

# ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion  
www.archipelago.org

## INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

Conversations about Publishing  
with the Editor of *Archipelago*

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Vol. 1, No. 3 Autumn 1997

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## A CONVERSATION WITH MARION BOYARS

Katherine McNamara

*Q: What should a writer expect from his publisher?*

*A: Loyalty.*

*Literary history, of which publishing is only a part, is marvelous and fluid. The publishing of books is itself a curious undertaking. In Europe and America, the organization, financing, distribution, and expectation of profit of the industry, that is, its entire structure, is different than it was ten years ago. Substantially, however, what has been changed? Do people read more bad books than ever? Fewer good books? Why should a marketer's opinion matter at an editorial meeting? What has become of the editor's art?*

*Was publishing ever so good as it's said to have been? What, indeed, was "gentlemanly" about it?*

*I thought I would ask some notables of an older generation what they thought about these matters. I wondered, What do publishers do? Why do they do it? What sort of lives do they lead?*

*In turn, they recounted experience, spoke of writers they published and did not publish, took note of the social and political hierarchies of their occupation, talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism, ruminated on the importance of language. They recognized that times have changed, but did not agree, necessarily, on why and how.*

*Excerpts of these conversations will appear regularly in Archipelago and may serve as an opening onto an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current establishment, reflecting on its glories, revealing what remains constant amid the present flux. Despite their surround of gentility, these publishers are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.*

*KM*

Marion Boyars, of Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd

Marion Boyars began her publishing career in 1960, by buying half-equity in the firm of John Calder, who was known in England for publishing avant-garde writers, among them Samuel Beckett. In 1964, the firm took the name of both owners. For more than 15 years they published the work of novelists considered among the most avant-garde and literary in Britain, among them Beckett, William Burroughs, Henry Miller, Elias Canetti, Peter Weiss, Heinrich Böll, Hubert Selby (*LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN*, prosecuted for obscenity); translations of the *nouveau romain*; the writings of modern composers, and books by social thinkers. In 1975, Boyars and Calder began to dissolve the company; by 1980, the list had been divided

Since 1975, Marion Boyars has published fiction, belles lettres and criticism, poetry, music, theater and cinema, social issues, and biography and memoirs.

Among book-people, she is considered a beautifully educated, very literary publisher with a strong list, particularly, in fiction and music. She publishes a number of Eastern European writers in translation and is, herself, fluent in three languages. How she succeeds financially is much speculated about, as her books are expensive; she is said to be very aggressive at selling rights. She is also said to be observed closely by agents and other editors, who have been known to take her authors away; with rueful pride, she acknowledges this. Odile Hellier, of the Village Voice Bookshop in Paris, praises her for having resuscitated the career of Julian Green, the nonagenarian Virginian novelist and diarist who is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and of the Académie Française, and whose work is not well known in America.

Marion Boyars Publishers was to be found in a narrow building on a side-street in Putney, a busy little London village south of the Thames, beside a men's hairstyling salon and a Pakistani take-away restaurant. A small display-window held a dozen or so recent volumes. This was a publishing "house" in the old-fashioned parlance. Inside, the editorial office accommodated five people, all of them capable editors, who read amid tall bookcases lining the walls. Authors' photographs hung in the stairwell; desks were piled with books, papers, manuscripts. There were word processors but no computers. The fax machine worked erratically. The piles and stacks did not indicate disorder: this looked to be the sort of establishment run on idiosyncratic but perfectly reasonable lines. Upstairs, under the roof, the director's office was a room smaller and more crowded with bookcases. The air was dense with cigarette fag.

Marion Boyars, director of her firm, was a tiny woman of indeterminate age and bright, sharp eyes. Her mouth was handsome; she smiled widely and often. Her voice was soft but emphatic, her accent not quite placeable; she was born in America but in 1950, had come to England to live, and had adapted its form to her intention. She was pleased her visitor did not mind the smoke.

Acquaintance was made, the tape recorder set up, the cigarette lit, the invitation given to go ahead. She was asked to reflect on why she became a publisher.

### *Why She Became a Publisher.*

BOYARS: It's a strange business. I find it very difficult to understand why anybody can do this now. You learn something about yourself: what you know; what you want. And I knew that I was not a writer. — One's curiosity is challenged, and it's a complex field.

McNAMARA: You went into publishing because it seemed the thing to do?

BOYARS: Only for me. What I did, actually, was unusual at the time: I bought half a publishing company. I had a lot of confidence in myself, and I wanted to start a career that was intellectually stimulating and demanding. My financial advisor showed me an advertisement in *The Bookseller*: the publisher John Calder was looking for a partner. My advisor looked into it and thought it was a good idea. And then I met John Calder, and I liked him, and so I bought 50% equity in the firm. That was in 1960. We began at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

And we had adventurous times together, especially during the first ten years. The Calder & Boyars imprint published some of the best pioneering writers of the 60s, people like Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet, Georges Bataille, Ivan Illich and John Cage, Hubert Selby, and so on. Our writers were often controversial — we published in the fields of fiction, music, the social sciences.

But our relationship deteriorated. In 1975 we slowly dissolved the partnership: we created two new imprints, John Calder, and Marion Boyars. By 1980, the separation was complete. We had appointed an arbitrator to divide the old C&B list, but the division was uneven, in John's favor, whereas I had bought 50% equity in the firm.

I had a wonderful lawyer. I called him up and said, "What should I do?" "Fight *a little*," he said. And I fought *a little*; unsuccessfully. We continued to share premises, sales, and distribution, until I moved to these offices in 1984.

My goal in publishing was to give voice to exciting new ideas, you see, ideas which excited me. This list is a reflection of my own interests: I want to share these ideas. Many of the writers we published have become modern classics. I had some very good books from the old Calder & Boyars. The big money-maker is still ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST. That was my book.

But there is also a good percentage of failures.

### *She Was Their Mascot.*

*Publishing used to be called a gentleman's occupation. It is perhaps best to remember that "gentleman," in its primary meaning, does not mean mere good manners, but is a class or station in society; and furthermore, that good manners may be wielded as deftly and cruelly as any other weapon.*

BOYARS: There was a strange club, a secret club for men who owned their publishing houses. Very few of them are left now; most have had to sell, and many of them have lost their job. But then, they were very elegant. There was a trip to Russia, the first delegation of British publishers to Russia, all the big boys of publishing, and me. It was because of that trip that I was invited to join the club.

McNAMARA: How did the trip to Russia come about?

BOYARS: There was going to be a delegation of British publishers to China. I had published a book about China [Julia Kristeva, ABOUT CHINESE WOMEN]. I was interested in the women, as women do the work in most countries; and I was an independent publisher. I was not accepted, because the Chinese wanted scientific and language publishers. The Publishers Association then promised me that I could select my next trip, and I chose Russia. I was part of the first English-language group to go; it was around 1981. A person from the Foreign Office briefed us beforehand, instructing us not to speak of politics.

Most of the group were scientific, or language, or specialized publishers. They said, "Why don't you write an essay about fiction, translation, poetry, the theater?" So I went to the hairdresser, wrote my little essay, Arthur [Boyars, her husband] typed it, and it was published in their fifty-four languages.

But then I talked to them about literacy. "The benefits are not what you think they might be," I said. I was proved right! Now the Russians want only potboilers.

But I made them laugh. Then I was assailed by a Russian who knew I had published a dissident. Arthur had translated him [Yuli Daniel, PRISON POEMS], but I had no political agenda and I wouldn't engage them on political grounds. Then they tried to get me on my husband's translations: Montale, Éluard.... All the others there knew what I was doing, and enjoyed it. They knew I wasn't going to get caught out. And so, for two days we had a fine time, because we laughed. It didn't last, of course, but my team saw how an atmosphere could be changed.

When we got back, they all had their limousines waiting for them. I had a husband waiting. (*Great laugh.*)

After the trip to Russia, the club secretary asked me to join. I was treated as their mascot. And I enjoyed it enormously. Some outsider actually found out about it and wrote articles. He called me; he said, "I found your name on the list of members." I said: "There isn't a list of members, surely!" It was a secret; so, somebody must have betrayed us. He said, "Anyway, you *are* a member of this club?" And I said: "Yes; of course." He said, "What are you doing there? Is it for price-fixing? What's the use of this club?" I said: "It is a social club!"

McNAMARA (*laughing*): What did you observe in this club?

BOYARS: Well, it was very interesting, because although you were supposed to be among a group of people who were *not* going to tittle-tattle — because that was the only rule: you *didn't* tittle-tattle — and I'm sure they didn't: it was all about, oh, you know, talking about the currents of publishing, and some commercial things about discounts to booksellers and chains, and other kinds of stuff — they were not entirely truthful! I said to one of them, "What kind of discount do you give Waterstone's?" "Oh, nothing special." Well, of course you do. Forty-five percent is what you give them. (*Laughs.*) Now, this is very interesting. If they had been women, they would have *said* they give forty-five percent. This not coming straight out: they were not frank....

Now, Carmen Calill, the founder of Virago, is an interesting woman, actually. She gets what she wants, and she wants the right thing. She's very good.

She's rather out of it now (*Virago has been sold to Little, Brown, which is owned by Time-Warner Communications*). But the only way Virago could continue was by selling.

McNAMARA: Virago was a wonderful imprint.

BOYARS: Wonderful, a wonderful imprint. They went wrong when they published people other than the classics.—

She used to be very nice when she first started and we had something in common. She was very supportive. We used to say hello and were friendly.

I had a court case in America, somebody had cheated me. We won, in a sort of way; of course the lawyers took all the money. But I had to make a deposition. They asked me all sorts of questions which didn't apply to me, but applied to her. They thought I was Carmen. I noticed it; and of course I could hardly contain myself with laughter. They think one woman is like all others. (*Laughs.*) After the meeting I was laughing. One of the lawyers noticed, and I said, "Well, you're very funny." "No, no," he said, "there's something specific you're laughing about." "Something specific? No. What?" "Oh come on," he said: "you don't want to tell me." I said: "Nothing to tell." I wasn't going to tell!

But I mean....

McNAMARA: What did you mean when you said you were the publishing establishment's "mascot"?

BOYARS: "Brave little publisher."

McNAMARA: Right.

BOYARS: I'm sure they didn't take me seriously, and they kind of liked me. I made them feel liberal and generous. I had a sense of fun, and I didn't take myself too seriously. I'm small. I think that has something to do with it. If I were taller, if I had a large face, they would have been intimidated.

I don't like this kind of role. I'm quite serious. They found Carmen Calill difficult, because she wasn't like a little pet.

### *Schooling.*

McNAMARA: You've lived in England since 1950.

BOYARS: I'm actually an American, but I went to school in Switzerland. I went to NYU, in New York; then, before graduation, I came here to get married. And they started a university, called Keele, in the Midlands, where I lived. So I went to Keele.

It was 1950, and there were as many undergraduates at that time in the whole of England as there were at Columbia and NYU combined: very elitist; and then they opened university education up, and now it's wide-open. But at that time, for a girl to get into university was still rare.

There was a wonderful man called Lord Lindsay of Birker, Alexander Lindsay. He was a moral philosopher who taught at Balliol, and was made a peer. He was very, very socially concerned — he was Labour. He invented my university.

I lived in Shrewsbury, along the Welsh border. There was a university in Birmingham. I had been at NYU already. I was too young to be a mature student, and they didn't recognize my NYU credentials. And this college was being started, and it was work I admired, and so I went along. Lord Lindsay was a very open man. He had brought a new course to Oxford, PPE — politics, philosophy, economics, called "Modern Greats," which I took at Keele. For me it was absolutely wonderful, because it started with 150 students and 25 dons. You had the most personal education you could possibly hope for; I mean, not only the tutorial system, which they used to have and is now almost gone, but you were *with* these people, you even had coffee with them. Lord Lindsay loved the students, he liked to talk with them, very much, over coffee.

Keele was the first university founded after the war. He had great ideas. It actually has a very good music department and a very good American literature department. His idea was to create a campus that didn't exist at the time in England. He felt that English education was too narrow. And so he invented the foundation course. During the first year, it was a core-year course. You had lectures in every discipline: it made it possible for you to switch over from an arts subject to a science subject, if you wanted to; even for the degree course, the requirement was that you had to take at least one social science and one hard science, so that even the people in literature would have to take, say, an economics course. I took physics as a subsidiary, which was dubbed Physics for Fools. I rather liked it: it didn't teach me much physics, but it taught me, and showed me, how the scientific mind works. I was interested in methodology. I didn't know much about real science, and so, this gave me an insight, a little insight; and that was his idea, you know: to have a much broader education.

McNAMARA: That would have been a way of communicating between the "two cultures."

BOYARS: That's right; I'm sure [C.P.] Snow's book had something to do with it, too. Lord Lindsay thought that with all the specialization there was, the scientists didn't understand the arts students, who certainly didn't understand the sciences.

I actually lived outside my college. It was residential; and I was married and so couldn't have a room; I boarded during the week. One of the professors gave me a room. He was a professor of philosophy who was really more interested in poetry, and his wife was a writer. We would spend our evenings reading poetry. I had a second education living in that home.

And I had a car. I was the first student who was allowed to have a car, and it was great fun. It's only 30 miles from Shrewsbury. I would drive over at 80 miles an hour. I

had an old Ford V-8 two-seater, and when you opened up the trunk there were two more uncomfortable seats in there. And this was the fastest car on the road!

I was the only American, that's number one. Number two, I was the only one who drove a car. And number three, I was the only one who was married.

McNAMARA: So you broke all the rules.

BOYARS: I broke every one of them. I had a very good time there. But, when we got our degree, Lady Lindsay said: "What are you going to do now dear?" She was like a little empress. I said: "Have babies." "Oh, dear," she said. I said, "Well, I'm married." "Well, that's all right then."

So that's what I did: I had babies.

McNAMARA: And then you decided to be a publisher.

BOYARS: I graduated in 1954, and then Susan was born in 1955, and the youngest one was born in 1957. And then I went to London in 1960, with my two little girls, and became a publisher.

McNAMARA: They really were little girls.

BOYARS: They were tots. It was a difficult life. My husband and I got divorced in 1962; he remarried almost immediately, but died in 1969. I moved to London and brought up my children. Later, I met somebody nice — Arthur — and we married in 1964.

In 1960, I went into a business that no woman had ever thought of going into under her own steam. I was actually the first woman publisher who didn't inherit her business or assume it by marriage. I mainly broke the rules because I didn't know them.

### *Is There A Literary Culture? If So, What Does It Look Like?*

McNAMARA: What is a literary culture? Is there one? Are there many?

BOYARS: Undoubtedly, but it's too difficult to define. I mean, the non-literary culture couldn't exist without the literary culture. Everybody knows about Marx and Freud, but you don't have to read them: they're essential, part of the lifeblood; but you don't have to be part of it. Language develops because of literature. It doesn't develop because of television.

McNAMARA: That might be argued.

BOYARS: Yes: I know it can be argued; that's why I say it. I don't think television has that much of an effect on "culture," though it is informative, while literature has a lot of effect. This is why, when people say obscenity in literature doesn't "do" anything, I think they're wrong. Literature "does" something. I think obscenity and the forbidden, taboos, as such, are not important in themselves; but they are necessary subjects. It is the *art* that is made of them that refuses to allow us to remain complacent. These things make us reach beyond ourselves, move, grow. They are very important. And through art, we can actually do something positive. We become aware of life through it.

McNAMARA: Certainly, not all books are literature.

BOYARS: Certainly not.

McNAMARA: And much of what makes a literary culture—

BOYARS: —is language. It is the use of language, the ends to which it's put. It's *how* you put it on the page. People write to me and they say, "I've written a novel about a such-and-such a subject." I'm not very interested in that. I'd like to know *how* you've done it, what you've done. Carlo Gébler, an Irish writer, has a new manuscript.



Let me read you two lines: “My name is Douglas Peter; I am a Russian scholar. I am married to a Russian woman, and have been for forty years. I’m extremely miserable.”

Wonderful. It’s got everything there. And that’s in the juxtaposition. You could do the same thing in a newspaper report, but it wouldn’t be the same. I think this is what writing is.

*Subsequently, she bought the book, entitled W9 AND OTHER LIVES; it will be published early in 1998.*

Of course it’s refined, of course it’s shaped: it’s actually a lot of hard work. I know people who like to say that someday they’ll be a writer. Maybe. You need a lot of practice.

McNAMARA: A lot of practice, and stamina.

BOYARS: And you know, I just like it, I like books and ideas. They have a habit of growing. There is a radio program: three people choose a book, often an old one, and discuss why they like it. I think the one that I would choose, although I haven’t read it in many years, is TO THE FINLAND STATION. It’s a beautiful book, I remember, but also it opened my eyes. I’ve never been a Marxist; and I’ve studied political philosophy and economics, I’ve had plenty of opportunity to become a Marxist, but I never took to it. But he [Edmund Wilson] tells us how it is possible to become a Marxist, and he’s the only writer who’s done that. He opened my eyes when these things were very important, during the McCarthy era, and so really one had to sit up and listen. And I rejected it. But this book was to show me what was the attraction. And I must read it again.

McNAMARA: Are there books you think of as a, or the, foundation of a literary life?

BOYARS: Well, yes; WAR AND PEACE is certainly one of them. Plato’s REPUBLIC, Shakespeare’s plays. World literature — the Russians; Thomas Mann, Rilke. Poetry. French classics. Updike, Joyce, Hemingway. There are so many books that have had an impact on me. — I’ve read all my life. A lot of things had to be crammed down my throat when I was going through the educational process, but I’m very grateful for it. I mean, music, literature, poetry become just part of one’s background.

McNAMARA: Do you think there was a time when the readership was more secure than it is now?

BOYARS: No; no. I’ll give you an example: George Gissing, THE PRIVATE PAPERS OF HENRY RYCROFT; wonderful book. When it was published, in 1902, it sold sixteen copies.

McNAMARA: When Stendhal’s DE L’AMOUR appeared, it didn’t sell. His publisher said to him: “This book must be sacred, because no one will touch it!”

BOYARS: I don’t think this age is any less intellectual than any other age; nor do I think the sensibility of people is impaired. On the Continent, people read more. In France and Germany, they think it’s part of their culture to read.

McNAMARA: Do they buy the books, as well?

BOYARS: Of course, because there it’s very important to do it. You go into a German household and they have bookshelves. You go into an English household and they do not have bookshelves.

*My original question continued to disturb her. She thought her comments were pointless, as no one could presume to “define” a “literary culture.” She spoke about writers America has produced.*

BOYARS: Think of Melville, for instance, and Henry James; think of Bellow, and Updike. Innovative writers! Nowhere else could their novels have been written, and they have influenced writers everywhere. Frederic Tuten [VAN GOGH’S BAD CAFE],

who thinks he is a European in spirit, is not: he's very American. No European could do what he does. This is where the literary language is developed: in America, with your wonderful mixture of peoples and languages and different sorts of experience; more so than in England, where we're hide-bound by grammar and convention.

*I pointed out that, although indeed we have good writers, much debate goes on in this country about the non-literary, entertainment-ridden, consumerist popular culture that is now, everywhere, called "American."*

BOYARS: All the Anglo-Saxon countries are unliterary, but they produce remarkable writers. John Cage [EMPTY WORDS; SILENCE], after all, was a remarkable writer, though he was a musician. There was Allen Ginsberg (*d. April 5, 1997*); there were the Beats: poets who were exceptional in their time. Perhaps the debate goes on because Americans, unlike the English, have always been self-deprecating.

### *Obscenity and Taboo. A Book On Trial.*

BOYARS: I think there are some really key books — one I think is a key book, not easy to read, is *NAKED LUNCH*, by William Burroughs (*d. August 2, 1997*), although I didn't terribly like his later work.

*Burroughs was published in England by John Calder and Marion Boyars. In 1963, Arthur Boyars, who was a friend of John Calder, assembled a collection of Burroughs' writings for the Literary Annual published by the firm. Calder and Boyars published NAKED LUNCH the following year. At about that time, the firm's name was changed to reflect their joint ownership; Marion had married Arthur, a translator and literary man informally associated with the firm, and preferred to use his name to her father's and her previous husband's.*

McNAMARA: You said that obscenity and taboo are important to society, and that it is important for literature to break taboos.

BOYARS: I think every good artist breaks taboos. Because you have to; you *have* to: because the writer shows us where we are.

McNAMARA: In America the taboos often center around what is considered sex, or sexual representation.

BOYARS: Oh yes; it's very puritanical, provincial. What can you do?

McNAMARA: What significant taboos exist here, and don't exist in America? Or, the other way around?

BOYARS: Well, English society is almost impossible to describe, because the moment you understand it, it escapes. Now, the English are envious, and the taboo breakers bring this out. Very interesting politics here. We had a Prime Minister [John Major] who was a socialist under the Tory label, and we have (*laughter*) a Prime Minister [Tony Blair] who is a Tory but under the label of socialism. Very interesting.

The Thatcher business was awful: what she did was awful, and it was awful how they turned against her. She came from a different class, and was ambitious and made straight for what she wanted. They hated her, because she was a woman, and because she broke all the rules of the men's clubs and did things in a different way, and because she used her handbag as a weapon. But, before she fell, they were all prostrating themselves. It was disgusting. You attack authority at the time authority is in power; not when it's finished.

You've heard about the *Oz* case, from Australia? One of those underground magazines, put out by four young chaps. They commissioned some kids to do a kids' *Oz* issue. The kids broke every taboo, they had no respect for anybody. They had a

Teddy Bear who had an affair with another Teddy Bear. And they were taken to court over that.

McNAMARA: In this country?

BOYARS: Yes! It went on and on. I was there most of the time. It was fascinating, of course. They got a highly respected social scientist, and they asked him the serious question — at the Old Bailey! — “Would you tell us about the sex-life of Teddy Bears?”

You wouldn't think that such stupidity can be committed by such sophisticated people, but it can, and they do it. The '60s and '70s were of course the ground for breaking taboos.

McNAMARA: You were prosecuted for obscenity.

BOYARS: We [Calder & Boyars] had an exhausting court case, a huge obscenity case brought against Hubert Selby's book *LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN*. It went first to Magistrates' Court, then to the Old Bailey, then on appeal. We won the appeal, in 1969, but we lost twice before that, and we were, for a time, paralyzed.

But I didn't know we were going to win — we could have been sent to prison. But it wasn't we who were in the dock, it was the book. When they prosecuted, the book was held up in the dock by a policeman. We were too well-behaved, we were Establishment ourselves. We were not pornographers, we were very respectable publishers. If we had been pornographers, we, not the book, would have been in the dock. Yet, we lost the first two rounds; and the lawyers were against an appeal. The reason they gave us was, we had suffered enough, they wanted to protect us from more heart-ache. But I think there were several reasons. They just didn't approve of the book, really.

But I never considered not appealing. We behaved in a most elegant way: we withdrew the book from sale; we made it known that we were not going to have the best-seller we could have had. And they knew that. If we had not been, we would have been in danger of being sent to prison. In fact, they gave us only a fine: £100 — I mean, no one gets fined £100; it's nothing. We didn't pay the fine and in fact, they paid for the appeal: if you win an appeal, they pay. So, I never considered not appealing; but we did something that had never been done before: we actually had our own transcript.

Just before the case started a salesman came to our office and wanted to sell me a tape recorder; this was the '60s. I said, “Hmm, not a bad idea, can you sell me one that would tape in a large room?” He said, “How large?” “Well,” I said, “I'm not quite sure, I've never been there before.” “What do you mean,” he said, “you want a tape recorder, you don't know how big the venue is? Is it a theater?” “No, it's not a theater. Well,” I said, “it's the Old Bailey.” “Oh.” So he sold me a tape recorder. Then I rang my lawyer, and I asked him if we could bring it in, and he said, “I have to ask the Clerk of Court.” He called me back and he said, “This is the first request ever; therefore, there's nothing against bringing it in.” And so we did. And my assistant and I: we didn't only spend nine days in court, but nights, typing it up.

McNAMARA: It's a job.

BOYARS: It's a terrible job.

McNAMARA: You couldn't have gotten a transcript? There would not have been an official transcript?

BOYARS: Yes, there is an official transcript; but it is not verbatim. It is what the man who takes it down he thinks he has heard; and the lawyers do, actually, the same. So, on the second day of the trial, when I came with my transcript and said to the chief barrister, “This is what happened yesterday,” he said, “Well, I don't need to read this, I have my notes.” I said, “Yes, but your notes are not really accurate.” He was very angry

with me. But: they actually withheld the official transcript from us. You have to appeal within six weeks; and they withheld it, they just didn't send it. We didn't need it, on the strength of our own. We got rid of our lawyers, and I hired John Mortimer, the novelist and playwright, who was a divorce lawyer and had never been concerned with this kind of thing. The first thing I did was to play the tape for him for an hour or so; and from there he did wonderful things.

The transcript, our own, is now in our archives, at the Lilly Library in Ann Arbor, at the University of Michigan.

*During our second conversation, in April, in New York, she spoke by phone to Hubert Selby's agent and, upon hanging up, said, pleased, "Well, we have a new Selby." She had just bought, in draft, his latest novel, to be called THE WILLOW TREE. "It's very good," she said, "I read it, and my editor read it. He wrote very long notes, almost a page-by-page analysis, to help with the editing. And, in fact, the author is feeling very well. He is starting with those notes: he's got wonderful editing notes." "What a dream," I said, "to have editing notes." "A dream to have that," agreed Marion Boyars. "And then he and Ken Hollings, my editor, will get together. The agent asked how long would it take him — six months, a year? 'No,' he said, 'I'll do it this summer. By the end of the summer you'll have a manuscript.'"*

McNAMARA: Wasn't the trial of LADY CHATTERLY'S LOVER in 1959? Didn't anybody learn from it?

BOYARS: Well, they didn't actually have any other cases. Oh, there were some pornography cases, but nothing that was claimed to be literature. And in fact, some of our witnesses were people who had advised the Director of Public Prosecution not to prosecute.

McNAMARA: Was there any such case afterward?

BOYARS: Oh, yes, many cases; but none of new works of literature, they have never done new works of literature again.

McNAMARA: Can you think of books that might have fallen under the category of obscenity in literature?

BOYARS: Oh, absolutely: I published one of them. I published *STORY OF THE EYE*, by Georges Bataille. It's very short; it's about children's sexuality. And Bataille was very subversive. I didn't want another court case — you can do that only once in your life, you can't do it more than once — and so I put in it an essay by Susan Sontag, called "The Pornographic Imagination." It's marvelous, but very general, not about this particular book. Roland Barthes wrote an essay which actually dealt with this; it's called *The Metaphor of the Eye*; I had it translated by Jim Underwood. Roland Barthes was of course very respected.

I then also put in a Publisher's Note: I took responsibility personally. Then we sent it to the printer. He called me about two weeks later and he said, "I cannot print the book." "Why not?" "Well, you know, the apprentices...." — there's always an apprentice. I said, "All right": because the printer is also the person responsible; certainly in England. They have got the right to say no; and I think one has got to respect that. So I said, "I completely understand, you're under no obligation to print this book, don't worry, I'll find somebody else. — You do realize, of course, that we're publishing this book 50 years after publication in France; it's actually a classic. And you do realize that Georges Bataille was a Catholic, and a scholar, and he was just — you know, just one of those people who went against the stream. He was not a nobody, you know, not a pornographer."

I saw that the printer knew all this. I talked about the book and its contents, and Susan Sontag. And he said this, and I said that. And then he called me back the next day, saying he “couldn’t put it down, and we’re going to print it”; and he did. And then, about two months later, Penguin bought it for the Modern Classics series. “Remember,” I said, “it will be a classic.” The printer had said, “I remember your saying that.” Well I’ll tell you: when I told the printer about Modern Classics, he said, “Oh, thank God!” It’s fantastic: it has sold thousands of copies.

*The Publisher’s Note reads:*

*The shortness of this important erotic classic — now translated into English for the first time fifty years after its original French publication — enables us to include in this volume two essays that deal with the genre and style of STORY OF THE EYE: Susan Sontag’s essay on aspects of the literature of sex, The Pornographic Imagination (from STYLES OF RADICAL WILL, 1967) explores a literary form that is, despite its manifold representation in English and Continental writing, seldom accepted in our puritan Anglo-American canon. Roland Barthes’ The Metaphor of the Eye (from the magazine Critique, 1963) discusses in depth the language of STORY OF THE EYE, a major example of French Surrealist writing, a movement which is at last beginning to receive serious critical attention in England and the United States.*

### *Obscenity, Censorship, and the Avant-Garde.*

McNAMARA: The first trial of Hubert Selby’s LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN was in 1966. You published Henry Miller [at Calder & Boyars] before that.

BOYARS: But we were never prosecuted for that.

McNAMARA: Why was that, do you think? Was there a reason?

BOYARS: Well, we did something rather unusual: we wrote the Director of Public Prosecutions, who in England decides whether a case is going to go forward or not. We said, “We are going to publish Henry Miller.”

McNAMARA: You had reason to think you might be prosecuted.

BOYARS: Certainly: Henry Miller was very dangerous. There were about five other publishers who wanted to publish him. The advance was the same from all of them. We had put in our contract that, if we were prosecuted, we would fight; nobody else was prepared to do that. That is why we got it.

So we wrote to the Director of Public Prosecutions and said, “This is what we’re going to do.” He wrote back, two days before publication — the book was already distributed — saying he was not going to prosecute. This was 1963, before the Hubert Selby book.

McNAMARA: They didn’t give you a reason?

BOYARS: They thought the prosecution was not going to be successful. They got copies of the book and had a panel of readers, and they wrote their opinion. They couldn’t prosecute then, because we would have produced the letter in court. And that was the end of it. We were the only ones who knew, and we didn’t tell anyone. And then, we couldn’t keep up with the printing!

McNAMARA: Because TROPIC OF CANCER caused such an outrage?

BOYARS: Because we didn’t tell anybody about the letter. They sold the book under the counter.

McNAMARA: And they didn’t have to?

BOYARS: Of course not; but they didn't know that. The book cost 25 shillings at the time. Thousands of checks were sent us. We lost a lot of money: we didn't know how to deal with this avalanche of checks and cash, and in England you have to write an invoice for each book, otherwise you'd be cheating on tax. We didn't have the staff, we had to get people from the street to help us, and they stole money. Still, that was TROPIC OF CANCER. Then we wrote the same letter when we published LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN.

McNAMARA: And they decided to—

BOYARS: No, they didn't; they said, "We have not decided. Sorry to be unhelpful." In the end, it was a private prosecution. A Member of Parliament, Sir Cyril Black, brought the charge. Private prosecution was then made unlawful by Roy Jenkins, now Lord Jenkins, who was Home Secretary. He inserted a clause into a criminal-justice bill. I went to see him: a very elegant man, wonderful, friendly, etc. He said, "Don't worry. I'll put in a clause." I said, "Are you going to debate this in Parliament?" "No," he said, "because there are thousands of clauses; they're not even going to notice." And they didn't.

*The Member of Parliament who brought the charge against the book was the object of an amusing, and self-defeating bit of mischief made by Maurice Girodias, publisher at the Olympia Press of literature and high and low pornography.*

McNAMARA: You knew Girodias.

BOYARS: I adored him!

McNAMARA: Why?

BOYARS: Oh, he was the most charming man in the world, incredibly generous. We used to go to Paris from time to time, Arthur and I, and we'd go and sit down in a restaurant; and we would say, "We'd better leave the third chair empty, because Girodias is bound to find us." And he always did! Not always, but many times, many times. Whereupon the Champagne would flow, and he would pay the bill.

The last time I saw him, he had fallen on very difficult days.

McNAMARA: He also published Terry Southern [as did Marion BOYARS: BLUE MOVIE].

BOYARS: Girodias was actually a very naive man. He was not very cautious. He went from Paris — he was thrown out of Paris publishing — and he came to England and started an imprint here, and was going to publish a book about Moral Rearmament. The Moral Rearmament Society offered him £50,000 for not publishing the book. Girodias, being a principled man, turned them down. Thereupon — *The Times* ran a whole page of bankruptcies — they printed a page imitating *The Times'* bankruptcies page. It was not published by *The Times* but by the Moral Rearmament people. It declared him bankrupt and said he was shutting down his business. Whereupon, he went bankrupt. He was not rich.

