

**The Art and Science of Choosing  
Literary Books that Sell:  
Acquisitions Decision-Making at Penguin UK**

By

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## **Abstract**

The research for this report was compiled during a three-month internship at Penguin UK in the Editorial department. This report gives the history and background necessary to portray the publishing environments of Penguin UK, and the Viking and Hamish Hamilton imprints. Through firsthand observations, interviews, and secondary readings, it attempts to delineate the decision to acquire, commission, or import a manuscript for publication without devaluing editorial instinct and experience. A scorecard is proposed to aid the acquisitions process, by taking 24 variables into account in a simple method that can be used as a tool to aide the evaluation of a potential book acquisition.

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## **Introduction**

At Penguin UK the process of acquiring literary books begins with the standard-sized, bubble-wrapped envelope that lands on an editor's desk. There's usually a synopsis and a biography of the author, as well as a letter from the agent submitting it. Accompanying them may be a full manuscript, or just a sample chapter.

The moment the pages hit the "to read" stack, the decision-making process has begun. Perhaps the manuscript will be discarded immediately; perhaps it will be taken home for reading over the weekend. These first impressions either bring the project to a halt or begin the acquisitions process.

This report focuses on the acquisitions process, aiming to delineate, discuss, and give examples of the variables that influence the decisions made as literary manuscripts are shared, considered, debated, and finally rejected or bought.

There is no standard procedure to follow in book publishing as there is with a product that is created on an assembly line. Each book requires its own individualized publishing program. Each book has its own editorial requirements and its own packaging, promotion, and sales approach as different combinations of the same variables come together in unique ways.

Because of the high-risk investment involved in a product that is not standardized and is unique in every way, the decision not to buy a literary manuscript is as important as the decision to buy. It is the first step in what quickly becomes a long and labor-intensive activity. Having bought a book the acquisitions editor must be willing and able to see the book through the lengthy and detailed process of having it not just edited but also published to the best of the house's ability. At Penguin UK,

the editor wears many hats, drives the activity forward, and guides the book through all stages of publication.

Using case studies accumulated through interviews and personal experience, this report identifies and discusses 24 basic variables that can influence the decision to buy a literary book. This decision is a delicate balance of factors, of pros and cons, of weighted circumstances that form a cluster of conditions rather than a linear process. The discussion provided in this report seeks to bring greater clarity to the process of book acquisitions by giving examples of how it works in two specific editorial environments.

To bring an additional tool to the acquisitions decision-making process, I am proposing an evaluation scorecard that uses a point-scale system to assess the quality of a manuscript. This scorecard does not seek to replace the gut-instinct that publishing relies on. It offers a supplementary process that could minimize the time, energy, and possibly the risks involved by encouraging the editor to examine variables he or she might not otherwise anticipate. The scorecard could also be used as a reference tool for making editorial requests of a writer, in writing letters of rejection or acceptance, or as a means of elaborating the rationale behind a decision. Because its formulation is based on case studies within a specific editorial environment, it remains to be seen whether the scorecard can be more broadly applied or whether it needs to be changed for use in editorial environments that differ from the ones considered in this report.



## 1. Background of Penguin UK

Stepping off the “tube” at Charing Cross station, it is immediately apparent that the area is rife with literary history. In a gesture designed to make the platforms more appealing, the subway station walls have been tiled with scenes from the original woodcuts of the works of Chaucer.

Leaving the station, to the left is Trafalgar Square and Parliament, to the right Somerset House, the BBC, and Fleet Street. Across the street and up an alley is Covent Garden. The only neighbor to the south is the River Thames.

London is a city filled with media buzz, with media of all kinds targeting every kind of audience. Whatever happens to make the dailies or weeklies or TV shows becomes the subject of conversation in pubs, coffee houses, and sitting rooms. This lively, well-read, and personality-oriented city culture in turn influences the reading tastes of this small, densely populated island nation.

Penguin-originated readership statistics show that 69 percent of the British population reads books. Taxi drivers read more than teachers, and teachers read more than accountants or lawyers. Nurses read five times more books per year than doctors and girls read five times as much as their boyfriends.<sup>1</sup> In this population women read more than men, and people who read generally work below the executive level. Penguin UK’s primary audience is women aged 25 to 65, with older demographics showing strength as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Penguin Books. Brand Campaign. Internal document.

## 2. History of Penguin UK

Allen Lane's founding vision for Penguin Books came to him in 1935, on a train ride from Devon with nothing to read. Finding no works of contemporary fiction to wile away the time, he hit upon the idea of creating quality contemporary fiction at an attractive price. He took the stitched paperbacks that had been in circulation in France and Germany since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and gave them new life in an England accustomed to hardcovers and libraries. Lane's vision was that everyone who could afford a pack of cigarettes could now afford a book. Almost at once, Lane transformed the publishing industry and created a vast new reading public.

Once launched, the paperback revolution was swift; within a year, Penguin had sold three million copies. Beginning with the Pelican imprint, Penguin engaged with serious contemporary issues by publishing history, sociology, economics, and politics. By the end of World War II, Penguin was distributing a million books a month into the American market and had founded a subsidiary in Australia. Using the breadth of its list, distinctive colors that sorted titles by genre, and unconventional outlets, Penguin group companies kept ahead of their competition.<sup>2</sup>

In 1970, Pearson, an international media group, acquired Penguin Books. Under Pearson, Penguin began acquiring smaller companies into the 1980s and incorporated their individual identities and lists under the Penguin name. Adopted imprints included Frederick Warne (best known for Beatrix Potter books), Michael Joseph, and Hamish Hamilton. Penguin continued this practice with the acquisition of the quirky Rough Guides and, most recently, with the highly design-oriented Dorling

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<sup>2</sup> Penguin Books Website. Company History. [www.penguin.co.uk/static/packages/aboutus/history.html](http://www.penguin.co.uk/static/packages/aboutus/history.html)

Kindersley series (better known as DK). As these companies were acquired, Penguin retained their individual identities as imprints. All of these imprints now benefit from a publishing house that has vast resources to invest in their titles, both in financial backing and in a proven team of talented individuals.

Since its inception, Penguin Books has been on the forefront of both literary and commercial publishing. While Lane revolutionized publishing and literacy in England and around the world by making books available for everyone to purchase, his motive was to make a profit off the new format. At Penguin, and publishing in Britain as a whole, editors strive to produce quality books amidst a deep commercial heritage.

In Britain, except for being classified as a tax-free purchase, books compete on their own in the marketplace without government subsidies. With the market as the determining force in publishing, lists are based on financial performance rather than on cultural or educational philosophies or class distinctions. At Penguin, there is strong pressure for books to sell, with little incentive to acquire books knowing they will lose money for the sake of literature or high principles. Even in the literary departments, print runs are carefully planned and books' market potential realistically assessed. The tension between adherence to literary quality and making a predictable profit lies at the heart of publishing at Penguin Books.

Today, Penguin's front and backlist is the best read list in Britain: In *The Big Read*, a poll of reader's favorite books conducted in the Spring of 2003, 45 of the 100

favored titles were published by Penguin, giving it the largest presence of all publishing houses.<sup>3</sup>

Even with the name recognition that makes Penguin's brand synonymous with reading, the publisher faces fierce competition from Random House and HarperCollins, with the three fighting for dominance in the marketplace.

### **3. The Structure of Penguin UK**

Today, Penguin UK's adult publishing program is split into two main divisions: Penguin Press and Penguin General. Children's books are published under the Puffin and Frederick Warne imprints. Dorling Kindersley's graphic-oriented publishing style is unique. Audio books and e-books have their own departments.

Penguin Press publishes academic non-fiction, reference, and specialist books such as the Penguin Black Classics, and the Modern Classics series. The two Classics series consist of books that have passed into the public domain or have licensed paperback rights.

Penguin General's books written for the general reader run the spectrum from highly literary to commercial works of fiction and non-fiction. Viking and Hamish Hamilton are Penguin General's literary imprints and Michael Joseph represents the commercial side. This report deals almost entirely with the editorial process within the Viking and Hamish Hamilton imprints.

During the period covered by this report, Penguin General was facing challenges. Front-list sales were being overwhelmed by returns from the previous year. At the half-year mark, it was 2.2 million below a second reforecast and 1.8

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<sup>3</sup> Penguin Books. The Big Read. Internal Document.

million below the previous year's numbers.<sup>4</sup> In other words, during the research period for this report, the pressure to acquire successful titles was intense due to waning financial performance.

