

**“Care on both sides of the desk”:  
A look at author–editor relationships  
at McClelland & Stewart**

**by  
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# Declaration of Committee

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## Abstract

In the book publishing industry, “author care” is an integral component of author–editor relationships. However, the concept is tenuously defined and rather slippery to grasp—those who work in publishing have an idea of what it means, but there are no explicit guidelines or handbooks on how to practice it. This project report explores the current state of author care, how its processes and expectations have changed in the last century, and if there are any gaps to be filled to create a healthier publishing landscape.

This report is structured as a timeline, narrowing in scope. In the era of “gentlemanly publishing,” the patriarchal, male-dominated industry and slower production meant there were fewer books published, but there was an emphasis on long author–editor relationships. This era transitions into contemporary publishing, wherein multinational conglomerates have acquired many of these small publishers. This shift in the publishing industry introduced new challenges for both authors and editors. With a cursory look at the mental health challenges facing authors and editors alike, this report concludes with an analysis of specific author–editor relationships at McClelland & Stewart and my own personal findings as a temporary full-time employee at PRHC and MPub student.

**Keywords:** author care; authors and editors; publishing; mental health; PRHC; M&S

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# Chapter 1. Why care about author care?

Author care is an integral part of the author–editor relationship. The nature of author–editor relationships has shifted drastically to accommodate societal and industrial changes throughout the last century, from the commercialization of the trade publishing industry to the COVID-19 pandemic. By identifying the positive changes and outstanding gaps in author–editor relationships, and the ways in which the nature of author care has changed in the last century, this project report highlights how author–editor relationships can be mutually sustainable, constructive, and creatively nourishing—not only for authors, but editors as well.

In “Author Care and the Invisibility of Affective Labour,” Parnell, Dane, and Weber describe the concept of author care as “a slippery notion with no apparent concrete definition.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout my six-month editorial internship with McClelland & Stewart (M&S), an imprint of Penguin Random House Canada, I witnessed the nebulousness but omnipresence of author care in trade publishing, which produces books for general audiences as opposed to scholarly or legal publishing, for example. I read editorial job postings listing care and compassion for authors as assets for applicants, and I witnessed publishers, publicists, and editors performing care work consistently. In my conversations with editors at M&S, I garnered that some of the biggest changes in editorial work since 2020 are increased conversations around capacity, time restraints, burnout, and boundaries, initiated by both authors and editors. Additionally, there are explicit calls for increased diversity, transparency, and accessibility in the publishing industry, which have grown since 2020.

McClelland & Stewart, a storied literary publisher acquired in its entirety by Random House in 2011, is the publisher of celebrated Canadian literary fiction authors such as Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Mordecai Richler. M&S’s backlist—titles still in print that have been on sale for over one year—also includes Canadian authors Leonard Cohen and Mavis Gallant. Additionally, M&S authors Omar El Akkad and Souvankham Thammavongsa won CanLit’s most distinguished award, the

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<sup>1</sup> Parnell, Claire, Alexandra Dane, and Millicent Weber. 2020. “Author Care and the Invisibility of Affective Labour: Publicists’ Role in Book Publishing.” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 36 (4): 648–59.

\$100,000 Scotiabank Giller Prize, in 2021 and 2020, respectively. M&S specializes in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and houses both the nonfiction imprint Signal and the experimental imprint Strange Light. Additionally, M&S runs an open submissions inbox, which solicits manuscripts from Black, Indigenous, and racialized writers, as well as those of other traditionally underrepresented communities.<sup>2</sup>

I joined the intern cohort in July 2022 alongside thirteen other interns employed in other imprints and departments within Penguin Random House Canada (PRHC). Despite working remotely, I performed editorial tasks for M&S, attended weekly Speaker Series events featuring professionals within the company, participated in all editorial meetings at the imprint level as well as all-company and committee meetings. Throughout my internship, I learned about editorial processes and the nature of author care through the editorial team via one-on-one conversations, team meetings, and in discussions about task parameters. My specific tasks included reading and evaluating agented manuscripts and unsolicited “slush pile” submissions; performing copyedits and proofreads; working with freelance copyeditors and sending editing queries to authors and editors; drafting and editing tip sheets (a one-page document containing sales information for each upcoming title); collecting all author highlights for dissemination and storage; proofreading e-books; and administrative tasks, such as submitting metadata for the Cataloguing in Publishing program and shipping gratis copies to authors and agents.

I reported directly to Joe Lee, Publishing Manager at M&S, and other editors would also assign tasks to me. I performed my work remotely in Vancouver, while most of the editorial team are currently located in the Greater Toronto Area. The introduction of remote internships at PRHC was one of the many changes to the company’s employee policy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 2022, employees are now permitted to work remotely instead of commuting to PRHC’s offices in Toronto or Vancouver.

Since I was, understandably, not privy to the private conversations between editors and authors, I developed a curiosity as to how the drastic shift caused by COVID-19 has impacted author–editor relationships. From my position as a junior editorial intern

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<sup>2</sup> “Imprint Submissions.” Penguin Random House Canada. Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/imprints/MS/mcclelland-stewart/submissions>

as well as my perspective as the published author of a poetry chapbook with Rahila’s Ghost Press, I approach this issue from both editorial and authorial standpoints. This dual perspective has prompted me to focus on the relationship between authors and editors, and especially the tenet of publishing known by industry insiders as “author care,” despite the vagueness of its definition. This project report identifies and examines the key differences between multiple eras of publishing, from the early twentieth century to immediately preceding the pandemic, and “mid-pandemic” approaches to author care, drawing on my placement with M&S. With the increase of remote work and reliance on technology in the book publishing industry, it is easy to lose touch with the sense of humanity behind the books with which we work. This project report’s central question is: how has the publishing industry pivoted to uphold author care over time? And how have calls for equity and representation for authors who are traditionally underrepresented, such as authors who are trans, Indigenous, Black, people of colour—essentially, authors who are not white and cis male—impacted how things are done today?

I write this project report from the position of a Master of Publishing student at Simon Fraser University. In complement to hands-on experience at M&S, my research draws from a range of sources, including scholarly articles, books, recorded industry panels and talks, and television shows. I have depended on historical research of the publishing industry to inform my understanding of how publishing has progressed and transformed over the last century, and I have drawn on scholarly articles and books authored by publishing professionals and sociologists.<sup>3</sup> This project report focuses on North American publishers, with a particular emphasis on Canadian companies, such as Penguin Random House Canada, and primarily on the genres of fiction, poetry, and some creative nonfiction.

Additionally, the scope of my research is limited in that specific author–editor relationships are highly personal and dependent on the people involved in them, so my observations on author care across the industry are based on specific relationships and personal accounts I have witnessed and researched. My research is limited to my internship at PRHC and published works about working relationships, such as editor

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<sup>3</sup> Foundational sources include *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates* by Gesa Stedman, *Merchants of culture* by John Brookshire Thompson, and *Stet* by Diana Athill.



Diana Athill's memoir *Stet*.<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge that this limitation presents a challenge in accessing the opinions and experiences of authors directly. However, I have taken into consideration the views and experiences of authors by including sources on author care *by* authors.<sup>5</sup>

The structure of this project report is a chronological timeline with a progressively narrowing focus. I have chosen to structure it this way to map the changes in procedures, attitudes, trends, and movements within publishing over the last century. Book publishing has been impacted not only by economic shifts (commercialization and mergers) and innovations within the industry (such as e-readers and e-books), but also, most notably, by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since my curiosity lies in the many pivots that publishers have been required to make, it is important to consider the economic contexts and business trends throughout the notable eras of publishing preceding the onset of COVID-19.

Therefore, I begin my report with a broad overview of the era of “gentlemanly publishing,” ranging from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Then, I analyze contemporary multinational publishing immediately preceding the onset of COVID-19, and the nature of the conglomerate and its shift to “vertical publishing.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, I reflect on my experiences as an editorial intern at M&S, where I experienced mid-pandemic editorial practices on a fleeting and micro (yet immersive) level.

