What Editors Do

THE ART, CRAFT, AND BUSINESS OF BOOK EDITING

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CONTENTS
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INTRODUCTION

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THE THREE PHASES OF EDITING

People outside the book publishing industry—and even many within it—often wonder: just what is it that editors do? It's a simple question with a complicated answer. This book attempts such an answer. It's intended for readers who are interested in becoming editors themselves, or who have embarked on an editorial career and want to learn more; for those in other jobs within publishing who want to understand their editorial colleagues; for book lovers curious about how the books they loved (or hated) came into being; and not least, for writers who want to know just what goes on inside the walls of a publishing house—or inside an editor's head. To find out how the literary sausage is made, for better or worse, read on.

In today's book business, the role of editor encompasses an enormous range of tasks. Imagine that the whole American publishing industry could be found on one single street. (So much of it was, in nineteenth-century New York, that the expression "Publishers Row" became a lasting metonym for the book business, as "Madison Avenue" did for advertising. Today publishing is more geographically dispersed than ever, but suppose the contrary with me for a moment.) If we could peek in the windows of all the different publishers, here are some of the things we might see editorial staffers doing:

- In this skyscraper, an editor is on the phone with a literary agent negotiating a contract for a new book.
- In the conference room next door, another editor is sitting with an author in front of a pile of photographs, choosing images for a book going into production.
- In the hallway, a senior editor is buttonholing the sales director to tell him why he has *got* to read a memoir that's just been delivered.
- In this ivy-clad building, a university press editor is scanning a new journal, looking out for promising young scholars.
- Across the street, several editors are in a marketing meeting, discussing publicity and sales plans on next season's titles.
- In this cubicle, an editorial assistant is struggling to fit a flap copy description into the two hundred words allotted for it.
- In this one, a copyeditor is checking to make sure that a character who

has green eyes on page 60 of this manuscript didn't have blue eyes on page 14.

- At the textbook publisher's building on the corner, an editor is researching professors who might peer-review a new environmental studies reader.
- In the brownstone housing an independent press, a fiction editor is painstakingly composing a letter asking a famous writer to blurb a debut novel.
- Back at the skyscraper, in the corner office, the editor in chief is . . . actually she's not there, she's on her way to lunch. But this, too, is a very important part of her job! I'll discuss why in the next chapter.

What we probably wouldn't see through these office windows are editors *editing* things—that is, reading manuscripts and suggesting changes and improvements to them. Perhaps the kaleidoscope of other tasks listed above suggests why. Those essential editorial activities require concentration and long blocks of time to do properly—and that's near-impossible to find in the busy publishing workday. If we followed all these editors out of their offices at night, we would see almost every one, as they sit on the bus, or on the sofa after dinner, pull a computer tablet or a stack of pages out of their bag and start to read. And many of them are probably still reading and making comments in the margins deep into the evening.

WHAT EDITING IS

It's ironic that publishing, a business whose essence is words, has some of the loosest, most confusing, and most contradictory terminology of any industry I know. For instance, one very common term, *galley*, could refer to three or four different things.[1] And the very item editors work on continues to be called a *manuscript*, which properly means a document written by hand, when today every author delivers his work by computer.[2]

As the list of activities above suggests, the title *editor* is misleading, too. What the word *editing* connotes to most people—correcting and improving an author's text—is only a part of what book editors do. It's a big slice of the

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1. The word is used in shorthand to refer to first-pass proofs, bound galleys, and advance reading copies, three related but quite distinct items—none of which matches the term's original meaning (see the glossary for definitions of each).

2. Our British colleagues might reply in self-defense that they say "typescripts"— but that term is only marginally less obsolete.

pie, but far from the whole pizza. The Latin origin of *edit*, *edere*, meaning "to bring out" or "to put forth," usefully expands our understanding of the role. *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.) Everyone in a publishing company, from the website designer to a picker in the warehouse, is by definition part of that process.