*Another account of this story, differing in details, but not in essence, appears in John de St. Jorre's VENUS BOUND The Erotic Voyage of the Olympia Press and Its Writers (Random House, 1994).*

He then went to America and started another imprint there, and somehow didn't make it work. One of the things he did was to publish a pornographic book, and he called it SIR CYRIL BLACK. Sir Cyril Black was the Member of Parliament who had started the case against us over the Hubert Selby book. The book Girodias published was not about him, but Girodias called it that. Then he wrote to me about it. I said, "Argue! (They were bringing a libel case against him.) Why don't you argue that by sheer chance this is something you invented? 'Is there a Sir Cyril Black?' — that sort of

thing.” “Oh, no,” he said, “*I am defending you!* I did it on purpose, as a revenge!” Well. So, he was very naive. Did you ever meet him?

McNAMARA: I’ve only read about him.

BOYARS: You would have liked him. He had a nightclub in Paris — this was unbelievable. This was very early in our acquaintance — It was a lovely evening, a private room, and I was a very naive young woman. He told me about flagellating people, and described all sorts of sexual practices. (*Laughs*) He was a kitty-cat, he didn’t try to seduce me. But I didn’t even know about these things, you know, I thought he was very amusing, to try and frighten me. I liked him very much. And he was very unhappy in New York. He married a Cabot or a Lodge, can’t remember which one. [She was a Cabot.] She was a doctor.

He went back to Paris in the end. He said to me once....

We’re not talking business. This is a lot of gossip.

McNAMARA: It is, but we’re getting to issues.

*The discussion turned to the internet — she has had some copyright problems with Microsoft over a book which she had published and which they later re-published on CD-ROM without her permission — and various Western governments’ attempts at censorship particularly in the matter of pornography, which is apparently thought by non-users to be rife, and available at the click of a button.*

BOYARS: It’s the people who like to control things who do this, you know. It really doesn’t harm you very much. We saw a film in New York called *Chasing Amy*. It will never come to England; we have film censorship, and this film is very explicitly gay, sexually. Every film has to be licensed, you see, before it can be shown. It was true in the theater, until the 1960s: you couldn’t bring a play to the stage without the approval of the Lord Chamberlain. It took years to abolish that part of the law; but we still have film censorship.

McNAMARA: What do they censor for?

BOYARS: Sex and violence, you know: sex and violence. Actually, they are less interested in sex these days. I don’t know about the United States: is there censorship there?

McNAMARA: People don’t like to use that word. There is a rating system—

BOYARS: Of course they don’t like to use it, because it’s an explosive word: but that’s what it is!

McNAMARA: Actually, there is a phrase edging its way around the book-publishing world: “market censorship,” meaning that publishing decisions aren’t editorially determined. Indeed, very good books are often turned down, because editors are basing decisions to publish on estimated “markets.”

BOYARS: I’m a censor, in a way; we’re all censors: we do not publish certain books. We don’t necessarily *not* publish them because they are too explicit sexually, although we have been known to do that. In the *LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN* case, there were a number of English publishers who kept their distance. One very kind publisher actually tried to collect money for us — it’s very, very expensive to defend yourself, you know — and some very distinguished publishers nearly refused. We were asked by some publishers to withdraw the book, or not to appeal.

But, an interesting thing happened. The solicitor Lord Goodman, whose firm defended us in the first two trials, was Chairman of the Arts Council. He convened over 100 people and proposed a scheme whereby there would be pre-publication censorship, because he felt that what happened to us should not happen to other people. I mean, his motivation was perfectly good; and all the people in the arts were

there: the filmmakers, the theater people, the publishers, the writers: it was really a most distinguished gathering of people in the arts. And they talked — he talked — for about an hour and a half: about forming a committee of the arts, to censor beforehand, so there wouldn't be such a trial again.

Eventually I stood up and said: "It doesn't matter how benign the censorship body is, it is still censorship, and that is something we don't want." Goodman was a rather big, bulky, important man, and he collapsed. He was so angry with me he didn't speak to me for two years. Because, suddenly, everybody thought about it and said, "Well, this *is* in fact pre-publication censorship." You see, they had just got rid of theater censorship.

And as a result of my intervention a committee was formed at the Arts Council. He was so angry about the whole thing that he put the partner who had defended us in charge of this committee; he had been our solicitor. He was a wonderful man: I've never admired anyone quite as much as him. And, after two years of discussion, he went against the committee. And so Goodman did not prevail; but he almost did. Because everybody could see that the publishers were all in favor of it: they didn't want to have the enormous expense of defending a book, and they all thought this "pre-publication review" would protect them. But of course, it would have done exactly the opposite. And it was very easy to change the feeling of the meeting. I said: "All censorship is bad, even benign censorship. I'm very much against it, in any form."

McNAMARA: You've said you were an avant-garde publisher.

BOYARS: I've said, "I used to be an avant-garde publisher; now, I'm old-fashioned in my ways, because publishing has changed."

McNAMARA: You also said, "Language develops because of literature, it doesn't develop because of television." I said that was arguable; and you said: "Yes, that's why I said it: because it can be argued." You were speaking of what is called obscenity and forbidden subjects, taboos, and about bringing — or not bringing — them into art.

BOYARS: The *artist* is doing it.

McNAMARA: The artist is doing it. Through art people can be made aware of these subjects, in a mental context: the artist makes them available through our higher facilities. Am I overstating the case?

BOYARS: No, not at all. I think art has a way of changing something that could be very vulgar, into something that is cerebral.

McNAMARA: What if this makes a false change. Is that possible?

BOYARS: That's bad art. If there is no artistic integrity, I don't think it's going to work, I don't think it's going to make anyone aware of anything except what is disgusting: and that's bad art.

McNAMARA: You published avant-garde writers, for serious readers. I myself don't think there is an avant-garde anymore.

BOYARS: I agree with you.

McNAMARA: And so, if erotica and obscenity were a way of opening the mind to what it refused to know, as Miller and Selby did; then, that seems not still to be true. So, what do you think, now, would be our taboo subjects?

BOYARS: War. Suicide. Incest. Racism, in two ways: what's happening with black people; the way the Chinese are spoken of, now that they are considered a rival for markets.

Genocide. There are things going on in the world that are like the Holocaust; extraordinary cruelty is still going on. The Holocaust literature certainly has shown us what we must know. But one of the terrible things is that people who are exposed to



genocide now are denied. The plight of the Jews is something that has been told time and time again, and I still find it shocking. But, if people were really that shocked I don't think it could go on, yet it does.

Now, very often we are told about these things in a newspaper article, and then we seem to forget. Television is too fleeting, as a matter of fact. You see, the goalposts have been changed. It's very difficult to shock people these days, except with actual life. Life is very, very shocking now. I am often very indignant, and that has to work itself out, somehow. Language should shock.

### *Commerce.*

McNAMARA: What makes a book commercial?

BOYARS: Ah. Ho. I don't know.

McNAMARA: How do you gauge a market?

BOYARS: I don't know how to do it — it's no good, I know, but I can't gauge a market. There are publishers, I know, who look at a book and weigh it. We have published quite a few books that sold well — ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, which is my all-time best seller, was out of print. I thought it should be in print. I certainly didn't know the whole world was waiting for somebody to attack the structure of asylums; but there it was.

The truth is, I don't know any other way. I can read a manuscript and love it, but I cannot tell if it will sell. How do they know; how do they do it? I'd like to know.

There were things I thought should be in print, forbidden subjects. *LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN* was one of those books. I must have published it because I wanted to shock the world. *I* was shocked.

McNAMARA: What was your shock?

BOYARS: Well, my knowledge of the Red Hook district of Brooklyn was nil. My knowledge of homosexuals was nil. This is simply not something I know about. It was my instinct, somehow, that this should appear, and that it was all very authentic. I never questioned the veracity of that book. And you know, it was very powerful.

McNAMARA: There is a cohesiveness and an intelligence to your list: it seems to me the literature of a refined or observant taste.

BOYARS: Well, it has quality. That is always hard. These are things I like; fortunately, enough readers agree with me. Of course, there have been many failures.

McNAMARA: Esthetic failures?

BOYARS: No; I'm not sorry I've published any books that are on the list. I've published books I thought would sell well, and they didn't: I still find them interesting. There has been some attempt by me to share something that I like, and shape the culture.

One of my best authors is Ivan Illich (*MEDICAL NEMESIS*, etc). He shares my ideas about authority and responsibility. What he says is not: "You shouldn't go to the doctor." What he says is: "You are responsible for your own health." He doesn't attack doctors, he attacks the medical establishment.

A lot of people minded that he wouldn't tell them how to live. They came to him with problems; he said: "You solve it." That's all. I admire that, because it was so easy, so easy, to have done the opposite, when he could have become president of the world at the time, he was so popular. Extraordinarily modest man. Yet, Cuernavaca was the most undemocratic place you can imagine. He's very authoritarian. He's very

severe, in many ways. But also, the people around him would of course take care of him, protect him.

We published his recent lectures a little while ago [IN THE MIRROR OF THE PAST]. He's putting together another volume, and I said, "Yes, I'll publish it." He's such a beautiful man. And it was a terrific adventure, publishing him in an active way. But it was also very hard work.

McNAMARA: What is hard work, to a publisher?

BOYARS: In the first place, you are getting involved with money every minute of the day. I find that such hard work. You have to be careful, but terribly precise, and there must be no mistakes. And so, we proofread, and proofread.

You have to try and sell the books. That is more work. And I have to do the money again. Publishing really exists, you know, as a business, and the money aspect I find wearying. I've always found it hard; most people do. You see, if you work for a large company you don't have to earn the money first to pay expenses, all you have to do is have a bloc of money to draw upon in advance. It's much harder work to own your own house.

McNAMARA: Do you work with agents?

BOYARS: I understand the agents, and the authors' going to them. I work quite happily with agents, because I see them, I have lunch with them, and the whole thing is kind of domesticated. They think I'm slightly eccentric, publishing books no one else wants; but they know my word is good.

McNAMARA: How are contracts important? Did you ever do anything on a handshake?

BOYARS: I don't believe people have good enough memories for that. It's got to be done properly. Though my office doesn't look tidy, I can find anything in it. I keep careful records. I know exactly what I'm doing at any time.

But I have superb books coming in. I hope it doesn't matter that the times are hard.

I used to have commissioned salesmen. That wasn't working properly; and then a firm of representatives, who were part of a huge distribution contract, offered themselves. I called all my reps and I said: "Look, this offer sounds good," and they released me to this new contract. But they're not selling, either. I asked why, and never got an answer, after 15 tries. One question, asked 15 times! This is what it means to work with a big firm.

McNAMARA: How long do you keep books in print?

BOYARS: It's very rare that we don't reprint a book. I have an awful lot of books with very small printings; but we reprint. We re-jacket books, and we paperback them. It's very rare that I don't re-do a book. It's actually a list that should go on.

McNAMARA: I've been told that other publishers admire your books and try to get the authors from you. Is that true?

BOYARS: Who told you? Yes, it's true. It's mostly the agents who do that, but sometimes the editors, as well. I had published Tim O'Brien: two books, *IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE* and *NORTHERN LIGHTS*. His publisher was Sam [Seymour] Lawrence. Sam sent *GOING AFTER CACCIATO* to me. I wanted to publish it and I made an offer. Tim called me and said: "Marion, please, what did you offer?" "Three thousand pounds." Not a fortune, by today's lights. "Is that all right?" I said. "I swear it will be all right," he said; "I don't want to leave you, but Sam told me he had accepted an offer from someone else."

I called Sam and asked what was going on. “What makes you think that?” “Tim called me.” “Tim called you? You have no business talking with him!” I said: “Hey, hold it. You introduced us. I worked with him on *NORTHERN LIGHTS*. I bought the first book and the second book: why shouldn’t we have become friends? Why shouldn’t he have talked to me?” He put the phone down, and I put the phone down.

What Sam Lawrence had done was call Tom Maschler, who was at Jonathan Cape, and said: “Marion has offered £3,000.” Tom had a lot of money. He said, “Triple it.”

Sam Lawrence finally said to me, “Will you forgive and forget?” I said, “Forgive, willingly; but forgetting is impossible.”

Very few authors come back after an event like that. Michael Ondaatje — well, it’s my fault it happened. He sent me a manuscript of *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*. I read it and thought it was wonderful, though a little precious. So I wrote him a letter, and I said: “I think you should, etc. ... wonderful, etc. ... be sure to send me a revised copy.” The agent was very angry, because I criticized. Actually, it didn’t harm my relationship with Michael very much. He’s a very nice person, he’s got a major publisher now, and he won the Booker.

So, these things do happen. They’re bound to happen. I don’t like them much.

McNAMARA: How many new books do you publish each year?

BOYARS: About 20. The back list is very long.

McNAMARA: Is there a typical press run?

BOYARS: Well, I don’t do many books under 2,000 copies, and we don’t do many over 5,000. But *COMPUTER ONE* [by Warwick Collins], for instance: we’ll probably print 10,000. Everybody’s very impressed with it. And I under-print, rather than overprint, unfortunately. So that means that I reprint, and then all the books come back again. The publishing industry is the only one that accepts full returns. Sheer madness!

### *Buying Rights. Selling Books.*

McNAMARA: I’d be interested in your opinion about publishing rights on the internet, generally and specifically. Let’s say a book is published in more than one English-speaking country, and I want to reprint something from it, an essay perhaps. I’ve got the author’s agreement; he understands that no money is involved; now I need the publisher’s permission. I think it good to get permission from the other English-language publishers, as well as from the U.S., because our readership is international; especially if the author involved is not American. This is assuming that the publishers have electronic rights. What do you think about this sort of thing?

BOYARS: Well, I think this whole thing has not been resolved. And when an exchange of money is involved — not in your case, but in mine, for example [reference to a pending dispute] with CD-ROM reprints — I maintain that the law has not been tested. I maintain that it’s like Xeroxing, quoting, etc. I get hundreds of letters about this sort of thing. They say, “We would like to reprint such-and-such an essay from one of your books. We will not distribute in England, therefore we want only North American rights.” I would say, “That’s fine,” and I would quote a fee; and they pay it, and distribute in North America. On the other hand, they may plan to distribute world-wide in English. In that case, I say, “Yes, you have permission for world use, and the permission costs more money than in England only.” Or they say, “We only want to distribute this in England”: there is an alternate fee for that. Or they say, “The main

thrust is in America, but we want to sell a few copies in England.” “Fine,” I say, “in that case I will make it cheaper for you than I would if it were originating in England.” And in my opinion, that is how it should work; but it hasn’t been tested. In other words, there is no case law. There was no case law with Xeroxing until Kinko’s fell into a trap. At NYU, professors asked for Xeroxed copies of published materials for the students in their courses. Kinko’s Xeroxed material without permission and had a huge court case because of it. They are very cautious now.

We make quite a lot of money, actually, from Xeroxing. The author gets half, we get the other half. In England, they have two organizations for Xeroxing: one looks after the publishers, the other looks after the authors. When I first started, I would divide it and give the author half. The authors just put it in their pocket, until I found out that actually they had already got their half. So, next time, I only wrote a statement, no words were exchanged.

But I think one should ask for the rights. Now, the other bone of contention is that contracts written before, say, 1990, do not specifically say “electronic” rights. And some agents maintain that, because it doesn’t say so, you don’t have the rights. But I say, It is exactly the same as reproduction and therefore I am entitled to these rights. Because the future, in my opinion, is that books will go on, but in much smaller quantities. There will be smaller print runs, and more CD-ROMs. Or, it will be as you are doing, publishing on the internet.

McNAMARA: What rights does a publisher expect and feel entitled to have?

BOYARS: We call them “volume rights,” which means “text rights.” You have the right to publish the text in any form. You can then publish in hardcover, in paperback, you can authorize excerpts of that text. This is a contentious point. Some people take the phrase literally, to mean you have the right to publish the text as a book. But “publish” means “to make public.” The writer creates the text; the publisher makes it public. I hold that that text is what the publisher should make public, by whatever means are available to him. The bookseller-publisher once only bought book-rights. But “volume rights” means, I contend, that the publisher should have the right to share in the proceeds of that text reproduced in its unadulterated form: as a book, or a Xeroxed copy, on the internet, or when libraries scan the book. I think that if the book is read on-line, or is downloaded, somebody should pay for it.

Now, film rights are not an automatic extension of volume rights. *Changing* the text is not an extended right. If a novel is made into a play or a film, that is the author’s right: the text belongs to him; he is in charge of what can be done to alter it. When I buy English rights, in most cases I don’t have film rights. In the case of this chap [Mark Fyfe, ASHER], I do even have film rights. And we sold an option on it to a producer: with, of course, the author’s approval.

I bought this on the strength of, oh, 50 pages, and then he wrote it under my guidance. I didn’t *write* it, you know: but we discussed it day in and day out. “This should stay in, and this should go out. Why not make this a bit more clear,” etc. It’s a complex process. I wanted clarity; my editorial criterion is clarity. If you want to say something, say it: don’t expect the reader to put it in himself. A lot of new authors think the reader should sit down and work it out, and then read it again, and then read it again. Those days are over.

McNAMARA: Joyce thought that. Faulkner thought that.

BOYARS: Well, a lot of writers think that. But people won’t: if it’s not clear, they don’t read it.

McNAMARA: What is the job of the publisher, if he buys volume rights?

BOYARS: You have to try to sell the book! I mean, you have to exploit the book; you have to do something for it. You don't get response to it for nothing. That stack next to you is 50 advance copies of the futurist novel *COMPUTER ONE* [by Warwick Collins]. We have great hopes for the book, we're going to pepper the world with publicity. I've already offered it to mass-market paperback publishers, and I've taken it to places like *The New York Times Book Review*. They need to have the book about five months before publication. The pub. date is November. It's ready to go to press; it's just that it's only been announced, the catalog isn't printed yet, and it's not in our current catalog.

I need a lot of lead time, and I'm going to do a lot of things with it to interest people in it, interest them in the author. I work very much with the author: he has ideas, I have ideas. One is really trying to make the book known, and so you use everything you've ever done on the book, if you have great confidence in it, which I do.

McNAMARA: In America, the independent-bookstore structure is so fragile.

BOYARS: It's even worse here, if you want to know. There's no "structure" at all.

McNAMARA: Is that because of the end of the net book agreement?

*The net book agreement prevented English booksellers from discounting the price of new books; it collapsed in September 1995, when several large publishers and a major book retailer withdrew from the agreement; other publishers soon followed. Earlier this year, suit was brought by the government's Office of Fair Trading to abolish the agreement, as it was now ineffective. A defense of the agreement was mounted by a number of publishing and literary figures, including John Calder. In the meantime, Waterstone's and Dillon's, the two largest booksellers, have launched web sites; a British-based on-line bookstore now exists, as well as Amazon, the US-based on-line book service. The British sites will also offer books published in the US, before they appear in England. In 1996, 101,504 new titles (including 9,209 new works of fiction) were reported to have been published in Britain, compared to 95,064 in 1995.*

BOYARS: The net book agreement has made absolutely no dent. It isn't that every book is sold at a discount, it's that the booksellers want huge discounts. Our discount structure will change completely. We used to give 25%; we now give 45%. Our books are not even costed that way.

McNAMARA: Meanwhile, the price of books goes up.

BOYARS: Of course it does, because you have to recoup.

McNAMARA: In the States, the terrible analogy some publishers have made is: The cost of a book is the same as the cost of three movies. It's the wrong analogy, from my point of view, unless you're interested in Jeffrey Archer or Patricia Cornwell, let's say; then, yes: they are the cost of three movies.

BOYARS: Well, I don't think it's the price, I think it's the fact that books are simply not sold properly. Barnes and Noble have just emptied their shelves — it makes you despair.

McNAMARA: What would they do if they were selling books properly?

BOYARS: Well, the books are there: I think they should keep them on the shelves. The shelf-life is so terribly short. If they were only to keep the books on the shelves. People do go in to the shops to browse.

McNAMARA: I told you about the well-known American novelist whose book was published in late Spring. Two days after the books appeared in the stores, Michiko Kakutani reviewed it for the daily *New York Times*. She had liked the novelist's last book — a blurb from that review appeared on the cover of the new book — but she

demolished this one. It was a virulent review and unaccountable. But the novelist is a pro: she took it in stride. The worse news was this: the day the review appeared, Barnes and Noble began shipping returns. This she learned from her editor.

BOYARS: It's a real horror story. If publishing were like any other industry, they would not have accepted the returns.

McNAMARA: Can they *not* accept them? The publisher was Knopf, dealing with Barnes and Noble: large corporation to large corporation. The Sunday *Times*, on the other hand, gave the book a good, an intelligent, review.

BOYARS: I would have talked to them, I would have said, "This is not fair, this represents a lifetime's work, to become a writer. You don't treat people like that, you don't!" And they might have kept the books, I'm sure I would have prevailed. You have to be concerned about other people's feelings.

*Barnes and Noble advertised the book in its summer catalogs.*

Anyway, you asked me about volume rights. This is what you buy, in theory: you have total right to exploit anything that you can do with it. We actually have a clause in our contract about "any means." This is why I insist on this business about electronic rights, about "means now invented and that might be invented in the future": because things change all the time, and you mustn't cut yourself off from the market.

I'm very positive about the internet, electronic bookselling and so on. I can see there's future in it, additional markets. And the booksellers are doing badly, on the whole. The independents are in a dreadful situation. They are being persecuted out of existence by the chains.

McNAMARA: How will distribution change with the web, do you think? I believe you mentioned, for example, that Amazon takes a big discount from you.

BOYARS: Not from us! No, no; they make an arrangement with Ingram [the distributor/wholesaler], but they do give a discount to the customer. You see, the book business in America is very different from the book business in England. America is a huge country, and wholesalers are most important. We have wholesalers, too, but they're no good. The American wholesalers take every one of our books: such a thing does not exist that they do not take our books. They may take 5000 copies, or they may take 500 copies, but they take them. In the first place, they know that they can return them; in the second, the smaller bookshops buy from the wholesalers, they don't buy much directly from us, not in America. But they do take a very high discount. Baker & Taylor and Ingram [wholesalers] now take 55%.

Now here, it's completely different. Bookstores buy directly from the publishers. Baker & Taylor were going to start up in England. I went to the London Book Fair, and there was a Baker & Taylor stand. I said, "Welcome, welcome, welcome." He said, "What are you talking about?" I said: "Well, I publish in America as well, and I love Baker & Taylor, you're doing a marvelous job." He said, "You'd welcome a proper wholesaler?" "Very much," I said. But they couldn't make it. The chains — Dillon's, Waterstone's — deal only with the publishers, the big publishers, and with us, too.

But in America, the scale is enormous, with book warehouses around the country. The library system is better, also. In England, the libraries have no money, so they can't invest. Each county has its central library. They buy one book — one each of any title — for the whole county; and you'll be lucky if you get to read it in six months, because you know there are already 500 people ahead of you who want to read the same book.

McNAMARA: Libraries now are scanning books, most often older books, into their systems. The books then can be read on computer, though I don't know if they can be printed out. What do you think about that, and how does it affect your business?

The NY Times, *Sept. 2 (after our last conversation), reported that certain librarians have been consulting the leading American bookselling chains for advice about buying and shelving books; this follows the lead of several trade publishers, who have been reported consulting representatives of the chains about contracted books and, in at least once instance, about a manuscript.*

BOYARS: Well, this is of course the whole question of the future. I think eventually what's going to happen is that, instead of printing 5000 copies, it will be 3000; and the rest of them will be scanned or made available by computer. This is why I'm so keen on this copyright idea. That way, the publishers get paid: because you put just as much effort into a book if you print 1000 or 10,000 copies. That is why subsidiary rights are important. There is a financial investment, and there is a moral investment. I have only 20 new books a year: I've got to exploit them, I've got to. I don't forget a book. I think that's why authors like a smaller publisher, who's invested a life in them.

It's an advantage and a disadvantage, this investment. Look at the time I spend doing things. I mean, look at Selby's book, *LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN*. I fought for him, went to court for him for two years. In the end, we won. We pay him handsomely; his book still earns well. But I didn't know we were going to win. He was *very* grateful.

McNAMARA: What is the best question you were ever asked about being a publisher?

BOYARS: "What does success mean?"

McNAMARA: Your answer?

BOYARS: "Survival."

Now I'm not so sure I would say that. That was many years ago. I think you should have financial success. I'm not commercial. I think it is a very good thing to be: I'm just not that good at it, and I'm very sorry. Once in a while I see that sort of success. But the list, which is very difficult, really doesn't make much money.

I would like to sell the imprint, but there are no buyers. One very large book company offered to buy my "top 50 sellers." I said: "What about the others?" "Not interested," he said. I turned down the offer.

McNAMARA: But your list sustains itself.

BOYARS: Yes. Oh, it does. I've never remaindered, I don't believe in it. We make a small profit.

### *Going to Stockholm.*

BOYARS: I published [Elias] Canetti for ten years before he won the Nobel. We have published a number [six] of Nobel winners. Some of the time there is a change in sales, but most of the time not, because they are foreign writers. Faber [and Faber] have all the English and Irish Nobel Prize winners — Golding, Seamus Heaney, and so on. We have the same number, but in translation.

McNAMARA: What is it like to go to Stockholm?

BOYARS: It's wonderful. I went for Canetti. Now, Canetti was not a very nice man. When he won the Nobel he had been trying to get published elsewhere in England, but nobody wanted him. I was the only one; I wanted to publish him, and I

had three books [KAFKA'S OTHER TRIAL, etc]. He was ashamed of us, I think. He didn't want us to come.

It had really never occurred to us to go. Then, at Frankfurt [Book Fair] everybody said, "Ah, you're going to Stockholm?" "Of course, you're going to Stockholm?" Well, why not?

His main publisher was a German publisher, very good, and a good friend. The man who was running it then had trained with me as a very young man, and he said to me, "Why go to Stockholm? It's not interesting. I've been to Stockholm." Very nicely, he sort of said, Don't go to Stockholm as his English publisher.

But I wanted to go, and I told Arthur — you've met Arthur, he's a very sensible man — and he said, "Fuck Canetti! How do we know we're going to have another Nobel Prize winner, ever?" —But we did.

Arthur said to hell with him. He was absolutely right. We weren't celebrating Canetti, we were celebrating ourselves. And it's fun, and it's very glamorous. We thought there was just the ceremony and the dinner — it's a terrific event, everybody in Sweden is involved. But there was much more to it. We went the week before — there were parties galore, very nice parties. It was really great fun. I wrote it up for the *Independent*.

Then we went for Kenzabure Oe [HIROSHIMA NOTES, etc].

We also published others: Heinrich Böll, Samuel Beckett, Claude Simon, Eugenio Montale, Oe, of course, and also Canetti. And we published every one of them before they won the Nobel Prize. Every one. And we nearly got it last year, because there were three Polish possibilities. The other two were a wonderful poet named Zbgniew Herbert, and Tadeusz Rozewicz, whom we publish [THE CARD INDEX, etc]. He's also a playwright and short-story writer. [Wisława] Szymborska is very famous in Poland, and has a very nice nature, and cares about the world. And Rozewicz doesn't have the large canvas. She has it. They chose the right poet. They are all very good.

I think my Danish writer, Henrik Stangerup, has a very good chance. You said you read BROTHER JACOB. We have a new novel coming out [THE ROAD TO LAGOA SANTA], an historical novel about a Danish paleontologist who for reasons of health had to leave Denmark, and in 1833 went to the jungles of Brazil. He discovered fossils and so on, did brilliant work on the theory of evolution, but could not go on, because of his strict religious principles. But he never returned to Europe. Stangerup is fascinated by this: What really happened to him? Why couldn't he remain at home?

McNAMARA: You publish a number of translations. Is it a different thing to edit a translation than to edit a manuscript written in English? Would you describe the process itself, and the differences?

BOYARS: It's completely different. Ideally, you have read the original, but very often, you haven't. I don't read Danish, though my father was of Danish origin. I speak French well, and can read it, and German. I can't read Danish, Norwegian, Italian, or Spanish, but you know from the translation what's wrong with it. I think it is a question of experience. You look for traps. I have three languages; with three languages, you have to know *something*. With German, I can read Dutch, somewhat, or even Swedish and Norwegian, because they're very similar. But I also know something about the structure of the language. You can find certain similarities. So: the Scandinavian languages have very small vocabularies and very long sentences. You break them up, and you make the language more sophisticated in English.

It's completely different when the book has already gone through the editing process. I publish the translation after an editor has done the work in the original.



Now, with an English writer you ask for something different. My main question is: Is it clear? What do you intend to do, and have you achieved it? Can you shape it?

You have to choose the right moment; you have to be very tactful; and you have to do this because you *want* to do it. No personal vanity. It happens with many publishers that they feel they have to change things, even though this might destroy the artistic integrity of the work. That can be very arrogant, very, very disrespectful. I mean, if you don't like something, say so. But not for the sake of your authority. You and the author have to remain harmonious.

McNAMARA: Have you ever gotten to the point where you wanted to publish the book but what the author wanted, finally, was completely unacceptable to you? Have you ever given up?

BOYARS: Not many times. I always say to the author, "I will argue till the cows come home, but it is your book." And once I have committed myself to something I will try to help it succeed.

On the whole, I will give in, but it isn't automatic. And you do a lot of compromising: "You win this one, I win that."

### *Author and Publisher.*

McNAMARA: What should an author expect from his publisher?

BOYARS: Loyalty. It's very important.

You can go too far with your loyalty. You can, you know, bind yourself into a difficulty with an author, if you find his work is deteriorating, or if he wants more than you can give.

But you should have a loyalty to your author, which doesn't mean you have to approve everything. But I do stand by the authors. I really do have an interest in their fame and well-being. And it's good when you like the person. I like my authors.

They are the ones who create. I don't, and I never will; all I do, after all, is facilitate, it really isn't a creative act. I pledge my know-how and give them money to live. They're the ones who take the real risks.

I think attention, listening, is part of it, too. Frederic Tuten [THE ADVENTURES OF MAO ON THE LONG MARCH], for instance, needs to have a publisher who listens to him. They need that — it's not like being a mother; it's a completely different thing.

McNAMARA: And writers are not like children, although they're often called that.

BOYARS: No! It's just that you have to listen to people. I think that much of the trouble of the world is that nobody listens.

### *Afterward.*

*At the end of our third, last meeting, in her London office, as the day was ending, I was packing up the piles of papers and books she had given me, and we exchanged a few words about how long this conversation would be, and how I might cut it. I was hemming and hawing, when she said, suddenly:*

BOYARS: Yes, I think one of the great difficulties about having been a publisher for such a long time — I don't know if it's me, or if it's the general standard of writing, now — but it's very difficult to get excited over so many of the books I see, so many of the manuscripts. And I have a horrible feeling it's not only me.

*Books Mentioned in this Article Published by Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd:*

- Georges Bataille, STORY OF THE EYE  
Samuel Beckett, (with John Calder)  
Heinrich Böll, ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE  
----, BILLIARDS AT HALF-PAST NINE  
----, THE CLOWN  
William Burroughs, NAKED LUNCH  
    (with John Calder)  
John Cage, EMPTY WORDS  
----, FOR THE BIRDS  
----, M: Writings 1967-1972  
----, SILENCE  
----, X: Writings '79-'82  
----, A YEAR FROM MONDAY  
Elias Canetti, KAFKA'S OTHER TRIAL  
----, THE VOICES OF MARRAKESH  
----, THE NUMBERED  
Warwick Collins, COMPUTER ONE  
Mark Fyfe, ASHER  
Carlo Gébler, W9 AND OTHER LIVES  
    (forthcoming)  
Julian Green, THE DISTANT LANDS  
----, THE STARS OF THE SOUTH  
----, THE APPRENTICE WRITER  
----, SOUTH  
----, THE GREEN PARADISE:  
    Autobiography, Vols. 1-4  
Ivan Illich, MEDICAL NEMESIS  
----, DESCHOOLING SOCIETY  
----, SHADOW WORKS  
----, IN THE MIRROR OF THE PAST:  
    Lectures and Addresses, 1987-1990  
Ken Kesey, ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S  
    NEST  
Julia Kristeva, ABOUT CHINESE WOMEN  
Henry Miller, TROPIC OF CANCER  
    (with John Calder)  
Eugenio Montale, POET IN OUR TIME  
Terry Southern, BLUE MOVIE  
Tim O'Brien, IF I DIE IN A COMBAT  
    ZONE  
----, NORTHERN LIGHTS  
Kenzabure Oe, HIROSHIMA NOTES  
----, NIP THE BUDS, SHOOT THE KIDS  
----, TEACH US TO OUTGROW OUR  
    MADNESS  
Michael Ondaatje, COMING THROUGH  
    SLAUGHTER  
----, RAT JELLY  
----, THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BILLY  
    THE KID  
Tadeusz Rozewicz, THE CARD INDEX and  
    Other Plays  
----, MARIAGE BLANC and  
    THE HUNGER ARTIST DISAPPEARS  
----, THE WITNESSES and Other Plays  
Hubert Selby, LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN  
----, THE DEMON  
----, REQUIEM FOR A DREAM  
----, THE ROOM  
----, SONG OF THE SILENT SNOW  
----, THE WILLOW TREE (forthcoming)  
Claude Simon, (with Calder)  
Henrik Stangerup, BROTHER JACOB  
----, THE ROAD TO LAGOA SANTA  
Frederic Tuten, THE ADVENTURES OF  
    MAO ON THE LONG MARCH  
----, TALIEN  
----, TINTIN IN THE NEW WORLD  
----, VAN GOGH'S BAD CAFE

Marion Boyars Publishers, 24 Lacy Road, London SW15 1NL

Distributed by Inbook/LPC, fax 1-800-334-3892.

