



The Juvenile Book Editor: An Interview

by
D. PHILIP BAKER
with
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THOMAS G. AYLESWORTH

BAKER: Let me open with some questions which deal with your specific job responsibility as book editors. How do you find the author? How do you work with the author as he or she develops a manuscript? How do you go about editing? How aware do you have to be of what the market is going to be? In other words, what is your technical job as an editor of a book?

SMITH: First, most of the authors find us. We get in touch with authors in many ways. A great many of the authors are repeats; they have done books for us before, and we have a working relationship with them. Some are people who have worked in education or they have had certain adventures, such as a scientist who may have gone to the Antarctic who wants to write about his experiences. These people may write to us. Some of the authors come in through other authors, other editors, or agents. A very small fraction of our manuscripts arrive unsolicited.

AYLESWORTH: Let me pick up on the point of unsolicited manuscripts. We do, of course, get hundreds and hundreds of them every year, but they are all read. The most obvious reason we do not publish more of them is that many authors cannot write. That is a terrible thing to say, but there are people who cannot write.

Another reason is that the writers of these manuscripts may not have checked the competition on this or any other publisher's list. For

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example, the state of the art is such that almost every publisher has on his list a juvenile book on basic ecology. So there is no point in publishing another book that will be in direct competition with something on his own list. If someone were to submit an excellent book about earthquakes, it is doubtful that it could be published since there are fifteen to twenty books in print about earthquakes—written especially for youngsters.

Another type of manuscript that we must reject is one written by an author who has not investigated what kinds of books our company does publish. He sends us teachers' guides or textbooks, or other types of material that we just do not handle, such as pop-up books or books with records inside them. There is nothing wrong with these types of books, but we just don't publish them.

In reference to getting a book started, I would guess that at least three-quarters of the books that I handle start as editorial ideas. Then I look for the proper author, who is often someone we have already published. On the other hand, authors do come in with ideas that are then, in a discussion, modified somewhat. We must, because of the nature of juvenile publishing, be sure that a book will be popular. For example, there is nothing that I would rather edit than a book on the flora and fauna of Central Park in New York; but I have to decide whether or not it would sell in other parts of the country. Chances are it would not. Juvenile books are usually not blockbusters in sales, so we must pay attention to the market across the country. Our books cannot be too highly specialized.

After a book is thoroughly planned with the author, we wait for the manuscript to arrive. At times we must contact the author because he is late, or because we have come up with some new information that we want to be sure he has included in his book. When the manuscript comes in, it is edited and copy-edited. Then, when the galleys arrive, they have already been proofread. The author, naturally, can make his own additions and subtractions from time to time. Finally, at the end of this whole process, a book appears.

Of course, all the time the book is in production, we have other duties: planning the jackets, writing the flap copy, arranging for some sort of publicity or promotional activities, and alerting our salesmen to the pertinent points of the forthcoming book.

BAKER: I am interested in the way that you discover authors you think are particularly worthy of being brought to the attention of readers, and if there is such a thing as a "hot" author in the field of juvenile science books.

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AYLESWORTH: I suppose there are such things as hot authors, but they may have started as cold authors. There are a few science writers whose very name on a book can sell it, but they started with a good idea. This idea could have come either from the author or the editor. And, if one piles one good idea on top of another, and the sales force gets to recognize the name of this author as a good solid producer, one suddenly finds that one has what might be called a hot author.

SMITH: I disagree to some extent. No one comes to us empty-handed. We already know his experience and some of the things that he has already written. The idea that the editor develops this author from nothing is, I think, wrong. The people we have dealt with either have a lot of teaching experience or we saw a good solid manuscript from them before we went on. Before taking someone, we will often have long discussions with him to size him up. It is only fair to the public that will read the book that we do so. I feel that hot, or at least lukewarm, authors come into our offices, not cold ones.

AYLESWORTH: Perhaps I did not make myself clear. What I mean by a cold author is the type of person who has never written juvenile books and who does not have any ideas about writing them. He may be someone who has written good adult science books or good school science textbooks. But certainly he will have had some sort of experience that will lead us to believe that he can also write a trade book for youngsters. And I certainly agree that a lot of talk is important before the author starts writing. That way, both the editor and the author know what the desired product is and there are no misunderstandings. Obviously this is impossible in the case of fiction, but it certainly can be accomplished in informational books.

BAKER: I want to ask a question concerning trade book publishing, and, specifically, the fiction book as opposed to the nonfiction book. If there is any attempt to assign a priority, do you feel that it is more important to publish well-written nonfiction science than well-written fiction science? This might range into such fields as fictionalized biographies of scientists—the Curies, Pasteur, people like that. What are you actually looking for in terms of making decisions about fiction as opposed to nonfiction?

AYLESWORTH: To begin with, I do not think I have any priorities on this. Any reading person should enjoy both fiction and nonfiction. He may lean one way or the other, but he does not stick to one and ignore the other. As far as criteria for fiction in the areas of science, I feel there is nothing more dishonest than putting out a highly fictionalized biography of a scientist. One of the difficulties that a biographer comes

across is to try to set the dialogue in the country and time that is appropriate. I rather doubt that Pasteur ever said, "Gee, whiz." Too many biographies have been filled with made-up languages and paragraphs that start, "Little did Einstein know. . . ."