#### **4. Literary Publishing Within Penguin UK**

The tension between bottom-line financial considerations and the tradition of publishing based on literary merit lies at the core of every literary acquisition. In most publishing houses, budgets are usually set outside the editorial department and focus on maximizing the sales potential of literary lists. These budgets tend to create a situation that is dependent on high title output and a fast stock turnover, so that the window of opportunity for a fiction title is small, and success is usually determined within six weeks of publication. A popular theory, espoused by Gerald Howard holds that the budgeting pressures

inhibit risk-taking and the free exercise of taste and breed impatience over the pace of a writer's artistic and commercial development... A managerial layer not always sensitive to the literary and intellectual values is almost always a matter of necessity, so complex are these large-scale operations. And that the indefinable quality of character and individuality that used to typify various houses' lists are lost, as corporate publishers seek to serve all markets that can be found rather than publishing what they like.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Penguin Books. Half-year Newsletter. Internal Document

<sup>5</sup> Howard, Gerald. "The American Scene: We're Still Here." Publishing Now: A Definitive Assessment By Key People in the Books Trade. Ed. Peter Owen. London: Peter Owen Publishers. 1996.

Andre Schiffrin expands upon this when he says, “the new approach – deciding to publish only those books that can be counted on for an immediate profit – automatically eliminates a vast amount of important works from catalogues.”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike commercial lists, literary lists require a long-term view as authors’ careers are nurtured and their names become known to consumers who will return to read authors’ subsequent books. Literary titles with print runs below 10,000 copies over a period of a few years are not an attractive proposition to a business executive. According to Ian Paten, the need for immediate results that can be reflected in the season’s accounts is particularly important to conglomerates because they have large overhead costs. This has led to a reduction in mid-list acquisitions as corporations expect returns on their investment as soon as possible.

In order to sell books to the trade, their contents and revenue potential need to be clearly communicated by a sales team. Literary titles are more difficult to communicate, however, and their audience more difficult to pin down in the minds of sales teams tasked with getting books into the stores.

Despite the challenges posed to a literary list, Paten argues that literary publishing can and does flourish inside a corporate structure.

Any publishing organization anxious to present a fully rounded profile needs a literary arm: [conglomerates] value the prestige that can thereby accrue; and to an extent they are aware that the future of the book is more likely to reside in works of quality rather than in mass-market ephemera.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Schiffrin, Andre. The Business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read. London: Verso. 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Paten, Ian. “Literary Publishing Within a Conglomerate.” Publishing Now: A Definitive Assessment by Key People in the Book Trade. Ed. Peter Owen. London: Peter Owen Publishers. 1996.

The experience of working for the Hamish Hamilton and Viking imprints suggests that Penguin has successfully incorporated the values described by Paten. One of the keys to Penguin's literary success is the fact that it is broken down into a few manageable, quasi-autonomous units that minimize the bureaucracy and inertia that can result when committees make decisions. Structuring Penguin UK with several separate imprints also enables editors to work with sales, publicity, and marketing people who are devoted to the output of their particular lists. As a result, each editor has a greater degree of control over budgets as well as editorial issues.

Paten argues that over time conglomerates will reduce their creative control and become centers for marketing and distribution, with creative aspects performed by freelancers. However he underestimates the power of traditional roles in publishing. While it is indeed true that less of the process of publishing a title occurs in-house, it still is necessary for one person to be at the helm of a project in order to produce a product that has a unified identity as it moves from publisher to customer.

While the sales team is an important force at Viking and Hamish Hamilton, the team plays a supportive role. While the sales team provides the bottom-line figures for the editor to use, in literary publishing the editor's personal vision plays a more important role than it would in a commercial imprint. Editors are the people who know the variables involved in a successful publishing venture and have the experience to weigh them against each other when making an acquisitions decision.

A period of observation in the Viking and Hamish Hamilton imprints show that literary quality is not compromised in order to make budgets. Even in a collegial environment, editors continue to publish titles that strike them personally and their

judgment can still outweigh other considerations. In other words, the art of editing is still very much alive within Penguin UK.'

## **5. Background of the Viking Imprint**

In the 1970s, as an independent company before it was acquired by Penguin/Pearson, Viking had a distinguished American list along with British authors such as Graham Greene, Frederick Forsythe, and Iris Murdoch. At the time, Penguin US was essentially a distributor for books that originated in Britain. In England, Penguin UK published works only in its paperback format, buying rights to books from original hardcover publishers around Europe.<sup>8</sup>

During this time, a few large companies had come to dominate the publishing industry with big publishing houses creating paperback lists to supplement their own hardcover publications. Intense competition between paperback companies such as Penguin, Pan, Dell, and Corgi began to dry up the supply of existing material. These companies then bought independent hardcover publishers whose founders were retiring or that had become dependent on paperback income from manuscripts sold under a limited license.

Penguin's management decided that Penguin needed to expand its reach by buying a trade hardback list. Penguin, backed by Pearson, bought the American Viking list and began publishing hardcover books under the Viking imprint. In Britain and Canada, Penguin created Viking hardback lists from scratch. In this way, Penguin established a world hardback imprint alongside a world paperback publishing program.

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<sup>8</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.



Viking gave Penguin the opportunity to offer original hardback publishing to authors who were publishing with Penguin in paperback. There was a sorting out of authors: for example, John Mortimer had to decide whether to stay with his previous publisher or come to this new venture at Penguin. He chose to move and has been publishing with Viking for over twenty years.

Tony Lacey was given the task of setting up and running Viking. In the early days, his list included Margaret Drabble and Claire Tomalin. As the current Publishing Director of Viking, Lacey continues to handle several of them.<sup>9</sup>

In Britain, Viking was conceived as a hardcover imprint that could reflect the diversity and wide-ranging interests covered by the Penguin paperback list. Viking continues this tradition today, with a vast, intelligent list of well-written books for both the interested and general reader. Of all Penguin's hardcover imprints, Viking always was the "broadest church" as Tony Lacey put it, because it was home-grown and set up to reflect the great scale and scope of work that Penguin published.

Today, on the highly literary and even experimental end of the list, Viking publishes Jim Crace, Pat Barker, David Lodge, Anita Brookner, Saul Bellow, and Helen Dunmore. More commercial authors include Barbara Vine, John Mortimer, Alex Garland, and Nick Hornby. Nonfiction works include current affairs, histories by authors such as Antony Beevor, biographies by Valerie Grove and Claire Tomalin, belles-lettres, travel, soft science, and sport. The only genre that Viking does not publish is nature books.

With such a broad publishing program, the list allows the editors to pursue their own tastes and editorial visions. Books are not acquired to strengthen the depth

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<sup>9</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 03.

of the Viking list, but rather to increase its breadth. With their varying tastes, the editors maintain a list that is fresh as well as learned, outrageous as well as erudite, adventurous as well as reflective. They publish books from America through collegial relationships with editors and agents, and their international connections yield books from around the globe. The editors working at Viking include: Publisher Juliet Annan, Publishing Director Tony Lacey, Eleo Gordon, Mary Mount, Leo Hollis, and Kate Barker. Their tastes and specialties vary and are impossible to pin down with any generalization or casual observation. Except for Eleo Gordon who edits only non-fiction, all publish both fiction and non-fiction.

## **6. Background of the Hamish Hamilton Imprint**

Hamish Hamilton is the other hardcover literary imprint at Penguin UK. Hamish Hamilton began as an independent publishing house in 1931. In 1984 Penguin bought publishing houses Michael Joseph and Hamish Hamilton from Thompson International as a defensive move, to prevent Pan or Dell from buying them. In two years Penguin had gone from having almost no trade hardback program at all to having three different hardcover imprints.

Because this report concerns itself with literary publishing, and Michael Joseph publishes commercial works, the discussion is limited to Hamish Hamilton.

Under Thompson International, Hamish Hamilton began publishing William Boyd, John Updike, and Paul Thoreaux, three authors who stayed with the list and made the transition to Penguin. However, Hamish Hamilton went into a decline in the 1990s. Because Penguin did not really need three hardback imprints, there was

discussion about closing the imprint. In the end, the Hamish Hamilton list was put under the same management as Viking. But as the current Publisher, Simon Prosser, observes, having one person look after two imprints editorially is ineffective when the lists have individual identities, as Hamish Hamilton was meant to be distinguished from Viking.

Hamish Hamilton has changed a great deal over the years. It always had a literary cachet, but has become, as one editor describes it, "quite middle-brow." In 1998, when Penguin decided to revive the list, Simon Prosser, serving as both publisher and editor, turned Hamish Hamilton into a literary boutique, with a strong list that is easily distinguishable from Viking. According to Prosser, the best way to describe Hamish Hamilton is to imagine walking into a bookshop and seeing that four-fifths of the books are very much like other books.

