

# Editing: Inside the Enigma

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WILLIAM B. GOODMAN

*In Memory of Margaret Marshall*

WHEN CANDID ABOUT WHAT they do, trade publishers and editors are gloomy about their business, but such gloom is usually contradicted by their irrepressible enthusiasm for their books. "Oxymorons all, every one of them," a wag I know would have it, but this is said not so much in criticism as in bemused appreciation. Why? Because the trade books—fiction and nonfiction—that can be taken seriously as literature and necessary discourse in a democratic society too often are weak to hopeless investments for their publishers in the short run (where their business is done) however widely circulated the same books may become when they no longer are vendible articles of trade.

Under the present copyright law, the lifetime of the author plus fifty years defines the duration of an author's property right in his texts, an improvement made in 1976. But please note, this good fact has nothing to do with whether those texts as *matters of business* are worth a publisher's while to keep in print. This is neutral prudential fact and brings us to the central enigma and mystery of our culture for writers, readers and publishers. Here, from Elizabeth Sifton, director of Elizabeth Sifton Books at Viking/Penguin, is a chastened gloss of that enigma: "There is a natural limit on the readership for [new] serious

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fiction, poetry and nonfiction in America that ranges, I would say, between 500 and 5000 people—roughly a hundred times the number of the publisher's and the author's immediate friends (Sifton's Law)."<sup>1</sup> Few trade publishers would agree with Sifton in public but all in the calculations they must make when acquiring manuscripts for publication obey Sifton's Law as best they can. Such obedience, by anticipating probable total hardback sales and such subsidiary rights income as might conceivably occur through possible sale to mass or trade paperback houses, has made the publication of first novels, poetry and general intellectual nonfiction more and more difficult to sustain. If Sifton is right, and I think she is, the cultural consequences are grave indeed for what the future can be expected to support as a matter of normal expectation.

What is involved here is what Sifton's numbers mean in what it will cost writers to live and in what the costs of publishing will become for what the trade pejoratively if ruefully calls "the literary novel" to which should be added the analogous nonfiction book or volume of poetry—books, in short that alert general readers—and their librarians—would buy when they surface, however briefly, in reviews and bookshops. If the fate of such work is more imperiled today than it was, say in 1945, it is because Sifton's numbers have not changed. There has been no increase there but everything in the cost of publishing books has increased heavily. This means so sharp a rise in the break-even point of such books that sales under Sifton's law almost always fall below the costs of their first printings. And that sales outcome means no second printings and fairly rapid remaindering of remaining stock.

This gloomy scenario is not always the case. I can think of three exceptions in my recent experience (all of which received front page reviews in the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*)—Aharon Appelfeld's short novel, *Badenheim 1939*; Benedict Kiely's short fiction collection, *The State of Ireland*; and Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical book, *Hunger of Memory*—exceptions in that each one turned a modest profit for their authors and publishers, but such exceptions must not be taken as the general rule. Their hardback sale per title exceeded the upper limit of Sifton's Law but did not triple it. Such a sales record, it needs be said, would not impress the embattled marketing managers of any of the major houses very much. They would think it respectable perhaps but not too much more than make-weights on lists that had better have a boomer or two on them per season.

Think, if you will, of our national population. There are 230 million Americans in 1984, most of them literate in the sense the term

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has in the law. An astonishing number of the population are college graduates, many of whom were “majors” in one or another of the humanities, history, or the social sciences. Each year we graduate far more than 5000 bachelors of art—some states alone exceed that modest number—but the top limit in Sifton’s Law remains remarkably stable. If you consider the meaning of that fact in the lives of writers and publishers much of the constrictive nature of the contemporary literary situation will become clear. The general phenomenon is not new. For most books that have lasted, from Samuel Johnson’s generation to William Faulkner’s, the situation has been essentially the same. The key word in the last sentence is *essentially*. The constriction in my working lifetime has changed the essential margins in trade publishing that as near ago as the late 1950s made it practical publishing for a trade editor to argue in his house that this or that good first novel or first nonfiction book was of sufficient artistic or intellectual power to command the kind of “word-of-mouth” and reviewing that would produce at a *minimum* a sufficient sale to pay for its costs of publication, even, “with the right breaks,” to exceed that break-even number and move into actual if mild profit. This is important to understand because it made it possible to support careers, to support new writers, and many experienced ones, over many books and thus sustain their continued development. As important, it allowed time for readers to catch up with them, and, in due course, for a genuinely profitable book to occur to reward the publisher’s confident patience.

