for some time but had been told by other publishers who saw his sketchbook that his pictures were "homely." Nordstrom saw something more in the images of "strange little children." This belief in his ability was the beginning of a literary friendship that would span both their lives and leave a significant mark on children's fiction. "Together, Nordstrom and Sendak took children's literature in an entirely different direction. Far from picturing childhood as a time of blissfully happy innocence, Sendak portrays childhood as a cauldron of vividly felt emotions, including

anger, joy and fear” (MacPherson 1). Nordstrom’s mantra was to put forth authentic narrative for an audience of children who deserved stories unfiltered through adult ideologies.

In 1967, Naburma Buris, a teacher at New York’s High School for Art and Design encouraged one of her students, John Steptoe, to bring some of his artwork to the children’s department at Harper. Nordstrom was out of the office when he arrived, he did not have an appointment, but a member of the staff recognized his talent and encouraged him to come back a few days later to meet with Nordstrom. After the meeting, Nordstrom wrote to Steptoe with characteristic compliments and encouragement, “We think you are tremendously talented and we are delighted to think that your first book will be for us” (1967). He didn’t yet have a manuscript, just ideas. That didn’t matter to Nordstrom, she saw something in the images that she wanted to foster into a more complete narrative. She validates his personal experiences, “And never forget that what you told me is something ONLY YOU know about; no one knows just what you know about anything,” (emphasis hers 1967). There were not a lot of books on the shelf that dealt with the lived experience of Steptoe, Nordstrom coaxed him into writing about his life to meet this gap in children’s literature.

To illustrate her commitment to the young man, in a letter, Nordstrom explains exactly how to create a rough dummy for a picture book: “Take 16 sheets of paper 8 by 10 (say) or 10 by 8 if you prefer. And make a 32 page dummy, starting on the first right hand as Page 1 and ending on the last left hand page as 32. Allow one page for a title page, one for a copyright, one for a half-title, or dedication, and start the story and pictures on the double-page spread made by pages 4 and 5” (to Steptoe June 1967). After

setting up the logistics for a picture book dummy, which could have been easily passed to a junior staff member, Nordstrom advises Steptoe not to stress about the “plot” (quotes are hers). She further writes, “It is the emotion that is important.” This tenet guides many of her editorial directives and subsequent acceptance choices. In an interview in 1979, Nordstrom was asked how she found so many quality authors, asked if she felt she had an instinct to find writers. She answered that she went a lot with hunches, but never felt she had particular ability to spot talent, “I’m a good listener. I’ve discovered that if people really think you are listening, and you can convince them of that, they will tell you the most amazing things” (Natov & DeLuca, 122). It is evident that Nordstrom listened to Steptoe as she writes about her deep interest in his idea of a mother babysitting another child from the perspective of the mother’s own boy; “I think the ideas you expressed so well, and the feeling you managed to communicate to me although it was very late on a very tiring day, could well make a fine picture book” (to Steptoe June 1967). Being heard is what an author needs, knowing that someone understands their ideas from truly listening or reading, becomes paramount to production.

Four months later, Nordstrom wrote an editorial letter to Steptoe after she reviewed the first draft and dummy of *Stevie*, the story they talked about in their first meeting. The letter exemplifies how Nordstrom editorially blended support and suggestion when working with an author. She compliments the images he sent in and asks him to find places in the story where he could “tell a little more” (to Steptoe October 1967). She recalls their earlier conversation to remind him that her suggestions stem from his ideas. She mentions how he had described a character’s motivation using the phrase “help out” and suggests he use the phrase to develop the character. Nordstrom does

not use her words, but the words and phrases of the author, when she suggests editorial changes. This skill requires listening and a deep level of engagement with the material, not just on the person presenting the material. It is not, *I think* on behalf of the editor, but *according to our conversation*. It is part of the editorial *we*. This is a vital component in a successful editor/author relationship. Nordstrom continues in her editorial letter to Steptoe, “So any letters I write you or anything I say is never never even to try to foist any ideas of my own on you. Please believe that. I have the greatest respect for you as an artist, young as you are” (to Steptoe October 1967). An editor does not take away the authority of the author, an editor puts forth the author’s own ideas as a springboard for their artistry. Through conversation and experience, the editor knows what the author is trying to accomplish. Nordstrom describes her role to Steptoe, “I know what you want to do and all I want to do is recognize it when you have done it.” This trust on the part of the author is principal in a successful creative relationship. Trusting that a knowledgeable guide will let you know when your project has arrived.

#### **5.4 Guiding Established Authors**

For many years, Syd Hoff was an illustrator and cartoonist for *The New Yorker*. His primary audience had been adults when he sent a manuscript to Ursula Nordstrom for a book length work for children, his first. Unlike Sendak and Steptoe, Hoff had been blending words with pictures for years in his syndicated strips, *Tuffy* and *Laugh It Off*. Despite experience with visual and narrative development, Hoff still required lengthy editorial input on the manuscript that would eventually become *Danny and the Dinosaur*. Nordstrom writes, “It is very good on the whole but it does need more work” (1957). She

felt the book would be perfect for the newly introduced *I Can Read* genre. She needed something to compete with Random House's *Beginner Books* series featuring Dr. Seuss.

The reader's report to Hoff (Nordstrom to Hoff 1957) is very detailed, the lengthiest editorial letter in Marcus' collection. Part of being a developmental editor is to decide how much suggestion and nudging an author can work with before the doubt creeps in and they shut down creative production. There is a sliding scale between the balance of encouragement and suggestion; younger writers require more affirmation as they make the changes, more seasoned writers can handle direct suggestion. Hoff had been writing for years and the tone in his letter is far more particular than the tone of the letter Nordstrom writes to Steptoe when he is getting started. The collaboration between editor and author during the development was a success, *Danny the Dinosaur* has been in print since 1958. The following is an excerpt from the original editorial letter Nordstrom sent to Hoff:

First page of text and pictures I think you should just say 'One day Danny went to the museum.' (He didn't actually want to 'see how the world looked a long, long time ago,' as you put it, do you think? Very unchildlike. He might have wanted to go see the dead mummies, or other specific things in a museum, but I wouldn't mention that here because you mention it on the following pages. (1957)

Nordstrom reiterates the importance of starting with short simple and clear sentences for a book aimed at new readers. She suggests Hoff list what Danny sees for several pages, "He saw Indians. He saw bears. He saw..." She reminds him that too much detail like, "Roman chariots" or "Egyptian mummies" may challenge a new reader too much and slow the pace of the story down. Nordstrom writes, page by page, her thoughts on what is

needed for the revised dummy, but always leave the control up to the writer, “Well, of course you can figure this out better than I can Syd.” Nordstrom also reminds him that he can keep anything in that is really important to him, these are merely suggestions, but she writes in the letter what became known to her authors as her signature line, “They just seem not good enough for you.” Nordstrom had an ideology that was reflected in a catch phrase, N.G.E.F.Y. Leonard Marcus writes in his introduction how everyone who worked with Nordstrom remembered this acronym scribbled across countless manuscripts. It means, Not Good Enough For You, Nordstrom would call out words, phrases and entire plots if she felt the author could do better. An editorial relationship works when there is an expectation of excellence, when an editor’s belief in an author’s genius means that projects won’t be finished until the words and images are good enough.