But one out of five of the books aren't ... They have different voices, they are something fresh and new. In an ideal world what I'd like the Hamish Hamilton list to be is the one-fifth of the books that are much harder to categorize and much harder to sell. But if you get it right then they can sell just as well as any commercial novel.<sup>10</sup>

Some of his early successes included Alain De Borton's *Conversations on Philosophy* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, which shows Hamish Hamilton's ability to publish literary works on a large scale. As of July 2003, the novel had sold nearly a million copies. Ali Smith's book *Hotel World*, which is a difficult book to read and experimental in form, sold close to 100,000 copies. So has *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald, a more highbrow book that was released recently. "So that's the ideal model really, is

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<sup>10</sup> Prosser. Simon. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.

to take books which aren't like anything else and to try and find an audience for them.”<sup>11</sup>

Hamish Hamilton is willing to take risks to get its books. Prosser published a novel in verse last year called *The Emperor's Bay*, a major risk as the public is not used to buying novels in verse, and poetry has notoriously low print runs. Prosser took this step because he believes there is an Orange Prize somewhere in the author's future, which could enhance the imprint and generate backlist sales.

It is rare for a literary list to have the marketing and publicity talent that Hamish Hamilton can access through Penguin. These resources alone could account for the success of the imprint's titles because the demand created by skillful marketing goes beyond that driven by literary reviews.

Hamish Hamilton exemplifies the tension in literary publishing between the acquisition of cutting-edge material and the need to maximize sales. The next chapter uses case studies from Viking and Hamish Hamilton to identify and assess the key variables that are used when considering a potential acquisition.

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<sup>11</sup> Prosser, Simon. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.

## Editorial Acquisition Decision-Making

### 1. Decision-making Structure in Editorial Acquisitions

As one editor at Viking put it, 99 percent of the job is saying “no” to projects. For the other one percent of manuscripts that for offhand, lucky, or well-deserved reasons strike a chord with a respected reader, or keep an editor up all night reading voraciously, the collaborative process of Penguin UK begins. Whereas editors used to have full responsibility for acquisitions decisions, Penguin UK now makes publishing decisions collaboratively through a hierarchy of meetings. Tony Lacey reflects on the two styles.

In the old Penguin days if you were a senior editor and you wanted to buy something, basically you would. We published too much. If you were published by Penguin you were barely noticed to have been published. ... On the other hand, it did mean there were some amazing buys. Now you have to get more people on board. I hate to use the phrase meeting of minds, but you can't buy a book [on your own]. The disadvantage is that it is very wearing and you lose some things. The advantage is that when a book is bought everybody is behind it. Now it is a decision by the company to take that book on, so everybody gets behind it and you've gotten them to believe in it.<sup>12</sup>

The first meeting in the acquisitions process is the Editorial Meeting, which is chaired by the Publisher of Viking, Juliet Annan. Each publisher and publishing director is also a working editor, with authors to handle and manuscripts to evaluate. It is in this meeting that editors propose book projects to the imprint, effectively pitching to Penguin UK as well. Though theirs is a distinctively separate imprint, Simon Prosser and Assistant Editor Juliet Mitchell, who constitute the Hamish

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<sup>12</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.

Hamilton staff, attend the same departmental meeting as the Viking staff, to be a part of the collaborative process.

In addition to the editors, representatives from other departments within Penguin UK who work specifically with the Viking and Hamish Hamilton literary lists, attend the meetings. Sales, marketing, rights, and publicity teams attend to offer support, perspective, and guidance in the selection process. UK Sales Director Genevieve Shore points out the importance of the collegial atmosphere.

It has to be collaborative. If it's just editorially driven or it's just sales driven, it doesn't work. If a publishing division or imprint become over-reliant on sales, they don't take risks, they don't really look for the best new things. Because the sales probability is what's happening now, today, they can't anticipate what's going to happen in the future. The best publishers are people who anticipate trends. They are the publishers who say 'the next big thing is going to be standing on one leg' so I'm going to start right now on my step-by-step standing on one leg book. They work together.<sup>13</sup>

Though the editors still wear multiple hats and have to consider the many variables that arise with any given title, they have the support of a team of people who bring different disciplines and fresh perspectives to each project. Manuscripts under consideration are circulated among the editors and members of the different departments so that the decision to publish a book comes from the team as a whole. This creates an enthusiasm for seeing the project through to completion and fosters a dynamic and lively atmosphere throughout all phases of a book's life.<sup>14</sup>

Because the process is collaborative, when a bad decision is made, the entire team takes responsibility. Even so, it is clear that the editorial department retains responsibility for acquiring a book for publication, and acceptance of a particular

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<sup>13</sup> Shore, Genevieve. Personal Interview. 15 July 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, Gill. Book Commissioning and Acquisition. London: Routledge.. 1995.

project is often influenced by the track record and seniority of the editor who recommends it. The editor's judgment has precedence and the editor is the individual who ultimately either opens or closes the door to Penguin UK.

The next hurdle a manuscript or proposal must clear before an editor makes an offer is the Acquisitions Meeting chaired by the Publishing Director of Penguin General, Tom Weldon. This weekly meeting is attended by the publishers and publishing directors of Viking, Hamish Hamilton, and Michael Joseph. Here, each imprint's potential titles are pitched and discussed with the senior directors of the marketing, sales, inventory, rights, and publicity teams. Initial estimates on quantity, price, overhead, and author advance are presented, the income through rights accounted for, the competition analyzed. It is in the Acquisitions Meeting that risks are assessed, and doubts aired and debated. It is here that the decision to make an offer or to join in an auction is made.

One element is missing in this two-tier process, however. There is no objective set of criteria for editors to use when making a decision. Instead, the process is accomplished through sharing manuscripts, discussions around the office, or in the meetings described earlier. The process relies on the accumulated experience of each individual to surface concerns or raise issues. There is no system that unifies the process or clarifies the variables at hand. Miscommunication can happen easily. One variable can influence a decision more than it should, or be overlooked when it should be seriously considered.

The scorecard presented in this report attempts to objectify and frame the core decisions involved in the acquisitions process. The following chapter identifies the 24

separate variables that are considered during the acquisitions decision process and discusses how they are represented in the proposed scorecard.

## **2. Variables in the Decision to Buy a Manuscript for Publication**

### *Writing and the Narrative Drive*

At both Viking and Hamish Hamilton, the most important variable when considering a manuscript is the quality of the writing. While many claim that the ability to sell a book into the marketplace is the first consideration, in doing so they have overlooked the most basic consideration: is this a good book? To the editors, this means not only the sentence structure and the flow from idea to idea, but also the structure of the work and the narrative drive that propels a reader through several hundred pages. To editors who work from instinct and personal taste, the quality of the writing is what keeps them reading page after page and leaves them feeling fulfilled. In Viking, Senior Commissioning Editor Mary Mount put it best when she said,

it's either being moved emotionally, to laugh or to cry or just to think; it's having something to say -- not necessarily having a message -- but saying things in an interesting way that doesn't try too hard.<sup>15</sup>

Tony Lacey gives a few examples that illustrate the excitement of reading good writing by two of his authors.

[Simon Armitage] has a real poet's ear... It's quite unusual to have someone who can write a story, who is in touch with the contemporary world. He has a real ear for the way English is spoken

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<sup>15</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview. 03 June 2003.



and he jumps off the page. Jim Crace is a much more controlling writer, he writes a fine prose which is wonderful. Some people find it is too controlling, that he never lets go, whereas Simon is very much dealing with the vernacular. But you have confidence that they both know what they're doing."<sup>16</sup>

It's only after assessing the quality of the writing that other factors are considered: how interesting and original the story is, how well the author lives up to the challenges that he or she has set. Only then is consideration given to the very nebulous and difficult question of whether anyone will care.

At both Viking and Hamish Hamilton, it is clear that without the writing and narrative drive in place, a title is immediately rejected. This is the bottom line of the imprints: writing is crucial, and without it a manuscript or proposal is labeled a no-go and tossed into the recycle bin. It is certainly more important than the sales potential. Generally it is understood that a badly written book just will not sell. Simon Prosser at Hamish Hamilton says,

all that's important are the words on the page, whether they come to life, whether the author can really write. I have a very genuine belief that if something is very, very well written and the author is talented, then it stands as much of a chance as anything of succeeding.<sup>17</sup>

In the scorecard I am proposing for Viking and Hamish Hamilton, writing has more point-values assigned to it than any other variable.

### *Time and Work Required*

Many manuscripts that circulate in the offices at Viking and Hamish Hamilton are well liked by readers, but need additional work. If it is a matter of a few revisions

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<sup>16</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Prosser, Simon. Personal Interview. 19 June. 2003.

in order to make the book publishable, the editor may volley with the writer, negotiating changes that could lead to the editor acquiring the book. If the changes are refused, or made halfheartedly, the book is turned down. Hamish Hamilton editors acknowledge that they frequently turn down manuscripts of exceptional quality because they require more than a very small amount of revision.

On the other hand, the Viking editors are more willing to work with a manuscript until it is ready for release. For the right book, a Viking editor is amenable to putting in all of the necessary work. Senior Commissioning Editor Eleo Gordon tells of the thrilling discovery of a handwritten book she found in the slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts, which had to be typed and edited into a first draft. Tony Lacey gives an example of a first novel in which the extra work was worth it.