With the continually rising costs of publishing (composition plus printing paper, binding, and house overheads) and with the persistent force of Sifton’s Law, editors and the writers they would support now face a situation so reduced or constricted that it appears to be more than a difference in degree. The editorial consequences are more and more in the direction of books that are safe commercially and books moreover, that are worth great sums. The decision to publish may be based on the submission of brief proposals because their authors—Carl Sagan is a recent example—have written best-sellers or are celebrities or both. Writers, in other words, whose “product” is “name brand,” the sort of merchandise that competent marketing and promotion managers can move out in literal car load lots. It is naïf and idle to complain about this. The first rule in publishing is to stay in business and best-sellers are part of the economic pattern or health of any general trade house that hopes to last. What’s new is that the economics of trade publishing today more and more limit lists to writers whose marketability is either proven or bankably high enough—Woodward on Belushi?—to be

worth investment. The consequence of such a pronounced drift to market safety in major house after major house is that it is easier for an editor to get a five- or even a "six-figure advance" against royalties for—let me invent something—say, James Michener's to-be-written historical novel tentatively entitled *Central America* than to free up a high four-figure or low five-figure advance for a life and times of, say, Archibald MacLeish, a book well worth doing for a respectable number of literary, social cum political/historical reasons.

James Michener, a perfectly decent man, is not to be blamed for this development. An old publishing hand, Michener, ever the survivor, has matched his talent to his times and succeeded famously. No one begrudges him that earned success. In a society more and more ahistorical, he has become too much the guardian of our national memory. What is to be noticed most here about his success, however, is that it symbolizes the drift to publishing lists that no longer are built as deliberate mixes of different levels or qualities of work—because good books of all kinds arguably would sell well enough book-by-book to keep the accounting department happy (or at least quiet)—but more and more are mixes of presumed probable best-sellers and some other books, many of which are given indifferent marketing and promotional support.

Some in my trade will say I exaggerate and will point to the uniform number of trade books—that famous 40,000—published every year. If the annual number of published trade books has not changed, and if all are not best-sellers, which manifestly they are not, where is the constriction, where is the drift to lists top heavy with supposed best-sellers? This kind of riposte puts us in the never-never land of debating points. The 40,000 figure for the annual number of new trade books published in the United States is a myth as Samuel S. Vaughan, editor-in-chief of Doubleday, has made plain in a fine essay, "The Community of the Book."<sup>2</sup> The terms of trade publishing are shrinking, as shrink they must, in response to what can be sold to book shops, book shop chains, libraries with reduced budgets, book clubs, select reprinters, and publishers abroad for some titles. The anguish some feel over this shrinking, while genuine, cannot be overcome by either accusations of pandering to low taste or grand histrionics in defense of presumed "high culture." If you believe as I do that literature is freest and best when it can support itself, and if literature means to you those books increasingly unprofitable to publishers who once took pleasure and profit in publishing them, then we are ready to take a speculative look at the future of good books and guess at some of what may be in store for

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readers, writers, editors, and publishers. It's not Oceania that's coming. Not that at all, though ersatz Orwell will not soon die, but the literary and publishing situation that surrounds us now with some shift and change. Here are some speculative paragraphs that attempt to smell out pieces of the future.

The constriction of the lists of major trade houses where best-sellers dominate and the voodoo economics they imply will continue. There is a best-seller syndrome. Continuance of this development means that the distinctive qualitative difference between publishers many adepts now claim to see will become more and more difficult to discern. The emperors are disrobing.