As an editor, there is a negotiation that occurs with a writer over any suggested textual change. Sendak’s career began as an illustrator; as he transitioned to writing the words as well, Nordstrom guided the prose so it would reflect the author’s vision. While the majority of Nordstrom’s, text-focused, editorial suggestion worked to draw the writer into more effective writing, sometimes these diplomatic negotiations favored the end reader. Just as in a writing center, the consultants must consider the audience for project. The part of editing that is connecting the industry expectations with the author’s desire requires diplomacy.

In 1960, Sendak was working on what would become, *The Sign on Rosie’s Door*. In an editorial meeting at Harper, while reviewing the advanced galleys soon to be published, it was pointed out that a line in Sendak’s drafted manuscript currently read, “Everybody shook their head yes” – which is not actually grammatically correct. The

Harper staff felt that the error in grammar would distance librarians and classroom teachers. Although Nordstrom felt that the author be allowed to write in the way he or she felt was the most effective, she wrote to Sendak asking if he would be willing to change the text, “would it be okay if we changed it to ‘Everybody nodded;’ That means everybody shook their heads yes but it will protect you are your book from your ever-loving, cotton picking publishers from being ostracized by the English teachers of this here great and gorgeous country with its locked in goodness” (underline is in original letter, April 1960). She closes the letter by reminding him that if he doesn’t want the change, she will defend his decision and go back to “shook.” This small textual change illustrates the responsibility Nordstrom felt for Sendak’s vision, while considering the importance of the book’s purpose, to reach as wide an audience as possible. Editorial literacy is two directional; editors should not make changes without authorial consent and authors who seek commercial success should consider the editorial suggestions. This respect for each other is paramount in a successful symbiotic editor/author relationship.

### **5.5 Supporting Speculative Projects**

In a letter to Nat Hentoff, Nordstrom explains that Ruth Krauss listened to children to get her ideas about how they think of things as she created *A Hole is to Dig*, “It really grew out of children and what is important to them” (1964). *A Hole is to Dig* was the first book of its kind to name things in unique ways, it launched generations of something is something books. With her next book idea, Krauss began to experiment with unconventional ways of enlisting young readers’ active participation. Krauss

eventually wrote several books encouraging children to think up play games for themselves, or she would offer the start of a drawing and encouraging kids to finish them.

In August of 1951, Krauss visited Nordstrom's office to discuss the idea for what would become *Is This You?* She pitched it as a book with blank places for kids to draw in. After thinking about it and discussing the idea with some colleagues, Nordstrom drafted her editorial response, "I am sure these suggestions will seem horrid, heavy-handed, obvious, uninteresting to you at first" (1951). She is aware that Krauss is fairly set with her drawing-in idea and is trying to steer her toward something she thinks the reader and house will be more receptive to. She writes, "But if you would be willing to give a little, and shift your angle on this book, I'd be very happy, and I think you might have just as funny a book, and honestly a more valuable one because it would get looked at, which the drawing-on book wouldn't get, probably" (to Krauss 1951). Nordstrom suggests an option that would allow her to meet the dual narrative plan Krauss had envisioned, "and oh Lord, I hope you don't scream with exasperation over this – how about a book within a book. It could be the way it is now within a book (a couple of extra pages at the beginning and maybe one at the end) and your wonderful stuff could all be used." Nordstrom attempts to explain a story about a boy writing a book and the book the boy is writing also appears in the larger book. "His' drawings could be in quite a different style, of course in just black and white. Oh, I just reread this paragraph and it doesn't describe what I mean. The thing is that you're so set on the actual child participating in this book and I think that is a good but half-baked idea" (punctuation and spacing in original letter to Krauss 1951). Nordstrom goes on to explain that several other members of the editorial department feel likewise, and further the book won't sell or

improve the author or the house's reputation. It is important to Nordstrom that she remind Krauss that it is not because she isn't scared of "different books" and that she has racked her brain to find a suggestion that incorporates all of the funny and wonderful stuff Krauss brought into the office. Krauss did take the suggestion and write a book that allows readers to learn the art of storytelling and encourage them to write a book for themselves.

## 5.6 Understanding the Audience

On many occasions an editor edits by providing suggestions long before the proof is in the galley phase. While Sendak was working on the art for *Little Bear's Visit* by Else Holmelund Minarik, Nordstrom wrote to him after she had met with the author.

Nordstrom realized the importance that the child who is reading the book know more than the adult bear characters in the book. She reminded Minarik of this plot point and offered her this encouragement, "I know it is going to be one of the loveliest books in the world" (1967). After writing to the author, she writes to Sendak about revising an image to reflect this important detail, "That makes it very much better, it still seems to me because all children like to know it when they are the center of attention or conversation (what do I mean 'all children' – even some adults do!) and since it was her original conception I wanted her, Elsa to go back to it" (emphasis in original, 1960 Marcus 139).

Nordstrom goes on to suggest Sendak draw little bear turned toward the back of the couch, but with his eyes open so the image would reveal a different narrative than the text. Nordstrom understood that children read pictures with an importance, as the way adults privilege words. She considers the images to be paramount in the narrative for

emerging readers “even young children are able to interpret visual images without ever having been specifically taught to do so” (Nodelman 6). Nordstrom reads the book with a visual, textual, and audial framework to make sure each layer of story is working with the others. As an editor, she has that needed distance from the content to critically examine how it is working together.

Another example of Nordstrom and her author’s focus on children, not adults, is shared in a tidbit about the author, Tomi Ungerer. After E.B. White had published *The Trumpet of the Swan*, he asked Nordstrom if a correction could be made in the next printing as two young readers had pointed out an error in the book. Nordstrom writes back to White revealing that Ungerer purposively only put seven tentacles on only one illustration of the protagonist, the octopus *Emile*, in order to delight any child who discovers the “error.” Ungerer realized the pleasure children derive from correcting adults. None the less, *Swan* was corrected per White’s request. The Whites were sticklers for perfection.

### **5.7 Steadfast Encouragement**

Nordstrom’s unwavering support of her authors is well illustrated through her editing of Sendak. He seemed to need her the most while he was in the development part of the writing process. At a local level, the letters are peppered with compliments, telling him he is a “brilliant young artist,” or his work on a project was “the high point of my life,” or, “What you have is RARE” (August 1961). With each book he pitches, Nordstrom supports him with “the idea is wonderful to me,” and expresses appreciation for the “WONDERFUL drawings” on every new project. However, even successful

artists aren't immune to imposter syndrome, While Sendak was working on the project that would eventually become, *Where the Wild Things Are*, he was filled with doubt.

In a lengthy personal letter to Sendak (August 1961), Nordstrom works to bolster his confidence, "...your work is getting richer and deeper, and it has such an exciting, emotional quality. I know you don't need and didn't ask for compliments from me. These remarks are not compliments – just facts." Nordstrom reminds him that his talent is an uncommon thing. She meets the doubts he expressed to her line by line; In response to a comment he made that his world was "furniture-less...it is all feeling," Nordstrom writes, "Well feeling (emotion) combined with an artist's discipline is the rarest thing in the world." Sendak expressed his "sense of having lived one's life so narrowly – with eyes and senses turned inward. Nordstrom affirms he lived "turned inward," but assures him he had to in order to fully realize who he was. She tells him he is a poet because he is able to write from the inside out. After Sendak laments that he is no Tolstoy,<sup>25</sup> Nordstrom corrects him, "You may not be Tolstoy, but Tolstoy wasn't Sendak, either." Like a coach, a director, a producer, or any other person who works to bring forth greatness from talent, Nordstrom sustained a supportive role for her authors, she measured her success through theirs.