See also:

Frederic Tuten, Prologue: THE ADVENTURES OF MAO ON THE LONG MARCH, Vol. 1, No. 1.

Endnotes, Vol. 1, Nos. 1, 2, 3

# ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal on-line of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion  
[www.archipelago.org](http://www.archipelago.org)

Vol. 1, No. 4 Winter 1997/98

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A CONVERSATION WITH  
CORNELIA AND MICHAEL BESSIE (1)

KATHERINE McNAMARA

“If you can say to yourself, when that manuscript goes to the printer’s, ‘This is the best book that this person can write at this time,’ then you’ve done your job.” *Cornelia Bessie*

“The important question about the publishing industry is: how well does it serve literature?”  
*Michael Bessie*

*In this second of my conversations with distinguished literary publishers, the question of good books recurred as a counterpoint in the discussion of institutional changes that have taken place in trade publishing. It recurred, I think, because of an assumption that once could have been made and now, especially at the trade-book conglomerates, cannot be: that bringing literature into print is the purpose of the responsible publisher. It has been remarked that “publishing,” in the old sense, perhaps, of the gentleman’s occupation, began to change about the time the phrase “publishing industry” came into use, probably in the mid- or late-1970s. If true, it marks nicely the changes I’ve been interested in tracing.*

*Substantially, however, what has been changed? Are there more bad, fewer good, books than ever? What has become of the editor’s art? Indeed, what sort of people became editors and publishers; why? Do the same sort run the business now? I’ve been inquiring of some notable editors and publishers of an older generation what they thought.*

*Generously, they’ve told how they entered the profession; spoken about writers they published and declined to publish; described the class structure of their domain; talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism. Without exception they are serious readers, usually of more than one language. They recognize that times have changed but do not agree, necessarily, on why and how.*

*Excerpts of these conversations will continue to appear regularly in Archipelago and may serve as an opening onto an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current establishment, reflecting on its glories, revealing what remains constant amid the present flux. Despite their surround of gentility, these publishers are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.*

KM

*Cornelia and Michael Bessie, of Bessie Books*

Michael Bessie began his career in publishing in 1946, when Cass Canfield, then head of the house, invited him to join Harper and Bros. as an editor. Cornelia Shaeffer, as she was then, joined the firm several years later, as foreign reader; she became an editor, subsequently, for *The Reader’s Digest*, Dutton, and, once more, Harper’s. In the meantime they had married. In 1960, Michael Bessie left Harper and, with Pat Knopf

and Hiram Hayden, founded Atheneum, a successful literary imprint. Cornelia joined the firm a year afterward. They remained with Atheneum until 1976, when they returned to what had become Harper & Row; and where, five years later, they housed their own imprint, Bessie Books. After Harper & Row was sold to Rupert Murdoch and transformed into HarperCollins, Bessie Books migrated, first to Pantheon, then to Counterpoint, of Washington, D. C., where it is presently housed.

(Counterpoint is an imprint backed by Perseus, a corporation whose owner, Frank Pearl, has recently acquired, as well, the respected imprints Basic Books and Addison-Wesley and, with the former editor-in-chief of Times Books, has opened Public Affairs. It looks as if a new conglomerate is in the making, this one devoted, so far, to literary publishing. We will keep an interested eye on this development.)

Among the hundreds of authors whom the Bessies, together and separately, have edited and published are (a nearly random selection): Edward Albee, Luigi Barzini, Justice William Brennan, John Cheever, Cyril Connolly, Jan de Hartog, Len Deighton, Janet Flanner, Ruth Gordon, Richard Howard, Guiseppe de Lampedusa, Harper Lee, Nadezda Mandelstam, John McGahern, Nigel Nicholson, André Schwartz-Bart, Jean Renoir, Peter Shaffer, Saul Steinberg, Joanna Trollope, Peter Weiss. Among Nobel laureates, they have published Miguel Angel Asturias, the Dalai Lama, Mikhail Gorbachov, Sir Peter Medawar, Anwar Sadat, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, James Watson, and Elie Wiesel.

Two years ago I approached Michael Bessie because of his founder's connection to Atheneum. A respected literary imprint, Atheneum had been closed in 1994 by its new owner, Simon & Schuster, itself owned by Paramount, which in turn had been bought by Viacom, an entertainment holding-company. Atheneum's last editor and publisher had been the late Lee Goerner, who was my husband. The reasons given for the shut-down were appalling. Atheneum did not, it seemed, turn enough profit; another literary imprint was not needed by the corporation. Viacom, or Paramount, or Simon & Schuster also owned what used to be Charles Scribner's Sons, also considered literary, which survived the corporate in-fights and is now called "Scribner." What had such reasoning to do with literature? Yet, in opportune circumstances a writer can observe the operations of those who hold power, in this case, power over the disposition of works of the imagination. Observe, closely, is what I proposed to do.

Lee Goerner was praised by his colleagues for publishing good books, books that appealed to his inclusive, American taste, without considering the so-called market. From the advantage of obscurity I had supposed this was any editor's responsibility and, though deferring to no one in my high regard for him, thought he had been praised for doing what should have been expected. Gently, Michael Bessie put me right. Lee, it seemed, had acted as the owner of a house might act, when in fact he had not owned it. Although he had begun to put Atheneum in the black, his margins of profit had been narrow: to be expected, but not what the conglomerate desired. Owning your own firm, said Michael Bessie, keeping it to a reasonable size: here was the best possible situation of the good publisher. Smaller was better, because more responsible. "Responsible publishing" was a phrase he used more than once.

For the conversation published here I visited the Bessies twice, in August and October 1997, at their wooded retreat in rural Connecticut and in their handsome, art-filled apartment on Washington Square, in New York. Against the fate of Atheneum Cornelia and Michael Bessie placed the breadth and uninterrupted length of their involvement with books. Their discussions and disputations were conducted in the courteous style of long-time partners who believe in the necessity of good books and

intelligent publishing, yet each of whom holds, nonetheless, a particular point of view formed by experience, intuition, and educated taste. For this first of two parts, I have excerpted, chiefly, their remarks about the complex relationship between character, background, class, and institution as it appeared in publishing; their own entry into the field; editors and the books they take or let go; the founding and early growth of Atheneum. Part 2, a conversation about reading, the literary life, the (further) education of an editor, and structural changes in Harper's, will appear in our next issue.

### *How They Entered Publishing*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: We've all observed huge structural changes in publishing — in the institution, we might call it, of publishing books — in the last decade or two. And yet, the relationship between an institution and its people, their relative influences upon one another, is complex. I think it just as important to know *who* the people involved were, and have been, as the nature of the institution itself. Amid change, I'm interested in learning also: What continues?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Are you asking, What are the relative influences of institutions and individuals? Individuals are more apparent, more interesting, more dramatic, more concrete than institutions; and so the great question that presents itself to me is, How important is it when Doubleday is headed by Nelson Doubleday, with Ken[neth] McCormick [1906-97] as chief editor, as it was when I first came into publishing, as against today, when it's become an enormous institution headed by an ambassador, basically, from Germany, because it's owned by Bertelsmann. So, in the long run, it has to satisfy German business requirements, although it is theoretically rooted in the American scene. That's an extreme example.

How much difference does it make to Harper's between the long run of publishing people who ran it [*as Harper and Brothers, then as Harper & Row*] and when it gets to be owned by Mr. Murdoch [*as HarperCollins*]?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you talk, both of you, please, about how you came into publishing?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I once had a conversation with a bunch of women friends, and we discovered, because we happened to be all of us female in that group, that all of us came in by accident. And, because we had had one salable skill which the gents were willing to pay for — though not very well. In my case, it was languages. [*Wry chuckle.*] It was funny, because we discovered that all of us got into publishing quite differently from the men, who were generally recruited; and we came to the conclusion, over a good bottle of wine over a long evening, that we had all sort of fallen in backwards.

MICHAEL BESSIE: May I rudely tell Cornelia's story slightly differently? As I tell it? When Cornelia was finishing up at Barnard, she learned something from one of her teachers that she couldn't believe: namely, that there were places downtown in New York that paid you to read! The notion of being paid to read seemed to her a voluptuous impossibility.

So, she checked into a few places, with the result that, one day, the then head of reading at Harper, a very New York spinster, who was never seen without hat and gloves, came into my office and said, "You know, there's that German manuscript that you were trying to find readers for?" — because I don't read German — "There's this young girl from Barnard and she says she reads German. She seems very intelligent.

Should I give it to her?" And I said, "Yes, of course, Amy, why not?" She said, "Well, Michael, she's very young." I said, "Yes? What?" "Well, it's a biography of Casanova." And I said, "Amy, you know, these girls nowadays, they read almost everything. Let's try it." [CB: *throaty laugh*]

Net result: a week later I got what I still think is about the best reader's report I've ever gotten, because it was fresh and thoughtful. I said, "Is she there? I'd like to meet her." Result: a career in publishing, and a marriage! [CB: *heartily laugh*] Now: isn't that old-fashioned publishing at its best?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I have to tell you, because that was the old-fashioned, 33rd Street Harper's [*Harper and Brothers, as it had been since 1817*], this was in a modest building where there was no natural light for anybody who spent their days reading, to say nothing of air or air-conditioning. I discovered, several months later, that I was the foreign reader, which nobody had bothered to tell me, which I gathered was par for the course for that Harper's. I did not know that this had been a competitive thing; that a number of people had been given the same manuscript. It wasn't till a long time later, when they kept sending me checks for \$10 whenever I brought a book back, that I thought, "Well, really!" That's my recollection.

MICHAEL BESSIE: What Cornelia is suggesting is that I was invited. I had been a newspaper person and a magazine editor, and at the end of World War II I was at the Paris embassy. One of my colleagues, indeed my boss, was on temporary embassy service: Cass Canfield, who had suddenly during the war become the head of the house of Harper and also one of its principal owners. He asked me what I was going to do after the war. I told him I was planning to go back to Cowles's newspapers, whence I had come. He said, "Well, what about book publishing? What about coming to Harper?" I said, "Cass, two days after I graduated from Harvard, I went to Harper to try to get a job, and I was unceremoniously shown the door. The person whom I saw said, 'Why should we have a job for you? You can't know anything, you just graduated.'" Anyhow, that's how I got into publishing: I was invited.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you were invited to do what?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, if I may rephrase your question: Why was I invited? I was invited because, at the age of 29, I had had ten years of journalism in various forms; I had also worked in the movies; I knew a hell of a lot of people; I talked a lot, had a lot of good connections among journalists and academics, etc.; and, in a word, because Cass Canfield said to me one day, "I think you would make a good publisher." And he was right: it was good for me.

Now: how important was the fact that I had a good degree from Harvard, that I knew some of the right people, that I even belonged to one of the right clubs? In those days that was not without significance. I do remember one delicious example. I had been at Atheneum for about a dozen years or so, when the leadership back at Harper was changing, and all of a sudden there was a new guy there, in succession to Canfield. His name was Winthrop Knowlton. I was having lunch with Cass one day and I said, "Cass, how did you find Knowlton?" Knowlton had worked for the Treasury in Washington, and on Wall Street. Cass said, "Well, it's a funny story, you know. We got a head-hunter, and he looked all over the place for people who might be the right person to head Harper, and we saw probably about 50 or 60 people; and then, along comes this guy Knowlton. We were very impressed with him. It was only after we hired him that I realized it could have been much simpler, because I learned that he was a fellow member of Porcellian at Harvard. We could have spared ourselves the whole search." Now, that's an exaggeration, of course, but not by far.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: For the time, no.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And what about most of the people I later hired? Well, most of them had a connection of some kind. We hired one person who just came in on the right day.

I think that two things have changed. One is this string of publishing courses, summer and graduate programs — NYU, as you know, has a master's degree in publishing. But these summer courses [at Radcliffe, Stanford, NYU, Columbia] produce a lot of people who get a smattering. And the faculty of these courses are all publishing people, so they—

CORNELIA BESSIE: They also have, in New York, a kind of trade market where the people who graduated come for cocktails or something, and the people who want to hire come and look. Apparently, a lot of jobs really are filled there.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But those jobs are mostly for assistants.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes; good point. Because what I've been talking about is, by and large, people who were hired to do editorial duties. What's also happened increasingly in publishing, of course, is that marketing and finance, as firms have grown, have become more and more important, and those people tend to come with both different backgrounds and training, from business schools.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It's the marketers that end up being the publishers.

### *Becoming an Editor*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you tell, Cornelia, how you became an editor?

CORNELIA BESSIE: That's a nice story, actually. I went straight from college to Harper's, and Harper's was full of hot-shot young men — youngish men — like Michael Bessie and Evan Thomas and Jack Fisher, and so forth. I was the first reader, and knew nothing, and nobody spoke to me. What happened, I think, was that somebody left. I had been an outside foreign reader; I got offered this job; and, once I was offered the job, they showed me into a cubbyhole and showed me where the manuscript pile was, and that was it. Then no one spoke to me. But as time went by, I realized that there was a wonderful person there, whose name was Elizabeth Lawrence. Elizabeth never went to cocktail parties, or seldom did, and was not a glamorous hotshot: Elizabeth, basically, did the work. I realized that a wonderful way to learn my job was to look over Elizabeth's shoulder; and, happily, Elizabeth was a wonderful teacher and enjoyed having someone to teach. So, for about a year, that's what I did. I realize, in retrospect, that I learned from one of the great old editors.

MICHAEL BESSIE: She made books.

CORNELIA BESSIE: She made books. I've had this conversation with young people in various New York publishing houses: what Elizabeth gave me is no longer being given.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And what was that?

CORNELIA BESSIE: What you do with a manuscript.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What do you do? Can you speak of it? Because I think there is much about editing that *can't* be spoken of.

CORNELIA BESSIE: There is. A lot of it is that you develop instincts. One of the instincts you develop, for example, is for the book that will never be finished: how do you know this? Somehow, you feel it in your bones. What you develop an instinct for is, what the writer really meant and what is *not* on the page. I leave aside the writing



problems — unclear thoughts, repeats, this kind of thing. But that sort of sixth sense which a good editor has: that's something you really pick up as you go along. But you pick it up much faster if you see somebody, as I saw Elizabeth, who did it superbly, and whose queries in the margins were just about publishable. They were a publishing course, Elizabeth's margins. She had a kind of generosity, she really, literally, sort of took me on.

MICHAEL BESSIE: She really taught us all, because she was also a senior editor when I came. She was not a sort of outside person; but several agents had come to realize her value. She *made* person after person. She was a specialist in taking on somebody who had had an interesting life or experience, somebody like Jade Snow Wong, for example, who wrote that marvelous book *SIXTH CHINESE DAUGHTER*; or Santha Rama Rau, whom Elizabeth edited. The only wonder about Elizabeth was that she didn't write: because she could.

I'd like to go back to the question that you asked Cornelia. What you're really asking is: "What's the job? What's required?"

I think two forms of either sensitivity or awareness are needed. One is, What's in this? And two is, What can I do, what can be done, to help the writer get it as good as that person can get it?

CORNELIA BESSIE: You see, the end result is, if you can say to yourself, when that manuscript goes to the printer's, "This is the best book that this person can write at this time," then you've done your job. It's as simple as that. Maybe in three years there'll be a better book; but this is the best, now. And not to stop until you've reached that. And, since one of the things we're discussing is the changes in publishing, to do that, you have to have the luxury of no time constraint. You have to be able to say, "No, that will not make this list; it will make the next list." All these things have become either more difficult or impossible.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What kept you going in publishing, and in editing; and is there is a distinction?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Hmm, not from my point of view. What kept me going was the same thing that kept me reading clockwise around my father's library when I was a kid: love of books!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And they kept sending you those ten-dollar checks....

CORNELIA BESSIE: I kept getting these ten-dollar checks, and one day I was terribly rich and had about \$200 and went to Europe [*laughs*], and when I came back, I met this man in the street. And he said, "Well, we have a job to fill: how would you like to come and work?"

### *How Publishing Has Changed*

MICHAEL BESSIE: Let me illustrate the change. My first round at Harper went from the end of 1946 until we started Atheneum, in 1959. During that period, and previous to it, the phrase "P&L" was unknown at Harper, and probably at any other place. There was no such thing as a P&L statement—

CORNELIA BESSIE: "Profit and loss."

MICHAEL BESSIE: It was not known. When you came upon a book manuscript you wanted to publish, what you did was this: you had to explain to the chief editor why you wanted to publish it. You had to give a notion of what you thought it could sell, and maybe how it could be sold. But that was likely to be conversational; or, maybe a memo was exchanged. Okay. Sixteen years pass between 1959, when I leave, and 1975,

when I come back from Atheneum. The P&L is regnant; it runs things. You've got an idea for a book, or you've got a manuscript, you have to fill out a form which is full of numbers. What you have to do is, you have to consult with the marketing people, the sales people; you have to get their take on it, until you've gotten to the point where now, in many places, that judgment, the sales and marketing judgment, and/or the financial judgment, are the prime.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that when I was president of Atheneum during those years, and was responsible for what we took and didn't take, that I didn't *consider* sales or marketing. But I didn't pretend that it was an exact science, and that the numbers could predict anything. What I *did* pretend was that there was still a crystal ball, and that there were some things you had to see in the crystal ball; but you *couldn't* do it on an adding machine. That's one of the big changes in publishing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Between when you left Harper and when you returned, how had the ownership changed?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, the ownership hadn't changed very much; but the nature of the beast had changed enormously.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Who owned it when you began?

MICHAEL BESSIE: When I began, and until 1975, Harper was owned in effect by itself. It had gone from the Harper family to a series of stockholders. When I joined Harper, in '46, there were about eight or ten principal stockholders; and that was the condition during the time that I was there — we all had some stock. We bought it; or you were given an option. It didn't go very deep in the organization.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said, for example, that Cass Canfield had bought into Harper.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, yes. He had, Cass and his family had — he was the largest single stockholder — he had about 20% or 22% of the stock. There was a board of directors, which included the principal stockholders. It was very closely held during this time.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Were they also an editorial board?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Not in any sense of the word! Cass presided over the trade department editorial board — he didn't preside over the editorial board of college publishing, school publishing, medical and so forth — because he was particularly interested in trade. Cass was, basically, a trade-editor. He ran the house, but he edited and published a good number of books. Indeed, he published the principal authors of the place, the E.B. Whites and the Thornton Wilders and so forth; they regarded Cass as their editor and publisher. He might get somebody like Elizabeth Lawrence, or me, or somebody, to read it and counsel with him about it. But in any event, the corporate change that took place, happened during the time that I was at Atheneum.

Harper discovered that it didn't have a school department. It had had, but had sold it. During this period, the 1960s, was an enormous increase in government investment in education, under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. A publishing house that didn't have school books — that is, a big house; and Harper was one of the biggest — knew it needed them. And so, Harper bought Row, Peterson [& Company], which was a large school-book publisher, in about 1962 or '63, and with that, went public: issued public stock, for the first time, and was listed on the NASDAQ, and, subsequently, on the Big Board. So the Harper that I returned to, in '75, was a *publicly owned* corporation with the stock listed on the Big Board.

What does that mean? That means you have to issue quarterly reports. That means, four times a year you've got to look good. *That* means that you've got to

jimmy the numbers. Simplest example: the fiscal year of Harper then ended on the 30th of April, which meant that, during the month of April, we emptied the warehouse: we shipped out *everything*, so that the numbers for that year looked good. Now, mind you, many of those books came back in May, June, and July. Returns have been a problem for American trade publishing ever since, oh, somewhere in the early part of the 20th century, when it was decided that—

CORNELIA BESSIE: Only in book publishing is it “Gone today; here tomorrow.”

MICHAEL BESSIE [*chuckles*]: That’s right. [*Seriously*] Last year returns were averaging about 40 to 45%, which means almost one out of two books were sent back.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Even with marketers in charge.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, it’s really a function of the growth of the big chains. The point that I’m trying to make, Katherine, is that the Harper I returned to was dominated by numbers — P&Ls, numbers — and by marketing, in the sense that the firm I had left 16 years before was not.

What I’m not describing, of course, is what I see as an institutional change. By the 1970s, trade book publishing, and indeed, education publishing, was increasingly dominated by a small number of firms. There are two elements to this, institutionally. One is the five, six, seven large firms, which now account for, oh, about 25% of the trade books published; and then there are somewhere around 1200 or 1500, maybe almost 2000, small firms publishing anywhere from two to 30 or 40 books a year. And they’re regionally dispersed; there are 400 publishing firms on the West Coast. So you see, where the subject gets complicated is, the important question about the publishing industry is, *how well does it serve literature?* And you’ll have to conclude that, while a small number of big firms has become increasingly dominant, this large number of small firms makes it possible for almost anything to be published.

Now, that brings you to the distribution problem: how well can the small firms market and distribute their books in a wholesale/retail area which is itself increasingly dominated by a small number of firms? Our present firm, Counterpoint, is distributed by PGW, Publishers Group West, which distributes independent publishers. Jack Shoemaker [*the publisher, formerly head of North Point, which now is owned by Farrar Straus & Giroux*] goes through the books with PGW *before* he finalizes the list; but he doesn’t change that list. The big houses have pre-publication conferences with the big wholesalers *before* they make up the list! They have what they *think* the list should be; they go through that stuff for two or three days, with three or four of the big chains; and if the big chains don’t react properly to the list, if it doesn’t look as though the chains are going to take thousands of copies of that book, they [the publishers] may not put the book on the list.

### *Turning down LOLITA and Frantz Fanon*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you read a book while trying to decide whether to publish it, are you affected by other things than the quality of the book itself?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Let me tell you my LOLITA story.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Please tell me your LOLITA story.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Scene: I’m in Paris. [Maurice] Girodias [*founder of the Olympia Press*], who was a pornographer *extraordinaire* but also a real publisher, gives me a manuscript by Vladimir Nabokov. Harper had published several of Nabokov’s previous books, which was why he gave it to me: because I was the young fellow from Harper. And I started reading it. I went to bed that night thinking to myself, “This is

wonderful.” I had read maybe 75 or 100 pages. Then I got up in the morning and went back to it. As I went on, I thought, “It’s getting repetitious. I can see what’s coming. This is really a short story or a novella, reconstructed as a novel. And Nabokov is too good a writer for this.” None of the so-called pornographic aspects of it disturbed me, but I thought it inferior Nabokov. So I let it go. Six months later, I picked it up, because it’s been taken now by Putnam’s, and I *can’t believe* that I had let that book go out of our hands. *It’s a great book.*

Now: what does that illustrate? It illustrates the point I think we’re trying to make: One is not always the same person. One reads under different circumstances. I have now re-read *LOLITA* several times since, and I cannot reconstruct the S. M. Bessie who sat there in a hotel in Paris and turned that book down! But I did.

Cornelia and I had an argument once about [Frantz] Fanon, whom she wanted us to publish, and I was against. We were reading him in French, and she wanted us to publish it, and she was absolutely right.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was a great book: *LES DAMNÉS DE LA TERRE* [THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH]. I also heard from friends that Fanon was dying, and it was important that at least the book be taken. But mainly, I thought it was a good book.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I can’t believe that I turned it down.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh, I remember your arguments. “There isn’t a decent bookstore in Harlem” — which probably was true at that time — and—

*Some embarrassment follows, as changes in time and mores are considered.*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I’m not making a personal point here. What I’m inquiring about is ways of thinking.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Memory is fallible, Katherine, as I have increasing reasons to understand. I’ve searched my mind on this one, and I haven’t said this to Cornelia because it’s a confession of stupidity which I’m loathe to make, but I’ll make it now. As I reconstruct my response to that book: I disliked it. I disliked it because I’m against violence, and it’s a book that preaches violence. It says, in effect, “We have to liberate ourselves — violence has been practiced on us, we can’t liberate ourselves without it.” And I really think in retrospect, painful as it is, that I was against doing that book not for that reason which Cornelia says I gave, which I’m sure I did, but because I *didn’t like it.*

CORNELIA BESSIE: I know you didn’t like it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And I didn’t *want it to be true.*

CORNELIA BESSIE: Also, you didn’t like Sartre’s preface.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, I think I was right about that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Why? Because he praised it in the usual—

MICHAEL BESSIE: Because I thought it was a parlor pink saying “You go kill ‘em.”

CORNELIA BESSIE: Which, incidentally, is not what Fanon was about.

MICHAEL BESSIE: No, it was what Sartre was saying.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: He was still a Stalinist then, surely.

MICHAEL BESSIE: But in any event, I was wrong. Because Cornelia was right about the merits of the book, the importance of the book — and the timing!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you speak to that — what you thought the merits were?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes. I had just come back from the Sorbonne, where I had a number of North African friends. I wasn’t, as the French so nicely say, *dans le vent.*

But I was plugged into that mind-set; and also, it's a very strong book. And a beautiful one. I thought it was an important book. Now it's a classic.

MICHAEL BESSIE: The circumstances are interesting in this case. Cornelia had never been in Africa; I had lived in North Africa before the war; I was there for a year and a half during the war; I was *very* interested in North Africa in particular, but Africa in general. Cornelia had had a different form of African experience. Although I had been there and seen it, she knew more about it than I did. She was more aware of what was going on. And I was wrong.

But: Is what I said reasonable? Should you publish what you like, or, more importantly, should you not publish what you don't like? Well, there are a lot of books out there, and I'm kind of opposed to publishing a book I don't like. I used to do a session at Stanford: I'd give 'em a list of books, saying, "Would you publish?" One of the books on the list was *MEIN KAMPF*: would you publish it? When I got into publishing, at the end of the war, this is the thing that young editors like me would sit around arguing about. And my own feeling, about myself, anyhow, as a publisher is: I don't want to publish things I don't like. I don't want to publish things which add—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You mean this *morally* and—

MICHAEL BESSIE: *Authentically*. You think it will affect—

CORNELIA BESSIE: Also, you live with a book for months and months: you don't want to live with a book you don't like any more than you want to live with a man you don't like.

### *Collegiality and Paul Flamand*

MICHAEL BESSIE: We mentioned his name, Paul Flamand, and that Editions du Seuil was an example of, what shall I say, of almost everything about publishing and the difference between small and large publishing firms.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: We were talking about competition and collegiality. I remarked that competition, as you describe it in publishing, sounds very much like what they always did at, say, Harvard: they'd hire five young assistant professors for three possible tenure-track positions.

MICHAEL BESSIE: "On, man; on, bear!" In other words, let's see who kills whom first.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Exactly. And it seems to me that that was part of a certain kind of education, wasn't it: to learn to compete?

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was. Remember, this was the early 60s, and the women's movement was really not yet born; and so, this was a very masculine point of view. [*To MB:*] Do you remember Papa Knopf's phrase, which was printed somewhere, which was: "Women should pay to be in publishing, they shouldn't expect to be paid." He said this in the 50s, on record. Nobody else would have dared say it; but they would have acted on it. At that time, *Papa* Knopf could say that, cheerfully, and the women in publishing were quite aware of it. Certainly, that was true of my time at Harper. But that kind of competitiveness was bred into the situation; it was unspoken, but felt.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you speak about Paul Flamand and his spirit of collegiality?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Shortly after I joined Atheneum, I had this vision of the perfect publishing house, which would of course be small enough to be manageable, and which would have the kind of atmosphere which I had seen in France at Les Editions du Seuil.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And uniquely there.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Uniquely there. I remember various times at Atheneum when I talked about this, saying that we had a vision of a publishing house where part of the pleasure was intellectual stimulation. After all, you don't go into publishing to make money; you go into publishing to do what you love—

MICHAEL BESSIE: And to make a living.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes; and, you hope, for the pleasure of the kind I once saw in France. I guess we tried at Atheneum to recreate that. But it's very difficult in America.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes. But remember the origin: Paul Flamand and his wife and his partner, before World War II, were members of the group centered around Emmanuel Mounier, called the *Esprit* group. They were liberal Catholic intellectuals. And the house, Le Seuil, was formed with a deep spiritual agreement of purpose, which animated it. [*Turning to CB:*] Is that fair?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Were they part of Catholic Action?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Not really. They were too independent. Later on, Paul had actual arguments with Rome; he was liberal to that extent. But the original Seuil, that group, was more interested in the process than the result. What they wanted was a certain kind of group, with certain moral imperatives and certain goals. In fact — but this was way back, in the beginning—

MICHAEL BESSIE: And they weren't all Catholic.

CORNELIA BESSIE: The house was known to be Catholic. Yet, his successor was a Muslim, and the current head of the house is a Jew. *Le Seuil* means “the threshold.”

MICHAEL BESSIE: And that expresses it very well.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said that it's difficult to have an intellectual, collegial atmosphere in American publishing; and you said also that Paul Flamand was paternal. Are these things related, do you think?

CORNELIA BESSIE: He *was* paternal; he *is* a very strong person. He had something which is so missing in today's American publishing world: he was never in competition with his editors. He edited books, secretly, really; but how he conceived of his job was to encourage all those people to go out and do *their* jobs.

MICHAEL BESSIE: He cherished his relationship with authors!

CORNELIA BESSIE: He had wonderful relationships with authors, and still does; but there was no competitiveness. The place was, intellectually, enormously stimulating, and, sure, there were disagreements, but they were family fights. That sort of organization takes a strong, sensitive hand at the helm.

Now, as we've discussed, you often have the feeling in the big houses that the editor-in-chief resents any “big” authors going to other editors. Paul was non-competitive. He was extraordinarily supportive in that paternal way of his. But he was no patsy; and when he thought something was getting out of hand.... He would not tolerate certain kinds of behavior. The rules were clear. He would tolerate any kind of intellectual discussion, and relish it. But he wouldn't tolerate in-fighting. No office politics.

MICHAEL BESSIE: He also had a wonderful, subtle sense of organization in the real sense, so that senior editors had clear-cut domains. Didn't mean they were restricted to them, but everybody had an area of responsibility.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes. Also, everyone had a stake in the company, in real financial terms.

MICHAEL BESSIE: That's right.

CORNELIA BESSIE: When he proposed his heir apparent, and the troops said “No, we don’t want this guy,” he said: “It’s your house.”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Why do you think it is so — different, let us say, intellectually, between the publishing environments in France and America?

CORNELIA BESSIE: As you know, having lived in France, it’s getting more similar everywhere.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I don’t think it’s different today at all.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But it was.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was, in certain places. As Michael has said, Le Seuil was not typical for France; it still isn’t.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But Atheneum was meant to be a literary house.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you wanted a certain kind of environment there, that you knew in Europe and didn’t see so often in America; is this right?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I think that is true, although I think that the publishing world that I entered, at the end of ‘46, had a number of places that operated with a *measure* of collegiality. You see, I’m obsessed with numbers, and I think that the much larger number of people around the table is not likely to be collegial any more. That’s a change, institutionally, in American publishing. Also, the kind of people who run publishing operations — this is beginning to be true in France, also —

CORNELIA BESSIE: —and in Germany, and in Italy—

MICHAEL BESSIE: —are not, essentially, literary people: which, whether we were right or not, we considered ourselves to be.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Also, it has to be said, again, that at that time, at Atheneum, there was no such thing as a P&L. There were very few of us. We all knew each other well. We didn’t always agree. But we could work together....

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You had a protocol for disagreement, I’d presume?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes; an understood one. And to take or not take a book, which is, after all, the prime publishing decision, was done very casually, was done by persuasion. If Michael and I disagreed, I would attempt to persuade him of why he was wrong.

MICHAEL BESSIE: We gave each other room, which was important; we didn’t crowd each other. I’m not saying we were angelic, but Cornelia has a story which illustrates this very well.