The entry of small, new, trade publishers into the field outside the major publishing centers of New York and Boston, modeled perhaps on lists like those of Godine in Massachusetts and North Point in California, will continue. Why more publishers? Two reasons: the first and oldest is the sheer fascination publishing books has had since it became a practical business in the late eighteenth century when modern road networks and later improved paper manufacture made it possible to print books cheaply and distribute them widely. Second, there will be an eagerness among the new and surviving small houses to take advantage of the opportunity created by the best-seller system, a system that shuts out books intrinsically worth publishing, and which if *well-published*, might return and perhaps exceed what it costs to produce them.

The probable continued force of Sifton's Law cannot be avoided. It means that the actual prosperity for a book begins well past its outer limit. Logic alone would dictate, then, that many of the kinds of books given the most respectful attention in reviews will gradually disappear. The logic of practical economics, however, has never ruled publishing. Experience, like history, does not always repeat itself in predictable ways. Good books now and then have violated Sifton's Law. Editors and publishers live for such violations. No matter how often they have been stung by respectable books they have had to remainder, they stay persuaded by an animal faith that before the end of the current week, month, or year, a *1984*, a *World of Our Fathers*, or a *Doctor Zhivago* will turn up through a contact, be invented in-house, come in through an agent convinced that only one house will be able to maximize the unknown script's potential, or —least likely of all—arrive unsolicited or unsponsored in the mail among the too many mute offerings some few of them persist in reading from writers of whom they've never heard.

It's quite touching when you think about it, this steady faith that writing worth investment somehow will always be there. So using

Sifton's Law to reject the merely respectable and always holding themselves ready for something —*what* is it? *where* is it?—that has not yet found them, publishers will huddle with their editors and will to outguess the culture. In doing so, they will scout the categories that have always included their most reliable books. These break down into familiar genres: biography, literary and not-so-literary fiction, public affairs, history, detective fiction. What do they look like now for the future? All will continue, of course, but the interesting question is: On what terms? All crystal balls have eccentric weathers. One man's predictions are another's giggle. Still, there's some point in trying to guess what the future may do to categories we think we understand.

In biography, there are some fascinating problems. If you take the gloomiest view and say that reading that is wide and deep is shrinking so radically that Sifton's Law is ratified in every book shop in the land every day—and returns to publishers in 1984 would support such gloom—that ratification will have to mean that serious biography—W. Jackson Bate's *Samuel Johnson*, say, or Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*—will lack support from readers and so, inevitably, support among publishers. Both the Bate and Ellmann books are deliberately addressed to conspicuously literate general readers. Acknowledged modern masterpieces, they were published with considerable confidence and both succeeded. But if serious reading continues to shrink, what is the future of such biography? At a minimum, it will mean trade publishers will support less of it and university presses will have more of it to consider and publish—the result, a loss to general readership. University press books are usually written on different principles than trade books, and, most important, university press books are not designed or discounted to facilitate wide general distribution. It will mean, too, thin advances for biography from trade publishers and a deepening of the trend toward academic authorship for biography. Is this bad? Not necessarily, but it is hardly a sign of cultural health if only academic careers can sustain writers lives in which serious biography is a central activity.

There are a number of biographical books that should see print before the 1980s are out. Two examples are David Donald's biography of Thomas Wolfe and R.W.B. Lewis's *The Jameses: A Family Narrative*. The authors, thoroughly experienced and distinguished biographers, both work in academic settings designed to sustain them. And both, like Bate and Ellmann, were trained in the last generation in which it was possible to assume that the modern culture that supplanted the Victorian would not unravel into something that would make their culture

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obsolete. Thus Donald's and Lewis's assumption that they have a dependable number of general readers out there to summon to their subjects. They are probably not wrong. The question is whether Sifton's Law will diminish their reach. The quality of what they will write is hardly in doubt. As academics, of course, they are not much at risk. A biographer who works free lance—Robert Caro is a good example—runs greater risks than Donald and Lewis. Justin Kaplan's bet for the late 1980s, a biography of Charles Chaplin, is underway. Its chances against Sifton's Law are pretty good—any inventive editor would have to say so—and therefore worth decent support. The question for biography in the 1980s—and with these examples of books under composition we are dealing with biography at our highest levels—is how far beyond Sifton's Law will they go. Not as far as they would have gone in the late 1950s, grim marketing managers I know would claim. Such men curse Sifton's Law, and by all too often treating it as prophecy, some injured writers and editors claim, insure sales failures for particular books.