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<sup>4</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*. Rakuten Kobo. London: Granta, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Author sources include Chelene Knight and Vivek Shraya. Authors' views were accessed via recorded interviews and talks, Tweets and other social media posts, and autobiographical books.

<sup>6</sup> Stedman, Gesa. From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates: Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/1849/stedman.pdf?sequence=1>

## Chapter 2. Definition(s) and context of author care

The notion of author care is slippery. This may be because the definition depends on exactly who is performing the act, since author care is enacted differently by publicists, publishers, and editors due to the differing demands of these roles. However, as the publishing industry has adapted and changed over the last century, the concept of caring for authors has shifted as well. We often think of lunches, hotels, and perks as being part of author care, due in part to the glamorization of the industry in film and television.<sup>7</sup> In actuality, author care is a more nuanced concept.

At BookNet Canada's Tech Forum in 2020, Chelene Knight and Cynara Geissler spoke about the concept of author care in early 2020. Knight is a 2019 Writers Trust Award-winning author who launched Breathing Space Creative Literacy Studio, a service-based consultancy that helps publishers, festival organizers, and other literary organizations better support the needs of their authors, and Geissler is a writer as well as the director of marketing and publicity at Arsenal Pulp Press.

Knight and Geissler defined contemporary author care as part of their presentation, entitled "The power and necessity of author care in today's publishing climate:"

*Author care means creating and being transparent about added support for authors by asking what they need. Authors need to be able to write, participate in events, travel, promote their books and do everything else that makes a writer a writer. [...] How do you prepare your authors for CanLit and beyond? Is this even your job?*

Knight and Geissler stated that author care entails preparing authors for what the publishing industry looks like, as it is "constantly shifting and changing."<sup>8</sup> It looks like helping authors "establish realistic goals, grow via professional development, [and] constantly add to their own toolkits." Although author care is intended to support authors' wellbeings and careers, it benefits editors as well: it helps authors "not only produce

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<sup>7</sup> Such movies and television shows include *The Proposal* (2009), *The Agent* (2008), *Younger* (2015-2021), and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004).

<sup>8</sup> Geissler, Cynara and Chelene Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today's publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020*. YouTube. BookNet Canada, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQQOf\\_MiHE4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQQOf_MiHE4). Emphasis added.

future books [with their editor], but also to establish a long-term career in the arts.”<sup>9</sup> In short, healthy author–editor relationships are mutually beneficial.

Healthy author care is clearly important from an industrial standpoint. From a more scholarly perspective, an analysis of the publishing industry and how it operates indicates that relationships are an integral resource. In *Merchants of Culture*, sociologist John Brookshire Thompson defines the five key resources of publishing firms: economic, human, social, intellectual, and symbolic. Most pertinent to this project report is social capital: the “networks of contacts and relationships that an individual or organization has built up over time.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, maintaining a strong author–editor relationship benefits the editor’s reputation and longevity, as well as the potential of the author’s work. As a practice in the publishing industry, care is not one-sided: it is in everyone’s best interests to prioritize wellness and support.

Throughout this project report, it is important to provide a working definition of author care. This concept is developed based on the qualities emphasized by Geissler, Knight, and Thompson. This working definition of author care is characterized by empowerment, transparency, and empathy: author care provides authors with the autonomy to make informed decisions about their careers, to ask for what they need, and to engage in writing and publishing in healthy ways.

In looking at author–editor relationships, this project report tracks how author care has changed over the course of the last century. Additionally, it examines how both publishers and authors can receive care. As a Master of Publishing student and young professional at the threshold of my publishing career, I am invested in the overall wellness and quality of the publishing industry. Therefore, this project report asks, paraphrasing Geissler: how can care exist on both sides of the desk?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Geissler and Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today’s publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020*.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture: The publishing business in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Geissler and Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today’s publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020*.

## 2.1. “Gentlemanly publishing” and its expectations, processes, traditions

Before analyzing the current state of author care, it is integral to understand the roots of publishing and where many cliches and expectations regarding author–editor relationships were born. Additionally, understanding the context of the business and its many fluctuations allows us to understand the pressures placed on editors and, therefore, authors. Since the publishing industry has undergone multiple transformations, this project report will map them to understand how historical context, economic factors, and tectonic corporate moves such as acquisitions and mergers impacted the concept of author care.

“Gentlemanly publishing” dominated the industry from the late 1800s until the 1960s. Dr. Gesa Stedman, Professor of British Culture and Literature at Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, states in an obituary for editor Diana Athill that “gentlemanly publishing, as a concept, is dead in the 21st century.”<sup>12</sup> Although the publishing industry has changed drastically since the 1960s, the era of gentlemanly publishing is a distinct period in the Western publishing industry, wherein a famously lavish standard of author care was established.

Charlotte Gascoigne, former editor of educational books at Longman, reflected on the nature of “gentlemanly publishing” in *Women in Publishing: An Oral History*. She asserted that a career in book publishing was “a gentleman’s profession” for “gentlemen of leisure, people who didn’t have a trade or profession, it was something for people with independent means. But it was a very male-dominated world.”<sup>13</sup> Executive-level positions in publishing were largely reserved for men with generational wealth, while women were viewed as “biologically unsuitable, didn’t have what it takes, too emotional, get too upset by things, not ruthless enough, really interested in other things, being at home with the children.”<sup>14</sup> This pervasive misogyny largely prevented women from

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<sup>12</sup> Stedman, Gesa. “The Death of Gentlemanly Publishing: Obituary for Editor Diana Athill.” *Literary Field Kaleidoscope*, January 31, 2019. <http://literaryfield.org/the-death-of-gentlemanly-publishing-obituary-for-editor-diana-athill/>

<sup>13</sup> Gascoigne, Charlotte. “Charlotte Gascoigne on the Attitudes That Held Women Back in the Workplace.” *Women in Publishing: An Oral History*. Accessed August 3, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Gascoigne, Charlotte. *Women in Publishing: An Oral History*.

advancing within the publishing industry, as this era of publishing was run by “men of strong character and opinion.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, gentlemanly publishing was predominantly white, cisgender, and heterosexual. Although the industry looks different now, much of gentlemanly publishing relied upon patriarchal structures which benefitted men and exploited women’s labour. Fenella Greenfield, former publicity assistant at André Deutsch, recalls in *Women in Publishing* how “there was a real demarcation of which were the women’s jobs. Women did rights and editing, and men did marketing and sales and finance.”<sup>16</sup> These publishers’ social capital was acquired through “elite connections that men had fostered, through their families, college connections, and male-dominated business practices,” whereas women were largely “invisible” and “employed only in lower-paying, clerical positions.”

Before the 1960s, there had been “dozens of independent publishing houses, each reflecting the idiosyncratic tastes and styles of their owners and editors”<sup>Error! Bookmark not defined.</sup> in the United States and United Kingdom, mostly in New York, Boston, and London. Some of these independent publishing houses included Random House, Simon & Schuster, Scribner, Doubleday, and Penguin. These companies were run by “individuals who either owned the company outright or had a substantial stake in it, and other members of the family were commonly involved in the business.”<sup>17</sup> This meant that these “publisher-owners” were heavily involved in the publishing process: “they knew what they wanted to publish, and they built their lists on the basis of their own judgment and taste – and, as they grew larger and delegated more responsibility to editors, on the basis of the judgment and taste of their editors.”<sup>18</sup>

The goal of these publishers was to find authors with whom to have long-term relationships. As Thompson writes, “good publishing was about acquiring books that sold well over a long time period.”<sup>19</sup> This meant that publishers focused on acquiring

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<sup>15</sup> Gascoigne, Charlotte. *Women in Publishing: An Oral History*.