According to Maurice's Sendak's biographer, Selma G. Lanes, *Where the Wild Things Are* began as a rough sketched idea in 1955 (Footnote in Marcus, 162). It would be nine years from inception to publication. During this time, Nordstrom focused on working with Sendak to revise the text, leaving the artwork for Sendak to develop alone. The working title of the initial dummy was, *Where the Wild Horses Are*, but Sendak

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<sup>25</sup> Both Perkins and Nordstrom refence Tolstoy and spell his name differently, Perkins with the i, and Nordstrom with the y.

wasn't able to draw a horse to his liking. Nordstrom asked him what he could draw, he told her, "things." Nordstrom always believed it was the emotion and the story that mattered most to children, so Sendak drew the book with *things*. According to Lanes, Sendak felt that *Where the Wild Things Are* was his first true picture book (Marcus 162). Up until then, his books had been illustrated children's stories. This marked a shift in the picture book genre, elevating imagery to be equal with the text. Pictures books need both mediums to align to tell a singular story. *Where the Wild Things Are* remains a huge commercial success. The book's text, consisting of just 338 words, is paired with illustrations whose depictions of children's strong emotions readily resonant with young readers. However, "some parents and even noted child psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim (who later became a Sendak supporter), believed the book would terrify children" (MacPherson). It was generally felt that unpleasant emotions were to be avoided. Nordstrom publicly defended the book, writing a long letter for public release and forcing her out of the editorial shadows.

## 5.8 Editorial Integrity

Part of Nordstrom success was her ability to tap into the emotional world of children and support the authors who wanted to write books that offered a different perspective of idyllic innocent childhood. One such author she championed was Louise Fitzhugh. Her first book with Nordstrom was *Harriet the Spy*. According to Marcus, *Harriet* was well received on publication. The book ushered in a new era of books for children that offered a realistic frankness to the anxieties of childhood, "real kids were sneaky and snarky and sometimes downright mean, like Harriet. They hid their true

selves from their parents and teachers, mostly to protect them” (Horning 14). Although not everyone agreed that this type of realism for children was appropriate; “a group of librarians from Miami, Florida had written to say they had found *Harriet* ‘completely unchildlike’ and ‘more suitable for a *New Yorker* piece than a children’s book’” (Marcus 188).

Fitzhugh’s second book with Nordstrom required affirmation from Harper as it would be the first children’s book ever to deal with the anxiety a girl feels before, and during her first period. The book would be titled, *The Long Secret*. In an editorial letter to Fitzhugh, Nordstrom first affirms the author’s decision to write about menstruation, “and when I read that ‘even Madam Curie did it’ I plotzed” (1965). Then, she offers Fitzhugh advice on dealing with the menstruation segment, “The part about the ‘lining falls out’ on Page 52 I though was a bit tough on expectant 11 and 12 year olds. Later the Biloxi family seemed a bit too grotesque, but you’ll know about that better than I will” (to Fitzhugh 1965). Nordstrom was considering the reputation of Harper, weighing the appetite of the public, and trying to balance the artistic design of the author. She suggests to Fitzhugh that “whore seemed a bit too much” in the story, but then concedes that, “maybe I’m wrong. Nothing important bothers us, really.” Time and time again, Nordstrom makes her suggestion and then lets the author know she will fight for what is important to them. She affirms that the writer own the text, her input is suggestion only.

Nordstrom defended several children’s books that stretched the boundaries of subjects that were considered inappropriate for children; she put forth the first published young adult book where a character had a homosexual attraction to a classmate, *I’ll Get There. It will Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan; she stood behind a book depicting

children being raised by a single father, *Daddy Is a Monster...Sometimes* by John Steptoe. She was constantly repeating how adults just couldn't understand some things. These taboo subjects meant that Nordstrom had to defend books that were steeped in the lived realism of children.

Librarians, in both public and school settings, were frequently the gatekeepers, determining which books ended up in the hands of children. While plenty of librarians appreciated the evolving landscape of acceptable subjects, some remained steadfast that children's books should act as primers for appropriate behavior; in other words, books are not meant to entertain but to instruct. One of the most influential librarians was Anne Carroll Moore, head of the children's department at The New York Public Library. Moore had championed the idea that books for children belong in a library and is largely responsible for opening the reading room of the New York Public Library dedicated to children's books in 1911. Ahead of her time, she fought to allow the "children of foreign parentage" borrowing privileges. For a time, Moore was one of the most powerful buyers of children's books. If she stamped a book, "not recommended for purchase by expert.<sup>26</sup>" a strong majority of libraries and schools would not buy it. Moore, however, was of the belief that books for children be instructional, moral, and of good character.

Moore had long read E.B. White's column in *The New Yorker* and wrote to him<sup>27</sup> encouraging him to write a book for children. E. B. White had been leisurely writing a book about a boyish mouse he had named Stuart. When E.B. White finally finished *Stuart Little*, seven years after Moore's first letter, he sent it off to Nordstrom for review.

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<sup>26</sup> This is what was written on her actual rubber stamp.

<sup>27</sup> Five times in 1939 alone prompting White's wife Katharine to write back asking her to stop pestering her husband.

The majority of correspondence between White and Nordstrom deal with the illustrations, the size and proportion of Stuart. Nordstrom arranged for several illustrators to depict the mouse protagonist including the illustrator of *The Wind in the Willows* and *Ferdinand*. Ultimately White and Nordstrom felt that Garth Williams captured the mouse. Moore learned that the book was ‘done’ and felt personally responsible for bringing the book to the public, “in her mind it was her book” (Lepore). Nordstrom sent Moore a galley proof. To say Moore hated the book is perhaps an understatement, she was repulsed by the blending of fantasy and reality and the obscene idea that a human woman gave birth to a mouse. She made it her crusade to have the book banned for obscenity.

According to an article written in 2008 by Jill Lepore for *The New Yorker*, the battle between White/Nordstrom and Moore over the *Stuart Little* was lengthy and notable. At issue, the book addressed birth, a taboo subject to talk about with children at the time. Dr. Spock had not yet been published and even adults didn’t talk about giving birth. Secondly, the book broke the ‘rules’ according to Moore. There cannot be fantasy and reality; they must be one or the other so as not to confuse children. Moore did in fact use her influence to have the book banned despite other notable critics praising it.

According to Moore’s successor, Frances Clarke Sayers, “Moore made her life ‘an absolute hell’ by refusing to cede control” (Lepore 15). A leaked memo to the *New York Post* about the library’s refusal to buy the book forced Mr. White to write an apology to Ms. Sayers assuring her that he nor Nordstrom had planted the letter. To resolve the scandal, “the library’s director, Franklin Hopper invited Louise Bechtel, the pioneering editor of children’s book at Macmillan, to deliver an endowed lecture on book publishing” (Lepore 21). Bechtel learned that Sayers hid a copy of the book in her desk.