Such prophetic considerations, however, do not usually engage writers before they commit themselves to new work. The subject can sometimes be all. Given substantial recent work from literary women on the terms with which women have had to lead their lives in the past, it is more than merely probable that today's writers will produce a number of revisionary biographies before the 1980s end. It is hard to imagine a more likely or more valuable figure for such biographical examination than George Eliot. Gordon Haight's biography in 1968, splendid as it is, seems less modern than it should now, and one itches to see what an Eliot biography would be like from writers as different as, say, Susan Gubar and Phyllis Rose.

The late 1980s should see (but probably will not) a biography of T.S. Eliot authorized by his widow. We may, however, see her edition of his letters, long rumored ready. Valerie Eliot has a torturing problem. Her husband forbade a biography, but he did not destroy his papers. Moreover, he was too much the publisher and literary man to believe that a biography could be stopped. Sonia Orwell had the same problem and solved it by authorizing Bernard Crick's biography without retaining right of approval of Crick's manuscript, an understanding that is the *sine qua non* of truly creditable biography. I don't know how or whether Mrs. Eliot will solve the problem her husband left her. She hardly needs new advice, there's been so much offered on every side. Since so much of imperative value depends on her cooperation, I do hope she will be able to bring herself to authorize a biography. I do not

have a nominee whose name would be new to her, but I do believe whoever is chosen should be an American. Eliot, more even than Henry James, had the most successful American career in English letters that any writer has had. He worked in an English setting, but English as he seemed to appear, he was undeniably American. It is always tricky when an Englishman writes an American's biography and vice versa. Tricky but not impossible. Small mistakes often undercut large analytic undertakings in such books. In Eliot's case it is supremely important that the biographer's bones know what it must have meant to be a boy in an exiled New England family in Saint Louis, Missouri, and what it meant for such a child to recover his Boston heritage, absorb Harvard and its native anglophilia, and finally transplant himself to London, mixing, as it were, Thames and Mississippi. So Eliot's biographer should start as he did from an American education—one that would have to extend beyond academic degrees to a considerable experience of England. The biography of Eliot published by the English writer Peter Ackroyd in 1984, and which I did not see until after this piece was written, is a case in point. It is as good and as thorough a book as an Englishman could write now under the rules imposed by the Eliot Estate and Mrs. Eliot's influence on the survivors of the poet's milieu—and it is weak in precisely those areas where what is American in Eliot should by authoritatively glossed.

Those allergic to television assure us that it will continue to discourage and depress reading. It is important to understand that there is little or no evidence for this claim. Readers, we are told, read as much as they did before television. Nonbook readers, of course, do not read books or much else; moreover, "on the average, book readers spend as much time watching television as do nonbook readers."<sup>3</sup> If television was as negative a force where reading is concerned as is claimed, you would think it would have killed the kind of best-seller pitched to its low-average level, the kind of mental junk food for which Judith Krantz and Harold Robbins have become famous. This has not happened yet and probably will not. The signs are not particularly encouraging, moreover, for what will happen for better books on television in the 1980s. Prime time is out. The conventional wisdom of commercial television in the United States, a wisdom that includes the conviction that anything that deals with any of the arts on or near their own terms is audience destroying, works heavily against heads however adroitly placed that would talk well about books. Not so in the United Kingdom where commercial television as part of its negotiated parliamentary price for being must produce prime time arts programming that includes