It was a very good experience buying it, I got a lot of people to read it and a lot of people liked it, so we're all going into it liking it. There wasn't any doubt... The book has some structural problems and we've been working on that because two-thirds of the book is fantastic – very funny, good characters...the plot works very well. [One section contained] a bit of a travelogue of weird America. We cut that right back, [as those] chapters unbalanced the whole book and lost sight of what the book was all about.<sup>18</sup>

Time constraints are certainly a concern for the Viking editors and influence decisions on more borderline submissions. This becomes an important consideration as the publishing season's schedule fills up, so that editors don't overextend themselves with too many projects that need a lot of work. For this reason time considerations have an important place on the scorecard.

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<sup>18</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.

### *Foreign Books*

Foreign books are published by Penguin UK as a result of relationships formed between Penguin editors and publishers in other countries. Titles change hands during the Frankfurt Book Fair, and Penguin also takes advantage of its international reach, conducting editor-exchanges within the Penguin group companies.

While on an inter-company exchange to India, Mary Mount received a manuscript called *The Sari Shop*.

I had read a short story of [the author's] a few years ago. She knew someone I knew in Delhi and they sent me her manuscript. I read it while I was there and recommended it to an agent. [What made the book worth bringing back to England was] the quality – it's very well done, it's very moving, it's quite an angry book. And it's very unlike a lot of Indian fiction too. Not that that's going to make it a success, maybe it'll be a failure, but it comes from the heart, which is very rare in a lot of debut publishing."<sup>19</sup>

Acquiring that one book made the month Mary spent in Delhi worth the trip. However, these situations are rare. It is more likely that the manuscript will arrive in London via an agent.

### *In Translation*

Some of the books that land on an editor's desk are proposals for translated works. These are considered just like an English title: they must conform to the local publishing market. For example, Mary Mount worked with an author, Linda Pullman, who wrote in Dutch. Her book arrived already translated on Mary's desk via an agent. Mary struck up a relationship with the author and was able, at long distance, to make editorial requests.

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<sup>19</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview. 03 June 2003.

Not all translation issues end so happily. In another instance, Hamish Hamilton turned down a translated title because, even though the author was a commercial success in France, she had yet to be translated and sold in the English-speaking market. While an exciting proposition, the book that the translator proposed was not the right book to launch the author in Britain.

### *Books from America*

The Viking team publishes a lot of American books. Publisher Juliet Annan travels to New York, where she used to live and work, and visits with editors and agents to gather manuscripts and book ideas. Simon Prosser also used to work in American publishing and crosses the Atlantic regularly.

One problem Viking faces when working with American agents and publishers is the size and diversity of the United States market. Many American editors have a hard time perceiving what will sell in Britain. For example, the US market can support a much larger mid-list, as there is a bigger market for niche publishing in America than in Britain.

To Leo Hollis, US books that succeed in England are attractive because of their undeniable Americanism. Yet other editors reject books because they see them as “too American.” All in all, a large number of US books are submitted for publication in the UK, but relatively few are actually published.

Because foreign books, books in translation, and US books need to comply with the same standards as a native title, the scorecard assumes that the same

variables will apply without the addition of a special section. Therefore, no statements in the scorecard directly evaluate foreign titles.

### *Writing on the Scorecard*

The quality of the writing, or translation, is captured in the scorecard with the following statements:

1. The writing has appropriate sentence structure.
2. The writing has well-stated themes.
3. The writing moves fluidly from one idea to the next.
4. The story is moving or thought-provoking.
5. The reader had difficulty putting the manuscript or proposal down.
6. This book will not require much editorial work.

### *Current Market Situation*

In his book *Getting Into Print*, Walter Powell states that as an editor

you have to be a good reader of the culture. If it's something you like and you think it is a good book, you supply the reason to publish it. If it's something you don't necessarily like and you reject it, then you are reading the culture.<sup>20</sup>

Because book publishing serves a cultural market rather than a service or product-oriented market, the risk is higher because the nature of the marketplace is constantly changing. Editors stay in touch with the literary market by reading articles and reviews and by watching what is selling in bookstores, through newsagents, and

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<sup>20</sup> Walter, Powell W. *Getting Into Print: The Decision-Making Process in Scholarly Publishing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1985.

online. At Viking, Mary Mount takes a pragmatic view of staying on top of the market.

The way in which the market plays a part with me is when you get something in and you really like it, it really helps if you can say “Well, blah-blah sold really well. It’s quite like blah-blah.”<sup>21</sup>

Being able to demonstrate market awareness by citing similarities between books and quoting media coverage is essential if an editor is going to sell the idea of a book to others within the publishing house. Mary Mount continues to say,

I think the whole thing about publishing and acquisitions in general is that it is very hard to predict. You try and narrow the areas of risk by hoping that the quality of writing is up to scratch, that you haven’t made too many mistakes in the book, and that the jacket is right. And then you have to hope that it finds its way – you spend money on the marketing and the publicity ... Sometimes [when] you are doing something new, you can have good luck or you can have bad luck ... But I think you can’t be too bound by what has sold because otherwise you’d never do anything new.<sup>22</sup>

If an editor is lucky, the book connects with the spirit of the times – and something takes off. Tony Lacey names four such books in his last 15 years that took everyone completely by surprise.

The ones that came out of the blue were *Perfume*, *Secret History*, *The Beach*, and *White Teeth*. They are all first books ... *Perfume* is historical, romantic, and shocking. *Secret History* appeals to literary types, with New England and all that, whereas *The Beach* is every youngish person’s experience backpacking – it’s hard to make even wild generalizations about any of them, and I think there’s even sort of romance about it when something runs away [like those books did].<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview. 03 June 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview. 03 June 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.

The very nature of originality is that no one can predict a new hit. But once somebody successfully publishes a new kind of book, every other house jumps on the success and publishes its own version. That is easier to predict.

The sales team helps editors in the acquisitions process by realistically assessing the market for a given title. Sales personnel look at how similar books have done in the past, and the kinds of books that the bookstores are currently buying. But as UK Sales Director Genevieve Shore points out, editors should not be too reliant on the sales team to anticipate how the market will respond.

It can be all too easy to be over reliant on a sales person to give an absolute figure. But there is no absolute figure. You can say here, now, today, if you publish this into the market I think it might achieve successful sales figures. But it might not and it might be double. So the sales figures that the sales department give are only a guidance for a purchase because at any one time a book can become a major bestseller and you don't expect it. And you can't buy on the basis that every book becomes a major bestseller.<sup>24</sup>

As Shore points out, there are no definite numbers that can be adhered to in order to determine market potential. Interpreting and anticipating the market is where an editor's instinct comes into play, because the forces at work are too numerous and diverse to quantify in distinct, rational terms.

### *Readership Identification*

Penguin UK has a reputation for its focus, throughout the publishing process, on who will actually read its titles. Editors keep their market in mind as they pitch their projects during editorial meetings and as they communicate the book to the design team.

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<sup>24</sup> Shore, Genevieve. Personal Interview. 15 July 2003.

It is more challenging for a literary editor to identify readership than for a commercial editor. The audience for literary works is difficult to define because no one knows definitively who reads literary books. Plenty of educated people do not read them, while plenty of uneducated people do. It is easier to identify the reader for a non-fiction book than for a novel. On the other hand, mass-market bestsellers are relatively easy to predict because an editor can see particular qualities in a manuscript and know that, for example, a middle-class woman is likely to buy it.

Identifying the market is up to conjecture and the experience of the publishing team. The simple fact that editors work on titles that have different audiences makes for a challenging and dynamic working environment.

Each of the books I do will vary slightly according to the market. Julia Darling is primarily a read for women, who are interested in literary fiction from the ages of 20-60. Simon Winchester is for British men interested in history and science. So each one is taken on separately.<sup>25</sup>

Eleo Gordon describes how editors see themselves as the reader who might buy a given title in a bookshop. "You have to assume that if you like it that much, they will too. Often they will, but not always. You [then] imagine who is going to read the book."<sup>26</sup>

By using their own taste as a compass, editors are able to anticipate the market that they see themselves representing. Leo Hollis agrees with this approach.

There is no way I'm doing market research in my head while I'm looking at something. If I like something then I will try to work out what the market is afterwards. But that's only once I've decided it's worthwhile considering. If there is something that I think will sell

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<sup>25</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview. 03 June 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon, Eleo. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.



well but bores the crap out of me I will reject it. Even if I know it will sell.<sup>27</sup>

Even though there may be a readership for a book, if the editor cannot foresee supporting the book with all of his or her energies throughout the publishing process, that particular manuscript won't be bought. So although a book might have a market, that factor alone does not determine whether a book will be acquired. The editor's determination to stay true to his or her own taste and instinct preserves the pursuit of quality as the editor builds a list of titles.