CORNELIA BESSIE: What suddenly comes to mind is this: I had read a play in German, which I thought was very interesting and which I wanted to do. And, because, occasionally, the devil gets into me, when we were for once having a sort of formal editorial session, for the fun of it I told the plot of this play to Hiram Hayden. After I finished, there was dead silence, until Hiram said, “You’re *seriously* considering this?” I said, “Hiram, I just bought it.” And that was a play called *Marat/Sade* [by Peter Weiss] [*general laughter*]. But you tell the plot of *Marat/Sade*, and people will say: “Are you *serious*?”! [*More laughter*] That’s an example of how casual it was at the time; you couldn’t do that today.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Maybe at a few places; but it’s not to be expected. The point that could be made is that you could induce an atmosphere, as Cornelia described how Flamand did, and which I think was done in a few places in this country *for a while*. For example, the young house of Simon and Schuster was a mad place in many ways. For one thing, the two principal partners, Dick Simon and Max Schuster, were bright people themselves, and they acquired a lot of very bright people; the place was a

maelstrom of activity. They published almost everything, but also a lot of good books. But there was an atmosphere of — it was febrile, the place was astir.

CORNELIA BESSIE [to KM]: You've brought Paul Flamand up. I think you realize that, of all the publishers I've known, he's the man I've most admired. He ran for many years a largish publishing house and, so far as I know, never compromised his principles. Paul has two gifts: one is literary, the other is with people. He took a very disparate, gifted, contentious group of people and really made a family of them, and made a family of them during those famous Fridays. Michael mentioned them, I think; I was invited to them several times. It was a great experience, and when Atheneum was founded, I kept saying to Michael, "If we can have anything like Seuil, we'll be doing well."

You know, we were starting from scratch, we were small, and I saw no reason why we couldn't do something like that; but we never really managed. I think part of it is that the culture of the business and the times were agin' us.

#### THE LAST OF THE JUST

MICHAEL BESSIE: When we started Atheneum, in the spring of 1959, we decided we would publish nothing for a year. We needed a year to collect a list. I went off to Europe, and circulated in France and Germany and England and Italy, buoyed by the wave of enthusiasm for the new publishing house. We were really the first literary publishing house to start up since Farrar, Straus, and that was 15 years before; and I had published a lot of stuff from Europe; and so there was a great deal of good will for us.

When I got to France, the last stop, I met with my old friend Paul Flamand and begged of him something for the new house. He said, "Well, we've got one thing here. It's not finished yet and it's very strange, and I don't know what your reaction to it will be; but when we get it in finished, which we should in a month or two, I'll send it to you." And along in August came this manuscript, in French, which was a novel, a Holocaust novel. It began with a pogrom in England in the 12th century and ended with the gas chambers at Auschwitz. I read it all night and went into the office the next day, and said to my colleagues, "I'm going to describe the book briefly. I've already called Paul Flamand and said that we want it, and I've committed us to pay" — I think it was — "a \$2500 advance for it, which is what he asked for." I described it to them, and they said, "Are you sure?" I said: "Yes."

Because by this time, in 1959, *anybody* would have told you that we were fed up to the gills with the Holocaust! You know, starting in 1945, '46, there was a great flood of books, some of them wonderful books, about the Holocaust, the Jews, etc.; understandably, my partners were very suspicious. All I said was, "This book moved me deeply," and I was in a position to say we wanted to publish it. [*The book was the beautiful THE LAST OF THE JUST, by André Schwartz-Bart.*]

That goes back to your question a while ago about the Fanon—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: My question was this: You said that, *à propos* publishing Fanon, or not publishing him, you might have made a different decision at Atheneum than you did at Harper's. Why is that?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Quite simply because at Atheneum I would have had nobody to answer to for that decision except myself. You know, the real reason that I wanted to start Atheneum — aside from the adventure of starting your own publishing house — was that, after 13 years at Harper, there was a question in my mind: "Could I do it if the buck stopped here?" Every book I published at Harper had Cass Canfield or



somebody else as the ultimate authority. I had to get his agreement, his approval. It wasn't difficult. There were a certain number of things under those circumstances that he would just say yes to, because I put it to him strongly. When he was dubious about it, he would say, "Would you be really miserable if we don't publish this?" Talk about collegiality: that was his way of running the place.

Anyhow, THE LAST OF THE JUST: I had no hesitation in saying to Pat and Hiram, "We must publish this book. I don't think," said I, genius that I am, "that we're going to sell very many copies; but I've only had to pay 2500 bucks for it, and I've got an idea for the translator, if he will do it." They couldn't say no. Three weeks later, the book was published in France, created a sensation, became the number-one best-seller in France, got the Prix Goncourt; so, who looks good?

Next miracle: we get a really good translation. It's a book written by somebody whose first language is Yiddish. Schwartz-Bart's first language was Yiddish; French was his third. He was an Auschwitz child who ended up in France, and it's hard to describe the French in which that book was written; so the problem that it presented to the translator! The good Lord presented me with Steven Becker, then just emerging from an iron lung. At the age of 29, after publishing two or three books and starting a family, Steve got Landry's paralysis, which is rarer but more fatal than polio. Steve had a Jewish background, had religious parents. He was a miraculous linguist. He was still on his back! I sent him the book, and he said, "I will love to do it." And he did a miracle in translation, partly because he was just back from the dead himself. You know, those things sometimes combine; and in this case, they did.

Go back to your question about the Fanon book [WRETCHED OF THE EARTH]: if Cornelia had brought in the Fanon at Atheneum, for two reasons I think I would have said yes. One is because I would have been in a position to say yes without contradiction from somebody else; I wouldn't have had to justify that decision.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But did you have to justify the "no"? Well, to Cornelia you did.

MICHAEL BESSIE: No: to myself. Yes, to Cornelia, and to myself. And that's the difference. Look, when we started Atheneum, I found myself saying to myself, "You can't call yourself a publisher until your decision is the last one." Nobody else to lean on. Pat [Knopf — Alfred A. Knopf, Jr.] always had his parents, and I always had Cass Canfield or somebody else. Now, I'd got a whole series of people on whom I placed responsibility or shared judgment with. And the great trick in publishing — which is why, by and large, small publishing is, what shall I say, the more *responsible* act — is doing it to one's satisfaction. And I've done it, for the most part, to my own satisfaction.

### *Atheneum*

MICHAEL BESSIE: I became friends with Alfred Knopf Jr. — Pat Knopf — who was essentially the sales and marketing manager of his father and mother's house; and in the course of a lunch one day, Pat said to me, out of the blue: "I don't suppose anything would ever persuade you to leave Harper." And I, without forethought, said, "I'm happy at Harper; good job, decent pay. But there are two things that would cause me to leave. One is an opportunity to join you at the house of Knopf, where somebody is now badly needed. Your father and mother are getting old. They don't admit editorial authority to anyone else." The chief editor was a fellow named Harold Straus.

The Knopfs were merciless in their way of dealing with other people, including their son. And I said, "You will need a chief editorial person." He said, "Do you really mean it?" I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "What's the other thing that would cause you to leave Harper?"

I said, "Sounds crazy, but the opportunity to start a house of my, or our, own."

About a week or ten days after, he came back to me and said, "I've talked to my parents, and they entertain the idea; let's talk about it." In a series of discussions, we outlined an arrangement under which I would come to Knopf. I would be, at the moment, the editor-in-chief; and I would become Pat's partner on the retirement of his parents, by the acquisition of a sufficient number of shares to bring that about. I wasn't going to despoil him of his inheritance. And it was all agreed. Then one day, I get a note from Pat that says, "This is most difficult note I've ever had to write. My mother's just come back from Europe, and she won't have it. She has told my father, 'You mustn't do this.'" He said, "I am miserable; I don't want to talk."

Several weeks later, came a call from Pat saying, "Were you serious when you said that you might be interested in starting your own publishing house with somebody, specifically me?" I said I didn't think it was a possibility but, yes.

"Come to lunch today," he said.

Third person at lunch was a fellow named Richard Ernst, who was a classmate of mine at Harvard, who was a cousin of my then-wife, and who had had the good sense to marry a woman whose maiden name was Bloomingdale; and who was trained as a lawyer, and who was investing good Bloomingdale money in enterprises that his friends started. He was a benign investor. The year was 1959.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: He wanted return, but not a hand in it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: He wanted to smile upon it. He didn't want to play a role in it, not at all. So, we had lunch, and Ernst said, "You guys serious about this?" We said yes, we were. He said, "Okay, give me a plan. I'll put some money in it, and we'll find some other investors." So we did a plan; and what it came down to was finding four people, each of whom would put in 250,000 bucks. They had to be rich, and not care what happened to that sum of money, Ernst being the first. Among us, we found three more. That's how Atheneum started.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That was real money then.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, we checked around, and people said, "What you need to get started on a small scale, you need about seven or eight hundred thousand dollars." So we said okay, and got a million. In actual point of fact, we had to make a second call.

Two extraordinary things about Atheneum: the people who put up the money — Pat and I didn't put up a cent — the people who put up the money *gave* us 51% of the vote. We could do anything with the firm except sell it; and that, you may be sure, is very unusual. 1959 was a glorious time in many ways; it became so. That's how Atheneum started. I suppose I could say I owe it to Blanche Knopf, who couldn't stand me.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you and Cornelia were both at Harper. Did you go to Atheneum, Cornelia, as well?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I went when they were ready for me. I had a job that was really an interim job [*at The Reader's Digest; see Part 2, next issue*], and a funny job, which in its peculiar way taught me a great deal; but I really was biding my time to join Atheneum, which I did.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What did you do at Atheneum? And what did you intend to do at Atheneum?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Edit.

### *Atheneum, 2*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Atheneum had what you called “luck.”

MICHAEL BESSIE: Sure did. How many publishing houses that pretend to be literary have a number-one best-seller on each of their first three lists?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And those were?

MICHAEL BESSIE: The first was the Schwartz-Bart. Second, the first *THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT* 1960, by Theodore White. And the third was *THE ROTHSCHILDS*, by Frederick Morton, which sold very well. The timing was right, as we said before, and, to a certain extent, as Mr. Dooley said, “The victor belongs to the spoils.” Cornelia will tell you about what young Roger Straus told us when he went back [to Farrar, Straus & Giroux] — for the second time, I guess — after they’d had that terrific success with that novel by the lawyer, what was his name, Scott Turow. Roger said, “You know, everybody’s now got to have an assistant.”

CORNELIA BESSIE: Young Roger, whom I’m very fond of, has a marvelously clear and keen view of publishing. He once said to me, “The most dangerous moment in a publisher’s life is after the first big success.” It’s a very smart observation.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But you didn’t bobble it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: In a sense, we did.

CORNELIA BESSIE: All of a sudden, there were 60 people on the payroll.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When was this?

MICHAEL BESSIE: In the course of two or three years after our start. We had to make a second call on our investors; we collected another almost a million, because we needed it.

Look, we were determined, Pat and I, at the start, that we would publish children’s books and we tried to get Margaret MacElderry to come with us, but she was tied to Harcourt [-Brace, Jovanovich], she thought, and so she couldn’t. I said, “Margaret,” — she’s one of my oldest friends — “you’ve got to find somebody for us.” And she did: she found an absolute genius in Jean Karl, who was then working for the [United] Methodist Publishing House [/Abingdon Press]. Jean came; and we had set aside 250,000 bucks out of our kitty to start children’s books. With that 250,000 bucks, and a little bit more, Jean within a couple of years was profitable. She was beginning to get Newberrys [*awards given for children’s literature*]. We subsequently got Margaret because the idiots at Harcourt fired her. They told her that her books weren’t adequately “course-adjusted” for the children’s market.

### *Atheneum, 3*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You were not there for the whole life of Atheneum?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I was there the first 16 years.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You were an owner and a director, and your backers would not allow you to sell Atheneum.

MICHAEL BESSIE: That was the only restriction. Pat and I divided the majority shares when Hiram left; they were originally divided three ways, then two ways.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When he left, his shares reverted?

MICHAEL BESSIE: We bought them back. In any event, we started publishing in 1960, and everything was glorious, for just about ten years. We prospered; we were profitable. We weren't profitable the first year or two, but we became so by the third year. And we grew — too much, I think — but anyhow, we grew, we were a presence. As a symbol of it, I was the only person, to this day, from a small publishing house who became chairman of the Publishers Association. There's never been another: there wasn't before, and there hasn't been since. As a general rule, the chairman of the Publishers Association is the head of one of the five or six big houses, for obvious reasons: pays the most dues; swings the most weight.

Why did they make me the head of it? Maybe because I'm a stand-up Jewish comic, and they needed one.

In any event, those ten years were glorious. But by 1970, Pat, in particular, and I began to get the wind up. We were both now well into our 50s. We had 60 employees. Our backlist had not grown sufficiently to be a real cushion. And also, the publishing business turned down in 1970. And we, particularly Pat — Pat got scared. The responsibility of it weighed on him very heavily. And so, he decided, and I agreed, that we had to do what everybody else was doing. By "everybody else" I mean Knopf, Viking, Little, Brown, you name it: they were all getting under the umbrellas, they were all selling to Random House or Simon & Schuster or Time, Inc.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is there a "why" behind that?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes: capital needs. Business was becoming more expensive. Authors were getting larger advances. You had to compete in marketing. Advertising became more expensive.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The large companies were publicly owned? Random House, for example?

MICHAEL BESSIE: They were either publicly owned — Random was owned by RCA, for a while, though now it's privately owned, by the Newhouses — or private. And Pat and I got worried, vis-à-vis our employees. If either Pat or I had died at that point, our estates couldn't have coped with the tax burden on our Atheneum shares, which had appreciated sufficiently in value, and yet there was no market for them. Successful small business in America — you see it happening now in the computer field: as soon as a small computer firm is successful, Bill Gates or somebody buys it. And the reason for this is because they can't compete in the big market, unless they grow the way Microsoft did.

Anyhow, we got scared, because all of a sudden, we were nearly alone. Farrar, Straus was holding on, but then Roger Straus and his wife both are wealthy people. Pat and I were not. And so, Pat gave me the assignment, as the sort of outside person, to find somebody to buy us. And the first person who showed up and was interested was from, of all places, Raytheon. Raytheon then owned [D. C.] Heath, the academic publishers.

CORNELIA BESSIE: We ought also to speak of the time. Of a time when big, really very business-oriented companies, felt rich. You remember, in the 19th century when a rich man was really rich, he kept a *danseuse* in a *garçonnière*. The big companies wanted their "*danseuses*," which were these small, stylish imprints.

MICHAEL BESSIE: We did sell part to Raytheon; Raytheon bought 10% of our stock. We needed some cash at that point, and that's how we devised it. Those of us who sold our stock put our money back into Atheneum.

In any event, I spent four years, from 1971 to 1975, trying to sell Atheneum, and I had the same response almost everywhere.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How could you sell by then? Your original backers had made it a condition that you couldn't.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, we had gone to them and said, "We've got to get under the umbrella." They were delighted at the idea because they would have made a lot of money out of it. Two of them had put in \$250,000 and two of them had put in \$500,000. They had gotten a fair part of their money back, because we were a Subchapter S corporation, which meant our first two years' losses came off their tax returns; so their actual out-of-pocket investment in Atheneum was less than what they had put in.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Inflation was growing then.

MICHAEL BESSIE: A problem — also, the Vietnam War, the atmosphere of the country.... I really covered the waterfront, and everybody said the same thing. Kay Graham [*owner of the Washington Post and Newsweek*] said, "Oh, absolutely, we'd love to own it!" And then, their accountants would take a look at our books and say, "Welllll, a very distinguished imprint, but...."

So, after several years of trying to do it, we found two possible buyers. One was the Los Angeles *Times-Mirror*, which was quite big in book publishing then; still is. They made us an offer, actually: a little bit more than book value. The other, in a sense more serious, purchaser was my old firm of Harper, then being run by Win[throp] Knowlton, who was beguiled partly by me — let's see, 1975 was the year that I was elected chairman of the Publishers Association, so that I was, in the publishing world, a fairly public figure. Knowlton offered to buy us, for a little bit more than that. I was for it, and Pat was against it. Pat was against it for very good reasons: he couldn't see himself working for anybody else, anyhow; but he really couldn't see himself working for Harper, or for me. The deal with Harper was that Harper would buy Atheneum and I would be made publisher of the house.

In the end, Knowlton bought me and not Atheneum. In one of those marvelous board meetings, our board of directors voted not to accept the Harper offer. I had told them I didn't want to put a gun to their heads, but that if they didn't accept the Harper offer, I was going to leave. As I put it openly to them, "Atheneum has a problem that I can no longer solve." This is partly a function of my own inability, for example, to attract and publish commercial fiction. By this time, Atheneum needed blockbusters, needed a couple a year — everybody does, but Atheneum *really* did. I didn't feel I could do that. And I had gotten Herman Golub as chief editor, and he was good — he had brought [James] Clavell [*author of TAIPAN*] and several other blockbusters — but more was needed. And also, I had been there 16 years, and I was no longer interested in being president of a publishing company. My principal interest was books and writers, and I wanted to stop pretending to be a corporate officer, which I didn't succeed in doing, but which I tried to do.

Knowlton offered me a good deal: go back to Harper; specifically, to be senior vice-president until I became 65, and then Harper would finance Cornelia and me in Bessie Books: which was the deal, and which I wanted. I don't think either of us foresaw the problems that we would have at Harper.

CORNELIA BESSIE: We didn't foresee the problems. The atmosphere in publishing had so changed in the years between when we signed the agreement and when we wanted to start Bessie Books — the agreement was that we could have Bessie Books on demand — that when we demanded, we thought, "Are they going to honor their agreement?" Because, by then, the atmosphere in publishing had greatly changed. But to our pleasure, they did.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This was between 1975 and—

MICHAEL BESSIE: 1975 and — I became 65 in 1981.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What had changed?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, these had been boom years, and it was during those boom years, really, that the agreement was made. Money then disappeared on the education side. All kinds of financial things happened.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The economy started to change about 1972.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, it was an entirely different publishing atmosphere; so it was honorable of them to keep to their agreement.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Book-publishing is counter-cyclical, it reacts slowly and late to changes in the economy, and therefore is in recession after the recession is over, and doesn't get into it until it's been on for a while.

And so, the board of Atheneum bought back my stock at a calculated value, which didn't make me a rich man but gave me some money, and I went to Harper, to be joined subsequently by Cornelia. Pat, within two years, merged with Scribner's. It wasn't a buy, either way; they merged the two firms. Scribner's was private, I think, owned by the family.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This must have been about 1978?

MICHAEL BESSIE: It was '77 or '78; I think it was consummated in '78. With the Scribner-Atheneum merger completed, it was less than two years before Macmillan bought the combo. That was a very successful operation, because Macmillan paid quite a lot for it. *[Macmillan was then publicly owned; afterward it was bought by Robert Maxwell, the late English media baron who thus acquired Scribner's, Atheneum, the Free Press, and Collier Books and formed a conglomerate he called Maxwell-Macmillan.]*

So, that's how Atheneum came to its ante-penultimate situation. Have I explained why that happened? I think so. I think it happened partly because of the changes in circumstances, partly because small publishing firms were having an increasingly difficult time surviving as independent entities, because they couldn't have the capital to compete, (a) for authors, and (b) for a place in the market. And also, I'll admit that I, too, got the wind up a bit. A bad year would have been bad for us; two bad years would perhaps not have been fatal, but would have been pretty close to it. There is a very low ceiling on profitability of quality publishing. If the firm makes more than 4% or 5%, it's because of blockbusters; otherwise, the cushion is not there.

And the same thing was operating everywhere. Why did Random House sell to RCA? Just a little before that, Random House was a prosperous firm. Bennet Cerf was no longer head. He had brought Bob Bernstein from Simon & Schuster: and then Bob subsequently brought [Robert] Gottlieb *[later head of Knopf; afterward, editor of The New Yorker]*, Tony Schulte, and Nina Borne: a trio. By the time of the sale to RCA, Bob Bernstein was head of the house. I don't know what the price was; and of course, subsequently, RCA sold it. Why? Because RCA discovered that you can't make as much money in book publishing as you can in TVs and radios.

### *Jews and Publishing*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: We talked a bit earlier about about Jews and publishing. Would you say more about this?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, yes; it's a subject of interest to me, and I'll tell you why. Harold Guinzburg was the founder and financier of The Viking Press, and he inherited a sizable fortune from the dress-goods business. In fact, it was said that the important publishing houses, American publishing houses, founded in the 1920s, were

almost uniformly products of the dry-goods business. Knopf was started by Knopf money: Alfred's father made his money in textiles. Simon and Schuster were two guys both of whose parents were in the dry-goods business; and so on, and so on.

When I came back from the war, I had in effect been invited to join a couple of places, Harper being one of them. Harold Guinzburg had become a good friend, and suggested that I might want to join Viking. I was attracted to Harper for a variety of reasons, one of which was *Harper's Magazine*. It had interested me a lot and was then an integral part of the house. I called Harold to tell him I was thinking about going to Harper, and what did he think? He and Cass were very close friends. He said, "I think it's a great idea. It's time that Harper had a Jewish editor. It's time that Harper had a Jewish person in the hierarchy." I was surprised by that. And, indeed, it was accurate, because when I came to Harper I was the only Jew at that level. But I wasn't ever made to feel that.

Shortly after I came to Harper I began to get to know the agents. One of the most important of them was a woman named Helen Strauss, who was the literary department of William Morris, and she and I became friends. She said to me one day, "You know, you're really very bright, and you're going to be a real success, but you'll never be president of the company." I said, "Why not?" She said, "You're Jewish."

I cite that because that's the way the world was. And had been. Now, I think it's no longer true. I think a somewhat similar thing has happened as far as women in publishing are concerned, though I think the Jews are doing better than women, by and large.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Was Atheneum considered a "Jewish house"?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, Hiram Hayden proudly informed us one day that he gathered he was known as our "golden goy," which he was—

CORNELIA BESSIE: No, he wasn't!

MICHAEL BESSIE: I don't think— But by that time, namely 1960, things had changed.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And so, that was, in a sense, a left-over joke.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes. What I described as true in 1946-47 really ceased to be, in the 1950s. In the course of the 50 years I've been at it [publishing], I really think there has been a very considerable change. I don't think that what was essentially a segregated publishing world in America, and also in England, still exists.

(End of Part 1)

*In Part 2, (Vol. 2, No. 1) Cornelia Bessie talks about editing, reading, and how she discovered THE LEOPARD; Michael Bessie talks about Atheneum's failures, and the evolution of Harper and Bros. into HarperCollins.*

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*Some Books Published by Michael and CORNELIA BESSIE:*

Edward Albee, WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, and others

Robert Ardrey, AFRICAN GENESIS; THE TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE, and others

\*Miguel Angel Asturias, EL SEÑOR PRESIDENTE

Marcel Aymé, URANUS, and others

Luigi Barzini, THE ITALIANS, and others  
 Georgio Bassani, THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI CONTINIS, and others  
 Daniel Boorstin, THE IMAGE, and others  
 Peter Brook, THE EMPTY SPACE, and others  
 John Cheever, THE WAPSHOT CHRONICLE, and others  
 Richard Crossman , et al., THE GOD THAT FAILED  
 \*The Dalai Lama, FREEDOM IN EXILE  
 Jan de Hartog, THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM, and others  
 Freeman Dyson, DISTURBING THE UNIVERSE, and others  
 John K. Fairbank, THE GREAT CHINESE REVOLUTION, and others  
 Janet Flanner, PARIS JOURNAL, and others  
 \*Mikhail Gorbachev, PERESTROIKA  
 Yoram Kaniuk, ADAM RESURRECTED, and others  
 \*Peter Medawar, THE LIVING SCIENCE, and others  
 Nadezhda Mandelstam, HOPE AGAINST HOPE and HOPE ABANDONED  
 Alan Moorhead, GALLIPOLI, and others  
 Frederick Morton, THE ROTHSCHILDS  
 Grandma Moses, MY LIFE'S HISTORY  
 Nigel Nicolson, PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE, and others  
 Harold Nicolson, DIARIES  
 \*Anwar el-Sadat, IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY  
 André Schwartz-Bart, THE LAST OF THE JUST  
 Peter Shaffer, AMADEUS  
 Ignazio Silone, FONTAMARA, and others  
 \*Alexander Solzhenitsyn, THE OAK AND THE CALF, and others  
 Saul Steinberg, THE ART OF LIVING, and others  
 Alice B. Toklas, THE COOKBOOK  
 Kenneth Tynan, CURTAINS, and others  
 \*James Watson, THE DOUBLE HELIX  
 Theodore H. White, THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1960, and others  
 Peter Weiss, THE PERSECUTION AND ASSASSINATION OF JEAN-PAUL MARAT AS  
 PERFORMED BY THE INMATES OF THE ASYLUM OF CHARENTON UNDER  
 THE DIRECTION OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE, and others  
 \*Elie Wiesel, THE CITY BEYOND THE WALLS

\*Nobel Prize



## Kundera's Music Teacher: Variation on a Theme, with Two Short Texts

Several editors and publishers left us recently, among them Catharine Carver, editor of such good and varied writers as Hannah Arendt, Saul Bellow, John Berryman, Richard Ellmann, William Gaddis, Flannery O'Connor; Gila Bercovitch, a splendid woman who was until recently editor-in-chief at the Library of America, a press which restores our literature to us as its authors meant us to read it; Kenneth McCormick, generous of spirit even in physical decline, who in the 1960s held the post of chief editor at Doubleday, then owned by the Doubleday family; and James Laughlin, founder of New Directions: the man who published the first Modernist writers Americans read, and the first serious books many of us when young bought for ourselves.

One quality these people shared was caring about books, in the sense that I grew up with: real books, the kind you kept and reread, probably in paperback. Who could afford hardbounds? Books were precious not as objects, but for what they contained: what mattered. "News that stays news," as Pound said famously. When young no one thought about publishers, for what was their purpose if not, as Michael Bessie says elsewhere in this issue, "to serve literature"?

On the other hand, the agony of writers is always an interesting subject, is it not? The real drama of any author's life is unseen, however extravagant his or her public behavior might be. Talking with publishers I've often thought about a particular infliction of theirs: the rejection letter. Publishers may hope to serve literature; writers write it. Gila Bercovitch, who was forthright and minatory, used to remind me how stupid editors could be, and have been, in the history of American letters.

Perhaps the French best understand the tragicomedy of rejection, for they comprehend perfectly, as well, the grandeur of the writer's undertaking, as shown in the following exchange between Margaret Duras and her interlocutor:

Q: What is the common trait of all literature, good and bad?

A: The fact that writing is a fierce need, a tragic need, in all writers, often more so in bad writers than in good ones. It is an undertaking that in some cases requires extraordinary moral courage. The writer sacrifices not only leisure time but also work time in order to write his novel. He is always alone, especially if he lives in the provinces, in which case he writes in order to avoid asphyxiation. Needless to say, rejection is always devastating, sometimes tragic. To reject a manuscript, especially a first manuscript, is to reject the whole man, to impugn his being.

Yet, during his simplest, most transparent hours, if he is granted them, a writer may smile at his human foolishness and return to the real work. Occasionally I reread a passage by Milan Kundera in which he recalls an incident from his youth. He writes:

When I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I used to take lessons in musical composition. Not because I was a child prodigy but because of my father's quiet tact. It was during the war, and a friend of his, a Jewish composer, was required to wear the yellow star; people had begun to avoid him. Not

knowing how to declare his solidarity, my father thought of asking him just then to give me lessons. They were confiscating Jewish apartments, and the composer kept having to move on to smaller and smaller places, ending up, just before he left for Theresienstadt, in a little flat where many people were camping, crammed, in every room. All along, he had held on to the small piano on which I would play my harmony in counterpoint exercises while strangers went about their business around us.

Of all this I retain only my admiration for him, and three or four images. Especially this one: seeing me out after a lesson, he stopped by the door and suddenly said to me: “There are many surprisingly weak passages in Beethoven. But it is the weak passages that bring out the strong ones. It’s like a lawn — if it weren’t there, we couldn’t enjoy the beautiful tree growing on it.”

A peculiar idea. That it has stayed in my memory is even more peculiar. Maybe I felt honored at getting to hear a confidential admission from the teacher, a secret, a great trick of the trade that only the initiated are permitted to know.

Whatever it was, that brief remark from my teacher of the time has haunted me all my life. (I’ve defended it, I’ve fought it, I’ve never finished with it); without it, this text could very certainly not have been written.

But dearer to me than that remark in itself is the image of a man who, a while before his hideous journey, stood thinking aloud, in front of a child, about the problem of composing a work of art.

KM

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# ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion  
www.archipelago.org

Vol. 2, No. 1 Spring 1998

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A CONVERSATION WITH  
CORNELIA AND MICHAEL BESSIE (2)

Katherine McNamara

*In this, second, part of my conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, publishers and editors of Bessie Books, now associated with Counterpoint, they told me about an event which took place more than a decade ago but which turned out to have contemporary, even immediate, resonance. The event they recount — their publication of Gorbachev's memoirs, in 1987 — involved (incidentally) Rupert Murdoch, then the new owner of Harper & Row. Michael Bessie, on the board of Harper, had opposed the sale. Murdoch had also bought William Collins Publishers, the distinguished English firm, combined it with Harper, and retitled the combination HarperCollins. The publishing house now sounded like an advertising agency. At the time of sale, Harper had a signed contract with Gorbachev for his political memoirs, negotiated by Michael Bessie. Murdoch, the neophyte publisher, was known to be strongly anti-communist, and he told Bessie he was "crazy" for publishing the book. The book appeared nonetheless; not long ago, Murdoch even took credit for it. But lately, Murdoch's heavy hand has fallen on another political book, and dropped it. In London in January, his courtiers, (as the English press likes to say) anticipating his disapproval of the political memoirs of Chris Patten, last (Conservative) governor of Hong Kong before its reversion to China, broke their firm's signed contract with the author. The erstwhile anti-Communist has huge business dealings with China, where "making money" is the order of the new day, while Patton had criticized the Chinese government. Nervous, Murdoch's managers provoked the "principled resignation" of the young senior editor who refused to go back on his word and abandon the book he had already praised in public. (See also, "Endnotes.") A number of prominent authors published by HarperCollins roundly denounced Murdoch, to no apparent effect.*

*The Bessies talked about the Gorbachev book late last summer, long before the scandal in London, when we met at their country retreat near Lyme, Connecticut. It is a pretty, book-filled farmhouse and separate office situated amid tall old-growth trees on a sloping back lawn, where they'll offer a visitor an afternoon drink. Michael Bessie is an open-handed host and worldly raconteur, while Cornelia, though more reticent, when amused laughs knowingly. Her handsome, blonde beauty, in no way masking a sharp intelligence, must often have been a trial to her inside the masculine offices of publishing. When she spoke about books and the surprise and pleasure of finding literature — Lampedusa, Harper Lee — her face lit up. Michael, the "outside person" at his old company, Atheneum, spoke with zest about the rough and tumble of publishing during the time when it was run by book men till the time — the present era — when it changed to something else.*

*Before this issue went on-line, I asked Michael Bessie if he would care to comment on the matter of the Patten book and Murdoch's getting rid of it. He declined, saying that on the one hand, this was hardly the first time a book had been in effect suppressed by the head of a publishing company; and on the other, that, at that moment, all he knew was what he had read in the papers, though he was acquainted with and thought well of the*

*editor in question, who had done the honorable thing by leaving. In his voice I detected a certain dryness. Perhaps he was recalling the ambitions of young men and old men and the lay of once-greener playing fields; and, having had a long good run there himself, perhaps he wasn't sorry to be watching this one from the sidelines.*

KM

### Art and Commerce

MICHAEL BESSIE: Up to now, I've been talking about what I'm not so much interested in; I've not talked about what I *am* interested in, which is literature and how does it get published?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Let me quote from an article you wrote for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*<sup>1</sup>: "If the publisher were simply a commodities salesman concerned solely with profit and loss, he might say, 'There it is. Fiction is down, so we concentrate on other lines, and the public be served. But of course, life is never this simple.'" And then you go on to say why life never *is* this simple, concerning the sales of fiction. But my question is: What does it mean to "serve the public"? Who is "the public"?

CORNELIA BESSIE: "Who is the public?" The public are all those people with all those different tastes, some of which may not be yours. You may not think that reading romances is the way you want to spend your evenings, but there are readers out there and they should be served.

What it means, in our lives, is the challenge of the book that may not have the audience, that may not have the obvious audience, but where you say, "This is very good, I want to do this." It comes down to great simplicity, for me. It comes down to whatever you think quality is, and have the arrogance to think that your notion of quality may have some validity.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Basically, of course, what you do, I think, is acquire along the way your likes and dislikes, and your own sense of how widely shared those likes and dislikes are. Give you a simple example: when I started Atheneum, one of the things I knew about myself, and said to Pat Knopf [*Alfred A. Knopf, Jr., co-founder of Atheneum*] — because it was originally just Pat and me — I said, "You know, I have an outstanding weakness: I have no real appreciation or appetite for commercial fiction. I wish I had. And there certainly is some commercial fiction which I enjoy; but I don't have any gift for it." And Pat had already had the notion of inviting Hiram Hayden to join us, because Hiram had already demonstrated not only his commercial skills, but had published people like William Styron. A few years later, we got Hiram to join us.