<sup>16</sup> Greenfield, Fenella. “Fenella Greenfield: ‘You Were Invisible.’” *Women in Publishing: An Oral History*, December 3, 2018.  
<https://www.womeninpublishinghistory.org.uk/content/themes/a-gentlemans-profession/2-fenella-greenfield-recalls-feeling-invisible-work>

<sup>17</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*: Accessed May 12, 2023.  
<https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/1849/stedman.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>18</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

books that would continue to perform well as backlist titles, since “backlist publishing was the most profitable and least risky form of publishing.”<sup>20</sup> In contemporary publishing, a book becomes part of the backlist approximately one year after publication, though there are sometimes exceptions. Mid-twentieth century publishers focused on longevity, and therefore sought committed, long-term relationships with authors. This also meant that the editorial process was slow in comparison to contemporary practices since communication between authors and editors relied on postal mail and in-person meetings.

With the death of gentlemanly publishing, Stedman asserts that gone are the days of “careful and long-term editing— [editors’] work and time is so different from the early days.”<sup>21</sup> Now that contemporary publishing consists of, according to Stedman, “tight deadlines, technology, celebrity authors, hard-driven profit margins,” it is “rather more difficult to foster and nurture literary talent as an editor.”<sup>22</sup> This is in opposition to gentlemanly publishing’s “unruly piles of manuscripts, literary lunches, malfunctioning offices, typewriters, and difficult authors.”<sup>23</sup> Athill, editor for André Deutsch, “took her time editing manuscripts, and was persistent. Recalcitrant authors were coerced, mollycoddled, talked to again and again to get them to give up their manuscripts and let them be improved.”<sup>24</sup> This era of publishing, and its focus on long-term relationships and “mollycoddling,” introduced a specific, iconic standard of author care at which today’s publishing professionals would chuckle. But, while those days are gone, their legacy of editorial practices remain the archetype for author care in contemporary publishing.

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<sup>20</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>22</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>23</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>24</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

## 2.2. “Gentlemanly publishing” and author care

Diana Athill, after helping André Deutsch establish his publishing house post-World War II, worked in the publishing industry for over fifty years. By focusing on her labour and contribution to the literary canon, this section of this project report highlights the work of a woman in the largely patriarchal era of “gentlemanly publishing.” While most of the authors she represented were men, Athill herself was somewhat of an anomaly, since most of her editorial peers were men. Echoing M&S’s commitment to represent authors from “traditionally underrepresented communities,”<sup>25</sup> this section will highlight the underrepresented voice of a prolific editor from a male-dominated period of publishing. Additionally, as detailed below, in her memoir, *Stef*, she writes about her many relationships with authors and, in doing so, demonstrates her capacity for author care within the context of gentlemanly publishing. She defines how publishers and editors viewed their authors—with interest in their humanity and personhood, but also as an investment:

If the publisher believes he has found a truly good writer, and can get real pleasure from his books, this is how it will go. The publisher will feel admiration for this man or woman, interest in his or her nature, concern for his or her welfare: *all the makings of friendship*. [...] But even so, part of the publisher’s concern will be that of someone who has invested in *a piece of property* – how big a part depending on what kind of person the publisher is.<sup>26</sup>

Athill acknowledges that the relationship between author and publisher, or author and editor, is transactional in nature since the publisher depends on the author to generate material, as “a piece of property.”<sup>27</sup> She asserts that any feelings of friendship, or genuine care, likely stem from “admiration,” as the relationship is primarily business oriented. She holds a similar view towards the author, as “the liking inspired by the publisher’s enthusiasm may well be warm, but it will continue only if he thinks the publisher is doing a good job by making the book look pleasing and selling enough

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<sup>25</sup> As stated in the previous section, gentlemanly publishing was predominantly white, cisgender, and heteronormative, hence Athill’s usage of “man or woman.” Her author list was composed of white, cis authors, and most were men. Contemporary editors and publishing houses interested in author care tend to use inclusive language, such as M&S on their [submissions page](#), describing their “ongoing commitment to amplify and prioritize the voices of Black, Indigenous, and racialized writers, as well as those of other traditionally underrepresented communities.”

<sup>26</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stef*. Rakuten Kobo, [n.p.] London: Granta, 2011. Emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stef*.

copies of it.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the author depends on the publisher to sell and market their book as though it were “the only book that matters in the world,” while the publisher “is thinking of the book as one among many.”<sup>29</sup>

Essentially, the author–editor relationship, according to Athill, depends on the expectation that both parties show up and perform their functions well. However, Athill describes forming overtly familiar relationships with her authors during the editorial process, such as Alfred Chester, author of *The Exquisite Corpse*. Athill and Chester communicated via post or in-person visits to the Andre Deutsch office, and they would meet up in New York, have dinners, and go to the beach together, which often “led to talk of [Chester’s] unhappiness,”<sup>30</sup> typically a result of failed romantic exploits. The contemporary understanding of professional boundaries between editor and author were not applicable here, and this lack of boundaries led to friction, and perhaps what could be considered abuse or harassment, between Athill and Chester. Athill writes that “being the [editor] of someone whose books are good but don’t sell is an uncomfortable business. Partly you feel guilt ... and partly irritation.”<sup>31</sup> After publication of his short story collection, Chester wrote Athill a hostile letter:

Dear Rat,  
Why haven’t you written?  
Why didn’t you let me know about publication?  
Why haven’t you sent me copies?  
Why haven’t you sent me reviews? [...]  
I would like you to volunteer an explanation.<sup>32</sup>

Athill responds that she did, in fact, inform him of the publication date and that copies were sent to his agent, but she withheld reviews due to their negativity. Their relationship was emotionally volatile, with Chester fluctuating wildly between vitriol and affection for Athill. To maintain the relationship, Athill responds with kindness, perhaps in an example of what Stedman calls “mollycoddling.”<sup>33</sup> Chester’s antagonism can also be seen to reflect the attitudes towards women in publishing at the time. Brenda Gardner,

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<sup>28</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

<sup>29</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

<sup>30</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

<sup>31</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

<sup>32</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

<sup>33</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *Literary Field Kaleidoscope*.



longtime editor and publisher at Piccadilly Press, recalls that male editors “found it much easier than the women. People respected them... you don’t question male authority.”<sup>34</sup> While male editors went unquestioned, female editors found themselves without access to boundaries. In *Women in Publishing*, André Deutsch publishing professional Fenella Greenfield reported that “as a woman, [she] was brought up in a world where you just kept your mouth shut and did as you were told.”<sup>35</sup>

Although faced with disrespect and volatility, Athill continued to provide Chester with author care. She responded calmly to Chester’s letters, and even procured a mental health specialist for him when he began to suffer from addiction and psychological crises later in his career. This demonstrates the high level of emotional labour Athill had to perform to maintain these relationships as well as the health of her authors, with whom she grew close. In their BookNet presentation, Knight and Geissler discuss how “editors are called to do vital emotional labour. Things like pep talks, talking through feelings, addressing fears. [...] We don’t always recognize it as necessary and valuable labour that is essential to the job.”<sup>36</sup>

Athill’s other relationships with authors had similarly vague boundaries, but these intimate connections proved rewarding. With author Molly Keane, Athill spent many hours getting to know Molly, her family, “her daughters, the people she knew, [...] her garden, the food she cooked, the problems and satisfactions of writing.”<sup>37</sup> At the end of her career, Keane wrote to Athill, saying, “I feel a real a loss at losing your company. [...] We have had many good moments together and you have done everything for my books – think what that has meant to me, to my life.”<sup>38</sup> This quote demonstrates the impact that Athill’s editorial work, and friendship, had on Keane. Although the two met on a professional basis, the closeness between them grew as Athill and Keane shared human moments together and allowed themselves friendship.

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<sup>34</sup> Gardner, Brenda. “Brenda Gardner: ‘You Don’t Question Male Authority.’” *Women in Publishing: An Oral History*. Accessed August 3, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Greenfield, Fenella. *Women in Publishing: An Oral History*.