### *Place in Literary Heritage*

The desire to build upon established literary heritage is an important factor in a literary acquisition. Hamish Hamilton demonstrated the meeting point of literary heritage and sales with its successful *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith. The book had a clear place in the literary heritage of London and England as a whole because it grasped the living reality of ethnically diverse London. Its place in this heritage was so strong that an auction was held based solely on the first three chapters.

Hamish Hamilton distinguishes itself from Viking by publishing works that aim to take a place in literary history. Examples of this include the posthumous publication of W.G. Sebald's works, and Hamish Hamilton's entry into an auction for Vikram Seth's latest book *Two Lives*, which was being offered with a suggested seven-figure advance, even though all evidence indicated the advance would most likely create a loss on the project.

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<sup>27</sup> Hollis, Leo. Personal Interview. 07 June 2003.

### *"Make" Books*

"Make" books are books for which an audience has to be "made" from scratch and that generally have no clear market. They are aimed at the general reader and have previously unknown authors. These books rely largely on packaging and blurbs, store placement, reviews, and whatever enthusiasm the publishing house and the editor can drum up in the mind of the public. As Eleo Gordon's experience shows, the effort to make them work has to come from within Penguin.

You have to create a situation where everyone takes it seriously. Often in my case I don't have any marketing budget at all, and I have to get around that as much as I possibly can by being as energetic about it as I can -- talking, distributing spiral-bound proofs, writing letters, sending material to outsiders, etc. At the same time I have to see if I can get a marketing budget for the book. If I am buying a lead title, I will have a marketing budget for the book, but I still have to maximize its chances. On *First Light*, my little book, I had no budget at all in hardback and I had to do my best to spread the word, and we did. Then comes the paperback and they decided they were going to make it a lead title, and we had a marketing budget with posters and all sorts of things, and it has become a bestseller. So that is a good story, they don't always go that way, but it is a good story.

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Many literary books begin as "make" books. The teams at Viking and Hamish Hamilton take them on with caution, and are encouraged to assess the higher degree of risk that they add to the season's publishing program.

### *Timing*

With so many challenges and so many variables in every book, it is a wonder when it all comes together, when the skills of the Penguin team members meet the market and find there is a hunger for what they have to offer. Zadie Smith's *White*

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<sup>28</sup> Gordon, Eleo. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.

*Teeth* was an example of a book that appeared at the right moment. Simon Prosser, Smith's editor at Hamish Hamilton, described the particular acquisition.

Well, everyone knew. There was quite a big auction. Everyone who read those [initial chapters] wanted to buy the book... the book was amazing for a first novel and a better read than one could have hoped for from the initial material, which was very good. Then once I read that manuscript, I realized that we were on to something amazing. It seemed to appeal on almost every level that a book could appeal. Across age groups, different ethnicities, it was very smart and also very accessible, it was warm-hearted, funny, and yet serious, with incredible style, great sentences. So when I read it, I thought it was amazing and then I really pushed it hard with people here, and very early on I got a quote from Salman Rushdie which then helped a lot, which meant that all the literary community took it very seriously. At the same time because her background was very interesting she got a lot of interviews and feature attention, and those things all combined with good support from booksellers to mean that the book got off to a good start and then carried on, selling very, very well in paperback.<sup>29</sup>

Smith's novel is an example of many elements coming together at the right time in the right way, but it is clear that her book hit upon the cultural pulse of London at the time of its release. The book might not have been such a success if it had been published at another time.

A major acquisition Penguin won at auction was well-known BBC reporter Rageh Omaar's book about his experiences in Iraq. His focus was on the people, the culture, and daily interactions with Iraqis civilians during the seven years he lived there. While others might have chosen to write war reportage, Rageh took a more literary approach. If there had been no war in Iraq, this book would not have sold anywhere near as well as Penguin anticipated. This shows how it is possible for

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<sup>29</sup> Prosser, Simon. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.

literary works to reflect the momentum of the times and expand understanding of current events, while still retaining a timeless, literary quality.

### *Current Market on the Scorecard*

Once the writing has been assessed and the work identified as an exciting prospect for publication, market considerations are taken into account. In the scorecard, market factors are represented by the following statements:

7. This book has a clear and identifiable readership.
8. This book complements current market trends.
9. This book is similar to another title that sold well.
10. This book will occupy a unique place in our literary heritage.

### *Sales*

Each imprint within Penguin UK has an assigned salesperson who works collaboratively with the publishing, marketing, rights, and publicity teams. Together, they decide which books are right for the list and right for the market. The salesperson's main role is to feed the state of the market back into the publishing environment.

Within the weekly departmental meetings, the sales team plays a very active role in deciding the revenue potential of each book. The team's preliminary figures can make or break an acquisition, as the numbers determine how much advance can realistically be offered based on the number of copies Sales thinks the book will sell.

It is important that the salesperson leaves a meeting with a positive view of the book being acquired. Although the process is editorially driven, if the sales team does not understand the book at hand, its numbers will not be as accurate. As the UK Sales Director Genevieve Shore points out,

if somebody brings a book and said "I absolutely want this book and its about how frogs create their own jumpers," somebody in sales would say, "that's great but there's no market for it." But if it's a novel or a history book... they will give you a sales figure based on their own experience, current sales in the market, past sales in the market, how it sits with the competition, what format are you trying to publish it into, what price point, what market are you aiming at.<sup>30</sup>

Simon Prosser was faced with a difficult decision when he felt he had stumbled on to a very talented African writer whose writing described life under dictatorship. The author had three titles in print with Penguin Modern Classics, but the numbers Prosser received from the sales department didn't support the acquisition of the title as part of the hardcover Hamish Hamilton list. As a result, despite his conviction that the book was worth publishing, the book was turned down.

The sales team also influences the format of a book. Sales figures can be adjusted to include, or exclude, color photographs or illustrations, sizes can be altered, and paper quality reduced or increased.

There is also a certain amount of flexibility and price elasticity in defining the consumer and the market. The sales strategy can vary depending on which retailers the team wants to sell a title into and whether the goal is to get the book promoted in the front of the store.

So if someone sits there in [an acquisitions] meeting and says "There's a huge market for the design of chairs," we say, "Now what

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<sup>30</sup> Shore, Genevieve. Personal Interview. 15 July 2003.

really is that market? Well, it's design students really, some architects, possibly some ergonomics as well." Right okay, how big is that market? Is this a specialist book, should it be £40, should it be £50? Is it a textbook, or is it a £6.99 gorgeous with lots of pictures and it's a pick-up buy? It's just about trying to find out where they think it is. And that really only applies to non-fiction because with fiction it's much easier to pigeonhole. There's a bigger slew into that market, but [fiction] churns faster, so if you do it wrong it's harder to come back and do it again.<sup>31</sup>

When formulating sales figures, pricing is often based on the editor's comparison between the title under consideration and a previously published title. The sales team looks at similar titles, similar authors, similar format prices and compares current and past sales, or uses the competition to refine the editor's conception of how the book is best published to make the most money.

If you [publish] a barbeque cookbook, you have a huge range in the market. So you would spend more time thinking about how to differentiate your product from the rest. If everybody else's books are £25, if you went in at £12.99 you could blitz the market. Or if everyone else is going in at £12.99, maybe if you went in at £25, you may not sell as many but you would make more money. So if you're talking about genre publishing and niche publishing, you are looking at what's currently out there. And whether or not you can make space in the market for it. If you're talking about a new novel then it's very different; you're probably going to look at similar types of books and say, "Well literary fiction in hardback at the moment is selling X. But if it's an established author then they have a track record." So it's not, there's many different ways of looking at it. And it's like all statistics, really, you can get to any answer you want to.<sup>32</sup>

Shore emphasizes that sales estimates should not be relied on too heavily. While an experienced salesperson will be able to reduce the margin of error significantly, these preliminary figures are still a best guess. As Genevieve Shore points out,

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<sup>31</sup> Shore, Genevieve. Personal Interview. 15 July 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Shore, Genevieve. Personal Interview. 15 July 2003.

it's not a science and I think there can be an over analysis of it. You can only ask somebody's opinion at any one time because we're not an absolute industry. We're a multi-product, multi-format, multi-consumer industry so you can only give people a feel for it and you can say "this what we will try and sell, we will try and sell 100,000 copies or we will try and sell 2,000 copies." In terms of buying books and publishing books, what we're trying to do all the time is to fit the book for the market that the editor intends and get to an honest answer about what they really think that market is.<sup>33</sup>

The art of anticipating sales is as complex as any editorial decision. The sales voice is particularly strong, because a proposition may not be possible unless specific changes are made in the price, format, or quantity. It is the sales team's bottom-line numbers that are at the third tier of considering a book for publication.

#### *Sales on the Scorecard*

The most important role the sales department has in the initial assessment of a project is in generating costing sheets in which the costs are weighed against income from the rights department and the anticipated sales figures. Editors use these numbers to justify their gut decision to acquire a book. Therefore, sales is represented by the following statements:

11. This book is part of a genre that sells well.
12. The financial numbers for this book work and indicate a clear profit margin.