One of Atheneum's failures during the time when I was in charge was the failure to develop commercial fiction. Now, I say this despite the fact that we published two or three of the most successful commercial books — James Clavell's *TAI PAN*: Herman Golub [*an editor at Atheneum known for his strength in commercial fiction*] brought that in.

The thing that you learn from, mostly, is your mistakes. Cornelia and I muse from time to time over the books we've published — and I can certainly illustrate this — which we were *certain* were going to be commercially successful, and weren't! That doesn't teach you how to avoid such mistakes, but it gives you a notion.

<sup>1</sup>Michael Bessie, "American Writing Today: A Publisher's Viewpoint," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 34:1 Winter 1958, p. 4.

I'm not blaming other people for the commercial fiction, or non-fiction, that I published that didn't succeed: I can't do that, that's undercutting my own judgment.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you mean, to succeed esthetically?

MICHAEL BESSIE: No, no, I mean, succeed in sales. Because, you know, if a book gets a half a dozen reviews, one or two of 'em are bound to be good, and if you forget the others, why, pronounce it a success.

Timing is such an important thing in this domain. There's such a thing as being ahead of the moment. For example, I would never have thought that any of these far-out, other-world, New Age fiction things would have gone, 20 years ago.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Sonny Mehta [*president of the Knopf Group, part of Random House*] said, about ten years ago, that perhaps the next big subject would be the failure of people who had made it in the stock market, then lost it all. He might have had a sense of "failure" as a coming topic.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Editorially, it's very hard to do things that way. For one thing, every book is unique.

The most frequent question you're asked by non-publishing people is, How do you decide what to publish? How do you choose? My answer has become simpler and simpler over the years. I say, "Well, I tend to publish something that I would like to read."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What is "commercial fiction"?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Most simply, it's fiction that —

CORNELIA BESSIE: Jacqueline Susanne.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Jacqueline Susanne?

MICHAEL BESSIE (chuckles): I'm tempted to say, anything that sells over 100,000 copies; but that's a cop-out. Commercial fiction is something that, I think most people would agree, does not have any abiding value, any literary value. There are a lot of ways of describing it: formula fiction, cookie-cutter fiction, fashionable fiction, fiction of the moment. There are a lot of borderline cases. In the eyes of some, W. Somerset Maugham was commercial fiction; but I think that's wrong, I think that he had value longer. The fact that he is now hardly read at all doesn't prove that he won't come back. Is Patrick O'Brian [*the celebrated series of Aubrey-Maturin sea-novels*] "commercial" fiction?

I guess the standard of it is, if it sells enough copies.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* [by Michael Ondaatje] commercial fiction?

MICHAEL BESSIE: You've read the book; I haven't.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I loved the book; it's a very good book. It's an interesting book that, thanks to a movie and a sales push, has had a lot of readership.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I liked the movie a lot, and on the way out I said — I like to talk about things afterward; Cornelia doesn't — I said, "What's the book got that the movie *hasn't* got?" and, without hesitation, she said: "Words."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It was *Lawrence Out of Africa*.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Exactly.

CORNELIA BESSIE (regretfully): Hmmmm.

MICHAEL BESSIE: It was; but it was beautifully made.

KATHERINE McNAMARA (laughing): How can you miss with sand dunes and gorgeous haircuts?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I assure you that a lot of movies get made with sand dunes and girls with gorgeous haircuts, but have failed. (Laughter from all) Anyway, my

answer to that knowing question is, try to publish what you would like to read, yourself! Now, for some people, that's an indulgence.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you speak about what commercial fiction is? When you read manuscripts, do you sort of divide them, or sort them, into categories?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No. Because, like Michael, I'm not good at commercial fiction, it bores me.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So, you know what commercial fiction is when you read it.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I know what it is when I read it. To be honest, it's not a problem we tend to have, because it doesn't tend to come our way. People know we're not interested. We can occasionally tell that something's going to be successful but that we want no part of it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Also, there's a momentum for commercial fiction. If somebody's novel number one or number two or whatever has sold very well, that becomes almost guaranteed reading, because people who enjoy the first book will buy the second. They may be deceived by it, or it may not satisfy them, and that certainly has happened, but—

CORNELIA BESSIE: Ondaatje is a good example of the other, which is that the first books didn't sell.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: No, but they were terrific books.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Terrific books.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY* is delightful; *IN THE SKIN OF A LION* is—

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is wonderful.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I couldn't read *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*; I thought it was too *fine*; and yet, I think he writes the most sensuous, and sensual, masculine poetry in North America.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I read *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* under very special circumstances. I read it in central Italy while one of my best friends was dying, and so it had an enormous effect on me. I can't divorce my response to the book from that.

### *Harper's, Gorbachev's PERESTROIKA, and Rupert Murdoch*

MICHAEL BESSIE: Is what I said reasonable? Should you publish what you like, or, more importantly, should you not publish what you don't like? Well, there are a lot of books out there, and I'm kind of opposed to publishing a book that you don't really like. I used to do a session at Stanford: I'd give 'em a list of books, saying, "Would you publish?" One of the books on the list was *MEIN KAMPF*: would you publish it? When I got into publishing, at the end of the war, this is the thing that young editors like me would sit around arguing about.

My own feeling, about myself, anyhow, as a publisher is: I don't want to publish things I don't like.

An example of how this came to roost: During the first round that I was in at Harper, Canfield was, as I was, a liberal Democrat. We had a problem, which was that we had virtually become publishers to the Democratic party. Canfield had published Roosevelt, Mrs. Roosevelt, Roosevelt and Hopkins. He and Jack Fisher and Evan Thomas and I all had friends in the liberal Democratic camp. The house was being increasingly characterized by it; so we *consciously* set out to find some Republican books. That's why we competed vigorously for Eisenhower, but didn't get it —

Doubleday got it — and I think the reason we didn't get it, probably, was the reputation.

Now, interesting example of the opposite: It's a long story as to how we came to publish Gorbachev. Because it really started with an idea which I gave to a Russian friend at the embassy in Washington. It took a couple of years to come about. The year I'm talking about was 1986; it was at Harper and Row; we had not yet sold the firm to Murdoch. I had gotten this idea, and then all of a sudden it began to happen. [*Bessie Books was then an imprint financed by Harper & Row.*]

So: in April of 1987, the Gorbachev thing is cooking, very secretly, and Harper is sold to Rupert Murdoch.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You were on the board of Harper and you opposed it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes; but I lost. But profited financially. Now Rupert Murdoch suddenly is the owner; and Brooks Thomas, who was then the head of the house, said, "You know, I think you ought to tell Murdoch," who is very conservative, an anti-Communist. "I think you should tell him about this deal with Gorbachev." So I did; I called Rupert on the phone and I described to him what the situation was. He said, "You mean you're going to give Gorbachev \$500,000 for a lot of Communist propaganda?" I said, "Rupert, I'll remind you: the understanding is that we don't sign the contract until we have a manuscript; and we don't give him a cent until we sign the contract." Believe it or not, that was the situation with the head of the Soviet Union!

CORNELIA BESSIE: And we got world rights.

MICHAEL BESSIE: World rights: I mean, I've occasionally been very lucky. And so, Rupert says: "Well, I think you're crazy. Are you committed to it?" I said, "Yes." Meaning, are you and the house of Harper committed to it? Yes. "Well, I think you're mad."

CORNELIA BESSIE: Just to interject: I think — we don't know this — but I *think*, also, that was a different Rupert Murdoch. He was, then, a book publisher for two weeks.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Trying to be, anyhow.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He was a neophyte.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Cornelia and I go to Russia, and we get the manuscript, finally, in English; and we like it; and we sign the contract.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: He [Gorbachev] had had it translated? You had it translated?

MICHAEL BESSIE: He had had it translated. That was, again, one of the conditions.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He had had it translated in a week, by five people, in Russia, into something that resembled English.

MICHAEL BESSIE: It wasn't really too bad. Cornelia did a very fine editing job on it, which he asked us to do. I don't know how I lucked into this understanding.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: He had done other things in life; he hadn't dealt with publishers. (Chuckle)

CORNELIA BESSIE: That's true! As you'll see, when the story goes on.

MICHAEL BESSIE: So now, as Cornelia said, she takes the manuscript back to New York, and I take it to London, where the person running HarperCollins—

CORNELIA BESSIE: Let's do some of the in-between.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes; do.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, what's interesting is what happened in Russia, then the Soviet Union. Our cover was the Moscow Book Fair, which meant there were a lot of



foreign publishers there — German, English, French — and as our negotiation went on, the book fair ended and people started to leave. We suddenly realized that the apparatchiks who were going with us for one reason or another, had put all their eggs in one basket, and we had not yet said yes. That they were, in a sense, committed to us because they had said, “This is our choice.” If we had said no, it could be very difficult for their careers. There were a lot of things going on at the same time. There was a day when we were told, “The manuscript has left the place where he is vacationing.”<sup>2</sup>

KATHERINE McNAMARA (laughing): It sounds like a code!

MICHAEL BESSIE: The whole thing was like Le Carré.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It *was* Le Carré. Gorbachev had a code name: “The Man,” as in, “The Man has finished the manuscript” — that sort of thing. And so, we were told, “The Man has finished it, it is in a plane on its way to Moscow. We will put it in translation; you will have it in five days. Where will you be in five days?”

We said, “Er, um, in Leningrad.” I wanted to see The Hermitage. They said, “You will get it in Leningrad in five days.” Now, we had thought that the time would come when we would get the manuscript, sitting cheerfully in our office in New York, so that if we said no, we would be *there*. We had not thought this would happen. There were these good scenarios we told ourselves — “Taxi accident on the Nevsky Prospekt.” (Laughing) Anyhow, we got the manuscript; the manuscript came in two copies. We read it; we decided it was certainly good enough to publish; and the contract got signed. And then came the phone call that said: “Do you have any editorial suggestions?” Which we never thought would happen. We had one day before the plane left. So we did something we’ve never done with any other book: we divided it in half, and we each edited half, and sent him those suggestions. We never thought the day would come when he would say, “Do you have any comment?” We were unprepared for that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Neophyte author.

CORNELIA BESSIE (chuckling): Yes.

MICHAEL BESSIE: To finish with the Murdochian point: the head for Murdoch of HarperCollins was Ian Chapman, in London, and he happened to be in London then. I took the manuscript there because it was Sunday, and Ian and a couple of other of the people who ran things were excited about it. The big thing in London publishing for a book like that is to sell serial rights, because that’s big money; and so, we had to decide by Monday morning what we were going to do about serials. Rupert Murdoch owned the London *Times*. There were four big Sunday newspapers; Ian had decided we should show it first to the Sunday *Times*. He had also decided, knowing his way around those things, that we were going to ask £200,000, which was a lot of money. So he told the editor of *The Times* on Monday morning, “We’ve got this very exciting manuscript: we want to give it to you on first offer, not simultaneously with the other papers.” So the guy comes over and spends the day at the office. He read it and was sufficiently impressed to say, as he went back to his office, “I’ve got to call Rupert.” (Chuckling in the background.) And Ian said to him, “I remind you: you love an exclusive, and we’re asking £200,000.” So the guy goes back, and a little while later, calls Ian, and says, “I am authorized to offer you £75,000.” Ian says, “Uh-uh.” “Well, Rupert thinks you’re all out of your minds. A book by Gorbachev can’t possibly be worth any more than that, and I’m not authorized to go beyond £75,000.” We say, “Well, that means that, tomorrow morning, we’ll offer it to the other three Sunday newspapers.” Which we did. And got three offers, of which the highest was £175,000, and that’s what it was sold for.

Now: why do I enjoy the story so much? Because, about three or four or five months ago, there was a long story about Rupert Murdoch in *The New Yorker* by Ken Auletta, and Rupert tells this story entirely differently: *he* had the idea for the Gorbachev book! So you see, history corrects itself.

KATHERINE McNAMARA (laughing): The first time as tragedy; the second time, as farce?

MICHAEL BESSIE: And either time, it's profitable! (General laughter.)

CORNELIA BESSIE: You hope.

MICHAEL BESSIE: That book was an immense success, it made a lot of money. It made millions. We had enormous foreign rights — it was an immensely successful book. It was more than a book, it was an event.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is this the moment for comic relief?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, it is.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He [indicating MB] is still in London—

MICHAEL BESSIE: Collins [*respected British publishing house bought by Murdoch and merged with Harper & Row*] had the printing plant in Scotland—

CORNELIA BESSIE: What Gorbachev wanted: he didn't argue about money; the one thing that he really wanted was to have it published on the 70th anniversary of the Revolution.

MICHAEL BESSIE: So it had to be published on November 1.

CORNELIA BESSIE: And this was September, October—

MICHAEL BESSIE: And I said it couldn't be done. And he said, "Well, it has to be." So we called London, and Ian Chapman said, "Of course it can be done, in our plant here."

CORNELIA BESSIE: Actually, that was fudged; but that's another story. Officially, we published on the day we had promised.

So: he is still in London. I'm in New York. They've had these excited calls from London, so they're now, more or less, paying a little bit of attention. There's a meeting. There was a changeover in the head of the trade department at that point; and there are these guys who have to throw their weight around. The first thing is: "*Perestroika*: who knows what that means?" We've got to change the title. I said, "That *is* the title." "Well, we've got to change it." "You can't change it: that's the title." "Well, who knows what it means?" I said, "Two months ago you didn't know what *glasnost* meant. It's now part of the American language." Finally, I lost my patience. I said, "Fellows: have you noticed: he's a *head of state*!" (Laughs.) Silence in the room.

Later, since the press couldn't reach the author, the calls from all over the world came to us. This started during the time while Michael was in London, and I and my assistant were the full might of Bessie Books. We got very good, very quickly, at handling the hard questions. On the one hand, we wanted it to have as much exposure as possible; on the other hand, we didn't want to give away the book. What we were doing was presenting it as an event, which indeed it was.

This is, again, comic relief: When we were sitting in that plane as it took off from Leningrad, I said to Michael, "You know, we won't get lucky twice. We had one bit of luck when we had Sadat's book<sup>3</sup> in proof when he went to Jerusalem—"

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Oh!

MICHAEL BESSIE: Which is to say: we had not known he was going; we had the book.

CORNELIA BESSIE: We had it, and so we could publish at that time. I said, "Gorbachev won't come to America. We won't get lucky twice." Well, that was exactly

the time when he came and when there was ‘Gorby-mania’; do you remember when he was getting out of the limousine in the middle of Washington and shaking hands?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Footnote: we tried to figure out — obviously, a lot of other things happened in this story — we tried to figure out why we were selected; indeed, we asked the Russian ambassador in Washington. He said, “Partly because it was your idea, you were first.”

But in the back of my mind was that we had published a lot of Russian stuff up until then: Solzhenitsyn, Mandlestam, all dissident literature. I thought this was going to queer us for the Gorbachev book; but quite the contrary. Nobody could say we were captive publishers.

### *Education of an Editor*

KATHERINE McNAMARA (to CB): What did you do, from the time Atheneum was being sold [*see Part 1*] to the time you joined Harper’s?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I worried. I went to India.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But when did you *know*, in fact, that you were an editor, and even a publisher?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Ah. Interesting question. To go back to the then-Harper’s, the “Canfield Plantation”: one of the things that was very obvious was that I had had a very sheltered life as far as the business world is concerned. My father wasn’t really a business man. I’d not heard business discussed, I had no business sense at all. My father was an art dealer, but he was an independent spirit, and what was talked about at table was never business. So, I came to Harper’s really very naive; and also, as far as the female side goes, it was “pre-feminism.” There came into Harper’s, at exactly the same time I did, a young man who was a Harvard graduate, who came from the right kind of family, who, I think, was Porcellian, probably — if he wasn’t, he should have been — and, because we happened to come in at the same time, I was quite aware that he was being groomed and I was not. If he hadn’t been there, I would have been quite unaware of what was going on.

And I left several times. I was fed up; I was depressed — well, what I was is, I was a reading machine.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You were then in your twenties.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes. So I left all the time. I went off to Spain once... I went to a lot of places; I supported myself by translating, which is a wonderful trade; it’s like being a carpenter, you can do it anywhere. And so, that’s when I did my traveling. — Actually, because this is a nice kind of a story: as you know, there is what publishers call the “slush pile,” the books that come in over the transom; and once in a blue moon, one of these things is good. Nowadays, incidentally, among the changes in publishing is that these things don’t get read.

MICHAEL BESSIE: In many places.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Almost every place. If things don’t come in agented or as “Friend of” somebody you know.... But at that point, if anything came up in the pile, it was then given to the lowest guy on the totem pole, which was me. I found a book, and worked with the author, and it became a book; and I was really in one of my I’m-sick-and-tired-of-all-this moods, when I was called by *The Reader’s Digest*. They said, “We would like to take this book as a condensed book.”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you like to say which book it was?

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was a book called EPITAPH FOR AN ENEMY, by a man whose last name was Barr: George Barr. He never wrote another book.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Very nice book.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes, very nice book. Because, when that call came in from *The Reader's Digest*, had I not been in one of my I-hate-you-all moods I would have gone to the nearest handy male and said, "Will you handle this for me?"; but because that day I was sick of them all, I did it myself. And from that came, to everyone's great surprise, an offer of a job at the *Digest*; and the job they offered me was very interesting. It was a job that didn't exist; it didn't exist after me, either. It was that I was the liaison between Europe and America, for all of Condensed Books.

I was hired in Spring. I said, "Can I start in Fall?" And so, I went to Europe, of course — and there was a day when I was visiting my future colleagues. *Reader's Digest* had an office on the Boulevard St.-Germain. While I was in the office of one of them, a man, there was a parade, one of those Sixties parades from the Sorbonne. I was fairly recently out of the Sorbonne myself, so, suddenly, I disappeared out of the window. There was my head out the window, and my ass in his office, with shouts back and forth between me and people in the street. When I reappeared in the office, my future colleague looked at me and said, "They hired *you* at *The Reader's Digest*?" (Laughs) That was the beginning.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What was the real situation; what had the man in Paris told you about why you were hired?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Because the European editions wanted their independence. I was the stop-gap measure.

As a result of this funny incident, he then told me the truth about what was really going on, which was very useful: why I had been hired, what the real problems were, and so on. He was amused by me, and so he was willing to talk. If there hadn't been that parade under his window, he probably wouldn't have. — But, in a serious sense, what Michael was getting to, is: I learned more. I got the publishing reports from all over the world. I learned more about publishing in that one year — that was while I was waiting for Atheneum to be able to put me on a salary — and it was a marvelous teaching experience. It also was a very interesting experience as an editor, because the people who condense those books, some of them, were extraordinary editors. The technique that they had evolved was a very sophisticated technique, which, once again, I learned from an older lady, and which served me in very good stead, in some ways. They had an eagle eye for the fat on a manuscript, that was a very good thing to learn; and I learned it there.

I also got a very good overview of world publishing that I could have gotten from no place else. After a year, I got an offer from Atheneum, and left. But I learned more in that one year than in any year before.

### *She Reads* THE LEOPARD

CORNELIA BESSIE: I also had a wonderful publishing experience.

First I should say that Michael and I always had a game that we played when we were bored. This game was as follows: "If you had read WAR AND PEACE in manuscript, would you have known it was a great book? Or would you have said, 'We'll do this, Mr. Tolstoy, but would you please remove a hundred pages of manuscript?'"

So: on my second or third day I'm sitting in this office, looking out at the green fields of Reader's Digest in Pleasantville, and there is on my desk sat an almost

impossible-to-decipher typescript. I started reading, and on page five I thought, “I don’t believe this. I have spent years in a first-rate publishing house and have almost never met literature.” And then, at *The Reader’s Digest*, on my second day, there it was: literature.

It was Lampedusa’s THE LEOPARD.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: My God. And it was *condensed*?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, not yet.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I knew nobody. There was this odd thing: I had been hired, and was hired by seeing everyone, including both Wallaces [*Dewitt and Lila Atcheson Wallace, owners*] separately. I mean, here I was, not a very high-up person. I went down to see my boss, who was a lovely man, and said, “*This thing has happened. Here’s literature.*” And he smiled and said, “Don’t give it to anyone else. Give it to me.” He took it home, came back in the morning, and said, “Come into my office. I’m going to give you a lesson in publishing.” He called the Book-of-the-Month Club and said, “Have you seen this book?” “Yes.” “Have you declined it?” “Yes.” He said: “Recall it.” *He* could say that to the Book-of-the-Month Club; and he did. They recalled it; they did it; *we* did it, and the book took off.

Now, *The Reader’s Digest* Book Club polls its readership on what they like and they don’t like. Just before I left, a year later, my boss and I had a giggling fit: because THE LEOPARD polled third from the bottom of *Reader’s Digest* books! But he and I were very proud of ourselves for having done it. (Laughs)

MICHAEL BESSIE: Let me intrude here just to say that Cornelia’s had the experience, and I’ve observed it also: if the *Reader’s Digest* did nothing else, it developed skills, as Cornelia has said. I have yet to see any book that I’ve had anything to do with that wasn’t, if not *improved* by the condensation, at least not destroyed.

CORNELIA BESSIE: They have a really extraordinary technique. You don’t get the *book*: any more than the movie *The English Patient* is THE ENGLISH PATIENT; but you get a smell....

### *She Reads* TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

CORNELIA BESSIE: There was another moment. I went to my then-boss and said, “I’ve just read a very pretty book. It’s quiet, it’s charming; it probably won’t do anything in the trade because it’s quiet, but I like it a lot: will you read it?” He read it, and said, “Yes, let’s do it.” It was a book called TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD [by Harper Lee], which sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

I read the book in manuscript — you got them in proof or in manuscript, so you had to make up your mind before you knew anything...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There’s a very nice expression on your face as you tell that story.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, it was fun. (Laughs) “It’s a very quiet book, it won’t go anywhere, but it’s nice.” (Laughter)

KATHERINE McNAMARA: After THE LEOPARD, it’s a one-two punch, isn’t it.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It does show you that there is something, whatever that instinct is, that is the “editorial instinct.” You know. It’s like falling in love. You know when you’re barely into the book that something special is going on.

*What Is a Literary Culture?*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I asked Marion Boyars [*Vol. 1, No. 3*] this question: “What is a literary culture? Do we have one?”

CORNELIA BESSIE: Very good question.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I don’t think there is anything in our society that can be addressed in so general a fashion. For example, I don’t think we have a literary society: I think it’s a mosaic, and is constantly shifting, like a kaleidoscope. I think we have literary *cultures*. I think as in all culture, literary culture essentially consists in “high” and “pop,” by not being all that clear and distinct.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is “pop” different, do you think, than what “popular” used to be?

MICHAEL BESSIE: In a sense. “Pop” is short for “popular” — it implies a lot of people. It also from a highbrow point of view implies cultural inferiority, or artistic or esthetic inferiority.

CORNELIA BESSIE: There are these weird phenomena, however. This is not answering your question, but it’s an interesting insight: When [Bernard] Pivot’s book program [*Apostrophe*] became so popular in France, the concierges were watching *Apostrophe*.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Prime time, Friday night.

CORNELIA BESSIE: In other words, there was a culture that could go from the concierge to the most high-brow author. I mention this because it is an unrepeatable phenomenon. We can’t even, in this country, have a television books program that people are really aware of.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There’s Brian Lamb, on CNN, with *Booknotes*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Which is on at a time when no one watches [*Saturday and Sunday nights*], and in a place with fewer viewers. Pivot was on prime time, and everyone watched. It was what was discussed the next morning with the taxi driver *and* with the colleagues in the office.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And it was a program that did not condescend.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Absolutely not. Thus, it’s a cultural phenomenon. It’s an aside to your question, it’s not an answer to your question. The fact is that we have no equivalent, and that there’s no equivalent anywhere else in Europe — he is, he was a phenomenon —

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Melvyn Bragg [*of London Weekend Television, seen in the US on the Bravo channel*] is in no way in comparison?

MICHAEL BESSIE: No, he isn’t bad.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He’s not bad; and he gets good people. It’s interesting, you know, that we do have a national public television, and that there is no equivalent to these programs.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Not since [Robert] Cromie stopped doing his book program out of Chicago. For years, he did a book program on radio and television, and it was quite popular. He was good at it, but never got the mass audience.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Which Pivot did.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do they have a mass culture in France?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh, sure. Every country publishes its trash and gobbles it up, like we gobble up junk food.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: On the way here, I was listening to a public radio program called “The American Musical Theater.” What was being played was a concert

version, done in England, of Cole Porter's *Nymph Errant*. It was quite charming. What occurred to me was that Cole Porter and the American musical theater, which we can't talk about anymore except in retrospect, I think, *were* a variety of what properly was called American popular culture. And I think that is what I mean when I suggest there is a distinction between popular culture, framing it in time, and pop culture, that is, our media-oriented culture.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Exactly. *Porgy and Bess* is not junk!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Alternatively, jazz is deeply popular, in every sense; but it's not pop. And Ellington is arguably one of the two or three great American composers of the century.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Jazz cannot be classified either as highbrow or lowbrow culture.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: No. But it is deeply *popular*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes, right. And it crosses borders.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is there any equivalent, or analog, in the world of books?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes: mysteries.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That's nice.

MICHAEL BESSIE: But that's not the only one.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is Simenon "popular culture" to you?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Why did we make the decision, at Harper's, way back when Joan Kahn built the mystery department, to call them neither "mysteries" nor "detective stories" but "suspense novels"? — starting in the latter part of World War II, and, largely, with English authors. For example, I don't read mystery stories, I never have, but I'm an absolute devoté of mystery stories on television. Show me a Poirot, and I'm there.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: On public television, you mean—

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, yes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: —or, now, A&E.

CORNELIA BESSIE: There are those things that cross boundaries — THE ENGLISH PATIENT, for instance. Or M.F.K. Fisher, who wrote about food, but really about life.

MICHAEL BESSIE: The lines are wavy, just as they are in high culture.

CORNELIA BESSIE: At this point, in America, "elite" is a dirty word. But, when you talk about a literary culture, you're talking about an elite, always. And that's very hard to do in America.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Nonetheless, although we don't like to talk about class, we operate on the basis of class — even, I would say, often when we believe we're talking about race.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Very much. Also, as Peter Finlay Dunne once said: "It's no disgrace to be poor in America, but it might as well be."

### *Cornelia, Reading*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Here is a question to braid into the one about literary culture: Is there such a thing as "illegitimate" reading?

CORNELIA BESSIE: What do you mean?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I'm not sure, but let me try to approach this. Literacy volunteers like to say that reading anything at all is important. They mean to encourage people to read. It is said by teachers, and becomes common thinking, that

“Whatever they read doesn’t matter: get them to read, and they’ll go on to something good.” People say this, knowing that in their childhood they had read what would have been called bad books, and yet that, for some time, at least, they had gone on to read good books.

MICHAEL BESSIE: They acquired *reading*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes. But I’m not necessarily convinced it happens easily. Of course, anybody can go on to read good books. But I wonder if there is a sort of “trash” reading that only leads to more trash?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I think that, as so often, both things are true. I think there is junk-reading that leads to more junk; and, occasionally, to the opposite.

I taught, briefly, in a community college; and the best student I ever had was a mail carrier, who came from an illiterate household, who was semi-literate himself for a period of time, and who told me the following story. One day he was delivering mail. The windows were open in a house, and music was coming out. He found out, later, that this was Beethoven. It transfixed him, and he decided that a world that included Beethoven could include other things, as well, and he started to read.

Any kind of anecdotal evidence is nothing but that: anecdotal; but if an adult, like the mail carrier, can be turned on by Beethoven, there will be, out there, somebody or other who can be turned on to Shakespeare.

MICHAEL BESSIE: It occurs to me that there is a perfect paradigm for this. When I was young, the reading of comics was banned in a lot of houses.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It was banned in my house.

CORNELIA BESSIE: In mine, too. And everybody else’s.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In the fear that the child would grow up into “pop” culture. And it’s happened. It did happen.

MICHAEL BESSIE: There was no notion that comics were “real.” Well, we are now living the apotheosis of the comic: MAUS.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They call it a “graphic novel.” Although there were brilliant graphic novels in the 30s, for instance: the Germans were very good at them...

(to CB): You read several languages: would you say which ones?

CORNELIA BESSIE: French, German, some Italian.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you came to Harper’s, what had you been reading?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I was an only child and a bookworm. There was a time, early on, when I read my way through my parents’ library, just going counter-clockwise. And amazingly, in this way, when I was about 13 or 14, I discovered Ezra Pound for myself, and was mesmerized. We then lived in a suburb, and my parents went to New York. The first time I ever asked them to buy me a book in New York was when I wanted another Ezra Pound. This was right after the war, and my father came home snorting, saying, “The first time she asks for a book it’s by a famous traitor!” (Laughter)

Anyhow, that was the background: I had read everything I could get my hands on. I think if you don’t read those classic texts at a certain age, you’re unlikely to, later. By that, I mean, probably before college, and certainly before the end of college. In order to have what we call “taste,” you have to have been exposed to, and, hopefully, set on fire by, the great readings, and if that doesn’t happen at a time when you’re ready for them, it probably won’t happen.

As you know, my secret sin is riding horses, which means that you’re usually riding with some teenaged female companion. I was constantly riding through the



woods where I live in Connecticut saying to some damsel, “There is, you know, life after horses.” (Laughter)

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you’re met with skepticism. (Laughter)

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh yes! My favorite of those incidents was: one day, I was riding through the woods with a 14-year old, and she said, “You know Hemingway?” I said, “Yep.” She said, “Well, you told me he was good, but you didn’t tell me he was *cute!*” (Laughter) She’d just run across a photograph! But she was exactly at the age when she *should* have been reading Hemingway, and I guess, trotting through the woods, I put something into her head that made her go to a book. The really sad thing is, when I look at the kids around me, is how few of them go through that marvelous stage of reading everything and devouring everything and finding things you love.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I asked this of one of my assistants, and she said she used to read everything when she was a kid: Wheaties boxes, comics: anything that came across her eyes, she’d read. Because of that, she read everything, including good books. But she noticed that people who didn’t read good books, didn’t read *everything*: they didn’t read Wheaties boxes, they didn’t read newspapers; they just didn’t *read*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I’ve watched several kids at a very young age, particularly if it was at a house I was supplying with children’s books, read with great pleasure; and, suddenly, in about the fifth grade, they stop. I don’t know whether this is because — for the males — sports suddenly become all-encompassing; or whether it’s because they encounter a computer for the first time...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is this true of girls and boys?

CORNELIA BESSIE: When I’m thinking of several kids who were wonderful readers... I think it is true of *kids*, particularly now that there’s equality in sports, which means the girls are being pushed as much as the boys.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: If you were to think of a foundation of reading, or, your foundation of reading, what books would you name?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I fell in love with Shakespeare at a very early age, which amused my father because he was persuaded that I couldn’t understand what I was reading. What he didn’t understand was that I probably didn’t understand, in his sense, but I was set afire by the beauty. I could understand the beauty, if I couldn’t understand any more.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When I was a kid, there was so much I didn’t understand that it gave me a large desire to learn. That was very exciting. I understand children now are often discouraged by teachers and librarians from reading books that are considered too hard for them.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I think that’s true. In fact, no one was encouraging me to read, which is probably one of the reasons why I read so much! (Laughter)

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They weren’t discouraging you, however.