But editors have a special position, as the professionals most closely connected with the book and its author. Editors are responsible for finding works to publish in the first place, and for steering each one through the serpentine pipeline of the publishing house into the marketplace, tending to the author's needs (and psyche) along the way. An old publishing adage has it that an editor "represents the author to the house and the house to the author," and this is true, but incomplete. The editor also represents the *reader* to the author, and vice versa. To edit a manuscript effectively, you must put yourself in the shoes of someone who's picking up the book with no prior knowledge of the author or the project's history. At the same time, you must grasp what the writer is trying to accomplish in the book; sometimes this will be more evident to you than to the author. And to publish a book well, you must combine that understanding of the author's vision with your knowledge of the marketplace—of what readers are looking for and how they find it.

The editor, then, is a connector—a conduit from writer to reader—but also a translator, improving the communication from each to the other. As our snapshots from Publishers Row revealed, editing takes in a wide variety of activities. Sometimes one person carries out all of them; sometimes they are distributed among multiple individuals, depending on the type and the size of the publishing house.

Our time has seen enormous and still-ongoing changes in the industry of book publishing—the technology has been revolutionized, the retail landscape has been transformed, and even as commercial publishing has increasingly become the domain of huge corporations, small publishers and self-publishers have greater presence in the marketplace than ever before. A "publisher" now might be a multinational corporation like Penguin Random House; a small not-for-profit literary firm or university press; or even an author publishing his own e-books from his kitchen table.

Some have wondered whether in this brave new world editors will become obsolete. I doubt it, because whatever form publishing takes—unless it is defined downward to be something like blogging or handing out

photocopies—the editorial functions explored in this book will always be critical to it. That self-publishing author doesn't have a business card saying "Editor," but as soon as he reads over his work to get it ready for uploading, or when she writes a description for her Amazon page and wonders how to make it sound appealing, she is one.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

For all the transformations mentioned above, 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.

A small but increasing number of universities offer publishing classes for undergraduate or graduate students, or intensive summer courses for aspiring editors; those at Columbia, New York University, and the University of Denver are among the best known.[3] But they train a relative handful of applicants. Perhaps that's why there are virtually no textbooks or manuals for book editors, not counting those covering specialties such as copyediting and proofreading.

One standout exception to this was the essay collection *Editors on Editing*, in which the veteran editor Gerald Gross gathered contributions from many leading practitioners discussing aspects of their work. First published in 1962 and still in print, *Editors on Editing* is an excellent resource. I read it avidly when I started out in publishing in the 1980s, and I still find it valuable.[4] But the contents focused almost entirely on trade publishing, offering little practical information for editors in academic or small press settings. Also, it was last updated in 1993—a time when Amazon did not exist, very few Americans were online, and the cutting-edge technology in publishing was the CD-ROM. *What Editors Do* aims to perform a similar service for publishing in the era of Amazon, downloadable e-books, and social media.

The figure of the editor has often been romanticized or glamorized (or,

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3. A more complete list of these programs can be found within the resource list at the end of this book.

4. The resource list also includes the titles of other useful reading material, in print and online.

in some quarters, demonized). Another goal of this book is to demystify the editor's job and put it in context within the publishing process. I have used the subtitle *The Art, Craft, and Business of Book Editing* because I believe all those nouns fit together. The *art* of editing lies in exercising taste and making aesthetic judgments, and in attuning oneself, in a slightly different way each time, to the sensibility and psychology of an author. The *craft* involves learning techniques and best practices, which range from the rules of grammar and style mastered by copyeditors to the diplomatic ways of phrasing suggestions that good line editors learn by experience. Finally, the editor, even in a not-for-profit press, is part of a *business* that sells a product and must generate revenue. Understanding how that business works, and learning how to guide one's projects through the publishing process and into the marketplace, is a prerequisite for serving your authors well.

Like many of my colleagues, I was drawn to editing initially for the art of it: the opportunity to read for a living, the chance to help creative people shape their work, the hope of contributing to literature. Happily, I found all that as an editor. But I also found that I enjoyed learning the craft of editing. Some of that learning came from generous mentors, much from my own curiosity and sometimes painful experience, but whatever the source, there is always satisfaction in improving one's skills. And the craft is difficult and complex enough that the journey up the learning curve can last a long time. Once I got far enough along, though the pace of learning new things diminished, I took satisfaction in teaching the craft to others. But most unexpectedly to me, I discovered over time that I actually loved the business of publishing. I came to relish the perpetual challenge: starting with a book you're excited by, how can you operate the equipment of the publishing house to realize the author's vision as fully as possible and put it in the hands of the greatest number of readers?