Bechtel gave it to Hopper to read and decide for himself, “He liked it very much. ‘Have those who talk about its abnormalities no imagination?’” Stuart Little finally took his place on the shelves of the New York Public Library.

Years later Nordstrom responds to Katharine White, who has just received an encouraging note from Louise Bechtel. In her response, Nordstrom recalls the whole episode with horror, mentioning that she and Bechtel never spoke of the incident, “It was always somehow so embarrassing that ACM [Anne Carroll Moore] had been so awful about *Stuart*. One averted one’s eyes if possible.” The letter is written in 1974, Nordstrom reflects on being a woman in publishing and asks White if she ever felt hindered by her gender while working at *The New Yorker*. Later in the same letter, she closes, “Publishing is, as you say, a sacred trust. And particularly so I feel when one is involved with publishing for children. Teaching is also the same sort of field” (to K. White 1974). In subsequent printings of *Stuart Little*, a small change was made. After reading the book the executive editor of *The New Yorker*, Harold Ross, suggested that all of the controversy could have been avoided if White had used “adopted” instead of “born.” In later editions, “Mrs. Frederick C. Little’s second son is no longer born. He arrived” (Lepore 24). Nordstrom fought many battles with censors over the course of her editorial career.

In 1972, Harper & Row issued a rare press release on behalf of Maurice Sendak whose latest picture book, *In the Night Kitchen*, depicted a naked toddler cooking. As a matter of course, publishing houses expect differences of opinion. However, this time the librarians were involved. The letter was in response to reports in the *School Library Journal* that some librarians around the country were using white tempura paint to cover

up the naked child by drawing a diaper on him, or simply cutting out parts of the picture that were offensive (Marcus 334). The Harper press letter went to 380 librarians, professors, publishers, authors and artists throughout the country, asking them to support the author's freedom of expression. Nordstrom argued that what an individual does in their own home is one thing, but for a public librarian to censor a book purchased for the public with public funds, was an act of "censorship by mutilation rather than obvious suppression." The response to her public request of support was overwhelmingly positive.

Nordstrom also defended Sendak in less visible ways by writing to members of the public who, offended by the toddler's nudity, wrote to Nordstrom directly. In a letter to an unnamed person, Nordstrom stresses the importance of understanding audience when contemplating the content in a book. She asks the letter writer to consider if their reaction is filtered through "our adult prejudices and neuroses" (to Anonymous 1976). Nordstrom reassures the writers that the nudity only bothers the adults, not the elementary school aged children for whom the book was intended. It is this ability to keep the end reader in mind that makes Nordstrom such a successful editorial force. She is constantly thinking about to whom the story in front of her belongs. Her capacity to navigate so many different audiences is a testament to her skill.

Nordstrom was asked if she was ever tempted to publish projects she didn't like after the author became famous, "Does it become a problem at a certain point whether to edit them or turn them down?" (Natov and DeLuca 130). She replied that while variation of quality is true for any writer, when an author gets on a soapbox and starts speaking instead of letting their character's voice come through, those are generally the projects

that end being bad books. Nordstrom, like most publishers, had authors who no longer felt her editorial knowledge was needed after they became established. Sometimes, after she would let an author know that a manuscript wasn't their very best, some sought representation from other publishing houses. Nordstrom drew a comparison between herself and Maxwell Perkins. After encouraging an unknown author for years with letters of support, "I know you can do something which is even better than anything you've ever done, if you don't get discouraged and say the hell with it" (Letter to Meindert DeJong 1947) which resulted in several successful books, the author he ended their association after a 30-year editorial relationship. In a letter to George Woods, children's book editor of *The New York Times*, she writes, "If [novelist Meindert DeJong] wants to play Thomas Wolfe to my Maxwell Perkins, well, I'll live with it" (1969). The most fruitful writing relationships are often the ones that are not forced.

DeJong worked as a janitor for a church in Michigan and was filled with doubt about his ability to write. He had published one book before Nordstrom took over the children's department. It took years of encouragement from Nordstrom to inspire DeJong to write again. She tackled his writer's block head on, "I admit it is a bad time for you in your writing life, but it won't last forever. You and I know that you can write and feel and think better books than any of the poor bloodless competition and you must remember that and get back to work and know that sooner or later it will once more come out right and warm and good DeJong" (1947). She was very direct with her editorial guidance, requiring numerous drafts of *The House of Sixty Fathers*. It took more than seven years of revised drafts before it was published with illustrations by Maurice Sendak. In a letter to DeJong's agent, Nordstrom explains how much coaching it took to

get DeJong to write anything good, “my problem was to try to keep him sending stuff along even though I was having to reject to with tears and anguish” (to Nowell 1949). Nordstrom writes about how she rejected a manuscript, but told him to focus on the delightful little duck on the Ferris wheel which turned into *Good Luck Duck*. She also stressed that *House Sixty* has potential, but is not ready for publication. Nordstrom goes on to defend herself to DeJong’s agent as providing the author with years of tender loving attention. She even sends copies of the correspondence to illustrate just how much she helped nurtured the author. For a lot of different reasons sometimes relationships just don’t lead to creative production. Respect for the skill and trust in the other’s input is vital for a writing relationship to thrive.

One objective of an editor is getting a writer to put down their ideas on paper. It doesn’t always work; there needs to be chemistry. Nordstrom writes about her inability to get author, Maia Wojciechowska to write, “She was one of my failures as an editor. I couldn’t reach her. I couldn’t do a thing to get what was down on her head on paper” (to Woods 1969). The author went on to another editor, Ellen Rudin and was finally able to get her ideas down. Nordstrom felt that one of the strengths of her department was the “editorial talent in depth and if an author doesn’t want to work (or won’t) with one editor he or she can work with someone else.” When the chemistry is right, the editor/author relationship is both personal and professional. Nordstrom and Sendak had that chemistry.

## **5.9 The Editor Author Friendship**

One letter to Sendak that appears in Marcus’ collection, was written on June 10, 1955. It was Sendak’s birthday. Nordstrom addresses the letter, “Dear Maurice, I mean

Marlon.” Nordstrom’s tone is playful, as she flatters the young illustrator by comparing him to Marlon Brando. With mirth, she closes the letter by thanking him for being born. As a model of the editor / author relationship for children’s literature, it is hard to imagine one that bore more fruit than Nordstrom and Sendak. Their conversations, preserved in these letters, is benignly flirtatious and intimate; the tone is playful. After Nordstrom learns that Sendak has a new book in mind by reading an article about him in *The Village Voice*, she sends him a letter introducing herself and feigns mock surprise that she happens to have an open place on next season’s list for a book with the same name, *Very Far Away*. In another example of friendship building, Nordstrom writes to Sendak after watching a profile of him on *60 Minutes*, she keeps him up to date with the press materials being circulated by Harper and shares an anecdote: She was mistaken for a secretary when she called *60 Minutes* to ask for a copy of the televised interview, she writes of her response to the chauvinistic assumption, “I am Mr. Sendak’s editor, I said with simple dignity. I don’t plan to be buried but it would be nice on my tombstone... ‘She was Mr. Sendak’s editor.’” The letter ends with her usual affirmation, “I know how privileged I am to hear about what is going on in your head. It has been and is the greatest happiness of my professional life” (to Sendak 1973). A running joke between the two involved long standing nicknames born from a mix-up during a book conference. A hotel clerk had him registered as Mr. Senlack and her as Ersella Norcross (Marcus footnote, 163). Several letters are addressed to Mr. Senlack.