<sup>36</sup> Geissler and Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today’s publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020*.

<sup>37</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

<sup>38</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

The “gentlemanly publishing” author–editor relationship is characterized by the commitment that both author and editor demonstrate to one another. Although Athill insisted that the publisher views the author largely as a “piece of property,”<sup>39</sup> her relationships with authors were long-term, heavily involved, and held vague boundaries. Although the relationships were transactional on paper, the intimacy shared between author and editor was significant: these were more, much more, than mere professional relationships.

It is evident that Athill, in her own way, cherished her authors. She was willing to safeguard their health and answer their queries with “care and love.”<sup>40</sup> Because “gentlemanly publishing” focused heavily on long-term relationships with authors, many editors made concessions around personal boundaries. When we think of lavish dinners and drinks with publishers, these scenarios are borne from the era of gentlemanly publishing due to the importance of keeping authors close, as well as keeping these transactional relationships functional and healthy for the social capital of the publishing house.

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<sup>39</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

<sup>40</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet*.

## Chapter 3. The transition from “gentlemanly publishing” to conglomerates

From the 1960s to 1980s, the publishing landscape changed drastically. The industry began transitioning away from the “gentlemanly” model as large corporations began acquiring the smaller publishing companies.<sup>41</sup> This change began because the “gentlemen” at the helms of these publishing houses were interested in retiring, and it became increasingly difficult to run small publishing houses in a financially viable way. A stream of mergers and acquisitions began. By the 1990s, there were “five or six large [publishing corporations], each operating as an umbrella organization for numerous imprints, many of which still bore the names of previously independent houses that were now part of a larger organization, operating with varying degrees of autonomy.”<sup>42</sup> This shift occurred in two phases, which John Brookshire Thompson names “the synergy phase,” from the 1960s to 1980s, and “the growth phase,” from the 1980s to present day.<sup>43</sup>

The “synergy phase” is characterized by large corporations wanting to participate in trade publishing. These large corporations viewed books as content that could be repurposed in other profitable formats such as films, and therefore sought to acquire publishers so they could gain content for cultural production. The owners of the publishing houses, meanwhile, were willing to sell their companies so they could retire. However, by 1980, many of the large corporations became disillusioned when they realized the publishing business simply was not as profitable as they had hoped. They were frustrated by the “cyclical and unpredictable nature of trade publishing,”<sup>44</sup> which limited consistent cash flow. Therefore, many corporations began selling off the trade publishers they had acquired.

According to Thompson, the following “growth phase” has been in place from the 1980s to at least 2012, when his book was published. In the 1980s, conglomerates

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<sup>41</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>42</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, John B. “The Emergence of Publishing Corporations.” Chapter. In *Merchants of Culture the Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 101–19. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of Culture*.

began buying publishing houses again, but this phase manifested in much more seismic changes in the publishing landscape. Independent publishers wanted to hand off their businesses to an external party, in part because they were struggling to compete with the more substantial resources offered to authors by the publishers already snapped up by conglomerates in the synergy phase. These independent publishers owned by the last of the “gentlemanly” era could not contend with the large conglomerates, which were often based overseas and sought acquisition of UK and North American trade publishers because they wanted to expand beyond their domestic markets.<sup>45</sup>

The five largest publishers in North America are known as the “Big Five.” As of 2023, they are Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Hachette Book Group, and Macmillan.<sup>46</sup> We are now in a new phase of publishing that Thompson has dubbed “conglomerate publishing,” with large corporations at the helm.<sup>Error! Bookmark not defined.</sup> This phase is marked by increased spending and visibility of book marketing to increase sales on a broad scale. With their vast resources, the Big Five compete against one another to acquire, and perhaps even poach, bestselling authors.

Now that publishing has transitioned away from the “gentlemanly” model, the trade publishing industry, and its editors, face different challenges when acquiring authors. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the key resources of contemporary publishing firms are “economic capital, human capital, social capital, intellectual capital, [and] symbolic capital.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, their success “depends crucially on the ability to attract and retain highly motivated editors who are able to identify and acquire the new projects that are likely to be successful and are able to work effectively with authors to maximize the potential of these projects.”<sup>48</sup> The value in an editor’s labour lies predominantly in their ability to acquire titles, polish manuscripts, and maintain positive relationships with

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<sup>45</sup> For instance, the German media giant Bertelsmann acquired full ownership of Penguin Random House in 2019. They have also acquired other publishing houses under Penguin Random House to increase market share and poach bestselling authors from their competitors. For example, author Vivek Shraya originally published with the smaller publisher, Arsenal Pulp Press, but has transitioned to working with Penguin. Many authors are faced with such decisions in their careers—whether to stay with the small independent press who launched them due to loyalty and value in the relationships formed there, or to join a multinational publishing house with more financial resources and prestige.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>47</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>48</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

authors and their agents. Since trade publishing is highly competitive, “an editor is as good, and only as good, as the track record of the books that he or she has acquired and published over the years: this record is his or her CV.”<sup>49</sup>

According to Thompson, editors must have the “right combination of judgment, taste, social flair and financial [intelligence] [and] their ability to spot successful books” because they are “vital to the overall success of the firm.”<sup>50</sup> If an editor makes multiple poor judgment calls, such as overpaying for titles that do not perform well, the editor “may come to be seen as more of a liability than an asset and may find that their judgement is called into question, their job is in danger and their career is at risk.”<sup>51</sup>

This is an important part of why author care is so central to the editor’s role. The positive author–editor relationship is as important as it was in Diana Athill’s era, but the publishing industry around it has changed: the nature of the conglomerate means that editors are working on a more demanding timeline with an expanding roster of authors. Stedman writes that she wishes today’s editors “had more time, less pressure, and more power to make authors write better books,” as they did in the days of gentlemanly publishing.<sup>52</sup> She says that “perhaps we would have fewer books, and it would take longer to publish them, [...] but maybe, their quality would last a bit longer than many of the products that get thrown on the market too fast and at a too early stage.”<sup>53</sup>

The largest book publishers are no longer independently owned vanity projects or family-run businesses, but rather branches of larger companies, with focus on increased market share, increased production, and overall growth. The comparatively lackadaisical pace of publishing in the gentlemanly days is no more. Editors now face different pressures, which means their expectations of authors have changed as well.

As Thompson writes, “there can be little doubt that the rise of large corporations has transformed profoundly the landscape of trade publishing, so much so that today it

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<sup>49</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>51</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>52</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>53</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

bears little resemblance to the publishing world that existed half a century ago.”<sup>54</sup> These seismic changes have fundamentally altered the process of acquiring and publishing books, and therefore the relationship between author and editor. In the next section, I examine the state of author care at conglomerates immediately preceding the pandemic and compare the differences between this era and its gentlemanly predecessor.

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<sup>54</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

### 3.1. Pre-2020 author care at conglomerates

This section will detail specific author–editor scenarios within pre-2020 multinational publishing conglomerates. While author-editor relationships are as unique as the people involved in them and cannot easily be generalized, there are commonalities worth noting. One identified gap in contemporary publishing is the opaqueness of the industry: many writers find today’s publishing industry difficult to comprehend and navigate. As outsiders, unlike editors and agents, writers are forced to forge their own paths, ignorant as to how the industry operates. The implications of this ignorance are confusion, unmet expectations, and subsequent disappointment on the author’s end.