Concerning another type of fiction—science fiction—I have a very definite bias. I cannot really appreciate the type of science fiction that consists of monsters and made-up language. We have all read things in which one character is said to mount his grilk while eating a mauga and fly off to the planet of Hermes Trismegistus. It seems to me that good science fiction, although it may be set in the future, takes science as we know it today and extends it just a little. For example, at the time when so much work was being done in attempting to learn to communicate with dolphins, I edited a book set in the future in which man could actually talk to dolphins. That is taking science and pushing it a bit and everything follows logically. That is good science fiction.

SMITH: I have never edited any fiction, but I am always glad when my department brings in a good novel. A good reader is going to read novels and science. As for fictionalized biography, the very term is offensive. Biography should not be fictionalized. These were real people working with real events in real times, and the closer the biographer gets to those concepts the better the biography is.

A great burden is put on the biographer in that in a few pages he has to create a whole life, a whole time, and a whole feeling for the problems confronted by the person he is writing about. In a way, he has to have the reader respond to this person the way the reader would respond to major characters in fiction and has to elicit the reader's responses in much the same way.

As for science fiction, I think it is ideal in some ways for reluctant readers. It is one way that a person can get into an imaginative world easily without too many intellectual demands. We have done some science fiction with this in mind and I have gone to science fiction conventions. This was the general feeling among the writers at these conventions. There were many English teachers who were there, not because they were interested in science fiction per se, but because they felt that this is something that their reluctant readers could get into. I do not know exactly where one would draw the line between science fiction and fantasy, but I feel that in fantasy and in some kinds of science fiction, a good writer can really show us the limits of the human imagination. He can play around with no holds barred and we can see what the human can really dream up. I find this fascinating, and I believe that many young people also do.

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BAKER: Which is more difficult to produce and sell—a book of science involving fiction or a book of science nonfiction for the juvenile market?

AYLESWORTH: In a way, it is impossible to answer that question because the two types of books may go to two different markets. The nonfiction very often goes to the young hobbyist or to the person who really enjoys science facts. The fiction tends to go to the person who prefers fiction. However, assuming that both books are excellent books, the science fiction will have the larger sale for the first year or two. The good, solid science informational book will keep on at a slow steady pace, and probably will stay in print longer than the science fiction book.

BAKER: I wonder if you could discuss the characteristics of good science materials for young people.

SMITH: The first characteristic for a good science book is that it should succeed for the reader—that the reader, after finishing the book, knows more about a certain subject. Also, the questions that he raises should be answered in the book. Equally important, of course, the information should be accurate. Another characteristic of a good science book that a publisher must consider is the range of the material. For instance, most readers would be interested at some point in their lives in a book about dinosaurs. A few readers might be interested in finding a rare mineral which could only be found in one locale in America, but a publisher probably could not publish a book about it because of the limited sales. Such a book would have to appear as an article in a magazine or possibly a local newspaper.

There are several types of information. The author may suggest a nondangerous experiment for the reader to do. The writer should perform every experiment that he writes about to see that each will succeed safely. It is also valid that some books awe the reader. I think that certain scientific subjects are worthy of great interest, such as books about dinosaurs, prehistory, earthquakes or great space exploration. If these books arouse the reader and make him interested in either the solar system or the lives of scientists, I think this is desirable. If they arouse him to social needs or to the uses of science—such as in pollution or medicine—that, too, would be good.

Obviously, there are many different types of science books and each one would have to be judged on its own merits. Accuracy is an important factor in the value of science materials. Most publishers make a great effort to see that manuscripts are accurate, to be sure that the author knows what he is doing. At McGraw-Hill the manuscript is

then edited in the house and also sent to outside readers who are experts in the field. The manuscript may also be sent to people who work with school curricula to see if there is a tie-in there. Whatever the demands are, we try to meet them.

Another characteristic of a good science manuscript is timeliness. I think that every science editor secretly prays that technology continues to rush forward so that he may get new books rolling on the subject. We are fortunate, in a strange way, that there is always a demand for up-to-date science books. For instance, it is absolutely amusing to read a book printed as recently as the 1950s about space travel—any aspect of it. Timeliness is a big factor in our science effort.

BAKER: It appears that a prime responsibility of an editor should be to anticipate trends or developments in the field of materials for young people before they actually become general knowledge. What do you, as editors, do to keep yourselves informed to prepare for what lies ahead?

SMITH: First, I talk with writers who are constantly aware of new developments. Secondly, I read many magazines. I talk to people in schools and to librarians, when possible. I find talking to other editors and people in the field very helpful. But ideas are sometimes like gold—they are where you find them. Sometimes a casual remark in a conversation, or a thought while waiting for a train may trigger an idea for a book.

AYLESWORTH: I have picked up book ideas from reading daily newspapers and watching television. I try to get to local and national science fairs as often as possible just to see what the bright science-oriented young person is interested in this year.