Nordstrom and Sendak’s writing relationship lasted the course of their lives; of the 270 letters, 27 are addressed to him. Nordstrom considered Sendak a paramount figure in her life. In a letter to him in 1955 she writes, “There are few peaks in an editor’s

life and seeing these pictures of yours has been a peak in mine. They are indescribably lovely and absolutely perfect and – well, pure in the best sense.” Nordstrom never wavered in her belief in all her authors, but the mutual steadfast stability between Nordstrom and Sendak epitomizes the ideal literary relationship between editor and author. In the same letter, she closes with, “Oh my GOODNESS I’m so GLAD I went up to old F.A.O. Schwarz that day.....”

Through encouragement, friendship, and guidance, Nordstrom’s editorial literary position altered children’s literature. Her editing style exemplifies the playful and personal way writing can thrive when guided by an editor, who by all accounts, loved what she did. Editing, for her was a medium to getting quality writing to an audience through sustained writing relationships. Her open-door approach to finding and helping writers succeed could be a model for creating a writing center culture that is welcoming and lasting.

## Part 3 Suggestions and Implications

### Ch. 6

#### Rethinking Editing as Agency

*Editing in composition scholarship and writing center studies should consider the editorial paradigm in trade literature. Contributing to the lack of understanding is the background nature of the ways professional writing is supported. An editor and an author are two distinct contributors to writing, each with a different objective, each learning from the process. To have literacy in editing is to have prescriptive, additive critique that fosters collaborative relationships between vested parties. Editing is more than mechanical cleanup, performed in the final steps of writing. In the writing classroom, editing might be taught as peer review. Positive editorial practices in the writing center might include consultants reading and responding to each other's work as a matter of practice. The idea of an editor in the role of a writing center professional is not new. North called for such a position. Editing literacies for graduate students needs to be explored further. Perhaps, as a Writing Agent with editorial training and experience, writing centers must rethink their perceptions of editing.*

A key difference between professional editorial support in literary publishing and the current writing center position on editing is the phase at which “editing” begins. For the most part, aspiring trade writers have completed their manuscript before they begin to receive an editorial critique. It would be unusual for an unknown writer to align with an agent or editor without some sort of writing history. An exception might be if the author has demonstrated writing ability in another field, or with a previous project, then there could be an initial developmental conversation; Max Perkins, Katharine White, and Ursula Nordstrom all encouraged untested writers to produce manuscripts. For the most part, however, the writing is “complete” when the editorial relationship begins. In writing centers, the model often works in reverse, students bring in unfinished writing for a directive and supportive conversation. In the classroom, the writing project is born. But in both the classroom and the writing center, the conversation mimics the editor-author

relationship once a manuscript has been accepted. In both cases, a partnership is formed between people interested in improving the author's piece of writing. In each case, editorial literacy is having a conversation.

An editor, by simple definition, works with another person's writing. Whereas a writer can practice the skill of editing by revising their own work, an editor cannot write for someone else. Editing doesn't end with the editor, although writing ends with the author. If an author and editor are sitting side by side working through text, they are intellectually collaborating, they are editorially collaborating, but only the writer authorizes what is written. To edit then, with a positive, additive perspective, is to bring forth revised writing from the hand of the writer, through the agency of the editor. What complicates this illustration is the copyeditor, who does actually pick up the pen to correct the format to align with the genre specifications. But the title and skill are different. In publishing, it is a different word with a different definition; copyediting is not editing, it is copyediting.

### **6.1 Responsible Editing is Collaborative Learning**

There are exceptions to the current composition scholarship paradigm that editing is only the skills-based part of the writing process. John Bryant, editor of *Leviathan* and Professor of English at Hofstra University authored the article, "Editing is Learning", published by the MLA in 2009. He wrestles with the perception of his peers toward editorial work. In the article he writes about a time he thought he found a colleague who understands just what an editor does, describing his definition, "that an editor is not an anonymous custodian who sweeps away typos but an intellect who collaborates with

writers, minds the argument and sometimes mends it, facilitates meaning, modifies persuasive strategies, and shapes language” (127). For Bryant, editing is communal learning, it is an exchange not between two writers, but between a writer and editor, each with different learning objective, but each learning from the process.

As a scholar and an editor, Bryant is aware in the gap of knowledge on the role of an editor. This knowledge deficiency has filtered how he works with editorial terminology in scholarship, “The claim that editing is collaborative learning may be wishful thinking, but I adhere to it out of an inner pragmatism...In my secret life as a textual theorist, I have argued that literary works are ‘fluid texts,’ they evolve from version to version...” (128). Bryant argues that no public writing comes to us “without a series of revisions” and other people, editors, are part of the evolving text, “but print is only the illusion of stability, and when we assume a single print-text to be the only text of a work, illusion becomes delusion” (128). Responsible editing is not plagiarism, unless our literature is all plagiarized. That said, academic writing is most certainly different from commercially published books, at least at the undergraduate level. Assessment is required in a learning setting to measure attained skills against stated objectives. Frequently this assessment is determined through writing, and therein lies the gray area of editing and copyediting. Writing center consultants must understand the assignment’s objective(s) and criteria for assessment in order most appropriately collaborate with the writer, just as a trade editor must understand the genre and market audience to offer the most effective additive support. These are principles of editorial literacy.

We learn in the internship program that editing is prescriptive. It does the writer little good to only call out portions or qualities of the text that aren’t working; *passive*

*protagonist* scribbled in the margins is not editing. Nor is, *character not fully developed, the reader lacks empathy and is not vested in the outcome*. As it was bluntly explained to me in an editorial workshop led by Michael Mejias, Founding Director of the Writers House Intern Program “if the writer knew what to do, they would have done it in the first place.” Editorial support requires a suggestion to illustrate a possible solution.

An editorial reader first identifies a problem, referencing specific passages from the manuscript, then a fully developed description is needed to explain why the problem is a problem. After the deficit has been established with support and reasoning, then the editorial reader offers a suggestion and explains how the hypothetical suggestion would solve the initial problem. The proposed “what if...” solution is in no way the final word; it is the starting point of a conversation between editor and author. Bryant warns against overediting to avoid disempowering the writer, “an editor must induce discourse by identifying problematic wording, overreaching rhetoric, or lapsed argumentation but let the contributor do the rest” (130). When the writer fails to engage in conversation, but accepts the suggestions without question, there is no learning, no improving the writer, no collaboration.

A skilled editor, or writing center consultant, must gauge and adjust their editorial contribution to meet each individual writers’ style, “they are, above all, a conversation between equals in which knowledge is constructed, not transmitted” (Woolbright). Revisions are not always self-evident to the writer, in order to foster the authority of the writer, editors must add the “crucial, validating explanations” (Bryant). Writers need consistent editorial conversation so they can more fully engage with their ideas and their text. Editing is listening, really listening to understand the writer at your side.