This volume attempts to capture each of these aspects of book editing, in essays contributed by some of the most effective practitioners and insightful observers of publishing at work today. Inevitably the shape of this collection reflects my own experience: although I have worked in a small literary press and a large academic one, most of my time has been spent in trade publishing, where editors tend to have the broadest responsibilities. Therefore I tend to conceive the job in those terms. But those who have more specialized functions, from in-house production editors to freelance developmental editors, are no less crucial to the process. They too are represented in these essays. Furthermore, as I noted above, a significant share of the titles in today's

marketplace comes from authors who publish themselves, and sometimes become publishers of other kindred writers. So a chapter here is devoted to editorial best practices for the self-publisher.

To cover every variety of editor and editing would require a multivolume encyclopedia rather than a handbook, so I have not attempted that here. These essays amount to a mosaic that I hope will give the reader a clear understanding, if not a complete image, of the editor's place in the publishing ecosystem. Nor have I attempted to address every kind of book publishing, a vast and diverse industry that bleeds into fields such as journals in one direction, database publishing in another, and comic books in yet another. This book focuses mainly on core sectors of publishing with which most readers will have at least some familiarity. These include the following:

- *Trade publishing*. Of all counterintuitive publishing terms, this may be the commonest—it's as if the industry aimed to trip up laypeople at the door. While a trade *magazine* is one that covers a particular industry, aimed at readers in that industry, a trade *book* is the opposite: a work aimed at a general audience. The usage arose because these items were sold in the "book trade"—that is, bookstores.
- *Mass market publishing*—paperbacks sold through drugstores, newsstands, and the like—was once a separate category but has now largely been absorbed into trade publishing as trade and mass market houses merged, partly because their readers overlap so much.
- *Juvenile publishing* is the antique-sounding term for children's and young adult books. While a huge category in market share, it too falls under trade publishing, as kids' books are also found in general bookstores.
- *Academic (or scholarly) publishing*. This includes both university presses and commercial firms that publish for the academic market. Their books are aimed at specialist readers and the research libraries that serve them.
- *Textbook publishing*. Textbooks are written and published for use by students in the classroom, whether in elementary and high school (K–12 or "el–hi" in industry jargon) or in colleges.
- *Reference publishing*. Reference works span everything from a desktop dictionary to a massive online resource. Many reference titles are now published purely online; still, most publishers have some print and e-book titles on their lists that qualify as reference.

- *Self-publishing.* Together, the technological breakthroughs of printing on demand, e-book publishing, and online bookselling have allowed authors to publish their own work competitively with much larger companies, though few receive bookstore distribution. Self-published titles now number in the hundreds of thousands annually. Most of them have small to minuscule audiences, but in some popular genres such as fantasy, thriller, or romance, self-published books routinely become bestsellers.

The specifics of an editor's job may vary considerably from one of these categories to another. For that matter, even within the same category no two houses have identical procedures: a children's book editor at Dell may do her job quite differently from one at Scholastic. Nonetheless, across all these categories, even self-publishing, some fundamental features of the editor's role persist.

THE THREE PHASES OF EDITING

In a typical workday, an editor may "touch" anywhere from a few titles to a score of them, and (as that peek in the windows of our imaginary Publishers Row showed) carry out dozens of activities, some momentous and some menial. But overall, the editorial process consists of three overlapping phases, and every editorial task can be grouped into one of them. Some editors, such as copyeditors or freelance book doctors, perform one of these functions exclusively. But most, especially in trade publishing, will be involved in all of them. This book begins by exploring these three basic kinds of editorial labor.

The first is *acquisition*—finding new works to publish, which includes not just screening submissions from authors and literary agents but also scouting for promising new writers or even seeking the right author for a project the editor thinks up. In textbook or reference publishing, this phase usually begins with the editor identifying an opportunity in the marketplace.