CORNELIA BESSIE: They weren’t *discouraging* me, but they certainly weren’t encouraging. I don’t know why.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Your father was an art dealer. Was he a reader? He had a library.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He was; he was. He had a Classical background. He was German; and not only German, he was Prussian. So there was a lot of this: “How can you read Shakespeare when you can’t *understand* him?”! And of course, I was too young and too naive to answer. But now that you bring it up, I remember this scene: he was laughing, because he had a big, one-volume edition of Shakespeare, and I was reading my way through it. I was *very* offended!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How old were you: 10, 12?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Must have been. And I actually *didn't* understand, but the *love* of that has stayed with me, and the love of poetry, which started at a very early age. Poetry and music. If you love one, you often love the other.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Did you have the third in the trivium: mathematics?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No. No, I'm the genius who failed Math I twice. (Laughs) In fact, at the last school I went to — you know, they give you these aptitude tests, and I had just been thrown out of a school, so getting *into* a school was quite a thing — the headmistress, who later became a friend, said, "We've seldom seen such a disparity: such a low math aptitude and a high English one. We'll take you, but we will not attempt to teach you math." (Laughs)

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And so, Shakespeare and Pound.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, Pound, whom I discovered for myself, as I've said, reading along the family shelves; Shakespeare; all poetry; and then, all those things everyone falls in love with: *LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR*, D.H. Lawrence—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Did you read Stendhal in French?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No, I didn't; not the first time. We used to do something called Woodrow Wilson Fellowships, where we'd go to a college and teach for a short time. Michael and I did it together. You were supposed to talk about what you did, and I decided I would be happy to talk about what I did, but I'd also like to teach something, and I chose *LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR*. So I sat under a tree down South and reread it, which I hadn't done since I was a kid, and it was amazing how that book had grown up! (Laughter) The questions you ask yourself, such as, What choices did Mathilde de la Môle have? you of course don't ask yourself the first time through.

I talked to you earlier about my experience with *THE LEOPARD*. My experience with reading it in manuscript was that you knew on page five of the very faint typescript that you were in the presence of literature. But to explain to somebody how you knew this is like explaining how you know you're in love.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Can you think of any other books?

CORNELIA BESSIE: *WAR AND PEACE*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Were you a Tolstoyan or a Dostoyevskian?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I was first a Dostoyevskian. I didn't read *WAR AND PEACE* until I went to Oxford, because I'd always saved it. I said I wasn't going to read it until I could read it through. While you're in school, you don't have that kind of time. I read it at Oxford shut up in a flat for the better part of a week, at the end of which I almost married the wrong man, since I thought I was in 19th century Russia. (Laughs) A 19th century character came down the pike, and I didn't realize till later that he *was* a 19th century character but he was also a son of a bitch. So much for the dangers of reading.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Was Harper's good for you?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No, because Harper's was so totally sexist. That was at a time when Papa Knopf could say, in print, "Women shouldn't expect to be paid in publishing, they should pay to be in publishing." And he could say that without blinking, and was quoted in a magazine. Harper's was super-sexist, which is why all those wonderful women were under-appreciated; and it was the women who did most of the work and had, I thought, the finer taste. Not that some of the boys didn't have it, when they could sit still for long enough. Already then, you were being rewarded for beating the bushes rather than for publishing good books. And I think that's still true; it's *more* true.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, is more true; but it hadn't been true before?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh, I don't know. By the time I appeared, it was true. I suppose the question is, when did commercialism start? It was always there.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said that one of the jobs of the editor is choosing books well. For what purpose do you choose a book? It seems that now, books are chosen for marketability, for adding to the bottom-line; but I think that is not your purpose.

CORNELIA BESSIE: No. I have never been editor-in-chief or publisher of a large list, so I've never had the responsibility of making a viable list, which means that you have to balance off a few of the things that will pay the light bill with the things you love.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Those are almost always in opposition?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Mostly. I've bought a few books that I didn't dislike, and certainly didn't look down on, but that I sure didn't think were great literature, because I knew that they would do well. It's rare that I've had to do that. If you have a responsibility, as Lee [Goerner, 1947-95, *the final publisher at Atheneum*] had, for making a place live, then you have to have those thoughts. I've had the luxury of never having had to do that.

Whatever that book you take on is, you have to live with it. On one occasion there was a book that I really thought was quite remarkable; but the book was so horrifying, it horrified me so much, which meant it was so well done, that I suddenly thought: "I can't live with this." I couldn't see myself presenting it to the sales force. So far as I know, the book wasn't published.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you read now, do you think you know when a book is commercial?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes, and I'm so often wrong. I think it is commercial, and it isn't. I've come to the conclusion that I don't have that set of instincts.

I've been working for a couple of years with somebody who's never written a book before, and who comes from another part of the forest; who doesn't know about book publishing. One day I said to him, "There aren't that many people who would spend two years with you doing what I call an elementary writing course." He happens to be a very smart fellow and caught on immediately, and it's been a great pleasure working with him because he is so smart. But, you know, he thinks this is what publishing is like! And it's not, to a great extent, that way anymore.

And then the *New York Times* runs a piece saying, "How come we can't find any young people who will edit books?" I don't know if you've had any experience with cybernetics. In that field, they talk about "the payoff." Now the payoff is in the wrong place: I think that's one of the intrinsic problems with publishing now, that the payoffs are all in the wrong place. What do people get rewarded for, or get raises for? What do they get secure places in the system for? It's not for doing the grubby work late at night with a pencil. Not only that you don't get rewarded: people are absolutely *not* rewarded, they're told they're wasting their time. The pay-off work goes into making a best-seller.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Have you never considered writing, yourself, nor been drawn to it?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I've performed small acts of the dread deed, yes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And are those available to be read?

CORNELIA BESSIE: (Laughs.) No.

I did do a lot of translating; my translations paid for my travel. Oxford I paid for with Simenon, believe it or not. And I've done one book which was a pure act of

love. I announced at the time that it would be my first and last German translation, and it has been: it was a book by a well-known writer there called Ilse Aichinger. She's a lovely writer, and I fell in love with this book.

I met her again by chance about two months ago, and it was quite wonderful: we had the same sort of magical, instant communication we had had before. In German, the literal translation of the title is, "The Greater Hope," which doesn't work in English, and so I called the book *HEROD'S CHILDREN*. She's a great lady and, now, an old lady. The book is about a group of Jewish children in Vienna during the war. In each chapter their world grows narrower, smaller, as the Nazi edicts about the Jews progress, until the only place for them to go is up, into their imagination. It's both very real and a blessedly imaginative work of fiction. It still moves me as much today as it did when I worked on it, when I woke sometimes in tears in the middle of the night.

—And here's a book I did that was great fun to do.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Oh, this is marvelous. [*BESTIARE D'AMOUR*, Jean Rostand, Doubleday 1961, tr. Cornelia Schaeffer]

CORNELIA BESSIE: He was still alive when I did that. That was fun. I paid for my travels and studies — at one point I did anything anyone would pay me to do. Most of it was from the French,

The *Simenons* — you know, he wrote them all in 11 days, and so, my point of pride was that I translated them in 11 days! (Laughter.) (Except that I used the 12th day to revise. Maybe he did, too.) So, 24 days of work paid for a year at Oxford. That's not bad.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Not bad at all.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Mind you, I was paying £5 a week for my room.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Even so. Are the titles still available?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I don't have them in the house. He wasn't a bad writer, you know. At that time, he was married to a Canadian woman. The publisher was Doubleday, and she had editorial rights, and her notion of a good translation was that the words appear in the same order in the English sentence as in the original. I refused to sign the translations, because she mangled them. But they paid for my education.

### *What Happend to Harper & Bros.?*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What happened to Harper & Bros.?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, lots of things. It depends on when you want to start the story?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: From when you were there till when you left.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well. When I joined, in the fall of 1946, it was 130 years old; it had started in 1817, and had been, in the latter part of the 19th century, the largest English-language publishing house in the world. It published books and magazines, lots of them: *Harper's Bazaar*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Harper's Monthly*, and so forth. But, shortly after the turn of the century, it was going bankrupt; it had been bled by the various partners, a characteristic thing of a family-owned business.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: By then, the second or third generation?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, yes: at least third. Four brothers started it, four brothers from a farm on Staten Island, like the Vanderbilts. It was saved by Tom Lamont, who was then the partner of J. P. Morgan, I think for the total of, I don't know, two million bucks, which then was a large sum. And it went through various hands; and in the middle of the 1920s was joined by a fellow named Cass Canfield, who came from a

wealthy family, and who actually joined it to run the London office. Harper's at that time, and from early in the 19th century, was Harper and Brothers, New York and London, publishing in both places. Then Canfield came back to America, and he wasn't head of the house, but he became so in 1944; he might as well have been, he was the principal stockholder by that time. The stock wasn't listed, it was privately held; he bought the largest part of it — he had about 22, 24% of it.

Anyhow, when I joined it, he was then the head of the house and principal stockholder. And, in addition to being an able businessman and administrator, he was also a publisher, a person who knew about and cared about books and edited a lot himself. Indeed, the jewels of the Harper 20th century list were his: Aldous Huxley and all the English, Thornton Wilder and that generation of Americans: they all were people whom Cass personally published, something which is rare in our time.

In any event, what was the house like then? It was one of the two or three — along with Doubleday, and Macmillan, maybe — largest diversified publishing houses. It published all kinds of books: medical, school, college, religious; and its trade department was certainly one of the two or three dominant trade departments. It had begun to seem predictable, by comparison with the new generation of the 1920s and '30s houses — Knopf, Simon & Schuster, Random House, and Viking, etc.: they were brighter; the scene was brighter. They were more contemporary, although Harper still had great strength. Cass, for example, had an almost proprietary relationship with the *New Yorker*, because he had published the Thurburs and the E.B. Whites and so forth. He didn't maintain that monopoly, because it got passed around; but when I joined, most *New Yorker* writers published still with Harper's. The staff of the trade department was essentially Ivy League. Not everybody came from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, but most did. Women were beginning to play a role editorially, though they tended to be assistants — not in the role of secretaries. The place had a singular advantage in *Harper's Magazine*, which brought in young writers and gave us first crack at 'em. We got a lot of people that way

Anyhow, that was the house that I joined in '46. And I was there for 15 years, and then came the Atheneum adventure.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What became of Harper's?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I left in '59. In about 1962 or '63, Harper & Bros. became Harper & Row, because elementary and secondary publishing became enormously expanded in those years, and there Harper found itself, in the early '60s, without a schoolbook department. [*So it bought Row Peterson, a textbook publisher, and added the new firm's name.*]

The Harper that I left in 1959 was doing about \$20 million worth of turnover a year, which was about as much as anybody else. The Harper I returned to, in 1975, was doing nearly \$100 million. But in the meantime, Harcourt Brace, for example, had gone to about \$300 million. Subsidiary rights had become considerably more important: book club, paperback, movie, etc. So, the things that we are now so aware of were beginning to develop. The increase of money, in every sense: Capitalization. Money needed for marketing. Money needed for advances. Everything got more competitive, more expensive. General publishing became more closely allied to show biz. The Harper I returned to was dominated by numbers: P & Ls, numbers, and by marketing, in the sense that the firm I had left 16 years before was not.

When I returned, as the senior publisher of the house and one of the corporate triumvirate who were supposed to run the place, I had to go through about a three-week indoctrination, because I had to learn a new business. I learned what had

happened to big publishing during that time. Of course, it happened to every other one of the big places: it had become “corporatized.”

I went back to Harper — I was then 59 — under an arrangement in which I would be senior vice-president, publisher, etc., until I was 65, and when I was 65, Harper would set up Bessie Books for Cornelia and me, as an imprint under Harper’s aegis, independently. We would own it, but we would have publishing and money arrangements with Harper.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What did Cornelia do in the meantime?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Cornelia had been working for Atheneum, actually, until we were married; when Pat Knopf, who saw his mother in Cornelia, became impossible for her to work with, she went off to Dutton. But when I went back to Harper, she came into Harper; or shortly thereafter.

So that was the deal. And for the next — well, from ‘75 to ‘81, I was at Harper. In ‘81, we set up Joshuatown Publishing, a small corporation which is ours, which is Cornelia and Michael Bessie Books. They kept me on the Harper board. I was on till ‘87, when we sold to Murdoch and the board disappeared.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you weren’t in favor of that sale.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I was very strongly against it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Why were you against it?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Because I liked Harper independent, and also because I didn’t like Murdoch. The easiest way to answer your question is, Because I foresaw what has happened.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And what has happened, that you foresaw?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Harper has become, or, starting in ‘87, became, huge. It became a minor interest, namely a cash cow, for Murdoch. See, he bought it for two reasons: he wanted a publishing house; he by that time had 40% of Collins [William Collins Publishers], in England.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Which was a respectable firm as well.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, it was a great firm. It was a great old publisher, and a printer as well, Scottish printer. But under English law, once he acquired 40% he had either to stand still or take on the whole shebang. But he had a vision of a world-wide English-language book-publishing enterprise. I think at the time he had that dream first, he didn’t realize that his real dream was going to be movies and television. He also suffered, as did many another — why did Paramount buy Simon & Schuster? — from “synergy.” It was a widely-spread notion.

So, I was opposed to it, as were almost but not quite half the board. Harper was being headed by a fellow named Brooks Thomas, a lawyer by training, but not a book person. The firm was having a hard time adjusting itself to the situation that has since developed in big-time publishing. It was still, in the view of Wall Street, bound to the old-fashioned notion that you published books because you liked them, and so forth, and so forth. And it was beginning to have cash problems: it was profitable, but at too low a level.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Ah, yes; that dreaded notion.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well. RCA became disillusioned with Random House and sold it because they realized, as others have, and I suspect Mr. Newhouse [*S.I. Newhouse, head of Advance Publications, a family-owned company which owns Random House, Knopf/Pantheon/Vintage, and other imprints, as well as The New Yorker, Vogue, Vanity Fair, and a number of other glossy publications*] now has, that book publishing, even under present circumstances, is very unlikely to return more than five or six

percent net profit. In a very good year, you might; but almost nobody does. It's certain nobody does over a long period of time. Almost anything else in media can and does do better. They're also capable of generating larger losses. But, you know, they gamble for bigger stakes.

You know what the economics of trade publishing are: about two-thirds of the books that you publish don't make a profit. So if you're good, the loss is smaller; the loss narrows. About a third of the books that you publish make a profit; and if you're good, some of 'em make a big profit. That's the economics of trade publishing. And in most instances, year in and year out, now, the profit comes from subsidiary rights. You may break even on the sale of books, but it's book club, paperback, movie and television, foreign rights, etc., where you make money. And one of the effects of the increased power of the agents is that publishers have a smaller and smaller share of subsidiary rights. For example, in the new world, the electronic world, agents of popular authors don't give book publishers an *inch* of electronic rights.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They think there's going to be a windfall there.

MICHAEL BESSIE: They think that there may be, and they're negotiating from strength. And you know, when people start paying five, six, seven, eight, nine million dollars to acquire a popular author, as they do, there's a competition set up, and so, one of the first things the agent makes clear is this.

Now, just as in the old days — by which I mean, before my time — publishers would have 50% of movie rights, or more. It was then reduced to 10%, and then eliminated. That's, by and large, what's happened.

It's amusing that what's left of Atheneum [*the imprint, except for children's books, was closed in 1994 by its newest owner, Simon & Schuster, itself owned by Paramount, which is owned by Viacom*] — since that's one of the things we share — is children's books, and they're doing quite well.

What we've been talking about is obviously important. There has been a spate, as you know, recently in the *Times*, and elsewhere, of writings about the terrible troubles of book publishing. At various times during these 51 years since I got into this business I've had to give lectures and write about book publishing. So I've got a slightly tired but still not-bad research file on this. There is, in effect, nothing that's being said about the troubles of book publishing in the Computer Age that wasn't said about the troubles of book publishing in the Movie Age, etc., etc. In the '60s and '70s, when I was doing all this talking and writing — there's nothing new under the Sun, or Mars, or Jupiter, but it takes different forms. I'm evenly divided between concern that, when I look at publishing and feel disoriented, feel a stranger in a strange land, it is more a function of my age than it is of real change. That's one side of it.

The other side says, "Boy, it sure was a hell of a lot better." And, for the likes of me, it was. I'm one of those rare people in publishing who had the rare opportunity to do what many people would like to do, but almost nobody gets the chance to do, which is: start a new firm. And then, have it work. And have it publish a lot of good books. We were very lucky.

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Counterpoint, Washington D. C. <npagano@counterpointpress.com>  
Distributed by Publishers Group West 800-788-3123

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*My novels are based on the fantastic designs made by real human beings earnestly laboring to maladjust themselves to fate. My characters are not slaves to an author's propaganda. I give them their heads. They furnish their own nooses.*

Dawn Powell

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## FANTASTIC DESIGN, WITH NOOSES

### 1. Making Money in China

A Chinese friend who is an antiques dealer in my town is doing very well, she notes wryly. Sotheby's comes regularly to select from her stock. As I write, she is on her way home from China, importing an enormous shipment of furniture and domestic accessories. For the last decade the peasants of China have been enjoined to "make money," and so they are selling off their households. Rivers of furniture are draining off to the West. My friend, in position to divert a wide stream of these things into her own warehouses, says this massive selling-off causes great pain to intellectuals, among whom she would rather be located. She is bored with making money — it takes no *thought* — and spends her days reading philosophy. However, the practical study of Chinese furniture has revealed to her marvels of her great civilization that she had never been taught on the Mainland. She is aware of the irony of this, and of her own position.

Rupert Murdoch, the naturalized American media baron, is said also to be making money in China. We presume the Chinese government, if hardly the peasants, is also benefiting greatly, as its leaders have given Murdoch rights to loft an exclusive satellite network across the Mainland. It is expected that this access will open China as a vast "market" to Western material and psychological goods. "Making money" replaces all previous slogans and spurs men to frantic destructive new activity. My friend the antiques dealer reports sadly that (in China) only good people are not making money, precisely because they are good people and don't know how to cheat, lie, and do the unethical things necessary to manage in the new economy.

### 2. I'm shocked. Shocked.

Last June Britain handed Hong Kong back to the Chinese. Via CNN we watched the last British governor leave: Mr. Chris Patten, late an advocate of democracy for the soon-to-be former colony, critic of the Chinese government. Soon after his departure several publishers, including Mr. Murdoch's HarperCollins in England, signed contracts for Mr. Patten's political memoirs. Several months ago, Mr. Patten delivered the first 70,000 words to his editor, Stuart Proffitt, head of trade publishing at HC, who wrote back with enthusiasm that these were very fine political memoirs, so exciting as to quicken his blood, and certain to become a best seller. In late January Mr. Proffitt introduced Mr. Patten to the press as a coming author for HarperCollins and once again predicted great commercial success for the book.

But as we soon read in the papers, Murdoch wouldn't cotton to the plan. At least, so his minions worried. Patten had criticized the Chinese government. What would the boss think? Consternation followed, we infer, and down through the levels of Upper Management came the word: Drop the book. (Had Murdoch murmured, "Will no one rid me of this priest?") Stuart Proffitt, we read, was called into the office of a Senior Manager and told to take back what he had already publicly announced. He refused; was handed a gag order, then

sacked (in effect, a “principled resignation,” said Patten’s agent, an old hand at the publishing game); and promptly sued his former employer for breach of contract. “It would have meant, in short, both lying and doing enormous damage to my own reputation,” Proffitt said in a legal affidavit.

I acknowledge a certain bias, being acquainted with Stuart Proffitt. I’ve thought well of him as the editor of very good books by writers I care for: Patrick O’Brian, Doris Lessing, Penelope Fitzgerald, Richard Holmes, John Hale, among others. He acted as anyone would have expected of a serious editor and honorable person. I think as well that the very British elements of this tale are more complex and interesting than have appeared in the media. Chris Patten was, after all, once chairman of the Conservative Party; Proffitt also published the memoirs of Margaret Thatcher and John Major; Murdoch was long known as anti-communist (as noted by Michael Bessie, in our conversation, elsewhere in this issue). HarperCollins, like most major publishing conglomerates, is rumored to be on the block.

The *Financial Times* said reasonably, yet with underlying horror, that Murdoch’s dropping the book was a “business decision.” HarperCollins is a small part of the man’s media/entertainment conglomerate [which now includes the Los Angeles Dodgers, and cable stations to broadcast their games]. It wasn’t worth antagonizing the Chinese over a book; the possible “harm” to HarperCollins’s “reputation” and “standing” was a price easily affordable for continuing good relations with the Mainland. Thus supposed the *Financial Times*. No doubt HarperCollins has a better reputation in England — in good part, because of an editor the caliber of Proffitt, who also led Flamingo, HC’s literary imprint — than in the U. S.; but surely this is a relative statement.

In an earlier Endnote I quoted Steve Wasserman, editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, who said, naming companies like HarperCollins, with memory recent of the publisher’s arbitrary canceling of contracts with a hundred-odd writers, that after the conglomerations of the last decade, most of the publishers “left standing” have “debased the imprints started by their founders.”

It’s worth recalling Michael Bessie once more on the matter of Murdoch, big publishing, the stock market, and real profits to be expected from publishing books:

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you weren’t in favor of that sale.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I was very strongly against it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Why were you against it?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Because I liked Harper independent, and also because I didn’t like Murdoch. The easiest way to answer your question is, Because I foresaw what has happened.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And what has happened, that you foresaw?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Harper has become, or, starting in ‘87, became, huge. It became a minor interest, namely a cash cow, for Murdoch. See, he bought it for two reasons: he wanted a publishing house; he by that time had 40% of Collins [William Collins Publishers], in England.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Which was a respectable firm as well.

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So, I was opposed to it, as were almost but not quite half the board. Harper was being headed by a fellow named Brooks Thomas, a lawyer by training, but not a book person. The firm was having a hard time adjusting itself to the situation that has since developed in big-time publishing. It was still, in the view of Wall Street, bound

to the old-fashioned notion that you published books because you liked them, and so forth, and so forth. And it was beginning to have cash problems: it was profitable, but at too low a level.

What interests me about this most recent act of bad faith in publishing is the public response of some notable British authors. It was grand, conveyed with the gravity and yet volume we desire of writers and intellectuals. The historian Peter Hennessey is quoted as saying, "I am appalled by this...HarperCollins has quite simply ceased to be a member of our open society and no one in their right minds of any worth will ever give them a book again." Doris Lessing called Murdoch "unprofessional" (of all things): "It is so shocking I can't find words for it." These writers, estimable without question, are published by HarperCollins. It is as if they had never considered the kind of man who owned the company whose name appeared on the spine of their books. How is that? The writer's conscience, speaking historically, is a subtle, poised instrument and skillful at locating distinctions we might not otherwise have noticed.

### 3. Two Mortal Men Deciding Fate

MICHAEL BESSIE: [Harper] was still, in the view of Wall Street, bound to the old-fashioned notion that you published books because you liked them, and so forth, and so forth. And it was beginning to have cash problems: it was profitable, but at too low a level.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Ah, yes; that dreaded notion.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well. RCA became disillusioned with Random House and sold it because they realized, as others have, and I suspect Mr. Newhouse now has, that book publishing, even under present circumstances, is very unlikely to return more than five or six percent net profit. In a very good year, you might; but almost nobody does. It's certain nobody does over a long period of time. Almost anything else in media can and does do better. They're also capable of generating larger losses. But, you know, they gamble for bigger stakes.

You know what the economics of trade publishing are: about two-thirds of the books that you publish don't make a profit. So if you're good, the loss is smaller; the loss narrows.

Michael Bessie, speaking last Autumn, was not prescient, I'd say, merely acutely observant, being a man who knows the territory. The landscape of European and American conglomerate publishing is being paved over. His "Mr. Newhouse" is S. I. Newhouse, whose huge family-held company owns "big" Random House, covering "little" Random House, Knopf, Pantheon, Vintage, Villard, and so on, and several English imprints. Bertelsmann, an immense German media corporation represented by Mr. Thomas Middelhoff has just agreed to buy all of Random House from Mr. Newhouse for a very great deal of capital. Mr. Middelhoff approached Mr. Newhouse with the offer, it's said, on the latter's 70th birthday.

Interested readers have seen media reports of the scale of this transfer of ownership. Bertelsmann is the Xth largest media conglomerate in the world, and holds Bantam Doubleday Dell, part of American On-Line, plenty of other entertainment companies, and, amusingly, RCA Records. Random House is the Yth largest publishing corporation in the U.S. and England, and publishes serious literature as well as lucrative high trash. Agents, always preferring the status quo, said glumly that now there would be fewer imprints and not as many editors to read their clients' work. Editors are holding their breath waiting to be fired, or scurrying about looking for likely mega-sellers. Everyone is fearful; no one will speak for attribution. Etc. Etc.

What interests me about this development are two things. One, “no one” inside or outside Random House seemed to know the deal was in the works. Wonderful, when the gossipy publishing factories can be surprised. Two, once again the ground has been shaken underneath us who are writers and serious publishers. The quake isn’t even a natural disaster or some great historical cataclysm, merely the banality of capitalist dealings and their unintended consequences. The Random - Bertelsmann deal: two mortal men deciding fate.

Feeling portentous, I e-mailed the last few sentences to a Contributing Editor of this journal, a novelist who replied sensibly:

“Serious writing is always a little unnerving. Or that’s my experience. It’s great, though, what’s happening in publishing these days. At least if we write seriously, we don’t have to worry about having anybody read it. But God reads all books.”

#### 4. Perspective

R. B. Kitaj, the painter, has moved to Los Angeles. The jingoist treatment of his superb retrospective at the Tate in 1994 by English critics caused him to leave London after decades of residence. He was interviewed before the show by Richard Morphet:

“Oh, I see myself in most exalted lines of descent of course, among those mad scribblers Delacroix, van Gogh, Gauguin, Whistler, Sickert, to name just five. The collected writings of Matisse and Klee are also favourites on my shelves, and I’ve already mentioned the crucial books written by Mondrian and Kandinsky in another context. Painters who write are also enacting a kind of play within a play... the larger drama is the work of the great confessional writers for me... Rousseau (a discovery of my old age), Proust, Montaigne, Kafka, Gide, the Russians, Canetti and the like. I came upon the confessional mode quite young. In the army, I read Gide’s superb Journals on guard duty in the Fontainebleau forest. Kafka’s Diaries changed my life later on, and Robert Lowell’s poetry also helped lead me to think an autobiographical art of painting was not only possible but deep within my bones. But painters have always written. Picasso wrote a lot of Surrealist stuff. At the top of the heap was Michelangelo.... He inspired me to try to write poems about my own pictures, to somehow extend the life of a painting while I’m still alive, maybe because I don’t want to die yet and poetry is a special life-force after the painting has been taken out of my hands. I’ve failed so far because my poems seem poor, but I’ll keep trying. Meanwhile, I’ve written some short stories or prose-poems for some of my pictures, as you know. I like the idea that they have no life apart from the picture. They illustrate the picture the way pictures have always illustrated books in our lives.”

KM

R. B. KITAJ: *A Retrospective*, ed. Richard Morphet. London: Tate Gallery, 1994

# ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion  
www.archipelago.org

Vol. 2, No. 4 Winter 1998/99

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A CONVERSATION ABOUT PUBLISHING  
with WILLIAM STRACHAN

Katherine McNamara

*"I come back to this: the writing. You've got to look at the writing."*

*In this third conversation with literary publishers, I talked with William Strachan, director of Columbia University Press, formerly editor-in-chief at Henry Holt, who had taken the rare step of crossing over from trade to academic publishing, and who thought in an interesting way about those two not wholly compatible domains: about what they had in common and what they did not. Furthermore, Columbia had taken up e-publishing, producing several CD-ROMs and sponsoring the first of what it hopes will become a series of scholarly journals published on the internet. Yet, while technology entered the discussion of institutional changes in publishing which has been the theme of this series, it did not dominate; as would be expected, the making of good books — writerly writing, editorial acuity, the publisher's willingness to take a chance, and readers wanting to read — was the real subject.*

*It has been remarked that "publishing," in the old sense, perhaps, of the gentleman's occupation, began to change about the time the phrase "publishing industry" came into use, around the mid-1970s. If true, it marks nicely the beginning of changes I've been interested in tracing. Substantially, however, what has changed? Are there fewer good books, more bad, than ever? Is the art of editing no longer widely practiced in the trade? How can we speak of publishing "houses" in this era of conglomeration? What sorts of people became editors and publishers; why? Do the same sorts run the business now? I had been inquiring of distinguished representatives of an older generation what they thought; now, a fellow member of the baby boom, generation of the Sixties, had something to say.*

*Generously, these persons have told how they entered the profession; spoken about writers they've published and declined to publish; described the (changing) class structure of their domain; talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism; preferred "responsible" publishing: the mid-sized company that may, increasingly, be a "refuge." Without exception, they are serious readers, usually of more than one language. They recognize that times have changed. They speak with wary-friendly observation of the generations coming up.*

*Excerpts of these conversations will continue to appear regularly in Archipelago and may serve as an opening into an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current corporate structure, reflecting on glories of its own, revealing what remains constant amid the present flux. Despite their surround of gentility, these publishers are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.*

-KM

A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 3

A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 4 and Vol. 2, No. 1

## WILLIAM STRACHAN, Director, Columbia University Press

WILLIAM STRACHAN said of himself, with the self-effacement of a certain sort of editor, that he had joined “the accidental profession”; an amateur in the good, old sense? No, a generalist educated in the liberal arts, characteristic of a good part of a generation for whom schooling was not job-training. He graduated from Carleton College, an excellent small college in Minnesota, then took the Radcliffe Publishing Course, from which he emerged, in 1970, as an editorial secretary at Anchor Books. Having discovered what kind of books he wanted to publish, he moved on to various houses, was editor-in-chief at Henry Holt, and joined Columbia in mid-1998. He is tall and looks fit, though his once-lanky frame (you feel) is filling out with middle age, and dresses in not-too-new, tweedy-casual clothes. The offices of Columbia University Press, where he is director, are located in utilitarian rooms in a college building undergoing renovations, on W. 113th Street in Morningside Heights. The receptionist reports a visitor and, when she hears footsteps pounding lightly downstairs from the second floor, says, not wholly approving, “That’s Bill: *never* takes the formal way” (i.e., the elevator) “when he can run.” Seated behind his desk, his back to the distractions of Broadway below the window, he is cordial, discreetly gossiping (has recently returned from the Frankfurt Book Fair), very much the director (still testing his way) of a very respectable publishing company. His speech evokes distant seminar rooms and is without personal reference, respectful of its elders, perceptive, aware of what it now also knows, sounding with a modesty that is never false.

Several themes recurred during our two conversations in New York, last October and November: writerly non-fiction, its importance and nourishment; how one tried to make sense of the great shifts in the culture; e-publishing (novelty for a former trade publisher); and, unexpected pleasure, the tastes of generations, ours-in-common in particular. “Writerly non-fiction” is Strachan’s admirable phrase, neatly leaping over reams of self-involved “creative” genres; privately, I thought it worth stealing. Aloud, I wondered how the transition from trade to university press impressed him and asked if he would begin by describing the differences between those two kinds of institutions.

*For a certain kind of publishing, this may be a refuge*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What do you do as a publisher: what is the job of a publisher, as you conceive it?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, I think you run a publishing company. First and foremost, we have to remember that we are publishers. Some of publishing is printing, some of it is distribution and the like; but, by and large, it means finding the books that you want to publish, then making sure that they are seen all the way through to publication, and then giving them full service.

My role as chief executive is to make those decisions about the company. There are all sorts of decisions you make, because there are a lot of ways to spend your money, and a lot of priorities. Most of what, I guess, falls to me is to establish those priorities, the hierarchy of those priorities: to make some decisions, not only about what comes first, but how we go about doing something, what the strategy might be. Where you’re going to go with the press down the line. Are we going to go wholesale into electronic publishing? or are we going to say, “No, that’s not what we want to do, we don’t have that sort of money, or go into those areas of publishing.”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So you came over here.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: So I came over here, and here we are.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Maybe the topic is culture shock.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, I went from seeing this as not so different, to seeing this as a completely different world, to saying, No, this is different and this isn't. Part of the confusion, if you will, in my mind, is the fact that I am still living in New York City. The people I see at the cocktail parties, the people I fraternize with, are those I used to see. And so one is tempted to think there isn't a difference — "Oh, I just needed to change offices." That, of course, is not true. The adjustment would have been greater had I left; as Peter Gazardi left Crown, to go to Duke: he went to become the editor-in-chief at Duke, and was out of the realm. But suddenly you are *really* in the world of a university press community. I'm not sure I would have gone to any other university press.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I've been interested in the view, from inside, of the institutional changes in publishing over the last decade: what they are; how they affect the work you do; and, equally, how the work you do affects the institution. That is, how *do* people act in and upon the institution of publishing? Would you talk about your own experience, having gone from trade publishing, or what might be called corporate publishing now, to the university press?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Sure. For me, the switch from trade or commercial publishing — better put, from corporate publishing — to a university press was an idea I had, to somehow recreate what trade publishing was when I started in 1970. I am now working, at Columbia, for an independent publisher which is owned and operated without conglomeration with any other publisher.

That used to be the case all around this town of New York. What are now different imprints within houses, were, once, publishing houses, free-standing and, in most cases, independent. That's been a rather remarkable change in publishing, though maybe necessary. Actually, I guess I should back up a little. That has been a change in New York publishing; I don't think it's been quite the case outside this city. But if, as many people do, you define commercial publishing by what goes on in New York, then that's the change in publishing.