## 6.2 Additive Editing is Guiding

Trade writers, even before they are published, receive editorial support and advice that is akin knowledgeable conversation. Professional editors foster a collaborative relationship with their authors through supportive conversation and editorial suggestion. According to Stephen North, “nearly everyone who writes likes – and needs – to talk about his or her writing, preferable to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too” (78). There is not a singular editorial blueprint for the writing conference between an editor and an author. There is a Rubik’s cube of ways to put together a successful story or draft a research project. But editors do not necessarily need to be subject matter experts; they need to be empathetic writing experts who know when to reach out to the subject matter experts. The three trade editors examined for this project offer up a model for the role of an editorial relationship in the development of a text. Editing is vital during the production of the text, when writing stalls, the writer suffers; according to Philip Roth, “the road to hell is paved with works-in-progress” The editor is best-placed to foster writing by drawing on their literary practices. In each example below, the writing was stalled before its completion.

The biggest fiction seller of 1946 was *This Side of Innocence* by Taylor Caldwell. It was on *The New York Times* Bestseller list for six months, at #1 for nine weeks. In November of that year, the author needed input on the development of a new book on which she was working, despite the fact she was an accomplished author, she needed help. She sent a draft of the manuscript to Maxwell Perkins, her editor. He helped her find her voice and diagnosed the stall in the linear narrative. His guidance is both general and specific:

In my reading, I have been trying to think of some way of giving the story more plot. Being a story of the growth of one who has in him genius, and how this is deterred and developed in spite of everything, it does not need anything like as much plot as “This Side of Innocence,” for instance. It isn’t that kind of story. But if it had a little more, it would be good. If there were hints and suggestions to the reader that what occurred at a certain point was going to lead to something else, it would create a great deal of suspense. (Perkins to Caldwell 1946).

To illustrate his suggestion how to invest the reader more, Perkins suggests possibly introducing a character, “a charming or graceful girl,” or whatever type of girl the author wants. The reader then would anticipate the character reappearing later in the story. This expectation of the reader becomes a lingering question in the plot and helps drive it forward. Perkins’ understanding of genre expectations and literary devices helps him outline a plan for the author to consider. He is comfortable in his role as guide; his working relationship with the author allows him to take a more direct approach. This exchange is a model for editing as agency. It is additive writing support. Perkins suggests how plot might be increased and the resulting effect of adding a plot point. That editing, although seemingly simple, reveals a complex understanding of the reader, the genre, and the takes into consideration the skills of the writer. If Caldwell chooses to add a character, she will write it alone, her editor just sent her in the right direction.

Katharine White was also comfortable with her editing advisement. She understood what had to be changed in one of Vladimir Nabokov’s submissions for publication in *The New Yorker*; In her editorial guidance she carefully negotiates the needs of the author with the needs of the reader; which are paradoxically opposing forces

at times. “I honestly feel we are sound in thinking that in this one instance your learning and knowledge of language has just a trifle worked to defeat the emotional and literary effect you want to achieve. We don’t want to be lowbrow but we do want our readers to be able to read what we publish without recourse to dictionaries” (1949). An editor has a multitude of interested parties while moving a text from submission to print. They balance the behind the scenes obligations to an institution against the artistic temperament of a writer.

Writing Center support is no different, the consultant operates as a specialist, knowledgeable in both writing production and general assignment expectations. The writing center editor must reiterate the author’s ideas back to them while voicing any concerns within the parameters of the assignment. The writing center editor attentively listens to the author in order to focus their additive suggestion for the author to consider. The pair become bound by text, working toward the shared vision. The writing center editor is mindful of the student writer’s intention and draws on their own expertise as a writer and as a member of the institution to offer guidance. This mutual collaboration between the text generator and text advisor can lead to sustained appointments. Sustained appointments indicate a trust in the editorial advice that results in greater writing agency for the student author.

The professional editor and the professional writer have distinct roles with the same goal, they are a textual team. As they work on a singular text, only the author is the writer/reviser/rewriter. The editor is a trusted advisor. When Maurice Sendak had questions about a manuscript, he sent it to Nordstrom for editing. She did not mention conventional rules, her role is not mechanical correction. Instead she embodies the

editorial relationship between writing collaborators. It is additive, responsible editing. She begins the editorial letter with broad commentary, “There were parts that were not clear to me...there was too much repetitive material.” And she tells him that the manuscript needs much more dialogue. She composes a specific reader’s report:

This manuscript is full of beautiful passages Maurice, and at present (in this version) they are not easy to find with so much repetition and so little dialogue. The story needs shortening and at the same time opening up. Don’t you agree? Isn’t in fact the story of a boy’s search for his parents? There are too many digressions and we lose sight of the basic story, which is so important. I’ll skip a few more marginal notes and go to Page 17. Could the parents be mentioned in the first paragraph? There should be some sense of urgency to his journey (Nordstrom to Sendak 1973).

Nordstrom helps identify to whom the story belongs, *a boy’s search for his parents*. She offers an outsider’s perspective that is necessary for a writer who may be too close to the material. She suggests a change in organization that would create importance and direction. Her expertise as a craftsman of narrative offers a prescription toward a more complete story. She guides him with suggestions, inspiring him to complete the work. Nordstrom’s diagnosis of the heart of the material is textbook writing center tutorial work, like when the consultant asks for clarification on the focus of a paragraph.

### **6.3 Editing is Interpretative**

Supporting writers, be they students or professionals, requires a similar skillset even if when there are differences with the end reader. Nordstrom guided writers who

crafted for children, White for writers of a weekly trade periodical, and Perkins guided writers to reach an adult audience. The editorial input of all three shifted depending on the genre context: “Ultimately, though, the best editing is not the least or the most; it is whatever measure of editing evokes the writer’s greatest talent, that presents the writer’s work in the best possible light...” (Gross xv). Editors do not need to be subject matter experts, unless that subject is writing. Gerald Gross writes in the Preface of his book about the career of editing, “I have looked upon my years as an editor as being analogous to being a perpetually stimulated student who is attending a nonstop, incredibly diverse series of courses at the worlds’ largest, and always expanding university. I learn from editing each author more about the subject of his or her book than I have ever known before” (xix). Writing center professionals can attest to the array of knowledge they have gained while working alongside student writers. Content knowledge certainly, but also effective methods of working with writing support. The methods they learn would certainly transfer to editorial roles in publishing.

Trade editing is collaborative, but it is not collaboration, it is not “group writing” as described by Ede and Lunsford. There is not a blending of voices into a singular product. The editor and author do not have a singular role. Editing is not inequitable; editors are not writers just as coaches are not players, despite their collaboration with the athlete to win the game, or in this case, to see the book completed. Authors and editors are not interchangeable.

The background nature of the editor’s role contributes to the lack of understanding of the ways in which writing is supported. Part of editing is leaving no trace. Unlike movies, where the credits role for the audience to see who did what, part of

the artistry of books is the appearance of the singular celebrated creator. Perhaps part of movie magic is the awareness that a host of people brought the story to the screen. But even in movies, the editing is invisible. Seamless cuts between scenes are essential to creating the suspension of disbelief; “in any media product, editing is like a thief wiping down his fingerprints before leaving the scene of a crime” (Golden 159). In text, there is the perception that only the story is between the reader and writer. If the literary editor has been successful, they have provided the writer with what they needed to make the story their own.