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<sup>33</sup> Shore, Genevieve. Personal Interview. 15 July 2003.

## *Author*

The author's background, personality, and his or her relationship with the editor are the fourth most important factor in the decision to acquire a book at Viking and Hamish Hamilton. It is only after the quality of writing is assessed, the market identified, and the sales potential evaluated that the Viking or Hamish Hamilton editors consider the author.

## *Author Background*

An author might be a journalist, someone who has written a prize-winning short story, or a debut novelist. The author's background is particularly important when an author is submitting a proposal, as the editor must be confident that the author is capable of following the project through to completion. That is not to say that an author has to have a publications background at all, as a face-to-face meeting may erase all doubts as to his or her ability to write a good book. But as Gill Davies points out in his book, *Book Commissioning and Acquisition*, a first-time author is difficult to assess because there is no track record. Returning authors are usually scrutinized "for their likely ability to produce another winner or something mediocre – a mere bread and butter, mid-list item that will just get by."<sup>34</sup> A lack of experience can be offset if the author is a recognized expert in the field that is the subject of the book.

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<sup>34</sup> Davies, Gill. *Book Commissioning and Acquisition*. London: Routledge. 1995.



## *Personality*

While the author's personality does not enter into the initial consideration in either Viking or Hamish Hamilton, it is definitely a factor in whether a book gets published or not. Perhaps because of their commitment to quality writing, the Viking and Hamish Hamilton editors do not consider personality first while an editor for a commercial list may be more inclined to do so. Eleo Gordon confesses to loving to work with strong personalities and engaging with them in a lively, dynamic interaction.

Mary Mount had this to say about the value she assigns to the author's personality.

You get the proposal, it's quite good: you want to meet with the author to hear more about the book and how they plan to do it. If you feel convinced by the meeting, it tends to influence the offer. I think with fiction, it's not as much personality as their ability to see the book clearly. With fiction, you don't really need to meet the author. [When] you want to buy the book, if the author's wonderful that's great; if [the author is] awful it doesn't really affect the book. Think of a reader in a bookshop, they're not going to meet the author; it won't influence their decision so it shouldn't influence yours.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, having an author that is young, good-looking and charming are considered assets that work in a book's favor. A literary biography of John Donne was pitched to Mary Mount as an exclusive offer from an agent. Questions were raised over the sales record of literary biographies, and there was also a rumor that another house might be working on a similar biography. But when Mount met the author, she found him attractive and charming enough to warrant taking on the risks rather than have the agent open up the proposal to other publishers.

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<sup>35</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview 03 June 2003.

Frequently writing and personality are very much intertwined. Tony Lacey describes Nick Hornby as an author who “men recognize and women find beguiling.”<sup>36</sup> His honesty is endearing and is a quality in his personality that makes him a pleasure to work with as well as to read.

Sometimes, the personalities of the author and the book are completely intertwined and result in work of great originality. Leo Hollis describes one project.

The *Book of Lost Books* was written by one of the bizarrest people I know ... (the book) comes from a weird place ... no one else in the world could or would ever want to write this book.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, another outcome of the courting process, in which author and publisher circle each other through negotiations, can be that the match is not right. In one case, after meeting with an author, an editor exclaimed that she couldn't imagine working with that author for another two years, the time that would be required for this particular book to be completed.

#### *Relationship with the Editor*

One compelling argument for building sustained relationships within the literary world is the story of how Tony Lacey wooed author Nick Hornby to join the Viking list. “I was the under-bidder on *Fever Pitch*. I failed to buy it first time around.” But he and Hornby struck up a friendship, “and then years later he came to me (with another book project) because we had become very good friends. It was a sad story that turned good.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Hollis, Leo. Personal Interview. 04 June 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003

Authors also like to see an editor demonstrate interest in the subject matter. Mary Mount lost a Canadian title called *The In-Between of Vikram Lall* to Canongate, an independent house that underbid Penguin but won the manuscript. Mount attributes the loss to her inability to communicate Viking's commitment to the book and empathy with its purpose.

In a reverse of the usual process, a solid relationship can lead to an idea springing up in the editor's mind that is just perfect for one of his or her authors. Eleo Gordon is widely acclaimed for suggesting a book on Stalingrad to one of her authors, Antony Beevor. The book went on to become a bestseller and won several prizes. She got to know him when she bought the paperback rights to one of his previous books. Then she published a book about Beevor's mother, and "sort of got in with the family."

What happened [with Stalingrad] was I went to see a film about the battle of Stalingrad with my sister-in-law and I thought, I'd like to know a bit more about it. Why don't I think of doing a book. I thought Antony would make a good author because he's very good with descriptions as well as analyzing political elements in the military. He wasn't sure. He didn't think he could do it, actually. At the time he wanted to do a book on Britain, which I wasn't that keen on. But his agent got the hang of [the idea] pretty quickly. So the meeting ended with them saying they would go away and think about it. Then we got a fax a few days later that said they'd decided it was a good idea and the rest is history.<sup>39</sup>

The author-editor relationship frequently yields new projects in a more indirect way, in the constant exchange of ideas. Mary Mount describes a typical back-and-forth volley.

Frequently authors have lots of ideas on the go and part of my job is to say "well I think that will work" "I don't think that will work."

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<sup>39</sup> Gordon, Eleo. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.

For instance one author brought me an idea that we discussed and I didn't think would work and then he said he had another idea. He told me about it and I said it was great. He's just written the book.<sup>40</sup>

Leo Hollis acquired *The Book of Lost Books* through a friendship with an author who was getting married, "I said, 'well, you could probably use some money so shut up (about the book) and send me a proposal.'" Leo did all the editorial work on the proposal that eventually worked its way through the meetings and was indeed acquired.

Despite the current trend towards professionalism in editor's relationships with authors, leaving agents to do more of the nurturing, the acquisitions process is still very much dependent on the relationships that develop, enhance, and sustain the output of both the author and the editor.

### *Returning Authors*

Second only to producing an excellent book each time around, a multiple-book scenario is something an editor most wants to develop for an author. These long-term relationships become an editor's brand, a source of steady output and predictability. Multiple book deals enable an editor to fully leverage the initial investment in an author.

Time and money are poured into promoting each book and its author. Ideally, the name recognition created in publishing a first book can be leveraged to promote subsequent books at a lower cost. Unfortunately, as Tony Lacey tells it, in the current competitive environment of publishing, this rarely happens. An editor will often turn

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<sup>40</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview. 03 June 2003.

down a book from a returning author. “Or an author wants to write a book and the editor doesn’t like it, or there is a vast increase in the advance, but the previous books haven’t been selling.”<sup>41</sup>

Eleo Gordon faced this situation with Virginia Nicholson, the author of the biography *Among the Bohemians*, which sold well. After Eleo pitched the author’s idea for her second book to the team at Viking and Hamish Hamilton, it was decided that the book would not have enough of a life in paperback. The Viking team decided to turn the book down even though it was clear that the author had enough of a belief in her proposed subject matter to take the idea to another publisher. Viking not only lost the book, but also lost an author in the process.

Another common situation with a returning author is one in which the author has done well with one book and Viking or Hamish Hamilton is considering what kind of an investment to put into the second. Leo Hollis faced this issue with author Mary Roach, whose first book, *Stiff*, was just coming out in hardback with Viking UK, after appearing in the top-twenty bestseller list in America. “She’s a good thing, she’s a singular author. She’s a writer who is developing. *Stiff* is a very good book, but it’s not going to be the best thing she can write.”

With preliminary results in England yet to be seen, Hollis received a mediocre proposal for Roach’s second book. Hollis and the team at Viking concluded that the proposal lacked a narrative thread to pull the proposed book together. It seemed to be more of a collection of essays than a unified narrative.

*The Pope’s Alarm Clock* is a very shoddy proposal, but because she is a returning author who currently everyone is feeling good about, she’s going to get away with it. But it is a thorough proposal of what

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<sup>41</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.

she wants to do. It still has all her wit and all her personality, and what she's proposing is a journey, can't say what's going to happen, just something. And she's going to react to it in a very Mary Roach type way.<sup>42</sup>

Two-book deals offer a solution that acquisitions editors can use to deal with the issue of losing authors that they have invested in. Mary Mount gives examples of how these deals bring more security to both the author and the editor.

For instance, someone like Juliet Darling, she's already written a first book, this is her second, so I know she can write. It's not like she's a one-book wonder. I [also] bought two books so that she would be reassured that she was somewhere for a longer period of time. I bought short stories and a novel from an American writer, which you often do with short stories, you want to get the novel as well.<sup>43</sup>

Two-book deals come with their own pressures and problems. There is a distinct second-book syndrome, where the pressure of a previous success builds and collapses into the second book. The pressure can be too extreme for the author to write well, or the author may be expected to turn around the second book in too short a time. Mary Mount said she tends to do two book deals only with authors who are very solid in their writing.