Acquisition is a "sales" job too—it includes the crucial task of persuading one's in-house colleagues to invest in a new project, and of selling the house to an author who may have other publishers to choose from. Finally, to use a current-day buzzword, acquisition is the art of curation. One important way in which an editor contributes to both his business and our culture is helping the public find books worth reading. The very developments that some predicted would make editors obsolete—the technology allowing anyone to publish a book with a few clicks—has created an explosion of titles that has only made the editor as curator more valuable.

The techniques of acquisition vary from one market segment to another, as the essays in part I make clear. In trade publishing, the vast majority of projects come to editors from their network of agents, the cultivation of which is a key ongoing task. In academic publishing, an editor develops a network of scholars in her field. In textbook and reference publishing, the process often begins with the editor working backwards from a subject and seeking authors for it. The title of Peter Coveney's chapter on textbook acquisitions, "The Lords of Disciplines," might also apply to the academic editors described in Greg Britton's essay: in both markets, a lively understanding of one's designated scholarly field is essential. In every category, the acquiring editor must advocate for a new book with enthusiasm, but temper that enthusiasm with a pragmatic understanding of the book's prospects in the marketplace. Jonathan Karp's "The Alchemy of Acquisition" wryly offers some guidelines for doing so from the viewpoint of a seasoned trade-book publisher.

The second phase might be called *text development*; it is sometimes referred to as "pencil editing" after the time-honored tool for the job. This is what most people think of when they hear the word *editing*: the core task of working with the author, from proposal or first-draft manuscript, to make his manuscript as good as it can be and ready it for publication. Today, of course, much "pencil editing" is in fact done electronically, allowing quicker exchanges between author and editor and greater efficiency in later stages. In this way, technology has enhanced rather than threatened a traditional process. (Like many colleagues, I still prefer to edit "old school," with pencil on paper, but I'll often transcribe my comments into an author's electronic manuscript to make it easier and faster for him to respond.)

Text development takes place along a continuum from the big-picture, conceptual level—such as when an editor and author talk through the outline of a book over a lunch or a telephone call—down to the level of phrases, words, and punctuation marks. I refer to the most fundamental, "macro" interventions as *conceptual editing*—this is not a common industry term, perhaps because a conversation over lunch doesn't seem like "editing" and indeed a pencil may be nowhere in sight. But sometimes the most important contribution an editor can make is to help an author frame her approach to a topic in a compelling way or steer away from a poorly chosen subject. In *Avid Reader*, Robert Gottlieb's memoir of a brilliant career at Simon & Schuster, Knopf, and the *New Yorker* (highly recommended for all aspiring, or practicing, editors), he jokes that all editors' accounts of their work take the form *"So I said to him, 'Leo! Don't just do war! Do peace too!'"* That's conceptual editing. By definition, it takes place early in the creative process. Quite a lot

of conceptual editing may be done by the author's agent before editors even see a proposal, as editor-turned-agent Susan Rabiner explains in her essay in part II.

Developmental editing is a term often used for input a step or two further along, usually when the author has a complete draft or most of one. At this stage an editor may reorder chapters or restructure within them, suggest different writing approaches, or retool an introduction, for example. This kind of work bleeds into *line editing*, where the editor works her way literally line by line through a manuscript and makes comments on every aspect of the text, down to word choice and punctuation. *Copyediting* is the final and most fine-grained step of the editing process, in which the manuscript is combed for any technical errors or lapses in consistency, marked up with design specifications, and otherwise prepared to be set into type by a compositor.

Nancy Miller's "The Book's Journey," which begins part II, traces the path taken by a typical book from the moment an author delivers a draft manuscript to the time a printed copy leaves the publisher's warehouse. Other chapters in part II, by Scott Norton, George Witte, and Carol Fisher Saller, walk us through each of these kinds of edits in more detail. As Miller points out, these are different *levels* of editing, not necessarily discrete *stages* that a book passes through in sequence. They can happen simultaneously—a developmental editor won't hesitate to correct a misspelling, and on rare occasions a copyeditor may suggest a chapter-level overhaul.

In trade publishing, usually the acquiring editor does everything through the line edit, while in academic presses the sheer volume of titles to be published often means books get only a high-level developmental edit with little line-by-line work. But no serious publishing house, nor even a self-respecting self-publisher, sends a title into the marketplace without a meticulous copyedit: grammatical errors and other obvious flubs instantly put readers off and damage a writer's credibility.