People are fond of pointing to all the new independent publishers that have jumped up. That being the case, I don't think for the most part they have had the effect on book publishing that commercial publishing has had on the general trade. I don't think there's the replication of what existed here. And that's interesting, because, given the way business has changed, they *should* have had an effect. But the distribution system is concentrated; it's much easier now to get to all the different book outlets than it ever was 20 years ago, when you had so many independent bookstores. You now have Amazon.com. You have all these wide-angled changes in distribution, but I don't think the small publishers have the penetration that they might have risen to have. What I hope we have here is a sort of moderate or smallish independent publishing house. I like that scale of operation; it works for me; and I like to see what we can effect with that. For a certain kind of publishing, the kind I'm interested in, this may be a refuge.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Will you say more about the kind of publishing you're interested in?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I was raised up in non-fiction, basically. I started at Anchor books in 1970, which Jason Epstein had started, back in the '50s. At that point, it was still one of the few trade paperback publishers, along with the Vintage list; and it was fun, because that was the '70s, and it was the turn of the paperback revolution. It



was going to change the world; half of our list was academic publishing, in a sense, and half of it was ‘cutting edge’. What was new went into trade paperbacks.

I cut my teeth on non-fiction, and I stayed with that throughout my career, going from Anchor books in 1980, to what was then The Viking Press. The desire there was to move into hard-cover publishing, and what I looked at changed. At Anchor, you thought up ideas for books, or people came to you with one-shot books, and you did them in paperbacks, and you sort of went on to the next book.

But at Viking, what I hoped to do was to develop some of the writers who had been doing non-fiction, book in and book out. Alan Williams, who was there at the time, said we published authors, not books. That was the philosophy of The Viking Press, and it was a nice change. It had recently been sold to Penguin — what was then Penguin — although at that point it was a separate entity. Well, the twain met, a little, but they were editorially independent even though they worked under the same roof. Penguin then was owned by Pearson, and it still is. [*The publishing conglomerate is larger and now called Penguin Putnam Group.*] But at that point, curiously, Penguin wasn’t as renowned in this country as it was in the U. K., and it was still growing up under Kathryn Court, who was the editorial director then. So I stayed with non-fiction. I can count on maybe ten fingers the number of novels I’ve done over the history of my career. That’s what interested me about Columbia, and about university presses, which, by and large, are non-fiction publishers.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Who are some of these authors you published with Viking?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Witold Rybczynski, whom I first published at Anchor Books, in a paperback original, and then brought over to Viking, where I did his next several books. I edited people like Marc Reisner (CADILLAC DESERT) and Gretel Ehrlich (THE SOLACE OF OPEN SPACES). Writerly non-fiction.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I like that: ‘writerly’ non-fiction.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: So. I went on from Viking, to Houghton Mifflin, in the new York office [*corporate headquarters were in Boston*], to what was then Weidenfeld & Nicolson, before ending up at Holt, in 1990, where I was editor-in-chief. And now this. The idea that university presses publish non-fiction is interesting; and I think, you know, we can bring some of my trade there, although running the press leaves much less time to be an editor, which is a change.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But you do still edit?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, and probably once I settle into this job a little bit more — I came over to Columbia in June 1997 — I might have some more time to do it, rather than to figure out where everything lies in the hierarchy.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Holt was going through some changes as well, when you left. [*It was bought by the German publishing company Holtzbrink.*]

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Holt has gone through some changes, and continues to go through some changes, yes. That company is part of Holtzbrink, the German publishing conglomerate, which here owns Farrar, Straus and St. Martins, *Scientific American*, and a number of other outfits. I think they have to figure out where Holt fits into that conglomeration.

We don’t have those confusions here, which is very nice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A look of relief is on your face.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, I’ve seen this time and time again with my colleagues in publishing, where you sign on to do a certain kind of publishing, and the house is going in a certain direction, and over the years the changes haven’t come at the bottom,

they've come at the top. A new administration, or a new ownership, or whatever, comes in and, suddenly, what you were supposed to be doing, or what you *were doing*, very happily, is no longer very desirable or wanted or rewarded. That makes it very hard to make a long-term commitment to writers. I think it's the longer-term continuity that works best for writers, and for publishers, as well. Obviously, there are exceptions; but I think that is how a publishing house gets its character: how it builds a stable and works with writers: over a long period of time.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: If they still care about that.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: If they still care about that. I don't know that they need to. I *think* they do. It works better, I think, if you push a house: "This is what we know to publish, and this is *who* we publish; and therefore, if you're a kindred spirit, or you like that, then we know how to publish you well."

### *The business has changed, but so has the culture*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I was trying to place a book, a non-fiction narrative, and asked a poet for advice, as I had had some difficulty with it. I carried on for quite a while about this, until he said, very simply, "Why don't you just give it to a good publisher, and let it go?" I stopped in my tracks. There was nothing I could say. Books are turned down all the time for reasons that have nothing to do with literature as I know it. He was from two generations before me and had no idea of the kinds of difficulties serious writers face now from publishers.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, the business has changed a lot: but so has the culture, and that's what's hard to figure out in publishing today. I'm not sure where you place yourself in the culture — I was thinking about this — because the idea of reading and books, if you will, used to be kind of divorced from other parts of the culture. You had movies, you had books or literature, you had drama, and increasingly—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And there was a hierarchy.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, and increasingly these things are blurred. There's plenty of book stuff on TV. There is plenty of book stuff on the internet, god knows, and there are wonderful magazines. All this blurring, or mixing, we're still sorting out, but it's had an enormous effect on what you publish, and how you publish it. I think the books published by the larger commercial publishers are seen now as entertainment. I mean that not just pejoratively, because the best, most wonderful book in the world is supposed to be entertainment, you know, the highest literature is wonderfully entertaining to a certain audience. I haven't sorted it out yet. I don't think anybody really has, and can say, "*This* is why we're publishing" this or that book. What is getting drowned out is the idea of quality entertainment, if you will; but, again, I say that too quickly, because the flip side of it is that, actually, what's succeeding in the trade is either a very high quality in books, still, or a kind of mass-marketing entertainment.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So once again the mid-list...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The middle falls away. People don't know quite what to make of it. It's not either literature or, quote, entertainment, unquote.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And the difficulty about the shrinking of the mid-list is that was a standard of good writing.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, it was, and is, a standard of good writing. It's also the kind of proving ground, or developing ground, for many writers. You do one book; you do another; you keep writing, you keep publishing, you suddenly have an *oeuvre*, something's going on. People don't know what to do about that right now.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You mean, publishers don't.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Publishers don't. They don't know how to support it. You as a writer have to make it very quickly, in a book or two, so that you're not consigned to the scrap-heap. In today's climate, it's harder and harder to get attention for that mid-list; it just goes unappreciated, it's not championed and it's not recognized. Even if you get good reviews, the response is, "So what?"

But that's conglomerate publishing, too. One of the changes in the book world is that, when the houses were independent, you saw yourself saying: "This is the list, this is what we're publishing; and we'll make some money off of *these* books, and that will allow us to publish others." It sounds strange, now. But it was thought of that way. When I started at Doubleday, which Anchor was part of, we had the same publishing board. It was one of the first corporate publishing boards; you went to it every week. But you still said about a book, "This is part of the list."

I watched that change to P&L [*profit and loss*] statements. Suddenly, there was this idea that every book had to be profitable! No longer was it that you balanced the list; now you balanced the profitability of the company *not* on the back of a list, but on the *back of every book!* If you look at it that way, it won't work: I mean, 90 percent of books still lose money. Even if you were trying not to, that practice changed the way you looked at books. Completely. You didn't say, "Yes, but it fits in, we just have to publish this writer because it's part of our commitment to him," or "part of the list," or whatever. That affected the mid-list as well. You had people kidding themselves, either knowingly or with rose-colored glasses, saying, "Oh this isn't a mid-list book," when everybody should have admitted that it was. I think that changed things too. Very odd, but true.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: An English editor told me he showed the conversation I had with Michael and Cornelia Bessie to several of his colleagues, and they were all amazed: Michael talked about how they used to publish books with no P&Ls.\* You don't have to have them here at Columbia?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We do P&Ls at Columbia. But as a tool, a sort of snapshot; that's how they started out, of course. The interesting thing about a P&L is that it will reveal to me, sometimes, that, for all this *sturm und drang*, all this effort, at the end of the day we're going to make 35 cents. Well, maybe it's not worth all the effort. Or, at least, you're thinking: "Just what we are getting into?" What we do here is, after you've done a P&L, if it doesn't work, you still have the right to say, very nicely, "Yes, we know it doesn't work financially, but we wanted to publish this book," for whatever reason. Commercial publishers do this as well, of course, sometimes. We have another advantage, however, which is being a not-for-profit organization. It's easier for me to say that here than at some other places.

### *Categories, 'product', and the economics of independent publishing*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Now, I wonder if we can think in two directions for a moment. They'll have to be serial, not parallel directions. One is, your very interesting statement about seeing a book differently once a P&L is attached to it: what does that mean for reading and for readership; even, if you want, for the work of the imagination? — We won't touch the writer's imagination here; let's say, for the imagination as it makes it way through the trade editorial process.

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\*A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 4.

The second is, What does it mean to be an independent, not-for-profit, but also academic press?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, which is a very different structure and with different constraints. Well, in a trade situation, with a work of imagination, you're trying to catch that handle that will allow everyone to catch the same magic, the high concept that you see in it throughout. If you can get that, then there is no barrier to what you can do. I don't think trade publishing is that tricky, and, in fact, sometimes it's easier to do. An editor can say, "Oh boy, you just have to read this, it's wonderful, it's totally unique." Or, "It's just like something else that's wonderful." That's fairly easy to do.

When you work for a publishing corporation or a publishing company that does things pretty much in lockstep, though, that is when you have to be able to *categorize* a book, because "we have to be able to sell it in a certain way," *or*: "Where does it go in the bookstore?" This is not a bad question to ask yourself: "Where am I going to put this in a bookstore; how is the sales rep going to sell it?" But most of those aren't surprises, you'll have pigeonholed them very neatly. Again, a good editor can pigeonhole a book very neatly and sell it that way; and that works, but it's harder.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In its way, it's another kind of mid-list.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; yes, it is. Very much. Because if it's not bought as a bestseller or a blockbuster — because then you can do these rote things for it — but rather, it's interesting, then it makes you concentrate more, as an editor, on how you're going to publish the book; not simply saying, "Well, we'll just put 'em out there and see what happens."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is that the old way they did it?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think there was enough of it that we just didn't have to worry, because certain automatic mechanisms could take over. A certain number of books would be bought by the public libraries, which would snap up three to five thousand copies no matter what you did, if you had a good library sales force; and then you got more on top of that, and it just rolled along. Those days are over, forever: sadly, in a way, because the library system isn't capable of supporting the vast output of the trade anymore; but it does leave you, then, to think more carefully about what you're publishing, and how you're publishing it. And everybody still says too many books are published. That's probably still true; but who's ox are you goring when you say, "Cut this back"?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you, in your mind, distinguish between what you think of as books and what you think of as...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Product, if you will? No, yeah, I guess. Yeah.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Books, presumably, are what you want to publish, whereas product is what there is too much of.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: But someone's books are someone else's product; and vice versa, I guess.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That's not entirely true

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I don't think it is, but when you turn a corner and you just say, "Product is book-selling; I know how to sell this book regardless of what's in it," or, you could sell it because it's a genre, or because it's a 'brand name', that sounds like a "product" to me.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Were book salesmen, though, like that when you knew them? Sales reps?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Sure. When I started at Doubleday, the idea was to have a bestseller every month. I mean, they did. They had Arthur Haley one month, they had

Irving Stone the next; they had Phyllis Whitney; they had Allen Drury. That was a very profitable publishing company.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And as those things went then, that was not bad writing.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No. It was the bestseller house. Betty Prashker was then the editor-in-chief; Ken McCormick had just stepped down. The Doubleday family still owned it. It was a publishing Behemoth, on one hand, and a very savvy publisher, on the other. We used to joke then: if this company weren't so busy making money, it would go out of business.

I think it's come back to that in a way: you've got a machine that drives certain bestsellers, best-selling writers, and then everything else needs to catch on in their wake, or distinguish itself from them. Maybe we have come full circle. But it's hard to distinguish the others from them, even though there are all these new avenues in which to do so. The sound of the larger books drowns out the voice of the smaller ones.

*(pause)*

We were talking about the idea of agent and submissions. Yes, we do get submissions from agents. I lost a book last week to Harvard, which Oxford, Columbia and Harvard were all considering and bid on. Harvard won out.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You started out at \$5,000 and went up to \$20,000. What kind of advances are you able to pay?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Not what I once paid in the trade, clearly; but that removes a certain amount of pressure or expectation from the publication of the book. What I was going to say was, certainly we want to sell every copy we can, for both the author's and our sakes. But I think expectations about what is going to happen when the book is published are kept within a certain frame. Scholarly people — most scholarly people — have a day job. Publication is not everything, or that “everything” that as a writer you're riding on, with the disappointments, expectations, and the like; and that fact insulates everything a little bit. We pay advances, and we pay royalties, which is very nice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Which means the advances are earning out.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Right, the advances are earning out, which is another side of the world it's nice to see. Royalty checks were few and far between after a certain point in trade publishing, because the advance had been all.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When did you notice the advances starting to rise? And how did you stay in that game?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think the advances probably always rose. Look back at legendary stories of old: you know, the million dollar advance, back when. When I was at Doubleday, in the '70s, I think the change came more or less then. In the early '70s, Betty Prashker [*then editor-in-chief*] was fond of saying that the change came in when the Xerox machine came in, because that allowed multiple submissions.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Ah, of course; and, there were still plenty of publishers.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I remember talking to Cork Smith [*Charles M. Smith, a respected literary editor*] about this at Viking in the early '80s, and he said that old idea of actually “earning out” was being replaced by the phrase “You're buying a book.” That's what you're doing now: you're *buying that book*. It's no longer, “Oh, we'll give you an advance.” That changed drastically, and *that* really happened in the early '80s. There was more money. The chains had expanded, so that you could sell many, many more copies of a hardcover book than you ever had before; this is still true. Doubleday was a

house of bestsellers: 60,000 copies was a big sale. Now you're looking at initial print runs of two million copies.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But often, huge returns follow.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, but you're capable of selling in excess of a million copies. Charles Frazier [COLD MOUNTAIN] sold a million and a half hardcover copies! That's remarkable these days.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Or John Berendt's MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL — whatever that's sold!

Do you have a problem with returns?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, we don't. We *are* affected by returns, we have returns. The problem is ameliorated by the nature of what we publish. The good news is we don't get returns; the bad news is that we don't get that many books out, because bookstores buy in ones and twos, for representation, and then reorder; much more so than for trade books. Because we publish reference works, and expensive reference works, that keeps our rate of return down. You're not going to order a \$750 copy of THE COLUMBIA GAZETTEER on spec. You're going to say, "We have a customer for it, we'll order one." That affects the percentage of returns. We're running, oh, 18 to 19 percent, which is about half of what trade or commercial publishers are getting.

*You've got to look at the writing*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How is university publishing different than you thought it would be?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: One of the big differences is, the writing; and the fact that we don't publish fiction. But that's peculiar to Columbia, because some other university presses do publish fiction. But the fact that you don't have that writerly aspect around as part of the fabric of the house affects your non-fiction as well.

Again, I come back to this: the writing. You've got to look at the writing. That, partly, is what people are looking for. Part of it, too, is just that scholarship can carry the day, rather than, simply, the writing. So that's one aspect that's very different. I think the other aspect is this notion of peer review. The publications committee is a wonderful sounding board and helps us constantly, not so much as checks and balances, but by saying: "This is not, I'm here to tell you, the cutting edge!" That's a very helpful expertise. Or, "If you're going to do this, be aware of this, that, and the next thing."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Because you expect to publish the top of the list.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; and that's great. What I am not used to, or in full adjustment to, is that is that we can't publish something that doesn't have the stamp of approval of the publications committee. I'm just not used to operating that way as an editor. That was on your shoulders in commercial publishing. But when people say, "How do you get used to it?" I answer, "Yes, but *you* have to go ask your sales and marketing department. *Can* you publish something without having your sales and marketing department signing off on it?" Increasingly the answer to that is, "No." I say, "Well, I can; but I have to go ask my publications committee." That's a different side of the process. I'd rather ask a publications committee.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You're in the same arena.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, it's an editorially-inclined committee. I think that's one of the nice things about this university press: it is still an editorially-driven publishing company. The genesis of what you're doing springs from the editorial matter.

*He fell into publishing; it was the accidental profession*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There is another way of looking at this question I haven't quite formed, which has to do with imagination and, perhaps, mid-list writers. I suppose the question behind it is, what took you into publishing? What made you want to be an editor, or a publisher? That is, What did you want to be able to read, as opposed to what you did get to read? Or, is writing as good as it was when you started?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Oh, I think so, yes; I think writing is as good as when I started. I fell into publishing; it is the accidental profession and everybody practices it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Did you write a novel and...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I didn't; no, no. I was an English major. "Gee, what are you going to do with your life? Well, have you thought about publishing?" No, I hadn't. "You know, well, you might."

So I came to New York. I went to the publishing course at Radcliffe, and it seemed interesting, and I came down to New York and knocked on doors, and got a job, and, as it turned out, it *was* interesting. You sort of have a knack for it, or you don't; but what always interested me was writing. I don't know that it's still the case, but by and large, that's why people got into publishing. You liked writing, and you liked reading. I think that's very pleasant; and I think the writing is as good today as it ever was. And, maybe, today it is stronger in non-fiction. There is more non-fiction; either it's replacing fiction, or it is what people are writing, or I'm more aware of it now, and less aware of good fiction. Although, god knows, there's tons of it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But you were always more interested in non-fiction.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: This is a certain professional bias. On the other hand, for pleasure I read only fiction.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What do you read?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The last two novels I read, were Don DeLillo's *UNDERWORLD* and Robert Stone's *DAMASCUS GATE*, so I now have the luxury of not reading these in manuscript. Actually the DeLillo is funny, because when I was at Holt, we were the underbidder for *UNDERWORLD*. I read it in manuscript, but I read it as an editor, which was to read it very hard for 150 pages, and then — it's a long novel — start 'kangarooing' through it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A thousand-plus...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: ...manuscript pages. I was having a conversation about the novel. Someone started talking about a scene I had no recollection of, and I thought, I bet that was that 100 pages between such-and-such and such-and-such. So I went back and read the whole novel right through. Now I feel on a firmer basis with it....

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How do you read it differently now? You've read it now, as a finished work.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: You do read differently as an editor than, I think, most readers do, because you're looking for "what's going on here, what is the writer trying to do and is he doing it well; if not, can you help him or here?" Maybe you can; maybe it's just fine and this major flaw is just part of the work, and you live with it. Novel falls apart in the middle, but goddam he picks himself up and goes on with it and there you are at the end, loving it. And I'm sure that's said often about what we now consider classic works of fiction. Anyway, I like reading and think you have to stay with it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How old were you when you knew you liked to read?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, as a kid I read constantly. That was what I enjoyed doing, it was fine for me, not just an escape, but for when you found yourself with free time. That's not all I did, but I would be as happy reading as doing anything else.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you remember the earliest book that affected you?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I don't, Katherine. I can't say, "Oh boy, from there on it was good." I remember having very good English teachers, who affected me. Maybe it was because you were sympathetic; but they remained focused, certainly; they made it interesting.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you joined Doubleday, what did you start as?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I was Doubleday's first male editorial secretary.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So you opened manuscripts, and...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I did the whole thing. I was an editorial secretary at Anchor and was, literally was, their first male editorial secretary. Men, at that point, got into publishing as sales reps, and then advanced to editorial; having sold books, they would come in and learn, then, from outside, how to put books through the editorial process. But you got your background from the field rather than from the publishing house. I was a change from that. I sat there and typed rejection letters just like everybody else, and came up that way. It quickly broke down thereafter, that was the nice thing. I can remember the personnel director at the time being worried. He said, "Well, you know, you're the first male secretary," and asked if that was going to be a problem. And that was not: it was a job.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said you went to the Radcliffe course.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I went to the Radcliffe [publishing] course in 1970. It was the second or third year that they admitted males; it had started as an all-female course, as a way to bring women with degrees into the professional world, as publishing was.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you think the publishing courses are still useful?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I do. We hire regularly out of there; my current assistant is a graduate of the course. I think they're useful as a kind of pre-screening for employers, to sort out those who are really serious about this as a career. What the students get is a good overview, an exposure, so they come into the job understanding what the big picture is, and having a network, that is, your class and those teachers who were there. I think the courses work.

At a big publishing house, where you sort of get pitched into a corner of Editorial and wonder, "Gee, what do subsidiary rights do?" if you hadn't had that overview, you'd feel a bit lost. That's why the course is useful. I know it's changed, even from when I started, but at least you knew, the first time, when you were a secretary and they put those long white sheets of paper on your desk: you knew those were galleys. You didn't say, "What's this stuff?" That was a big difference, you knew a little bit how it works.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How did you become an editor: when did you *know* you were an editor: a real editor, engaged in a book?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: People say you're doing the job before you get promoted to the job. I think that's probably the case. I thought, Oh I can be an editor, I'm doing the rote. That was useful at Doubleday, where there were so many routines and regimes, because if you learn the system, you could actually operate within it before you actually knew why they did it that way. Later, when you discovered "Oh, *this* is why," you'd think, "Wow, get me out of here!" So it was probably after I became an associate editor that I really thought, "Oh, gee, I get this, I understand this. I can now distinguish good from bad, possibility from hopeless: you know, 'This is not going to go anywhere.'" And



I could see a different *idea* of what you want to publish, to *identify* what you wanted to publish. I would say, probably, you're not born with that insight; but it's a quality of being a real editor, that you know *what* you want to publish: not just what you *can* publish, but what you *want* to publish. That's a big distinction. When you ask the kids who are coming up now: "Well, what do you want to publish?", they haven't got a grip on it, yet. They say, "Well..." In the corporate ethos as well, they say, "Well, whatever the board lets me buy!" Yeah, but do you *want* to publish it? Sure, they'll let you buy it. If you want to publish it, what can you do for it, what do you *want to do* about it? That's part of what's changed.

*He wanted to publish writerly non-fiction*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you knew what you wanted to publish, what was that?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That was writerly non-fiction. I thought, "Oh, boy, you can find these people and develop them." The model at the time was John McPhee. You saw somebody who had started here, and worked on that, and developed the craft, and you wanted to read him regardless of what he wrote about; and you saw that with other writers, and in certain areas. I was always a sucker for natural history and history; I liked them very much. History and a kind of biography. "Okay, those are the kind of books I like to publish and think I can make something go with that; and I sort of understand how to publish them, as well, develop the network." It's kind of a hierarchy of writers, those whom you admire, whom you would like to publish. You ask, "Who's writing what?"

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How did you find writers?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Reading, going out with agents, all the usual efforts. You read magazines, you read periodicals. For instance, I wrote — god, I can count on two fingers the number of times this has worked in my history, but I wrote Witold Rybczynski, who had written a review, or an opinion, for what was then *Co-evolution Quarterly*. It was on appropriate technology. He had had a lot to do with appropriate technology, and he said, I don't believe in appropriate technology. I wrote him a letter: "That's very interesting, do you think there's a book there about this?" He wrote back saying, "I've actually been thinking of a short book on this." He said that appropriate technology existed very neatly in the minds of a lot of people, and on paper, but did not exist in the real world as a viable alternative to the present situation, and that the people who had set it up were paper heroes. Like "paper tigers." The result was a book called PAPER HEROES.

That was 1975, something like that. I think I published that book in '78. Then the next book was TAMING THE TIGER, which we did in the early '80s at Viking, which was on the idea: If you invented a technology, did you have to use it? How do you control it? That sort of thing. Then he went on to HOME, which was a bestseller. That was one way you developed writers.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said it worked twice in your history. Who else did you find that way?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Chris Camuto [A FLY FISHERMAN'S BLUE RIDGE], who's a very good natural history writer in your part of the world. He had written such an intelligent book review in, I guess, *Sierra Magazine*, that when you read it you said, "Boy, this guy can write." I wrote him a letter: "Are you working on anything?" I think

you find writers by reading. Even if you're having lunch with an agent, and they're telling you about a writer, you still have to go back and read what he or she has written.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Are there writers whose work you didn't take, that you regret not having taken?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Oh, I'm sure there are. I've learned from *not* publishing certain books: "Oh you just approached that wrong, where you didn't see the possibility," or, "Something was wrong with it when you were looking at it and didn't think, but if you only just fixed that, then it would be just dandy, wouldn't it?" There was a book a couple of years ago called *HAUNTS OF THE BLACK MASSEUR* [by Charles Sprawson], which was on swimming. Pantheon published it; it was by a British writer. I remember reading it and thinking, "Oh, well, this starts so well," and then it went in a direction that I wouldn't have gone with it, and I thought, "Oh, well, too bad!" What I should have done was, I should have published it anyway, because it was better than anything else I've seen since on swimming.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Having come here now to Columbia, do you find that there are authors who come to you even here?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, though the playing field is a little different here, one of the differences being that, in fact, we are a university press; and like most university presses, we have to have our books reviewed by a publication committee; and they have to go through a process of peer review; and so, some of my writers in the past, who are wonderful writers, would not pass muster in terms of scholarship, and don't have "peers," as such.

But certain writers whom I have published in the past could easily come aboard. I signed one of them here, an historian, Charles Alexander, who writes on baseball. The sort of travel writers whom I've published over the years won't come, because what they do is not scholarship. I would hope that our vision would expand to include some of the natural history writers, like Stephen Pyne [*BURNING BUSH*], or Ellen Meloy [*RAVEN'S EXILE*]. John Mack Faragher [*DANIEL BOONE*] or Greil Marcus [*INVISIBLE REPUBLIC*] would also fit.

Stephen Pyne is not going to come over, I don't think, but he is interesting because he originally had been published by university presses; and then I took him on in the commercial world. Viking just published his most recent book, *HOW THE CANYON BECAME GRAND*, which is a very nice book. I don't know that he will ever go back to the university press, although he's doing some books on fire [most recently, *VESTAL FIRE*, 1998] with University of Washington Press.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you have done the fire book?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, absolutely. There is that kind of writer who the trade may not support any longer. If it does support them, I think those people are better published in the trade, because it's a wider exposure; but, whether the trade will support them, I doubt. I don't think the trade supports books such as *VESTAL FIRE*. They are probably better off at a university press. The book on the Grand Canyon is probably better off with commercial publisher, so Stephen Pyne may have a foot in both worlds.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you, do you think, edit differently here than you would at Holt?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, I don't think so. Again, it depends on what you're working on. What I have found in editing some writers here is that, where I would have simply drawn a line through things before, for the sake of the writerliness of it, I will now query, to say, "Is this important scholarship?" and I would explain that "for the sake of just the flow of this book I don't think you'd need it, but if you feel if you have

to get this in for the scholarship, then I understand.” But I wouldn’t have even asked that before, in the trade, because the writing would have been primary. And they might have asked, “Gee, why’d you cut that? Because of the flow?” and they would work it in some other way. But that’s a different way of approaching it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How did your writers tend to respond to your editing?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, I think that as long as it’s clear why you’re doing something, and you’re consistent about it, it’s either: “Yeah, we’ll go along with this,” or “No, what have you done!?”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would the writer have the last word?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; absolutely. It’s their work. My name’s not on the book: they’ve got to live with it. But I think a good editor has just sort of gone into the writer and said, “I think I know what you’re doing here and we’ll go along with that.” And of course, there are writers with whom you practically don’t touch a word, you’re reading along just to make sure they’re not tripping over themselves.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But that would be the ideal thing!

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, yes. But that’s a little different in approach than what we do here. I think that, when push comes to shove, writing is what carries the day in the trade, again because of the entertainment value, good, bad or otherwise... Here, scholarship can be enough to qualify you for publication.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: About four years ago, an Italian publisher remarked to me that, while the best fiction was coming out of New York, much — even most — of the best non-fiction was coming out of the small presses, away from New York: because, and I infer some of this, because the complexity of non-fiction was being edited out here, in New York, and the tone, the quality of the work, was becoming broader and thinner.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That might be true. People say, “Well, this has to be a book about *this*, not have all those other sides into it.”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Editors here have difficulty with complexity.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, very much. I remember when I published *THE MEADOW*, James Galvin’s book, he sent in about half a manuscript. Do you know the book? It’s a very unusual form for non-fiction. Jim called it “weather.” When I read it, I called the agent and asked, “Can I talk to him about this?” I said, “Well, you can go one of two ways with this book. You can be conventional; but if you actually think you can pull off what you’re doing now, you’ve got something brilliant.” And he said he thought he could do it; and he did! He said, “I was surprised that you asked if I could do it in the kind of non-linear way that I’ve been working out. Because I thought somebody would say, ‘Yeah just put this in order, and here we go, and tell the story.’”

Initially, the interest in that book was very much grass-roots, in the realm of the small presses. I remember getting a call from a small press to ask if we were selling the reprint rights for the book. I said, “No, we’re doing it ourselves in paperback.” He said, “Oh, are you the editor? Oh, then you *know*. I thought you guys wouldn’t know what you had there. You know that sort of complexity,” which is very flattering. But it may be a way of saying that small presses are more attuned, or have time, or make the effort to go that way.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Could you have published that book now?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think so. At good publishing houses, people still say, “Sure!”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Are there particular editors you think of?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Not any editors, in particular. What you'd have to have is the sort of climate where, when an editor says, "You've got to give me one: just trust me on this," somebody will. That sort of situation does come up — should come up — at least once a year. I think the hard side of it, for an editor, is not whether the corporation will let you publish the book you want, but whether it will then embrace it; say, "Let's go!"; and not just, finally, say: "Print it, I just don't want to hear about it again."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That makes me think of the famous Alfred Knopf story...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: THE MOVIEGOER!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It is it's a great story. Would you like to tell it?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: As I understand this story, THE MOVIEGOER [by Walker Percy] was taken on by an editor at Knopf over Alfred's objections, over his dead body practically.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Apparently, it was during a brief bout of 'democracy' on the editorial staff.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: And Alfred walked out of the meeting, turned to an assistant, and said, "Fine, we're going to do this, and nobody is ever going to hear about that book again!" When the judging came up for the National Book Award that year, some one of the judges had been sent a copy...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It was Jean Stafford, who was married to A. J. Liebling. She went home and said, "We can't find anything." He said, "Well, I've been reading something interesting," and gave her his annotated copy. That's how I heard it.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I heard that they then said, "This is great. Can we call the publisher and get some more copies?" The warehouse said, "We've never heard of the book." So they circulated that one copy among the judges, and it was voted the winner, and there goes a career; and it is a great book too, just wonderful.

### *Changes coming: contraction; e-publishing*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There's been much discussion, in the trade, about university presses. *Publishers Weekly* occasionally runs pieces about them. What do you see happening on the ground in university presses that we ought to pay attention to?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think several things are happening. The world of university presses is going to go through some contractions, in the same way as the trade publishers; a kind of Darwinian change. I would say there are going to be several of the smallish university presses over the next several years that are either going to combine or go by the wayside.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: As University of Arkansas Press almost did, until they were reprieved, at the last moment.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Exactly. We are not immune from the same pressures the commercial book publishers are. But, university presses are going to succeed in a kind of regional publishing. That's what saved Arkansas, in the end: it is the only publishing company in the state of Arkansas. If you want representation, I think that's very nice; it's not quite the WPA, but it *is* a *regional* interest, and a base and should be part of your mandate. If I were sitting in Arkansas I'd be damn sure that part of my mandate was to be publishing the regional materials. And, certainly, Oklahoma and Nebraska and others have made fortunes doing that. I think, more and more, that that mandate will be embraced by the university press communities around the country.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What, then, if not regional publishing, is your mandate?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, we are given the mandate of publishing scholarship. I said at the AAUP [*American Association of University Presses*] convention, in June of this year, that in being given a mandate we were given a niche, and that that's what everybody is looking for in publishing: "Get niche, or get out," as they say. We've got a niche by definition; it's what we all need, a niche to try and exploit. So our mandate is publishing scholarship; but also, defining that, and seeing how that fits, and "Don't kid yourself about being what you aren't!" That's the sort of thing I said, using sports metaphors: "Are you going to go the net, or you're going to play baseline? Well, if you go to the net, you'd better be able to serve and volley. I can't serve and volley with what I have, so I'm going to hit from the baseline for a while." That is what I think we can do; but you just have to know what kind of player you are, what kind of niche you're in, if you're doing that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You've become an e-publisher here at Columbia.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: On the electronic side of publishing, university presses are light years ahead of the commercial world, partially because they're connected to libraries and to the internet, and the commercial publishers aren't. And, partially, because being, by-and-large, not-for-profit or underwritten organizations, they don't have to make a profit off what they're producing, not as quickly. And so they can afford to try some experiments. Certainly, CIAO is a great experiment for us.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What is CIAO?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It's *Columbia International Affairs On Line*, a repository of on-line publications for material about international affairs. It's part of an experiment being underwritten by the Mellon Foundation. We're interested in developing a self-sustaining on-line publication which would augment what we publish in the field of international relations, and would lead to some other things.