Many authors enter the publishing industry with expectations and perhaps hopes about publication, but these authors are often met with a different reality once they begin the publishing process. Thompson says, to authors, the contemporary publishing industry “acts like an alien beast that behaves in unpredictable and erratic ways, sometimes reaching out to them with a warm smile and a handful of cash, [...] and then suddenly, without much warning or explanation, pulling back, refusing to respond, or perhaps cutting off communication completely. [...] This is a system geared towards maximizing returns within reasonably short time frames; it is not designed to cultivate literary careers over a lifetime.”<sup>55</sup>

Thompson details a case of “frustration, disappointment and despair” with a writer navigating the publishing industry for the first time, and the egregious author care she experienced throughout. “Joanne” had written a crime novel. Once her manuscript was acquired, she was asked if she would like to include any clauses in her publishing contract. Ignorant to how publishing works, she only added that she did not want to go on long book tours, thinking she would be “exhausted by all the attention she would receive when she became a published author.”<sup>56</sup> This expectation, she would later discover, was sadly unfounded.

After her first book, which was a success, her editor advised her to develop the novel into a series. She agreed, but “no one ever advised her about how to continue [...]

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<sup>55</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>56</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*:

nothing, not a word from her editors or from her agent.” From there, she continued writing, assuming from the minimal communication from her editor and agent that things were progressing smoothly, until she found out that she had no marketing budget allocated to her books. Joanne then informed her agent that she was upset about this, but her agent responded, “well, you know, that’s the way things are going.”<sup>57</sup>

Joanne acknowledges that she was “terribly naïve” and had “unrealistic ideas about what it means to be an author”<sup>Error! Bookmark not defined.</sup> before publishing her first book. She expresses a wish that she had “taken it upon herself to try to find out what she needed to do to try to make her career a success,” knowing that she should not have “counted on her agents and editors to provide her with sensible advice and wouldn’t have interpreted their encouragement as a sign of commitment or long-term support.”<sup>Error! Bookmark not defined.</sup> She recognizes that her agents and editors did not provide adequate career advice, and she wishes she had reached out to other industry professionals, agents, and writers throughout the process. She not only “got very little advice,” but she also “had no idea at all about what those who could make or break her career were expecting of her.”<sup>Error! Bookmark not defined.</sup>

Regarding today’s publishing industry, Joanne has realized that it is one “that expects things to happen quickly, that is hungry for something new and that has little patience for what it regards as a settled mid-list author.” However, she does not blame her editors, because they “are subject to very similar pressures [...] they’re as much in the dark about what’s going on as authors are.”<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, she feels that “big publishers have become so impatient, so preoccupied with sales figures that they’re willing to cut loose authors in whom they’ve invested quite a lot simply because their books, however good they might be, are not displaying the sales curve they want to see.” She says, “I regret the loss of a previous publishing ethic in which editors committed themselves to authors whom they thought had potential and stuck with those authors [...] developing a body of literary works

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<sup>57</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>58</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*:



rather than just churning out bestsellers.” She describes this feeling as “a kind of nostalgia for something I never knew.”<sup>59</sup>

The “previous publishing ethic” to which Joanne refers hearkens back to the gentlemanly publishing era when publishers dedicated more time and resources to fewer authors. This sense of loss experienced by Joanne speaks to the lack of publishing knowledge available to authors entering the industry for the first time.

However, Joanne’s reaction also speaks to how the narratives shaped by the gentlemanly era continue to influence contemporary publishing and shape authors’ ideas about how the industry works. Additionally, the fact that Joanne yearns for the “previous publishing ethic” of gentlemanly publishing demonstrates the lasting dominance of this era, even though women experienced rampant sexism and were rarely published back then. As evidenced by Joanne’s experience, contemporary authors must educate themselves, lest they be brutally educated by the publishing process. Contemporary authors and publishers alike face mental health struggles due to the nature of the industry and societal changes, which demonstrate the ways in which author care can falter or fail.

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<sup>59</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*:

## Chapter 4. Contemporary, post-2020 publishing and mental health

The onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 disrupted everything. The publishing industry had to adapt according to changing safety standards and support the mental health of its employees and authors. At the same time, accounts of disappointing and painful realities post-2020 beckoned the industry to do more for its authors and employees.

On April 24, 2023, UK publishing journal *The Bookseller* published a survey wherein 54% of debut authors “said the process negatively affected their mental health,” and only 22% of the respondents “described a positive experience overall.” 48% of these authors were published by a multinational publisher, whereas 51% were published by independent publishers.<sup>60</sup> The thought that the process of publishing a book would prove a negative experience for more than half of debut authors is disturbing.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there have been other mental health and overall working conditions crises. After the Black Lives Matter protests in mid-2020, the #PublishingPaidMe campaign emerged to expose racial inequities and wage disparity in publishing. In highlighting Black authors’ advances to demonstrate how little they receive compared to white authors, Kiese Laymon, author of *Long Division* and *Heavy*, told the New York Times, “it just seems like you almost have to beg to get merely valued. That really put a lot into perspective for me.”<sup>61</sup>

Additionally, the visibility of social media allowed authors an audience for their disappointment and embarrassment due to poor attendance at book events. In April 2023, Suzanne Young tweeted a photo of empty chairs at her book event, with the words, “If you ever want to see a career low point, this is it. Crying my entire way home.”<sup>62</sup> While an outpouring of support has been offered to many of the authors posting

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<sup>60</sup> “Bookseller Survey Finds Debut Authors Struggle with Lack of Support.” *The Bookseller*. Accessed August 3, 2023. <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/bookseller-survey-finds-debut-authors-struggle-with-lack-of-support>.

<sup>61</sup> Grady, Constance. “Black Authors Are on All the Bestseller Lists Right Now. but Publishing Doesn’t Pay Them Enough.” *Vox*, June 17, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/6/17/21285316/publishing-paid-me-diversity-black-authors-systemic-bias>.

<sup>62</sup> Manley, Janet. “What’s Going on with All the Empty Author Signing Pics?” *Literary Hub*, April 17, 2023. <https://lithub.com/whats-going-on-with-all-the-empty-author-signing-pics/>

about similar scenarios, these “soul-crushing” experiences are being addressed on a larger scale than ever before due to social media.

The survey in *The Bookseller* cited how poor communication and disappointing launch experiences have hindered authors’ experiences. Authors reported experiencing “gaslighting,” “lack of clarity,” and “cynicism that underlies the superficial charm of this industry.” Another author asked if publishers could “set realistic expectations up front: ‘what can an author expect of the publication process and what can be expected of them?’” Another author reported “dwindling” or “no support” post-launch, meaning less communication, less excitement, and less resources to continue championing their work.<sup>63</sup>

Authors have spoken out on social media about their declining mental health and provided community support to each other. One writer tweeted, “The best thing for your mental health in publishing is to not compare yourself to others. Everyone has a different situation, and in the end, you’re just going to make yourself miserable dwelling on those who have bigger book deals or more fans. Focus on your own path. #pubtip.”<sup>64</sup>

The survey in *The Bookseller* urged publishers to do better, and they were compelled to do so, due to potential public relations ramifications. In July 2023, *The Guardian* described how publishers “have scrambled for solutions following [the] survey.”<sup>65</sup> One independent publisher vowed to create “an authors’ handbook in conjunction with the Society of Authors” as well as a “resource pack for publishers.” Fascinatingly, an independent publisher, Canongate, has announced “that it will publish fewer books so that it can dedicate more time to authors.”<sup>66</sup> This is an almost

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<sup>63</sup> Bookseller Survey Finds Debut Authors Struggle with Lack of Support.” *The Bookseller*.

<sup>64</sup> Moore, Penny. “The Best Thing for Your Mental Health in Publishing Is to Not Compare Yourself to Others. Everyone Has a Different Situation, and in the End, You’re Just Going to Make Yourself Miserable Dwelling on Those Who Have Bigger Book Deals or More Fans. Focus on Your Own Path. #pubtip.” Twitter, January 27, 2019. <https://twitter.com/literarypenny/status/1089314278409150465>.