Notwithstanding my comments earlier that pencil editing is only part of the editor's job, shaping the book in this way—working through it 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 "acquisitionists" or "flap-copyographers." And a publishing professional who is involved only with the text, like a copyeditor, is still an editor; one who's involved only in marketing is not.

The publishing house as a whole should serve the author in many ways. But engaging with the author's ideas and their expression is often the place

where the editor personally can have the most direct impact. It is probably the part of our work most greatly valued by authors, and for that reason often the most rewarding. For the editor, it's the most creatively stimulating part of the job, and the most intimate. For that very that reason, it's often the most psychologically fraught. Agent Betsy Lerner, a gifted author herself as well as a former editor, gives us a bracingly honest look at the author–editor relationship in the second chapter of part II.

The third phase of the editor's job is what we usually understand by *publication*—the complex and demanding effort to get the book into the marketplace and put it in the hands of readers. This effort includes both the nuts-and-bolts tasks of production (turning the work from a manuscript into a printed and/or electronic volume, or perhaps an app or audiobook) and the wide range of activities that constitute sales, publicity, and marketing. Unlike acquisitions and text development, the editor is not usually directly responsible for these functions, but she is essential to them. In trade houses the editor is in effect the project captain at the hub of all these processes; at a small indie house the editor may wear several of these hats herself; in academic or reference publishing the editor may be further from these functions but will still be responsible for funneling key information to all the players and communicating with the author.

This phase of the editor's job, marketing the product, is sometimes looked down on as mere commerce or, worse, hucksterism, but no good editor is ashamed of it. It brings us back to the essence of what editors do: connect writers with readers. What service is more important to the author, or to our culture, than bringing a good book into the lives of as many readers as possible?

Part III of this volume looks into the intricate machinery of twenty-first-century publishing and what it takes for editors to utilize that machinery on their authors' behalf. To begin, Michael Pietsch, who rose from editing some of America's most acclaimed writers to become the CEO of a Big Five publisher, writes incisively of "the editor as manager" and the skills of communication, organization, and teamwork that make an editor effective.

One particular form of communication is essential for editors to master: persuasion. To say that an editor must be a manager does *not* mean that he is a bloodless functionary. The best editors are passionate about their books, and have learned how to spread that passion through the publishing house and out into the world. Calvert Morgan explains this mission—the editor as evangelist—in "Start Spreading the News."

Pietsch and Morgan write from the perspective of the big corporate houses

that constitute much of the publishing business. But vital publishing is also being done in small to mid-sized independent presses all over the country. Unconstrained by corporate pressures, sometimes explicitly not for profit, these houses often take more chances and nurture more daring and innovative work. One such publisher is Minnesota's Graywolf Press. Jeff Shotts, Graywolf's executive editor, offers a glimpse of how an editor in an indie house operates, making an eloquent case for what indies have to offer authors: a keen sense of community and the gift of patience.

If the fundamental principles of publishing and editing hold true across diverse sectors of the market, from college texts to paperback thrillers, each content category has its unique features, too: the kinds of authors you work with, the editorial skills you need, and the ways you reach audiences will vary from one to the next. Part IV, "Categories and Case Studies," gathers essays from eight editors with expertise in varied fields: Erika Goldman on literary fiction (with echoes of Shotts on the value of independent publishing); Diana Gill on genre fiction; Matt Weiland on general nonfiction (a category far more interesting than its name, as he rightly observes); Nancy Siscoe on children's and young adult books; Wendy Wolf on biography and memoir; Susan Ferber on scholarly nonfiction; Anne Savarese on reference publishing (it still thrives, even in the age of Google); and Deb Aaronson on illustrated books. All of these editors discuss one or more projects they've worked on, giving us several vivid illustrations of what editing is in practice, not just in theory. Together, these essays suggest both the wide variety of issues that editors must grapple with and the underlying similarities in what all of them do.

THE PROFESSION OF EDITING

Finally, book editing is not only an art, a craft, and a business—it is also a career. Part V explores several aspects of editing as a profession.