If the author-editor relationship sours during the process of editing one manuscript it lessens the chance that a second will be considered. A mix of incompatible personalities can influence the next book deal, as Eleo Gordon shows in this story about an author who,

also had a sex shop in Amsterdam and he used to bring these awful posters, seriously, and as you can imagine, I hated it. And then he came back with the idea for a new book and they were sexy postcards from the olden days, and they weren't too explicit. And so

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<sup>42</sup> Hollis, Leo. Personal Interview. 07 June 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Mount, Mary. Personal Interview. 03 June 2003.

I started talking to him, but he was getting more and more aggressive and difficult, and then he was downright ghastly. And always rearing their awful head were these explicit pictures from his sex shop in Amsterdam. One of his great things also was that he was sure that [the royalties people] were embezzling, taking his money. And in the end, after an awful row he shrieked about a whole pile of things, but we hadn't bought the book, I thought enough is enough, and I said [author's name] ... I'm afraid I don't want to take this book any further. And that was the end of it. And that was the only time I've ever done that in my life.<sup>44</sup>

### *The Author on the Scorecard*

On the scorecard, this variable is given several statements to capture the different ways in which the author is valued and assessed during the acquisitions process.

13. The author has a marketable personality.
14. The author is worth keeping or acquiring for the long term.
15. The relationship with the author is positive and workable.
16. The author has a strong background in writing and demonstrates reliability.

### *List*

To the editors at Viking and Hamish Hamilton, the list is not as important as the writing or the story, but it remains a significant consideration. Each editor is hired into a publishing program and into an imprint to acquire a specific kind of book. As Powell points out, due to high employee turnover, an editor's loyalty is more to the craft than the corporation. If there is a good match between editor and imprint, then this fit is natural. As Gill Davies points out, in any list, "considerable knowledge has

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<sup>44</sup> Gordon, Eleo. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.

been built up over a number of years about what is suitable for publication within that list.”<sup>45</sup>

Viking has a very mature list with several authors signifying the Viking brand within the industry. Because Viking doesn't need to acquire authors to strengthen the list, the editors can be more relaxed about the fit of a particular book. Hamish Hamilton, on the other hand, is willing to take a loss on a title, as in the case of Vikram Seth's book. In order to add literary weight to its newly reinvigorated list, attention must be paid to collecting new authors that will create a stable backlist.

With a broad list like Viking's, authors are acquired more to expand the horizons of the list than to deepen a specialty. Leo Hollis states that authors create the list rather than fit into it. Viking's list is perhaps more a collection of the personalities of its editors than a list with a distinctive style. Rather than having the perfect book for the Viking list, there is a perfect book for each editor, which in turn adds the breadth that Viking is known for. An example of how the Viking list was expanded is the manuscript the publisher of Viking, Juliet Annan, brought back with her from New York. She bought a fiction title called *Victorine* that fell into the sub-genre of women's historical fiction. To gain acceptance for this new addition to the list, Juliet arranged a breakfast with representatives from all departments to discuss how Viking can best publish this new type of book.

On the other hand, Hamish Hamilton's list has much more of a niche quality to it, and its editors are more concerned about strengthening the list's depth, for example, by publishing all of W.G. Sebald's books after his death. In pitches to

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<sup>45</sup>Davies, Gill. Book Commissioning and Acquisition. London: Routledge. 1995.



authors, Hamish Hamilton talks of the camaraderie that it has established among its authors, and that joining the list is like entering a literary elite.

#### *Editor's specialty/interest within the list*

At Viking and Hamish Hamilton, the various editors have specialties within their imprint's list, even if they define a personal list only by what they enjoy reading. Sometimes the distinction is clear: Eleo Gordon publishes war histories, Leo Hollis covers quirky young works for readers in their twenties and early thirties, Tony Lacey publishes for middle-aged men, and Juliet Annan focuses on women's fiction. Some editor's tastes are harder to define, their specialties more in tempo with the media, what's going on in the news, or in a blend of genres like crime.

#### *Competition within a list or externally*

Quite often a proposal or an idea will compete with another book that is due for release. When that happens, the specific merits of each project are evaluated. When Leo Hollis arrived at Viking, he had an idea for a book about the history of gardening in Britain, but soon discovered that Viking already had a similar title. Eleo Gordon received a proposal that would compete with a title that Mary Mount was working on, so she rejected that proposal.

#### *The List in the Scorecard*

Although the Viking list has a broad identity and the Hamish Hamilton list is of a more specific nature, both can be represented in the scorecard with the same

statement. The list is of more importance in decision-making when there is internal competition between books. The list is represented in the scorecard as follows:

17. This book complements the list.
18. This book does not compete with any other book on the list.
19. This book adds breadth or depth to the list.
20. This book is in keeping with my editorial vision within the list.

### *Marketing*

Penguin UK spends less on marketing than it used to, but the marketing team still attends the tiers of meetings and is responsible for positioning the book for its target audience through the best choice of advertising, jacket design, and advertising copy. Once the market for a book is identified, a marketing budget is formulated, and a campaign and look developed. In big auctions, the marketing team pulls together a document that is designed to woo the author to join the imprint and Penguin Books.

Editor Leo Hollis states that marketing and quality of presentation are frequently what makes a best-selling book.

Sadly, it doesn't have to be a good book to be a bestseller. For me it is important for it to be a good book that sells very well. I think it's positioning and all a publisher can do ... all you can do to get someone to notice it ... which is the most difficult thing. I think that's how bestsellers usually work, because people are returning to an author they like. It's very rare that you get a first novel that does really well unless it has a huge amount of marketing weight behind it.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hollis, Leo. Personal Interview. 04 June 2003.

### *Marketing on the Scorecard*

The marketing department creates an identity for a book in order to differentiate it from other books on the shelf. Marketing generates demand for a book by accessing the targeted market through advertising and promotional materials. But the marketing department's role in the initial phases of book acquisition is minimal. It is still important for editors to consider the marketing aspect when they first assess a project. The marketing aspect is stated in the rubric as follows:

21. The book lends itself to having a compelling presence in advertising, on the shelf, and in front-of-store displays.

### *Publicity*

Penguin UK operates with a fairly restricted marketing and advertising budget and is therefore heavily reliant on publicity and media support for generating interest in its books. Gerald Howard describes publicity as "the jet fuel that drives book sales."<sup>47</sup> One editor stated that when you can fill a room with 150 people to see an author in any town, then you've got a bestseller.

To Penguin UK, publicity is a front-line selling force, taking books directly to their target audience. Penguin believes that publicity for a book should be considered and planned right from the start. The publicity team has a strong voice in the acquisitions process. Whether their involvement considers the more shallow aspects of the author's attractiveness in photographs, or whether it goes deeper into the author's personal story, publicity is present at every stage. It is important for a

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<sup>47</sup> Howard, Gerald. "The American Scene: We're Still Here." Publishing Now: A Definitive Assessment by Key People in the Book Trade. Ed. Peter Owen. London: Peter Owen Publishing, 1996.

publicist decide that he or she believes in a title and becomes determined, through personal passion for the project, to sell it to reviewers and media shows.

As Penguin Director of Publicity Joanna Prior explains, publicity is more than just media relations. It requires managing authors' personal profiles, and nurturing them when they are at their most vulnerable, when the book is released. It is therefore vital, Prior believes, for a publicist to understand and be there throughout the whole publishing process.

In working with Viking and Hamish Hamilton books, publicity programs focus more on the quality of writing.

We might publish a novel by somebody no one's heard of and the author might not have so much going for him, but the editor absolutely, passionately loves the book and thinks it is a masterpiece... An example of that might be something like *Passages*. When that [manuscript] came in, the author had written a couple of novels for other publishers that hadn't really done very much and he lived in Italy, he was English but not particularly sellable to the media, his track record was weak. He had an interesting mother who is a children's author, but we didn't know that at the time. We bought that book purely because we loved it. We loved the words. And then of course it won prizes, and one was able to do something with him, and it did fabulously well and continues to sell copies every year. But the publicity voice in that acquisition was tiny. I just remember reading it and liking it.<sup>48</sup>

Although *The Kid* by Kevin Lewis is a Michael Joseph book, it is an example of the value of having the publicity team involved in a project from the very beginning. The author came in to meet with the Penguin team.

Everyone was in tears in this meeting because his story is so terrible as an abused child and they felt that Kevin was such an extraordinary man. Jess [the publicist] could see how the publicity could sell that book and she could see that we needed to get him on TV and on the

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<sup>48</sup> Prior, Joanna. Personal Interview. 22 July 2003.

radio and get him to meet people. But actually he needed a lot of training and a lot of help to do all that. Definitely I would say the publicity voice was really strong in that acquisition.<sup>49</sup>

Publicity is a very important consideration when an imprint pitches itself to authors during an auction. Penguin UK can rely on the reputation of its publicity team, which regularly wins industry awards. When an author is approached with an offer to join the list of a publishing company, having access to a skilled publicity team is one of the most cited advantages of publishing with a larger house.