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books. There is no American equivalent of the popular ITV South Bank Programme, where the well-known novelist Melvyn Bragg will talk, sometimes for an hour, with writers of the quality, say, of Saul Bellow, David Mamet, Tom Stoppard, or Bernard Malamud about their work. "Bragg claims," the American editor Patricia Mulcahy (Viking/Penguin) says,<sup>4</sup> "that after he featured Isaac Bashevis singer on his show, over 100,000 copies of the polish writer's books left the stores the following week. It is hard to imagine Dick Cavett, [never network prime time], getting anywhere near comparable results for the many fine writers presented on his now-defunct PBS program."

The most recent American attempt to produce book programming on American television is "First Edition." It is based on an idea by the President of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Al Silverman, with John Leonard as very much its star host around whom revolve Nancy Evans, Clifton Fadiman, and one writer per show, a figure who usually has less to say than the host.<sup>5</sup> "First Edition" is syndicated nationally on the PBS network but never at prime time and all too often on a quite irregular schedule week to week, a fact that makes building an audience for it difficult. Its future is dim, I believe, because it misconstrues its function, which is by talking well—in literate and if possible idiosyncratic exchange between men and women soaked in books—about one writer's new book (or whatever subject the program's people may invent about books) provides the kind of civilized entertainment only the autonomous well-read can give each other. Until a decent books program is given a sufficient prime time test in one network time slot nationally—say six months during which ratings are taken but ignored where continuance of the program is concerned—it will not be known whether an audience "out there" can be built for it. Doubtless that audience will fall below what usually succeeds famously in such prime time national network slots. That familiar fact has always been enough to kill arts programming in regular prime time and it will continue to do so until one of the major networks reads its writ to include a mandate for a prime time chance for the sort of thing ITV and Melvyn Bragg do with such success in Britain. Such a move is unlikely and so perhaps in American PBS syndication of select examples of the Bragg program.

The short story, long a publisher's allergy, is less so today, and should continue to increase—mildly—its share of those who buy books for themselves or for libraries. But there is one limitation for short story writers that probably cannot be overcome. Fitzgerald and Hemingway, who were masters of the short story, worked in a publishing environment where many magazines—e.g., *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*,

*Liberty*, and *Esquire*, to name but four—paid well and regularly for short stories. Collections of their stories, while nice, were not central to their careers, but served as acknowledgments by their publishers of their fame and marketability as novelists. A short-story collection that reprints work previously published has some value for the record but usually succumbs as a book to Sifton's Law. In any event, the world that published Hemingway's and Faulkner's stories is long gone. The contemporary short-story writer—Frederick Busch, Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus, James Ward Just, Alan McPherson, of whom you've heard, and, to pick four, Susan Dodd, Pam Durgan, Kent Nelson, and Stephanie Vaughn, of whom you may not—works in a restricted magazine milieu, more of them poorly paying quarterlies than anything else. There's still *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic* and *Harper's* with some space to fill, but the old world of the popular weeklies and the pulps, where writers like Dashiell Hammett learned their trade, has disappeared beyond the hope of resurrection. There is *Playboy*, high paying to be sure, but a magazine with which not every good writer, and surely no woman, can work.

What's encouraging about the short story, the American fictive form par excellence, is that writers won't give it up, and that new writers keep coming on. Such writers' economic lives are much more difficult now than they were for Hammett's and Fitzgerald's generation. Many teach in creative writing programs attached to English departments and many more pass through them as students. Some of these students later join creative writing faculties. Our experience of such enterprises is too recent for reliable judgment on their actual value to writing, but this much is clear: ambivalence about them is high. Most writers feel it's probably not good for them as writers to teach literature or writing, however good it is for their students and however good it may be as a job they can hold and still write.<sup>6</sup>

What is pleasant to report is that the book of short stories is back as a publishing staple. That overstates the case a bit. Much of the activity is reprinting of older books in paperback—more trade paperbacks than mass—or handsome hardback books like the short stories of established masters like Welty or Pritchett or Cheever—but, hold, enough predictive caution. The quality of short-story manuscripts good editors see these days is noticeably higher than it was a few years ago, and often higher than that of scripts for first novels, and there's every reason to expect this trend to continue.