When we speak of publishing careers, the elephant in the room—and it is, unfortunately, a white elephant—is the industry's lack of diversity. As of 2017, surveys show American publishing houses are roughly 80 percent white, and editorial staffs even whiter. This is almost 20 percent higher than the share of white Americans in the 2010 census. African Americans and Latinos make up only 2 to 4 percent of editors—somewhere between one-eighth and one-fourth of their share of the general population.

I personally suspect this doesn't reflect conscious racism so much as the tradition-bound thinking of the industry. (One tradition, I'm afraid, is snobbery, such as the knee-jerk tendency to hire students from prestigious schools and look no further.) But that is only another way of saying that publishing

shares in the structural racism of American society, and it is certainly no excuse for accepting the status quo. Publishing's lily-whiteness is not only a failure of social justice when minority candidates are denied opportunity. It's a problem for the industry, as the works editors choose to publish become demographically out of step with an ever more diverse customer base. And it's a loss to the culture that publishers should be serving.

In his chapter, Chris Jackson, an African American editor who has published a diverse list of authors and in 2017 restarted the multicultural One World imprint at Penguin Random House, looks back at his own career to draw some lessons from it for publishers. His piece offers inspiration for anyone interested in becoming an editor, especially those from nontraditional backgrounds. And it offers a challenge for those in the business who make hiring and promotion decisions to widen their field of vision.

But let's suppose you are a talented applicant who has landed an entry-level position: what's it like? A few people move into editorial positions from other departments or even other media, such as magazines or television. But to reiterate a point made earlier, most of us learn the trade by apprenticeship. The best first step toward becoming an editor, then, is to be a good editorial assistant. Katie Adams's "The Apprentice" explains what EAs do and what sets the best ones apart.

Meanwhile, some editors make a career working for themselves—usually, but not always, after gaining some in-house experience. The increasing pressure for houses to publish more titles with fewer staffers and the surge in self-publishing have created new opportunities for freelance editors. Copyediting and proofreading, because of their piecework nature, have long been outsourced by big publishers. Today, developmental and line editing work, too, may well be sent to freelancers. Katharine O'Moore-Klopf, a freelance editor for two decades, explains the dynamics of freelance work and how one might go about building an editorial solo practice in "This Pencil for Hire." Some self-publishers, of course, don't want or can't afford to hire freelance services. Yet at some level every self-publisher must be responsible for the editorial quality of his work. Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry's chapter, "The Self-Publisher as Self-Editor," is an invaluable guide to what that means.

The final essay in part V, by publishing expert and consultant Jane Friedman, steps back to offer a wider, synoptic view of the changing publishing marketplace and the editor's place in it. While the e-book's threat to disrupt publishing has been overblown, many related developments—including the growing market share of Amazon and other e-tailers, the explosion of new titles from self-publishers, and the consequently critical problem of helping

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readers find books—have caused the business to change more in the past fifteen years than the previous fifty. If most of the other essays in this collection focus on what editors do now, Friedman's offers a glimpse at how those roles might—and might not—evolve in years to come.

A passing word about technology: Readers may notice that, for all my emphasis on change in publishing, this book does not include a chapter on technology per se, nor on such burgeoning product categories as e-books or audiobooks. This is not because these topics are unimportant—exactly the contrary. Every part of the publishing process, from writing and editing to marketing and distribution, has been reshaped by electronic tools and the internet, and each chapter here reflects how editors now work in a networked digital environment. But the principles and best practices of editing laid out in these essays are largely identical whether the editor scribbles on paper or taps on a tablet, and whether the book is delivered on paper, via e-reader, or through headphones.

Book publishing undoubtedly confronts many challenges as this book comes into being: not just technological but demographic, economic, and cultural. But the death of publishing has been proclaimed on a regular basis, seemingly since Gutenberg, and as I point out in my conclusion to this volume, the continuities in the profession are just as striking as the changes. I believe now is an exciting, dynamic time to be an editor, whether inside a publishing house, as a freelancer, or even as a hybrid creator-publisher of your own work. Compiling this book, and exchanging observations about editing with some of the smartest publishing people I know, has reinforced my optimism about the profession. Regardless of why you picked up this book, I hope that once you have read it, you will find reasons to share that optimism.