BAKER: In our society today single issues are rarely single issues anymore—they are related. I am thinking specifically of pollution which has overtones in terms of politics. How do we marshal the resources of the country to deal with it as a political problem? It is an economic issue, too—how do we pay for it? And, scientifically, how do we apply technology? Is there an attempt on your part to bring to the attention of young readers methods whereby these three elements are combined?

AYLESWORTH: We have published a number of books on ecology for young readers. I think that every one of these books urges youngsters to get active. That is, it is hoped that after they have read the book, the readers will have learned some action patterns from it. I realize that a book is not the best way to get anyone excited about action, but it is the only method at a publisher's disposal.

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We had a strange example in the ecology field a few years ago. I had edited a book for young people on noise pollution and it sold practically nothing in the first year. Then the whole country got excited about noise pollution and the book took off. We are trying to spur the youngsters to action, but we also know that sometimes the subject must be important to them before they pick up the book.

SMITH: I see a distinct trend in science books for young people today. Youngsters feel the pressure of politics, science, and economics more than before. They look around them and see pollution. They often blame science and technology for the pollution they see. In the 1920s, and up to 1950 or so, science readers read books on how to make a shortwave radio set and they would say, "Wow! Isn't that great? Isn't science marvelous? Think of all the things science will bring us!" Today the attitude is very different. They know what science is bringing. It has brought, in some kids' minds, pollution. They feel the Viet Nam War was run and operated by science, technology, and certain economic factions in the United States. They are very aware of this. I feel that publishers have a responsibility to discuss these problems in books. I feel that in the near future publishers are going to have to put out more books in which science is discussed in relation to its impact on society. This, of course, goes into areas of politics and economics as well. We cannot differentiate these aspects in simple experiment books. Indeed, some of the readers who are getting our books may be turned off by science—they may actually despise it. For instance, many of them feel that we have put a lot of money into the space program and not into urban problems. Maybe men did walk on the moon, but young people have to walk among garbage cans and junkies, and they see the difference. The publishers are going to have to do some very deep thinking.

BAKER: What sort of responsibility do publishing houses now take to find literature in foreign languages suitable for the juvenile market? Does it exist, and how does it get translated for this country?

AYLESWORTH: There are myriad ways in which we find out about foreign books. To begin with, we do have offices in foreign countries, and part of their responsibility is to alert us to foreign books that we might be able to use. There are also many contacts made at foreign book fairs such as the Frankfurt Book Fair or the Bologna Book Fair. Many foreign publishers employ American agents to show their books in this country, and there are a few fine translators who are always on the lookout for books that they would like to translate. Foreign publishers make frequent trips to the United States both to buy and sell. We

also regularly receive the catalogs of foreign publishers.

BAKER: One of the recent trends in publishing has been the taking over of a publishing house by a conglomerate. Companies like this are into producing all sorts of materials, print and nonprint. Do you, in bringing books to the public, also make it a part of your responsibilities to be in contact with people in these corporations? Are the people in these companies making a change in the kinds of materials that get published in book form?

SMITH: Our effort has been the development of books and books alone, though we do have several divisions at McGraw-Hill such as text film and others, which do audiovisual work. From my standpoint, I have always wanted to develop a good, solid book, and if it is usable in other media, I was very happy. However, I did not orient myself in that direction when I look at a manuscript or talk to an author. I feel that some media products are developed that way very successfully, but I do not think much of it is generated in our editorial offices.

AYLESWORTH: We do have our own Doubleday divisions in the multimedia area, and, of course, they see everything that we produce. On the other hand, in order for these divisions to be well run, they must see the things from all other publishers, and ours get no preferential treatment at all. Actually, if one of our books turns out to be a filmstrip, we are delighted.

BAKER: Most people involved in buying science things do not buy just books any more; they are really looking for a unit approach. How much do you think about the possibility that a book might lead into another instructional medium?

SMITH: At one time we were doing some trade books with an English publisher. I was very interested to see how differently he did books. He tended to put science on a pedestal. The reader was to read about famous, wonderful scientists and their good works. As I talked to the English publisher, I really came to the conclusion that we thought of our books very differently. We usually tell children to take certain materials and put them together. Or we tell them to make machines or to study animals and plants, or to find out what happens for themselves. In this way we feel that children do more than just read a book. They can work a successful project or experiment which helps them learn science from the inside out. This in turn, we feel, often leads them into the process of science so that they can understand it and progress to more advanced books. Although not all of our books follow this pattern, the English books were encouraging the reader to be a spectator.

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AYLESWORTH: I think that in some ways Doubleday is a different type of publisher from McGraw-Hill. Our prime sales areas are the library and the bookstore, so we seldom publish juvenile science books for the public school classroom. That is, very few of our books are purely instructional. We may have many books that are, in a sense, handbooks, such as how to raise various kinds of pets or do chemistry experiments, but we expect this to fall into the hands of the child who will use it in his hobby. On the other hand, when we are planning a book for general interest, we very seldom put in manipulative experiences. We feel that these books are to expand the child's horizons. So, in short, we seldom combine the two types of books. We seldom design a book in the hope that it may eventually turn into a film, a filmstrip, or any other type of nonprint medium. That comes under the heading of subsidiary rights, and we can always hope, but never plan.

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