<sup>65</sup> Kemp-Habib, Alice. “‘There’s an Industry-Wide Mental Health Crisis’: Authors and Publishers on Why the Books Sector Needs to Change.” *The Guardian*, July 18, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/18/were-not-on-the-nhs-frontline-are-we-why-authors-and-publishers-are-calling-for-change>

<sup>66</sup> Kemp-Habib, Alice. “‘There’s an Industry-Wide Mental Health Crisis.’”

unthinkable move, considering significant time constraints on publishers, but Canongate has shifted its entire publishing program to demonstrate their support to authors.

This is a cursory glance at major mental health-related challenges in contemporary publishing, but it highlights some of what the industry is up against. For both authors and editors (and other publishing staff), we have entered a new era of visibility due to increased reliance on social media as a whistleblowing tool. This means that when authors and publishing staff alike speak out about injustice and challenges in the publishing industry, others can amplify their messages and foster further conversation, if not actual change.

During my employment at PRHC, I witnessed a collective focus on and interest in making publishing more accessible, inclusive, and transparent for new and existing authors. At McClelland & Stewart, I observed strong author–editor relationships, the implementation of new and innovative publicity strategies, post-mortem reflection on festivals and author events, and increased resources, visibility, and pay for BIPOC authors. In reflecting on conversations with established editors and authors, I saw real-life examples of compassionate, clear, and “successful” author care.

## 4.1. Contemporary publishing at PRHC

In this section, I will describe what I learned about author care as an intern at McClelland & Stewart and Penguin Random House Canada. I worked remotely for PRHC from July to December 2022, during which time I participated in team meetings, one on one discussions with editors, and speaker series with the whole company. Below, I document one such event, called “The Editor and The Author.”<sup>67</sup>

Throughout my internship, PRHC held multiple all-company speaker events in the “Life of a Book” series. The intention of this ongoing speaker series is to illuminate all aspects of the publishing industry by following the life cycle of a book starting from acquisition, to allow all departments of the company to understand the entire publishing process, since the roles of each department do not always overlap. I would often hear from interns in other departments asking for short informal chats, during which we discussed the nature of our roles, tasks, and departments because we were unfamiliar with aspects of the company with which we did not interface.

The second instalment of the series, called “The Editor and The Author,” was delivered remotely on an all-company Microsoft Teams call in June 2021. It highlighted David Ross, senior editor of Penguin Canada, and Vivek Shraya, interdisciplinary artist, and author of *I’m Afraid of Men* (2018) and *People Change* (2022), among other titles. Ross, who has worked in editorial for Penguin Canada since 2008, focuses on publishing queer and underrepresented voices. Shraya, a trans writer of colour, published her previous titles with small presses, such as Arsenal Pulp Press, and began working with Ross on her nonfiction book *I’m Afraid of Men*. In this session, the two were asked to describe the author–editor relationship, including the editorial process and their professional partnership.

I include segments from this event due to the idyllic nature of Shraya and Ross’s professional relationship—both author and editor spoke highly of the other and often referred to how positive their working relationship has been. The conversation was structured around key parts of the editorial process: the first meeting before acquisition,

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<sup>67</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “Life of a Book - The Editor and The Author.” Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, July 2022.

the acquisition itself, the writing stage, substantive editing, and line editing. This structure speaks to the regimented and step-based editorial process, as outlined in *Inside Book Publishing* by Giles N. Clark and Angus Phillips, who say “books need differing levels of care and attention during their development” but that an editorial schedule is “preferably drawn up in advance of the delivery of the typescript from the author.”<sup>68</sup>

In nearly all cases, before an editor agrees to work with a writer, they will have received a formal or informal submission from the author and/or their agent. From there, if the editor is interested, there will be a preliminary meeting. David Ross said the first meeting between author and editor can take place in many different spaces: in person, at the office, in a restaurant, over coffee, on the phone, or over Zoom. Ross and Shraya met in the PRHC office at 320 Front Street in Toronto, where they had a “nice long conversation that set the foundation for a series of conversations, and that’s what [their] relationship grew out of.”<sup>69</sup>

Generally, both parties are hoping to find a long-term working partner. At this point of the editorial process, the author is often meeting with multiple editors “on the road to finding the right editor for their work, the right champion.” And while each editor has their approach and goal for these meetings, Ross said this first meeting will help the two “get a sense of our chemistry, our rapport, if our visions are aligned, if we have the same book in mind,” and the goal is to “[lay] the groundwork [...], get a sense of how the author works and what their previous editorial experiences have been like, whether open and collaborative, or hands-off.” Although this first meeting is typically centered on this one submission, Ross said that most editors are thinking about “what comes beyond it and the full career of the author they’re meeting with,”<sup>70</sup> which contradicted Thompson’s observation that long-term authorial careers with the same in editor in contemporary publishing are rare.

Regarding her own career and her desires in an editorial relationship, Shraya mentioned how she started by self-publishing her work, then publishing with small

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<sup>68</sup> Clark, G. N., & Phillips, A. (2020). *Inside book publishing* / Giles Clark and Angus Phillips. (Sixth edition.). Routledge.

<sup>69</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>70</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

presses. She added that the “challenging thing about them is not having editorial time and support,” and that she would “outsource [editorial support] to friends, colleagues, and other editors.” She learned to value the input of editors, saying “you can’t make your best work without having it refined over and over again. The hardest thing is to share your work with others, but that’s what’s going to make it the best version of itself.” Therefore, she sought “more collaboration [and] more editorial support.”<sup>71</sup>

When Shraya first entered the PRHC offices in Toronto, she was “starry-eyed [...] it’s very impressive, like a scene from a Netflix show.” She described being “wined and dined, muffins, books being handed to me,” to the point where she asked if the canvas bag they gave her would be “big enough to bring all these books home.” Although this is a stark contrast to what many contemporary authors experience and reflects the gentlemanly model, it is important to note that Vivek Shraya came to PRHC with six books previously published by independent publisher Arsenal Pulp Press. It is safe to say that Ross was already familiar with Shraya’s work and invited her with the intention of “wining and dining” her. This type of treatment would not necessarily be offered to a first-time author. Kelly Joseph, Senior Editor at M&S, said she typically has a phone call, a Zoom call, or an in-person coffee chat with a new author—no muffins or free books.<sup>72</sup>

For Shraya and Ross, the writing process began with assessing how much content Shraya had written by the time of acquisition. Clark notes that, generally, “crucial editorial skills include the ability to get on with authors... and to communicate well with those in other parts of the company.” Integral traits of a good editor are not limited solely to having a “meticulous eye for detail, a retentive memory, sustained concentration, [and] patience,” but also possessing “tact, self-confidence, persuasion, tenacity, and negotiation.”<sup>73</sup> This particular stage of the editorial process is when these traits set up the foundation of a positive author–editor relationship.

Like all editors, Ross has his own approach to substantive editing: he prefers to read the first draft without making any edits at all, because “you only get that first

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<sup>71</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>72</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>73</sup> Clark, G. N., & Phillips, A. *Inside book publishing*.

impression once.”<sup>74</sup> This is what his mentor taught him, although he admits he does not always “have the luxury of time to do this,”<sup>75</sup> which reflects the time limitations faced by today’s editors. And while Shraya wanted to send over caveats and explanations about the draft, Ross resisted listening to her—he wanted to keep that precious first impression intact.