In addition to the need for an editorial skillset to adapt to each writer, so is there a need for a deep understanding of audience expectations. It seems simple enough to divide literary content into adult or children, mystery or romance. But within those large categories, nuance is needed. Books with both love and murder fall into which section at the bookstore? What if the prose is lyrical? What if there’s a hint of the supernatural? How much dragon classifies a book as fantasy? Where is the line between science-fiction and fantasy? If a romance is written by a male (Nicholas Sparks<sup>28</sup>) why is it in the adult section and not classified as romance? Nora Roberts is always in the romance section.

Children’s subsets are equally distinct in their nuanced categories. How does this all matter for an editor? Because, “the ways in which texts are edited inevitably determine the ways in which they are read and the meanings that either do or do not emerge” (Schulze 120). An editor must understand the author’s intention and goal for the text, so they are able to help him or her reach their literary goal. This is the same writing center support, “editing is a deeply interpretative act. Good editing demands that each

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<sup>28</sup> This is changing, but for a longtime male author were not considered capable of writing romance.

and every editorial decision a scholar makes in regard to an author and his or her texts reflects the scholar's interpretation of that author and his texts and the scholar's interpretation of textuality generally" (Schulze 120). Even if an editorial writing consultant is working with a writer in the same genre, each professor has unique specifications that the writer is trying to meet. Writing center consultants with years of experience have developed a similar repertoire of skills as editorial readers in publishing. They have learned to balance the writing in front of them, with the person sitting beside them, in order to reach a specific audience. Students who flourish in the writing center environment would likely thrive as professional editors. They do need to be taught however, that professional editing isn't only copyediting.

#### **6.4 Teaching Editing**

To write well is an academic objective. To meet this standard, universities offer foundational courses in writing, often taken in the first year. Additionally, there may be writing intensive courses taken within the student's discipline. Within writing center discourse however, editing is viewed as an action taken by the author later in the writing process. Generally, it is not taught as a skill performed by an outside party. Despite the importance in teaching writing as a recursive practice, disregarding outside editorial contributions leaves revisional input up to the author alone, "all writers – restrained or lyrical, avant-garde or traditional, avocational or professional - need to revise, yet editing is commonly taught as an intrinsic part of writing, not an external tool. As such, the practice is elusive and random" (Bell 2). Further, editing is often listed as the last or second to last step in the writing process, just before proofreading.

The placement of the term *editing* in the commonly accepted trajectory of writing does the skill a disservice. Editing should be listed prior to revision as it represents the input from an outside party, “revision is invariably distinguished from text generation by the fact that it involves some fairly explicit processes of comparison, generally between some segment of a text and some representations of a writer’s knowledge or intention, which results in some attempt to change existing text” (Bartlett 346). Writers unskilled in reading like an editor, or in reading for absence, often lack the ability to diagnose the reason(s) their own text isn’t working. What may be unclear to an author is often clear to a reader absorbing the material for the first time. To counter this, “It is vital to teach editing on its own terms, not as a shadowy aspect of writing” (Bell 2). Editing is not a necessary byproduct of writing; it is its own proficiency; it is its own literacy.

Recalling the dismissive and narrow viewpoint of editing illustrated in the first chapter, it is a realistic assumption that within a number of writing centers, editing is usually defined as a skill less worthy of instruction. For those who have worked in both writing studies and publishing, the conclusion is that “few academics have any real understanding of or respect for editorial work” (Schulze 121). This holds true even within a writing center where editorial practices are taught and writing conversations take place in every session; “the belief that resonates among both academic departments and presses that editing is simply a set of mindless procedures has led many potential editors to choose other scholarly pursuits” (Schulze 119). Schools are in the business of being on the other side of teaching mindless procedures. Higher education is where learners go to develop a better understanding of things. Not to receive a misguided perception that a career in editing might be limited to a career in copyediting.

As composition departments expand concepts of writing to include multimodal texts, the need for an understanding of editing is even greater. For media, like literature, is edited; “analyzing media without understanding editing is a bit like analyzing a novel without understanding the alphabet” (Golden 159). A lack of understating of how books move from manuscript to shelf is a lack of understating of how writers become authors. Matthew J. Bruccoli, now deceased, was an English Professor at the University of South Carolina for four decades. He was considered an expert on Fitzgerald, wrote about Hemingway, Wolfe, O’Hara, and was also a student of Nabokov during his time at Cornell. His name came up while I was researching several of the case studies for this project. Bruccoli, an academic scholar, writes about the collaborative nature of trade publishing and its flawed perception within writing studies. “Publication is the mandatory act of authorship: A book is not a book until it is published. The teaching and study of modern literature are flawed because the circumstances of publication for the books are ignored; therefore, the profession of authorship is ignored” (Preface to *The Sons of Maxwell Perkins*, 2014). What complicates studying the role of an editor, is that editors don’t want to be known. To paraphrase John Golden, an effective editor eliminates an author’s sign of struggle leaving the reader the impression of easy eloquence. In other words, successful editors leave no trace. The mystery of the editorial role is necessary for the author to receive the credit. When the author receives accolades, more people read their work. When more people read their work, the author writes another book. And good books, dear reader, is why we became English majors.

If I sound contradictory, it is because I am still conflicted. One on hand, I desire for those that study text creation to understand what an editor does, to acknowledge the

intellectual input and supportive role necessary for books to come alive. And, at a minimum, to stop thinking of editing only in copyediting terms. On the other hand, I think the behind the scenes nature of the editorial role contributes to the magic of a great book. The author writes the book and it pains me to take anything away from that skill. Editors, if I have described them as I intended, operate in their own field and do not diminish the authority of the author in any way. I do not intend to pull the curtain back, but to create an awareness that someone might be in the wings nodding to the star at their cue.

### **6.5 Editing as Peer Review in the Classroom**

In the writing classroom, editing might be taught as peer review. In the peer review session generally, the “editor” will locate an error and call attention to it for the writer to adjust. The success of these session depends on how much editorial direction the instructor has given, or how they have defined editing. In my writing classrooms, I start with editorial sessions that are very focused. I set the groundwork for structuring an additive editorial comment, then assign a specific focus for the peer-review session. The aim of the editorial peer reader shifts for each reading, the level of engagement increases. It is hard work for the student editor, they generally take several sessions to understand their role as sounding boards and guides for their peer. Their first inclination is to correct. Rob Jenkins writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “one of the biggest obstacles to teaching writing skills is the inherent artificiality of the college environment. The classroom after all, is not the real world. Nowhere else, outside of a classroom, do we find people writing essays for a grade” (2016). I work to shift the perception that there is

a singular correct version of an essay. We discuss the organic, fluid nature of writing prose.

Developmental editing is as fluid; each reading produces a different response from a different reader. Ultimately, I work toward the idea that to be literate in editing is to have a conversation toward a specific writing goal. If they want to see this collaboration in practice outside of the classroom, I suggest a visit to the writing center where tutors push writers to explain their thinking and answer questions about the text in front of them. For the well-trained writing consultants, “It requires seeing what’s on the page while constantly thinking about what could have been on the page instead. It requires us to juggle, in our minds, multiple scenarios, in terms of diction, sentence structure, organization, and so forth” (Jenkins). Not everyone in the introductory composition classroom gets the same result from the peer-editing process. Learning to engage with another’s text takes time and training to be effective. A better place to teach additive editing is the writing center.