In a major acquisition it is understood that publicity is not going to be just about the coverage the team can get for the book, but also about managing the author's profile. As in every publishing project, every book and every author have different circumstances and unique publicity requirements.

### *Publicity on the Scorecard*

Although a member of the publicity department manages publicity functions, editors often anticipate publicity opportunities in their initial assessment of a project. Therefore, publicity has the following representation in the rubric:

22. There is an aspect of the book or author that the media will find stimulating.

### *Censorship and Libel*

Penguin Books has walked the razor's edge of censorship many times. Beginning with *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960, for which Penguin was tried for obscenity and acquitted, the publishing house has demonstrated a tradition of taking a

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<sup>49</sup> Prior, Joanna. Personal Interview. 22 July 2003.

stand for literature. *Spycatcher* forced England to reconsider its stance on free speech. And even though the staff's own lives were threatened by the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Penguin stood by the author. Penguin staff have suffered the indignity of metal detectors and tight security efforts in order to promote the free exchange of ideas.

Penguin also has a tradition of standing behind books that it believes should be published. However, the threat of a libel suit can take a proposal or manuscript right off the table. Having no lawsuit is seen as better than having to drag through one even when clearly defensible. Libel is the most threatening of the variables in making the decision to buy a title. For a project to continue despite a threat of being sued, the belief in the merit of the manuscript and in the subject has to outweigh the pains of going through court.

In these days of free speech, lewdness is generally accepted, but Penguin General by and large tracks popular tastes, publishing only the occasional book that raises eyebrows.

In my time at Penguin, no legal threat occurred, though one title was rejected because the potential for a lawsuit was too great and the quality of the subject matter did not make publication worth the risk.

### *Libel on the Scorecard*

The threat of a lawsuit or any court case is an important factor in determining whether to publish a given work. It can override the market potential and even the quality of writing. While not represented in the numbered items included in the

scorecard, libel is given a weighted value by automatically deducting points from the overall score, making the project only a “possible acquisition” rather than a “high possibility of acquisition.” This indicates that a greater sense of caution should be taken when considering these projects for publication.

### **3. A Title-by-Title Scorecard**

This section offers a scorecard that takes the 24 variables discussed in this chapter and sets them into a 22-step rating system that can be used to assess the viability of a manuscript or a proposal. As discussed, not every variable fits into the scorecard. Foreign books and books in translation should be evaluated using the same standards as a British title.

Whether used as a personal checklist or as checkpoint to ensure all considerations have been addressed, the scorecard requires the editor to rate the merits of each variable on a scale of one to five. One indicates the lowest level of agreement with each statement, while five indicates the highest level of agreement. The statements are all phrased in the positive, with disagreement signified by assigning a low score.

***Title-by-Title Scorecard***

**Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Author** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Submission:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Agent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Review:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Reviewer:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Answer the questions, add up the score and evaluate accordingly.**

- A rating of “1” indicates the lowest level of agreement with the statement.
- A rating of “5” indicates the highest level of agreement with the statement.
- A rating of “3” indicates a neutral position, meaning it has some of the qualities described but not all.

**SCORE: \***

110 – 73 = High possibility of acquisition

72 – 36 = Possible acquisition

35 – 0 = Low possibility of acquisition

*\* For cases in which a libel case is a possibility, subtract 35 points from the total*

**NOTES:** \_\_\_\_\_

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<b>Scorecard</b> <b>Title:</b> _____ <b>Author:</b> _____	<b>Rating</b> <b>1-5</b>
1. The writing has appropriate sentence structure.	
2. The writing has well-stated themes.	
3. The writing moves fluidly from one idea to the next.	
4. The story is moving or thought-provoking.	
5. The reader had difficulty putting the manuscript/proposal down.	
6. This book will not require much editorial work.	
7. This book has a clear and identifiable readership.	
8. This book complements current market trends.	
9. This book is similar to another title that sold well.	
10. This book will occupy a place in our literary heritage.	
11. This book is part of a well-selling genre.	
12. The financial numbers for this book work and indicate a clear profit margin.	
13. The author has a marketable personality.	
14. This author is worth keeping or acquiring for the long term.	
15. The relationship with the author is positive.	
16. The author has a strong background in writing and demonstrates reliability.	
17. This book complements the list.	
18. This book does not compete with any other book in the list.	
19. This book adds breadth or depth to the list.	
20. This book is in keeping with my editorial vision within the list.	
21. The book lends itself to having a compelling presence in advertising, on the shelf, and in front-of-store displays.	
22. There is an aspect of the book or author that the media will find stimulating.	
<b>TOTAL</b>	

at the launch meeting and you have to make sure it gets presented to the book club – you are the book’s representative in the house.<sup>52</sup>

As Eleo Gordon states, “there’s no point raising a book unless you feel strongly about it.”<sup>53</sup>

In interviews, the editorial staff in both Viking and Hamish Hamilton unanimously identified the primary quality of a good acquisitions editor as passion: passion for each book project and passion for book publishing in general. They also identified the characteristic of a good acquisitions editor to be an innate ability to anticipate and recognize changes in the temperature of the marketplace. Another key quality cited is a proprietary instinct, a desire to acquire that can push through the trickiest negotiations.

As Simon Prosser sums it up,

The least successful books we’ve published, [were the books] I published most cynically and thought “well why don’t we publish this, its fairly well written, it qualifies for a memoir.” Which I don’t do often, but I’ve noticed that when I have done that it doesn’t tend to be a very great success. So then I think I should just trust my instincts and hope they are right.<sup>54</sup>

There has to be an energetic passion at the heart of the publishing process, an editorial drive that propels a book through the publishing process. This enthusiasm is engaged at the moment when an editor calls on a colleague or assistant in a state of excitement or decides to make copies for distribution through the company. Fired by that moment of passion, reinforced by a calculated evaluation of the variables involved, an acquisitions editor opens the doors of a publishing house to an author.

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<sup>52</sup> Lacey, Tony. Personal Interview. 01 June 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, Eleo. Personal Interview. 19 June 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Prosser, Simon. Personal Interview. 19 June. 2003.

## Conclusion

### The Fine Art of Literary Acquisitions

Some critics have argued that attention to quality has been undermined by the corporatization of publishing houses. Richard Marek exemplifies this notion when he says that,

the first consideration that goes into making an editorial decision is a marketing one: whether the book will sell enough to make back its costs, including the advance to the author, and turn a profit.<sup>50</sup>

This report has tried to show that the role of the independent editor still thrives in the Viking and Hamish Hamilton imprints and that the spirit of literary quality is still at the forefront of editors' minds. While making a profit is certainly vital, Marek has overlooked the fact that a book has to be good in the first place. The quality of the writing still holds precedence over market and sales considerations.

Because books are published as a multi-format, multi-priced, and multi-packaged product, there is little science to be found in the acquisitions process. By and large, the acquisition process relies upon highly developed instinct guided by extensive experience and knowledge of the book publishing industry. At the heart of the editorial decision to buy, there remains a mysterious uncertainty, as neither an editor nor a salesperson can know for sure what will sell. This is left to the fine art of editorial acuteness and discrimination. As Walter Powell asserts,

many editors pride themselves on their sense of "smell" – their flair for finding just the right book. They contend that the traits of a good editor – judgment, expertise, intuition, and character – cannot be

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<sup>50</sup> Marek, Richard. "How Books Are Chosen." Editors on Editing What Writers Need to Know About What Editors Do. Ed. Gerald Gross. New York: Grove Press. 1993.

taught. Editors argued that success is a combination of luck, hard work, and timing.<sup>51</sup>

It is on this blend of instinct and experience that successful acquisitions in book publishing have always depended. However, a thorough understanding of the variables involved, as outlined in this report, can aide the editor in all his or her acquisition endeavors. This report has sought distill the acquisitions process by labeling the key elements to be considered, identifying the variables at work and creating a roadmap that can be followed when evaluating an acquisition. The basic considerations include: writing, current market situation, sales, author, list, marketing, publicity, and censorship and libel. These form a cluster of circumstances that combine differently for each title – hence this report’s conclusion that the fine art of acquiring books lies in being able to balance and weigh the importance of the different variables.

This scorecard takes a step toward standardizing the acquisitions process. It can be used as a reference when explaining the rationale for a particular decision, when composing rejection letters, or in providing evidence for enthusiasm about a title.

The success of a title depends on the editor’s belief in it. Otherwise it can get lost in the system.

There are all these books competing for positions [within a list]. It’s you who have to make it clear within the house just how important this book is, because books can get lost. You have to make sure marketing is willing to spend money on it and you have to stand up

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<sup>51</sup> Powell, Walter W. Getting Into Print: The Decision-Making Process in Scholarly Publishing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1985.

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