*I’m Afraid of Men* is a series of nonfiction accounts of harassment and abuse by men, and each section of Shraya’s first draft was titled after the names of these abusive men: “John,” “Jacob,” etcetera. Throughout the substantive editing process, Ross asked Shraya, “what would it mean to remove those names? What if we tried second-person point of view and make the reader feel complicit, involved in the conversation?” Ross described his approach to editing as “less from a position of authority and more questions, as someone who’s in the work with you.”<sup>76</sup> Therefore, he wanted to “make space to try things and experiment,” and allow Shraya to write with curiosity and take risks in revision. For instance, while “some people hate the use of second person,” he wanted Shraya to feel like she could try anything.<sup>77</sup>

When asked if this part of the editorial process is “scary,” Shraya said that “it’s always a vulnerable thing, even if you really respect and need the feedback. You go back to the grade school nightmare of red ink all over the page.”<sup>78</sup> However, she reminded herself that “this is about both of us being invested. We’ve worked together multiple times now, and I know how deeply you are invested in the work being as good as it can be. There’s a lot of trust and respect there.”<sup>78</sup>

Ross replied, “that first edit is a real turning point, especially when working with an author for the first time, when you don’t know what’s too far and what’s not far enough. Another reason why having those conversations in that first meeting is so helpful is that you can infer any openness to being edited, past experiences. With any author you don’t know, we anticipate that authors are frightened by the excessive—”

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<sup>74</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>75</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>76</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>77</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>78</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”



Shraya jumped in at this point. “Not frightened! Just intimidated. It’s so useful and I’m so grateful for it. It’s such a generous gift to have that reading. In smaller presses, we just don’t get that. We only get the copyedit for the most part. Nothing is lost. I lean in to trying.”<sup>79</sup> Here, Shraya pointed out that the resources of a large publishing house allow for more space in the editorial process for leaning in to “trying,” as opposed to the “smaller presses” with whom she worked in the past. Geissler and Knight refer to the value of time in effective author care, and how both authors and editors need a “workload that actually factors in time to stop and think, take a breath, [and] provide the care that needs to be completed before taking the next step.”<sup>80</sup> Shraya expressed how time is cherished in the editorial process, and how grateful she is for what Ross referred to as “the luxury of time.”<sup>81</sup>

Throughout the editorial process, concessions and compromises are made on both the editor’s and author’s part. Shraya mentioned how she plays “the bargaining game” with Ross. She indicates “the notes I will not budge on, these are the ones I will budge on, and I try to mentally keep the math going, maybe a two-to-one ratio, two yeses for every no,” she said, laughing. “I don’t want to seem disrespectful, but sometimes there are choices that just feel right to me. I feel really lucky, there have only been a few times where you’ve gently pushed back. Even when you push back, it’s more of a conversation. I try to be receptive. And while the edits are coming in, I’m going through my own process as well, sometimes last-minute sentences or paragraphs get added in. For me, the book isn’t done until it goes to print.”<sup>82</sup>

Ross mentioned how “that introduces a similar compromise on [the publisher’s] end. We ask what is absolutely essential, and what is something that would be ‘nice to do,’ determining what is more important especially if it will have an impact on the book coming out on time.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>80</sup> Geissler and Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today’s publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020*.

<sup>81</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>82</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

<sup>83</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. “The Life of a Book.”

When asked what she cherishes in the author–editor relationship and what makes her feel heard and seen throughout, Shraya said:

In my relationship with you, David, I appreciate how available you are. I'm a very communicative person. Some may call that needy, but I just like being able to talk through some things. Sometimes there are things a phone call will solve that an email cannot. I don't know if you see that as part of your job as an editor, but I like that touchpoint, I need that anchor. In the writing process, I can be more anxious-attached, and I think security for me comes from having a closer relationship. You and I end up being in touch a lot through edits often into publishing, and then it tapers off and I'm all by myself—no, I'm joking. I appreciate having that emotional, conversational touchpoint to talk about issues.<sup>84</sup>

Shraya's "all by myself" point, although expressed jokingly, reflects the surprise that authors often feel once their book is published, and their publisher is no longer actively supporting them. And on having a successful author–editor relationships, Ross says:

Knowing how an author likes to work is such an important factor to know early in the relationship, to know if the fit is right. It's good to know and one of many factors at play. Every editorial relationship is different. Whether you find out in that first meeting or when that first substantive edit goes to the author, you register their response and that will dictate the rest of the relationship.<sup>85</sup>

Ross and Shraya's editorial dynamic is aligned with the general structure of the editorial process, demonstrating the typicality of this structure and the shared vulnerabilities and challenges of the individuals involved. Shraya's vocalized appreciation for Ross' "availability" compared with Joanne's anguish at her publisher's demonstrated lack of care illustrates the value of clear channels of communication between publisher and author. However, unconditional availability and a complete lack of boundaries on the editor's end are not helpful in seeking a healthy author–editor relationship. If the editor is to refrain from burnout, boundaries need to be in place, as detailed by Kelly Joseph in the next section. In their recorded talk, Shraya and Ross demonstrated an editorial relationship that *works*—they found a means of collaborating that was creatively healthy due to the emotional and conversational touchpoints between both parties.

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<sup>84</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. "The Life of a Book."

<sup>85</sup> Ross, David, and Vivek Shraya. "The Life of a Book."

## 4.2. Author care practices at M&S: Kelly Joseph, Senior Editor

Kelly Joseph is a senior editor at McClelland & Stewart, having been the publishing manager of the imprint from December 2016 to February 2022. She primarily edits fiction and poetry titles, including, most recently, a series of three re-released collections from Souvankham Thammavongsa to be published later in 2023. In my role at M&S, I was often asked to perform first reads or “gut checks” on manuscripts submitted by agents to Kelly, and we had weekly check-ins wherein I asked her what she was working on, and I would report on my tasks and ask questions about the industry. We discussed how ongoing editorial processes with authors were unfolding throughout their respective stages, from the early acquisition days to late-game conversations around cover briefs and proofreads.

Throughout these check-ins, I inquired as to her method in maintaining relationships with authors. Regarding her approach, while it changed with each author and project, she hoped to “offer honest, critical feedback and offer expertise and guidance in terms of the publishing steps/process.”

To do this, she needed to “understand the author’s broad ambitions and overall vision for their work. Sometimes the author’s vision is set in stone from the outset, sometimes it evolves as the work evolves. In any scenario, good author care means that [the editor is] listening and receptive [...] while giving realistic expectations in terms of what’s possible and [what] serves the work best from the publisher’s perspective.”

Regarding how the author–editor relationship has changed in recent years, Kelly had noticed that the biggest change is that “there’s an effort to make more space to talk about capacity, time constraints, and to be more mindful of burnout and trying to be considerate of boundaries. Both author and editor are initiating these conversations more.” This indicates that there is mutual concern regarding these topics, and unlike in Diana Athill’s era, editors are empowered to ask for their needs to be met, too.

As for Kelly’s definition of a successful author-editor relationship, she indicated that honesty is integral:

[B]oth author and editor [should] have open conversations about what's working and what's not. I always hope that authors know that they can voice concerns or reach out if they think it would be helpful to have a sounding board. Most important, I think it's a successful relationship if an author accomplishes everything they set out to do and they're happy with the book in its final form.

Kelly's characterization of author care was comprised of openness and honesty, regarding both the work and the relationship. She encouraged authors to reach out, ask questions, voice concerns. Geissler and Knight say "we need to center the idea that we're all human beings with feelings. We're not art-making robots."<sup>86</sup> The publishing industry needs to account for their employees and authors as human beings with diverse needs and work styles, which will allow for a healthy editorial process, and therefore best position an author for future publishing.

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<sup>86</sup> Geissler and Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today's publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020*.

## Chapter 5. A summary of findings

It is unrealistic to expect author treatment that combines the care of the small, independent publisher with the pace and resources of the multinational publisher, as this simply does not reflect the current landscape of today's publishing industry. Additionally, as mentioned by Chelene Knight and Vivek Shraya, author care is more than tote bags, hotels, or even a strong sales curve, even if the free books are a nice perk.

I return once again to Geissler's definition of author care as supporting writers by making space for transparency, enabling authors to ask for what they need, and empowering them to understand what their needs are. Author care is "taking the time to slow down and meet the author where they're at" to "not only produce future books [with their editor], but also to establish a long-term career in the arts."<sup>87</sup> This is the goal for both editors and authors—but is it a realistic objective for today's publishing professionals?