## **6.6 Editing as Additive Support in the Writing Center**

The idea of an editor in the role of a writing center professional is not new. Stephen North called for such a position, “Maybe in a perfect world, all writers would have their own ready auditor – a teacher, a classmate, a roommate, an editor – who would not only listen draw them out, ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves” (North 78). North does not promote a ready editor to merely fix the grammar, but as an active listener to engage the writer with their intention.

Writing center work at its finest is vigorous listening, critical reading, productive dialogue and rhetorical prescription in a mutually respectful relationship. Writing center work aligns closely with the developmental editing in trade publishing. To better understand the “discourse that unfolds during writing center conferences,” Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson studied the conversations of writing center tutors to identify strategies they use when working with writers. They include three categories: “instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding” (xi). Instruction includes “directive aspects” that “supply solution or options, rather than supporting or making room for student writers to generate solutions themselves.” The second category, “cognitive scaffolding includes a range of strategies that prod students to think and then help them push their thinking further.” And motivational scaffolding is focused on affect, “encouragement though praise,” including “showing concern, praising, reinforcing student writers’ ownership and control, being optimistic or using humor, and giving sympathy or empathy” (4-5). The skills demonstrated in a contemporary writing center are those that have been encouraging text production in the background of publishing for a long time, it is editing. In other words, it is advisory, involves critical thinking, and is supportive. It is what Perkins, White, and Nordstrom put into practice as editors.

Positive editorial practices in the writing center might include consultants reading and responding to each other’s work as a matter of practice. This is a form of mentorship developed through modeled behavior and writing practice. The skill of writing isn’t always like learning to ride a bike; once a certain level of mastery has been achieved, it needs to be nurtured. If consultants were to write reader’s reports as a matter of course,

then talk with their writing center colleagues about the content and their intent, it would renew developmental editorial skillsets.

In publishing, teams of editors, agents, assistants, and interns talk regularly about a project in process. The developmental conversation is full of insight and inspiration to learn new ways to inspire more effective writing. Additionally, the readers' reports would be in support of each other's writing projects. These projects may be school-based, but often, those drawn to work in a writing center have writing of their own. It can be anxiety producing to have a peer engage with another's unfinished writing. This same uncertainty is experienced by the students using the center. The routine act of responding to, and having writing be responded to, scaffolds the concept of writing about writing. It reinforces the shift from literary analysis to textual analysis.

Such regular writing conversations might also support undergraduate journals, who are often housed within the writing center. This type of editorial work fosters writing conversations. Talking about writing produces better writing. Action follows thought.

The necessity of a human relationship to further writing production comes into play repeatedly. Numerous writing guides, how-to manuals, and blogs that focus on prose talk about having an *ideal reader*: the audience in your mind who will read an early draft. Often this person is a spouse, friend, editor, or literary agent who is thanked in the acknowledgements section. Often this person is more than the first reader of the final product, but the person with whom the writer speaks to during the manuscript's creation. Often there is more than one actual person. Writers need a conversational outlet; an author needs an ally to move ideas to the page. College writers are no different. Research on motivation in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* emphasizes the

importance of relationships, along with a sense of control and meaning, in developing strong internal motivations and the accompanying resilience to see a project through (Sheldon and Schuler). As students advance through their coursework, the writing tasks may become longer. Often these tasks require more sustained input from an outside reader. The advanced writers are developing their voice, to help them develop this agency in their writing there could be additive editorial practices in the writing center.

### **6.7 Editing as Agency for Graduate Writers**

I am a fortunate writer in part because of my relationships with people who understand the process and offer the unique support a writer needs, to be simultaneously present as an encouraging force and to completely absent to allow space for writing. My research started from my lived experience and has been reinforced while writing this paper. I have friends who are literary agents and they have bolstered me with encouragement; It is what they do for a living, boost the author along the way. It further helped that I could also speak to them about my subject. Their belief in my ability has given me the agency to complete my dissertation. I am one of the lucky ones who will finish. But it is not luck that got me here. It is writing agency, I believed I could do it, and the agents I know reinforced that belief. In a 2018 book, *Re/Writing the Center: Approaches to Supporting Graduate Students in the Writing Center*, the acquisition editors Susan Lawrence and Terry Myers Zawacki selected essays that that “explore how the idea of a writing center is being reshaped in response to demands – institutional, faculty, student – to assist graduate student writers with high stakes thesis and

dissertation projects” (17). Their book is a response to the need to help advanced writers finish. Not just finish but finish healthy and well-placed to advance into professionals.

Editing literacies for graduate students needs to be explored further. Masters level writers are developing theses that would benefit from sustained writing conversation. Doctoral writers are perhaps the most closely aligned to trade authors as the focus of their dissertations is largely self-sponsored. Both classes of graduate writers need editorial support for a healthy awareness of their own writing process. They need writing agency. A chapter, “Find Something You Know You Can Believe In: The Effects of Dissertation Retreats on Graduate Students' Identities as Writers.” in Lawrence and Zawacki addresses this need. The authors write, “We see agency as reflecting writers’ perceptions of their positions in given contexts, as well as their practices” (Smith, Lamsal, Robinson, Williams 208). Shifting perceptions from a tutoring center to a writing agency may refine how writers seeking conversation may approach places of writing support.

I hope this project has complicated the term, *edit*, in writing center scholarship and practice. I also hope it provides introductory paths to utilizing the rich skill of editing as it is practiced in literary trade publishing. I would also like to rethink literary editing as a form of writing agency, as additive support at the developmental stage of a writing project. Drawing on the model of an editor, illustrated by Perkins, White, and Nordstrom, I argue for a position of positive models of editing to be clearly defined in the writing center. Writing center agents already act like literary editors whose primary focus is moving a writer to completion. Their position is less of tutor, as the association of tutoring to overcome a deficit skill presents a barrier. Writing center consultants as editors would be problematic as the perceptions of editing vary greatly and have

connotations of lower-order, skills based mechanical cleanup. Perhaps, it is as a Writing Agent with editorial training and experience that writing centers could rethink their perceptions of editing. “Agency involves not only the skills necessary to undertake a task, but also the perception that one is able – or permitted – to undertake the task at hand” (Smith, Lamsal, Robinson, and Williams 208.). Proving agency in writing support is to exercise editorial literacy.

### 6.8 The Importance of Accuracy

Words shift meaning. *Like*, I mean, we can’t, *like*, *literately*, bring the definition of *editing* back to align between writing center practice and publishing. But it would be nice to use the precise word. Mark Twain did write, “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is ... the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning” (Letter to Bainton, 1888). However, I am realistic to the futility of this semantic endeavor, besides, the plea for accuracy was made 40 years ago:

Cooperation between composition researchers and practicing editors to develop a common definition of editing that reaches across both disciplines has tremendous potential for bringing a greater consistency to research, a much needed precision in terminology to the practice of editing, and perhaps most important of all, a substantial advance in bridging the gap between theory and practice so often talked about by theorists (Haugen 331).

However, in order to reduce the gap, the next time a new student walks into the writing center and says, “Can you edit my paper?” Let’s say yes, and edit like some of the best

trade professionals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did, with additive suggestion and unwavering support. They are not asking for copyediting after all, so let's stop saying "we don't edit" and teach the next generation of learners the powerful effect of talking about writing with a knowledgeable insider.

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