In long fiction, talk of themes, styles, subjects—unless historical—is remarkably unhelpful. The novel won't pose peacefully for predic-

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tion. Novelists do what they can and must. Nonfiction books can be respectably proposed to writers. It is common publishing practice to do so. But true fiction is something else. It is held in a creative privacy, especially when the talent is large, that cannot be broken. Here the wise editor waits till he is given something to read. The great danger in the shrinking readership for the "literary novel" is one in which repeated commercial failure for their best work turns such writers either to silence or to work they'd rather not do however well they learn to do it. And sometimes such work takes them away from books altogether. It can also induce a situation where what amounts to a species of patronage—publisher to writer—enters where heretofore straightforward professional matters of business obtained. Such favors are better left undone.

In long fiction sometimes there are itches an editor should scratch when he senses in a writer's work a book or large subject that may not have occurred to that writer. So I muse a bit on what would happen if so solvent a novelist and fabulist of our political history as Gore Vidal were to turn his attention to the milieu that produced both presidents Roosevelt. For good writers less solvent than Vidal there are inevitable losses—books implicit in ones they have written that may never reach paper. Here, for example, I mourn the loss of the sequel to Paul Fox's fine novel *The Western Coast* (1972), but my grief may be misplaced. The possibility of the book cannot be denied even in a society as "bibliophobic" as Gore Vidal is sure the American is.

The next decade, if present trends hold, should increase the literary and academic respectability of detective fiction. Course work in it will grow. I share Jacques Barzun's<sup>1</sup> and Carolyn Heilbrun's mixed feelings about this development, but as K.C. Constantine's editor, I welcome it, because Constantine, as a master of American demotic speech and of the crime situation novel, is bound to benefit from the inevitable attention. So will his few peers. But it's bad educational practice. The culture needs readers of cultivation that is wide and deep and the education of such readers needs Shakespeare, Milton, Melville, and Balzac far more than it needs Sayers, Simenon, Sjöwall & Whalöö, et al. Undergraduates, after all, will find them anyway.

Detective fiction does not need academic support, though (as I would argue), particular books in the genre may be worthy of close literary attention. Rather, what the future of reading needs is a multiplicity of readers of a sufficient depth of experience as readers to demand good new books, and to be capable of recognizing good new books when they occur. Undergraduates need no help toward Raymond Chandler or

Robert Parker. What they must have—and this should be said to college faculties as firmly as possible—are comprehensive liberal educations, educations that do not neglect scientific literacy, educations they cannot shirk—if, that is, if American books worthy to stand beside Thoreau, Melville, Howells, Wharton, Faulkner, Wallace Stevens, Saul Bellow, and I.B. Singer are to be written, edited, published, and read in the next century. While I do believe readers make themselves and that many of them—being masters of their local libraries—never use a college; still, it is not too much to require that our most expensive public and private institutions—our colleges and universities—make their degrees synonymous with well-instructed and competent readers.

### References

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2. Vaughan, Samuel S. "The Community of the Book." *Daedalus* 112(Winter 1983):93-94.
3. Yankelovich, Skelley, and White, Inc. *Consumer Research Study on Reading and Book Purchasing* (prepared for the Book Industry Study Group, Inc.) New York:1978, p. 61.
4. Ms. Mulcahy was Godwin Publishing Fellow in London in 1984. The quotation appears on p. 4 of her report to her sponsors (August, 1984).
5. See Bruce Bawer, "A certain air of seriousness," *The New Criterion*, September, 1984, pp 88-92, for a harsh critique of this program.
7. Editor's note: Goodman's arguments about literary studies and culture and his allusion to Barzun's are given more shape in Barzun, Jacques "Scholarship Versus Culture." *The Atlantic Monthly*254(Nov. 1984):93-104.