Over the last century, the process of commercialization and the industry's shift from largely independent, family-run publishers to multinational conglomerate ownership has impacted all aspects of the publishing industry, from the relationships between editors and authors down to writers' perspectives of the industry itself. The industry's ability to care for its authors depends on the decision-makers involved, as well as the accessibility of resources and time. My findings regarding shifts in the practice of author care show an industry where time and quality pressures are high, but conversations around mutual care are occurring frequently.

In the gentlemanly era of publishing, Athill writes that, ideally, editors and authors would share a mutual respect, even though authors are essentially a "a piece of property."<sup>88</sup> However, despite this statement, Athill's memoir details multiple long-term relationships with authors, with whom she developed strong working relationships and even personal friendships. This is reminiscent of a time when it was common, and strongly preferable, to forge connections between author and editor that were

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<sup>87</sup> Geissler and Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today's publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020.*

<sup>88</sup> Athill, Diana. *Stet.*

maintained long term. Athill's relationships with her authors bordered on what we would deem today as "unprofessional" or "lacking boundaries," since she often stepped in as a support when her authors suffered personal crises. However, this could also be seen merely as part of the job of editor—Athill was committed to maintaining these long-term relationships, and her authors' success reflected her editorial and professional abilities. Her willingness to support them through difficulties in their non-writing lives could reflect the nature of "mutual dependence" between author and editor in the days of gentlemanly publishing.

Since the 1960s, the practice of author care has transitioned to accommodate the commercialization and further industrialization of the publishing industry. At this point, the editorial process can no longer accommodate long stretches of sending letters between author and editor. There is added pressure to produce books on a quicker timeline, and if certain books are not working, there is an expectation to pivot and find stronger-performing titles. Pre-pandemic multinational publishing was geared "towards maximizing returns within reasonably short time frames; it is not designed to cultivate literary careers over a lifetime."<sup>89</sup> This is in direct opposition to the goals of gentlemanly publishing, when agents, authors, and publishers alike desired loyal and long-standing working relationships.

We see this in the case of "Joanne," as detailed by Thompson.<sup>90</sup> Joanne was not provided with any kind of structure or advice on how to proceed after the launch of her first novel. Although she takes responsibility for her naivety, it is difficult to blame her for her difficulties in navigating the industry. After all, her editors were the ones who suggested she treat the novel as the first in a series and offered her no further suggestions or guidance. When her agent provided her with the non-answer of "well, you know, that's the way things are going" after inquiring after her marketing budget, one can understand Joanne's frustration. The lack of transparency of the publishing industry leaves authors at a severe disadvantage. Although editors and agents are also working hard to acquire bestsellers and promising authors and to ride the waves of current trends, authors have been given the short end of the stick: they have the least resources of all the players in the publishing industry. Writers often reach out to each other for

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<sup>89</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *From gentlemanly publishing to conglomerates*.

<sup>90</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

resources, tips, and information on how to navigate publishing, since, often, higher-ups in the industry are unable to provide such information.<sup>91</sup>

I note that the lack of transparency expressed by “Joanne” is currently being addressed by McClelland & Stewart as they work to break down the barriers between authors and the publishing industry. Their submissions inbox is open to unsolicited manuscripts twice per year, and they are committed to hearing from writers this way as part of their “ongoing commitment to amplify and prioritize the voices of Black, Indigenous, and racialized writers, as well as those of other traditionally underrepresented communities.”<sup>92</sup> In doing so, M&S acknowledges that many writers experience barriers to publishing, particularly those from marginalized communities. Therefore, creating a channel for authors to submit their work allows them access to a multinational publishing house—an opportunity that is typically inaccessible to many authors. However, Knight and Geissler, in their presentation “The power and necessity of author care in today’s publishing climate,” asked a pertinent question regarding author care: “how do you prepare your authors for CanLit and beyond? Is this even our job?”<sup>93</sup> Here, the speakers referred not only to the publishing industry itself, but the underlying inequities operating within it and the CanLit scene. Although editors are unable to completely shift these dynamics, they can be empowered to guide authors through these processes, since they have more experience navigating them—another reason why the standard of author care in the publishing industry would benefit greatly from more diverse editorial staff.

Since 2020, many aspects of the actual editorial process and its procedures have not structurally changed, but the depth of conversations about boundaries, working styles, and capacity restraints between authors and editors have. This shift has created more space for conversations around mental health, as indicated by Kelly Joseph at M&S. David Ross and Vivek Shraya spoke about the level of trust and respect they share, allowing for open, honest communication about the editorial process. In November 2022, PRHC published a job posting for an assistant editor position at Doubleday Canada asking for “a skilled and sensitive editor, both on the page and in

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<sup>91</sup> Thompson, John Brookshire. *Merchants of culture*.

<sup>92</sup> “Imprint Submissions.” Penguin Random House Canada.

<sup>93</sup> Geissler and Knight. *The power and necessity of author care in today’s publishing climate - Tech Forum 2020*.

your interactions with authors.” In mid-pandemic publishing, from spring 2020 to winter 2023 and likely beyond, at PRHC, the practice of care towards authors is explicitly desired in their editorial staff.

Historically, as the publishing industry has grown, many aspects of author care have shifted: methods and rates of communication, boundaries, expectations, and space for humanity. Today, in the wake of various crises within and without the industry, authors and editors are embodying that space and speaking honestly with each other throughout their business partnerships.

I ask again: why care about author care? In the examination of the relationship between editor and author, there remain areas of improvement to be addressed by future publishing professionals. How would the publishing industry further educate hopeful writers about the best way to approach trade book publishing? How could writers learn more from the industry itself, and not solely from those lucky enough to be inside of and successful within it? While presses like M&S are working to remove those barriers, other PRHC imprints could certainly clarify their decision-making processes around submissions, acquisitions, and possibilities of next steps for authors’ careers post-launch.

For editors, is there a way to secure Stedman’s dream of “more time, less pressure, and more power to make authors write better books”?<sup>94</sup> The commercialized nature of the publishing industry requires a steady, consistent stream of new books, but this means that editors are under enormous pressure to build their lists and publish new titles rapidly. The publishing industry is saturated with so many books that many of them are lost to obscurity before they have had a chance to be received by the public, which cheapens the editorial process. Albeit an unthinkable question, one might ask: can the publishing industry, in any way, *slow down*? We know it can be possible on the independent level because the independent publisher Canongate has done it. While not all independent publishers are capable of such a move, this gesture indicates that some publishers are actively working towards adjusting things. Overall, on a multinational level: can we publish fewer books to focus on improving, highlighting, and properly marketing new releases?

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<sup>94</sup> Stedman, Gesa. *Literary Field Kaleidoscope*.



Although these questions may seem unreasonable, the publishing industry has shifted in such seismic ways that one must consider how things could change even further, and how the industry can better support the people who have devoted their lives to it. In this relationship of “mutual dependence,” editors and authors both work towards a shared goal: a product, a manuscript, a polished book of which both the editor and the author can be proud. It is worth considering if the publishing industry could do more to resource these key components in the production of a book. As Chelene Knight writes: “What does it mean to really have someone’s back? We want artists to be in this industry for the long haul. And so I think if we bring people in with care and love, then we’re setting them up for success.”<sup>95</sup>

The responsibility of effective author care does not lie solely with the editor, but also with the publishing house and the overarching multinational it operates within. Editors must be given the tools to provide care to authors and themselves. And why care? If we love books, if we love working in cultural production, and if we love writing, we need to care about the conditions under which books are produced. Without this care, young and excited publishing employees will continue to burn out, leading to further turnover, leading to fewer diverse voices in high-ranking positions within publishing. This industry does not need to rely on burning its employees out. I believe it can support itself, its employees, and its authors. This industry has survived much more daunting challenges—it can handle this.

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<sup>95</sup> Knight, Chelene. “Caring for Authors through Times of Uncertainty.” *BookNet Canada*. BookNet Canada, January 24, 2022.  
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