CIAO is full texts, abstracts, working papers, proceedings of symposia, the like, working with different organizations to be content-providers. The idea of it — this is why it's an experiment — is that everything that goes up on it is peer-reviewed. If we can establish a viable model for the publication of material in this arena, will it later count for tenure, promotion and scholarship? But you have to have a viable scholarly model operating, to see if you do it, and that's what we're trying to provide with CIAO.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It is available by subscription?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It is by subscription. There are a couple private scholars who subscribe, as well. Something we're looking at now, is to try to enlarge the bases.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Say, for American libraries abroad?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: There are 145 USIA centers around the world. If each of them had some sort of access to CIAO, I think that would be interesting; as well as the business journals and business press, which would also have use for it. That's part of the marketing outreach. What we're interested in learning is, what works, what doesn't? What do people use it for, and how do they use it? What we find about scholars is, they like it not only as a 'one-stop shopping center,' especially in smaller universities which couldn't afford access to all these things for whatever we're charging for it; but also, that scholars like the idea of works-in-progress: that you can kind of try out ideas, rather than have only what is has traditionally been the final publication after peer review. This kind of gray scholarly material.

We're also going to try and do a another on-line publication in earth sciences, called *Earthscape*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You also publish some CD-ROMs.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We did do some CD-ROMs in the past, and we will in the future. Again a learning process: we were successful with some, we were less successful with others.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: THE CLASSIC HUNDRED POEMS is enchanting.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That is a wonderful CD! It is something that we developed out of an existing project, the GRANGER'S INDEX TO POETRY; but this has a life to its own. We've been most successful with so far with the reference-works: GRANGER'S INDEX TO POETRY, THE DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS, the database-type CD-ROMs. Next spring, we're going to try putting the GRANGER'S INDEX TO POETRY, which has previously existed in print and in CD-ROM, on-line. The other CD-ROM we had a great deal of success with was Diana Eck's project, on religious diversity in the United States, ON COMMON GROUND, which has to do with religious diversity in America. That has been a great success for us. We've sold it to institutions; we will also sell as a textbook for students.

KATHERINE McNAMARA [*reading from the brochure*]: "Geographic courses. America's many religions, Fifteen Religions in the U. S. Diversities, Pluralisms." This looks interesting. Essentially, it's a kind of ethnographical approach.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, and a kind of advocacy as well.

So we're experimenting with what we can't make work, and what we can. The real scholarly monograph, which is fading from the shelves because libraries have no space for it, and fading from publishers' lists because you simply can't afford it, but which is the backbone of scholarly publishing, might have a future on-line or in electronic form. This doesn't save you any of the peer review in the process, but does save you printing, paper, and binding, which is not inconsiderable; and also may allow you to publish, in the sense of disseminating it, more widely than the 300 copies that sit on library shelves somewhere. That's why we're interested in e-publishing primarily: as a future mechanism for a distributing network.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In that regard, you're also doing a Lightning Print Book. [*Lightning Print Inc. is a subsidiary of Ingram, the wholesale book distributing company bought in November by Barnes and Noble; it provides what it calls "on demand printing and distribution services to the book industry," by storing and printing books electronically, one at a time, as ordered by bookstores and libraries, through book wholesalers. It is a development of e-publishing which raises important questions about authors' rights and publishing economics.*]

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We are. We have one National Book Award winner in our history, THE BLUE WHALE, by George Small, which is based on research done on the blue whale in the early '60s. The research is out of date, and, therefore, the book is out of print; but for those people who like a copy of every National Book Award winner, or just want to see what this was about, we licensed to Lightning Print the right to produce bound copies on demand, from our edition. I think, more and more, that this approach will be a certain salvation for the life of books. I think it's an intermediary technology, if you will: from digitizing to print, or from digitizing to downloading from our site, or whatever. I don't know that Lightning Print, itself, will be necessary as an intermediary after a while. It may be that that is the service they provide, and we won't want to be in that business, which is something I think they're banking on.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That you don't want to print *per se*?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Either we don't want to print *per se*, or we don't want to be the intermediary. If somebody calls us up, even if we have it digitized, is that how we want to spend our day, filling telephone orders for a digitized version and downloading

them? That is the job of a publisher; but maybe there's a distributor that could do the job better than we can as a publisher.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Right, and then you could do the real work of a publisher, which is making...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, making the text available, and they can do the rest. I think that that is where all things are possible in this Brave New World. It's another question people have to ask themselves: "What business are you in, and what is your role in the dissemination of information?" Because you can be in almost any area now. It's very easy to become preoccupied with something that you probably shouldn't be doing, spending your time on; that's not what you're on earth to do.

### *Academic writing and peer review*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Since you're an academic press, how does the peer review process alter the work of the editor, compared to how that work was done in the trade world?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It alters it a couple of ways. Quite often, the peer review is used by editors here as a sort of stage of editing. We get all sorts of peer reviews, ranging from "This is a wonderful manuscript, you should publish it," to almost line-by-line critiques of a manuscript. It's very interesting when those instances arise.

Both forms are a form of editing. I think peer review helps an editor with shaping a manuscript. There is, quite often, less hands-on editing here than in the trade, although everybody decries the end of editing in the trade; who knows? And because you have a publications committee or peer review that has to approve what you publish, there is some deference to the opinion of others, rather than to your own opinion about what you want to publish. That's overstating it; but, sometimes, the decision to publish is left in others' hands. You may think, "This is a perfectly good project, but we'll see what somebody else thinks." It goes back to what I said earlier: I think the role of the editor is to decide what you really want to publish; and, sometimes — I wouldn't say this role is abdicated, in scholarly publishing, but — there are other reasons for publishing than your own judgment.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It has a different weight.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It has a different weight; it does. The decision to publish something is not wholly your own. If that is still the case! Arguably, with the publishing committees in trade publishing, the decision there isn't your own.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I'm curious about whether you've found, on the academic side, that the integrity of the manuscript is important. That always should be a very large issue, don't you think, the integrity of the manuscript?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, the integrity of the text.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What happens, for example, when the review comes in and demands a change in the manuscript, which perhaps the author disagrees with? This can happen, too, with dissertations. What if the review goes against what the author wanted to do? What do you do when there is that sort of conflict?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think you have to decide whether or not to publish. The writer would certainly have a rebuttal to the review. In that case, you have to not-quite arbitrate. Either the reviewer has a certain axe to grind, or the writer says, "That's not what I'm writing." Just as a reviewer in the media quite often goes wrong on a book: "Well, that's not the book I wrote, you know, you're not reviewing the book I wrote." I think, there, you decide who you're standing by. And, most of the time, you come

down on the side of the author, rather than the reviewer. That's been the experience I've seen here, unless someone is being accused of completely sloppy scholarship, or is just wrong about something. We rarely arbitrate. You'd go with the author who said "No, this is what I mean, and that's what I want." I think that integrity of text is respected all the way through.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Have you noticed a change in tone or texture of the writing?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, the writing is looser. Because things could be left mutable till the end, people tended — I don't know, this may be slightly unfair — tended not to figure it out at the outset; it wasn't as tight, thinking you could go back or change this later, not having thought it all the way through on a first draft. The differences are odd. I remember talking about this to Witold Rybczynski, years ago, when he first started writing on the computer. For him, it almost restored the silence of writing. You didn't have an electric typewriter you felt you had to keep up with, that *clack clack clack*. It almost took him back to longhand. I think there are all sort of aesthetic advantages, as well as, god knows, the practical ones.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You can write as fast as you can think.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: You can write as fast as you can think; you can change things very easily. Just the factor of time: that's a wonderful boon.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Have you found any differences between on-line and print publishing in terms of procedure and so on? Or are they simply technological?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Actually, there *is* a difference. In print publishing, quite often, you are not publishing speculation. You don't get to try out ideas in print; they've got to have been through all the review process, whereas on-line there is a kind of gray area, sometimes. "I've researched this, and this is where I'm going, and I don't know that this is where I'm going to end up. And could I have your feedback? And, what else is going on?" That's what — we find — scholars like about CIAO, the ability to try things out before they are, if you will, committed to paper.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That is what the internet was for, when it was started.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: And it's been very nice. We've got a couple of things that we think will end up in print, after they've been through a number of stages on the internet.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So, it's a kind of editorial process. And that raises, for a writer, at least, an interesting question about drafts: not just about preserving them, but having material out there before it's in the final version. You must have some sort of a protocol for marking, and also for downloading and printing; do you? Do you restrict access and accession?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, you can download and print, in certain areas, but you can always block anything you want to block, so that certain things can't come down, while other things can. By and large, CIAO is pretty 'downloadable,' as I understand it.

### *Persuading Readers to Read*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I was thinking about your being drawn to non-fiction, that it is what you love. Very often, it also is the domain of the intellectual. We are all in a little discussion, or a cultural argument, that goes on here and there, about the matter of the 'public intellectual.' Where are our Edmund Wilsons, we ask? That sort of criticism also is the realm of serious non-fiction. You published such work at Holt,



surely. I wonder if you find that trade publishing is less receptive to the sort of serious writing I'm referring to, here?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think the culture is less receptive to it, in a way. You don't have, well, I don't know if you have public icons like Edmund Wilson, or the like, whose opinion on something mattered across the board to society. I think it's much more factionalized now.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It's a small group of society, still?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes. On the other hand, this sort of discourse still exists. Certainly, if you read the *New York Review of Books*, one sees that this is a community of ideas, and thought; that discourse does go on. I don't know that it ever was seamlessly integrated into society. Now, I think, it is more of the two cultures: the popular culture here, and the intellectual culture over here, rather than their crossing back and forth. But you see very serious books published constantly. People are seeking them out and making successes of them: books that deal with issues, that are issue-oriented, which is, theoretically, the hardest kind of book to publish successfully.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you still see, to your satisfaction, books like that being published?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes. Princeton has this book called *THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER*, by William C. Bowen and Derek Bok, that has to do with the long-term consequences of race and affirmative action. They are pushing that book hard, not only to the academy but to the trade. Princeton's not a trade publisher; they are a university publisher acting like a trade publisher, for this book. They hired a freelance publicity group in New York to promote it, and they are trying to tour the authors. They feel the book has a trade audience, as well as one in the academy.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That leads us to the matter of readership, rather than market, although I'm sure everyone uses the word "market." But doesn't a book like *THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER*, along with the sort of books you're interested in as well, appeal to a *readership*? How is it now more nearly the job of, say, university presses and small presses to find that old, perhaps legendary, serious readership? Publishers used to attach numbers to it, do you remember?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: "Seventy-five readers."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I even heard someone say, 60,000. "There are 60,000 serious readers in the U. S., period."

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The question is, how many readers are there: serious readers? It was always a great debate in trade publishing, and it is still such a debate, because when you look at a serious novel, or a work of fiction everybody agrees is serious — look at Don DeLillo, for instance — and you can sell 75 to 100 thousand copies of it, you say, "Well, is that the upper reach?" Or is the typical sale, 7500 to 10,000 copies, the real readership, and you somehow magically, with one book, expanded it? Or, are you just capturing ten percent of the total each time with all these other serious books? It's a remarkably small number, whatever it is, in comparison to the total population of the country.

But that has always been the challenge, reaching an audience, and I don't think that's changed. The challenge is now harder than ever, for trade or academic publishers: either to capture that audience, or to *create* an audience, in the sense of convincing those people who might be interested in reading, to actually spend their time *reading this book*, as opposed to spending their time reading something else, as opposed to spending their time doing whatever. That's increasingly the challenge.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is to persuade readers to read....

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes: persuading readers to *read*. It used to be, calling readers' attention to a book. There's been a subtle change. We used to say, 25 years ago, that publishing was recession-proof; that, historically, there was always a certain population that would rather spend their money on books than on food; that there were always the sort of 'poor' readers to march us through. I don't know that that's case anymore; or, that there aren't so many other sorts of intellectual distractions, or just distractions, that you don't have to pay attention to convincing people they have to read. It's the peril of non-fiction. Once someone summarizes a book, the reader can think, "Well, now I've got the information, why do I need to read it?" You either have to give it a better context than the summary, or write it so it's worth spending the time reading! The ongoing information stream is part of our challenge: "Okay, stop. Read this. Don't just consume the information."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I overheard a funny little conversation in a new restaurant. A woman was telling about a friend of hers who had recently been fired from her job: one of the middle class, the New York middle class, which means reasonably literate and reasonably well-to-do. This woman, now out of work, found that her day was different than it had been, because she was no longer a "consumer": she now had to *think* about what she did, what she bought, what she ate, what she read, what she paid attention to. And so, she found herself becoming more of a "customer," and she was becoming more — the dread word — "creative" about what she chose, rather than being caught in a kind of consumer-rut.

I thought it an interesting conversation for all sorts of reasons, most of which are ironic. But it might be something like that which you refer to, that subtle change of difference: not so much persuading the readers to read this book, but persuading the readers to *read!*

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, in terms of trying to figure out what's shaping everybody, that "consumer rut" is a good example. "I'm on this sort of treadmill, not that I can't get off, but..." You know, the urge; there's such an automatic, ongoing situation that you can't stop. That I spend x hours every day reading what I think I have to read to keep up with the industry, the trade journals, or review media, or this that and the next thing. So that you, perforce, are not reading for pleasure or the cultivation of intellect. Whereas, "maybe if I didn't have that job, maybe I'd switch over and do this." Yeah, the consuming side of it is interesting — I mean, going back to books as entertainment.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That analogy makes me flinch. Books are overpriced, is my notion, because I think they ought to be free as air, though that's another question, isn't it? But books are very expensive. So, I've heard publishers and editors say something like this: "Well, the cost of a novel is the cost of two and a half movie tickets!" It's a bad analogy, I think, because books and movies are not comparable; and when you make them comparable you remove the unique quality of the book. There is nothing else like it. It can't be compared, and it oughtn't to be treated frivolously.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think that's true. I don't know the answer to the problem of the price of books. Because I'm quite sympathetic. On the one hand, they are cheap by comparison to what other things cost, as well as what goes into the manufacture, the time of everyone involved to bring the book out. Here's a unit, for \$25. It's almost like food: you can't believe food is so cheap, even though we're decrying it, after, my god, this farmer raised it, transported it, took it to market...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It's not like the farmer gets much return on investment.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That's part of it too. Nonetheless, you're still convincing someone to part with \$25 to \$30 of their hard-earned-money, for this object.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Well, I'll ask you a question: Why publish in hardbound editions? Why not do as the French do, or as the old North Point [*a defunct, once highly-regarded small press; its name is now an imprint of Farrar, Straus*] did, and publish in handsome soft-bound?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Many people have done it. I mean, having been born and raised up in paper books, we thought hardbacks were going to be dead tomorrow, back in 1970.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They're so heavy and they're so expensive.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The only answer I have to this is the old cultural prejudice: It's not "real" in paperback; if this were truly valid, truly good, it would be in hardcover first. In many respects there is validity to that, because publishers say, "Well, then, it's true, and we put our best stuff in hardcover."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A certain pat decree/pedigree there.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We perpetuate it ourselves. But paperback publishing has been tried.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I wonder what generation started buying hardbound? Ours? When we finally got jobs with tenure?

WILLIAM STRACHAN [grinning]: We have.

KATHERINE McNAMARA [laughing]: We don't have to mail our books now from one temporary address to another. We're not grad students; we've even got gray hair.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, it's not only that. I found this fascinating: when I was at Holt, we bought Thomas Pynchon's novel, which turned out to be *MASON AND DIXON*. When we bought the rights to publish the book, we were counting on a certain sale in hardcover, but a kind of annual 'annuity' in trade paperback, based on the sales of *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*. And while I think that's true, what took everyone aback last year — I was gone, but I looked at this somewhat carefully — when the trade paperback came out, it didn't suddenly rocket onto the bestseller list. In fact, what everybody said was that maybe Pynchon's audience had grown up, and were buying in hardcover, and were not interested in the trade paperback anymore. I mean, our generation, that was raised up with trade paperbacks, may now have turned their back on them.

### *Our generation, those before, and the next*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you think about generations of book buyers?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yeah, I do.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How do you think about them?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think about them in terms of a kind of taste in what's represented. When I worked at The Viking Press, Elisabeth Sifton was our editor-in-chief. This was in the early '80s. I said, "This is a really wonderful publishing house," and she said, "Of course," and I said, "One of the reasons is that you have these various generations of editors." At that point, Malcolm Cowley was still coming in once every other week. Then it dropped down from Malcolm to Cork Smith and Alan Williams, who I guess were both in their fifties. And then to Elisabeth Sifton, who was a decade younger. And then down to Amanda Vaill and myself, who were a decade younger. She said, "You know, this isn't an accident." I said, "Oh?" She said that if you looked at the history of Viking Press, you saw a certain generation of editors that bought D. H.

Lawrence and a number of other people. And then you went maybe a generation later and you had Steinbeck, and you had a couple of other writers that came in.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That would be under?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That was Pat Covicci, and Marshal Best, and a number of other people. Then you had them picking up Bellow and the like in the '40s. But, she said, if you look at the history of The Viking Press in the '50s, you don't have the new generation of writers coming in. You have Steinbeck continuing to publish; you have Bellow continuing to publish; you have a number of other people they've always published. There was no new editor brought in from 1948 till Cork Smith got there in 1962. She said, "We missed a generation of writers, not having that generation of editors to represent the taste of a generation. We don't have the history from the '50s." I know, when I read submissions or look at editors who are in their late '20s, that it's a different taste. You need that. And, you know, they're probably looking in abject horror at somebody like Don DeLillo. Maybe, I don't know; I'm making this up.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Actually no, they're not, they're looking at him with some respect. "Content" is why. Somebody told me this about the internet, too: it's now chic to have "content."

WILLIAM STRACHAN: But I do think about generations of readers, what is attractive to them, stylistically, in content, themes, etc., changes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you find yourself able to read younger writers?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I can't, you know, say "This interests me," as often as, "I don't get it," or, "This doesn't speak to me."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So, yours is a sort of sociological reading.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; or you can say, "This is a technically skilled writer." When I see what they're up to, it's not of remote interest to me, but I see what they're trying to do, and I try and do a clinical reading, rather than an interested reading.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you find yourself noticing that kind of response more, are you tracking it, when you look around you at your colleagues in the trade?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Only to the extent that I read the gossip columns in the trade papers about the hot deals. At cocktail parties or in the trade journals, I am continuously aware that another generation is in place, that people who are from 25 to 35 are making a huge impact. And I'm aware of that, constantly. I don't see it as much, interestingly, in what is actually published, and I don't know if this is my radar, or what channels you tune to, in the trade reviews, or the papers: I don't see that as much is cracking into the establishment in the way that it used to. I mean, in some ways the writers that I'm aware of—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Are not taken so seriously?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, they are taken very seriously. I'm not aware, when I read trade reviews or reviews in the *Times* or the like, of the younger writers. Maybe I just read over them. When I was a kid, as an editor, people like Ann Beattie or Lorrie Moore were the young people rising then. And you were a contemporary of them as an editor, as well. There's very much a tie to that generation.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In terms of the kind of non-fiction that you like, do you see anything interesting happening in the younger generation of writers? Do they know enough to write about?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Hmm, yes; yes. Well the 'memoir' thing, that's another story. But the writers that I worked with who were coming up and who were writing, they were very concerned with place, a great many of them. Not just *their* place, but physical location, or detail or history: local *place*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That was very much of our generation.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; maybe I'm just drawn to those writers who were exploring these themes when they were younger. But beyond that I don't know. The memoir, if you will, the self-absorption, or the that old "figure out life through me," is certainly part of the landscape now.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What is called "creative non-fiction."

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, exactly.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Maybe the 'memoir' is a sort of sub-genre of fiction, but that's somebody else's argument.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, I'm not going to go on with that one.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do we have a literary culture? If we do, what does it look like?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, I think we do. There are a great many good books being published that count as literature, and are being talked about, and appreciated. I guess in some ways it looks more fragmented, for many reasons, than it ever did before; is maybe not as homogenous — although maybe it is, because it's linked up in ways that we never saw before. Suddenly, you're getting books on the internet, you're getting books on TV. The book culture exists in many different areas, other than *just* in a bookstore, or *just* on the page, which made it seem neatly compact before. Now, it looks diffuse and fragmentary, but maybe it's just an expanded circle. It may be illusory that it's more fragmentary. Maybe there is a wider dissemination of material than ever before. I think a lot of people are reading, and care about books. Certainly, the numbers prove it, whatever they're reading. And they are certainly *talking* about books: all those readers' groups and the like.

So the book culture has become more a part of the culture than, maybe, it was before. Maybe the change is in the literary part: is it more communal than the solitary life that it used to be? That may be a change. Or, the change is in what people want: they don't want to lose themselves, or bury themselves in a book. They don't say, "Stay here; I want to be alone."

&&&&&

William Strachan, Director, Columbia University Press  
562 West 113th Street, New York, New York 10025

*A Selection of Books and Writers Edited or Published by William Strachan:*

Witold Rybczynski, HOME: A Short History of An Idea

TAMING THE TIGER: The Struggle to Control Technology

PAPER HEROES, Appropriate Technology: Panacea or Pipe Dream?

Gretel Ehrlich, THE SOLACE OF OPEN SPACES

Marc Reisner, CADILLAC DESERT: The American West and Its Disappearing Water

Christopher Camuto, A FLY FISHERMAN'S BLUE RIDGE

Charles Alexander, OUR GAME: An American Baseball History

Stephen Pyne, BURNING BUSH: A Fire History of Australia

Ellen Meloy, RAVEN'S EXILE: A season on the Green River

John Mack Faragher, DANIEL BOONE: The Life and Legend of An American Pioneer

Greil Marcus, INVISIBLE REPUBLIC: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes

James Galvin, THE MEADOW

***Books Mentioned during the Conversation:***

Charles Frazier, COLD MOUNTAIN

John Berendt, MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

Don DeLillo, UNDERWORLD

Robert Stone, DAMASCUS GATE

Charles Sprawson, HAUNTS OF THE BLACK MASSEUR

Walker Percy, THE MOVIEGOER

William C. Bowen and Derek Bok, THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER

Stephen Pyne, HOW THE CANYON BECAME GRAND; VESTAL FIRE

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ON COMMON GROUND, Diana L. Eck & the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. CD-ROM.

“Multimedia introduction to the changing religious landscape of the United States.”

***Reference:***

THE COLUMBIA GRANGER'S INDEX TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN POETRY, ed. Nicholas Frankovitch and David Larzelere.

THE COLUMBIA GUIDE TO ONLINE STYLE, Janice Walker and Todd Taylor.

However, the authors don't hyphenate “on-line.”

THE COLUMBIA GAZETTEER OF THE WORLD, ed. Saul B. Cohen.

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VILLAGE BELLS, Alain Corbin, tr. Martin Thom.

THE WORK OF POETRY, John Hollander.

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Lightning Print <[http://www.ingram.com/Company\\_Info/lpihtml/](http://www.ingram.com/Company_Info/lpihtml/)>

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National Writers Union <<http://www.nwu.org/book/pubdemnd.htm>>

***Institutional Memory:***

A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 3

A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 4 and Vol. 2 No. 1

# ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion  
www.archipelago.org

Vol. 3, No. 2 Summer 1999

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A Conversation about Publishing  
*with* SAMUEL S. VAUGHAN

Katherine McNamara

*“ I think the reader has rights.”*

*It has been remarked that book publishing as a so-called gentleman’s occupation began to change about the time the phrase publishing industry came into use, around the mid-1970s. If true, it marks nicely the beginning of the kind of change I have been interested in tracing in the business of making and selling books.*

*Is it true, however: has the gentleman’s occupation changed so much, so quickly? Perhaps my assumption is faulty? An editor and publisher of long experience told me that he’d like to take the notion of “gentleman’s occupation” and kick it in the head. I liked this and asked him to say more. He did, and a lively conversation ensued.*

*Substantially, however, what has changed in the business of making and selling books? For I think it can be agreed that enormous change has occurred. What sorts of people went into publishing then? Are they a different sort now? Are there fewer good books, more bad, than ever? Is the art of editing no longer practiced well in the trade? How can we speak of publishing “houses” after conglomeration? Do conglomerate managers know anything about books? I have been inquiring of distinguished representatives of an older generation, and of my own generation of the Sixties, what they thought about these questions.*

*Generously, these persons have told how they entered the book trade; spoken about writers they’ve published and declined to publish; described the (changing) class structure of their domain; talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism; described their way of practicing responsible publishing. Without exception, they are serious readers, usually of more than one language. They recognize that times have changed. They speak with wary-friendly observation of the generations coming up.*

*Excerpts of these conversations will continue to appear regularly in Archipelago and may serve as an opening into an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current corporate structure, reflecting on glories of its own, revealing what remains constant amid the present flux. Despite their surround of gentility, these publishers are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.*

-KM

*See also:*

A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 3

A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, Vol. 1 No. 4 *and* Vol. 2, No. 1

A Conversation with William Strachan, Vol. 2, No. 4

“What He Says Is Gospel,” George Garrett, *in this issue*



Samuel S. Vaughan, Editor-at-large, Random House  
Former Editor-in-chief, President, and Publisher, Doubleday

Samuel S. Vaughan entered the publishing trade in 1951, as a desk man for King Features Syndicate. The following year he joined the syndication department of Doubleday, where he learned the craft of cutting books into serials, then selling rights to newspapers. He was promoted to advertising manager (1954-56), then to sales manager (1956-58). From sales he moved to editorial, becoming a senior editor in 1958. Ten years later, he was made executive editor of Doubleday. In 1970 he was named publisher and president of the company and remained so for the next twelve years. From 1982 till 1985 he was editor-in-chief of Doubleday. The list of titles (it is incomplete) should indicate that he learned the art of publishing books from the ground up. He has done nearly every job in the trade, he supposed, except printing. "The equation of the publishing business is what I think I understood, and what the publisher is asked to understand and to deal with," he said. "It is the *major* elements that the publisher can affect. I liked all parts of publishing. I like the editorial job; I like the publishing and promotion, the advertising job; I like the sales jobs. It was important to me to give everybody a fair shake."

Sam Vaughan is known as a man of his word. "You can take what he says as gospel," the novelist George Garrett told me. A woman of wide experience in the business, whose first job had been as his assistant, said simply, "He is a great man."

Sam Vaughan, though claiming to be semi-retired, is at present editor-at-large at Random House, once a competitor of Doubleday; now both large companies are owned by the same German publishing company. A visitor to the Random House skyscraper signs in, is given a badge, and takes an express elevator to an upper floor, where she is met by a tall, courteous man resembling James Stewart in aspect and voice, who apologizes (unnecessarily) about his small, book-filled office. Thoughtfully, he has provided coffee. He is interested in what the other publishers have had to say, seeming to converse with them as much as with his caller. He takes issue with received ideas, and he is careful about facts.

I spoke with Sam Vaughan in the Spring of 1999; twice we met at his office, the third time at the august Century club, where he gave me a pleasant luncheon. He expressed interest in the theme of "institutional" memory, while commenting wryly on the capacity of his own. His is a fine, dry humor, without irony but rather, enlarged by compassion and honest indignation.

### *A gentleman of contraries*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You've, very engagingly, called yourself a "contrarian."

SAM VAUGHAN: It's a stock market term, and I'm not much of a financial wizard, but I just don't agree with much of the conventional current comment about publishing. Although in the beginning I did, because I was learning. Now I'm beyond learning.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What are you contrarian about?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, we're still selling trade books by the pound, pricing them according to weight, not intrinsic value, or the limits of the presumed market or audience as reflected in the first printing, or their likely ability to pay. Publishers are still letting untrained, inexperienced people loose on books, refusing to train or

develop them except by the ancient system of an unstructured apprenticeship. And, we allow myths to perpetuate. For example, I'm trying to write an introduction to a new edition of a fairly well-known publisher's memoir — that's an oxymoron — called *AN OCCUPATION FOR GENTLEMEN*, by Frederick Warburg. I want to talk about the impact of the title, because people have picked up on it: that this was such an occupation. What I'd like to kick in the head is the idea that publishing was an occupation for gentlemen. It has led to many misconceptions about the origins and nature of publishing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Why do you say this?

SAM VAUGHAN: The word *gentleman*, it seems to me, doesn't have a precise definition, but it implies a person of independent means, who doesn't really have to work. In the Warburg memoir, the title comes from an anecdote. He was in conversation at a party with a man who was the head of Marks & Spencer, the big retailer. When Mr. Warburg said he was in publishing (after the usual 'What do you do?' kind of thing, which was not so common in London then) Mr. Marks-&-Spencer said, "Is publishing an occupation for gentlemen or is it a real business?"

I don't mean to say that there never have been gentlemen, by whatever definition, or gentlewomen, but the history of books and publishing is not a history of gentlemen dabbling in a pleasant occupation. As far as I can tell, the first books were in the hands of literate elites, meaning the church and high priests, scholars and scribes, who despite their exalted position were not exactly gentlemen. Then, following Gutenberg, publishing was often in the hands of printers and ultimately booksellers. They were tradesmen, sometimes middle-class. That's what we came out of, in large part.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you think the term "trade publishing" began, in fact, with the jobbing printers?

SAM VAUGHAN: As far I know, it begins with publishing for the retail book trade, as opposed to publishing for schools. A big part of publishing, now and for a long time, has been for schools and colleges and for libraries. I think the reference was to the book trade, i.e., booksellers.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When would that have come about?

SAM VAUGHAN: I don't know that. English publishers in the 1920s and '30s had what they called a "trade counter" in the publishing house. The trade counter was — I'm laughing because of the contrast with the current scene — where the 'trade' was supposed to come and pick up their books. In a really aggressive house the publisher might have a person or two who took books out and carried them to the booksellers.

English publishing, when I first started to visit London, in the 1950s, was sort of frozen, *en gelée*. I remember an English publisher who did a lot of visiting back and forth. We were each doing the same book. I said, "Our jacket for the book is just ready, would you like to see it?" He said, "Well, yes, that would be very nice." We got the jacket out for him to look at. I held it up. He stared at it for awhile. I said, "Like it?" "Yes," he said, "but don't you think it's a little '*market-seeking*'?"

That was a leftover attitude. In any case, I don't know whether the English were ever so uncommercial as they appeared to be.

On the other hand, German publishers tend, by-and-large, to be well-trained for business. My young assistant, Mr. Ulf Büchholz, is a case-in-point. He was trained by Bertelsmann [*owners of Random House, Inc. and Doubleday/Bantam/Dell*] in Germany. I once was one of the authors of a report for the Publishers Association, which I titled "The Accidental Profession." In Germany, publishing is much less accidental. The bookseller is a

professional, trained in a sort of guild-fashion. The relationship between the bookseller and the publisher is one of mutual respect.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So, the phrase “the accidental profession” is yours?

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. We found that almost none of us had set out to be in book publishing — but were.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How, then, did you come into this trade?

SAM VAUGHAN: I was like Mr. Marks-&-Spencer: I had never thought about book publishing as an occupation. I had thought about magazine-, but not book-, publishing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How were these different, would you say?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, I’d been an editor as an undergraduate of a magazine, a humor magazine first and a literary magazine second. And therefore I wanted to work in magazines; it was a form I thought I knew. But, fortunately for me, I didn’t work in magazines. Of course, in the ‘50s and ‘60s, mass-circulation magazines were about to encounter very heavy weather, and some disappeared.

The interesting difference, from the point of view of the writer, between a magazine- and a book-publisher is that, when you write for a magazine, the magazine owns the piece. You’re writing in the magazine’s voice, or you’re at least being edited by the magazine, and it tends to have a certain style. When you write a book, you’re really writing for yourself: you lease what you write to the publisher. So when publishers say, “I bought a book,” they misstate the case slightly. What they do is make a contract that gives them the right to vend the book in various forms, for a period of time. The author, always downtrodden and always fragile, is nonetheless the owner of what he or she created.

### *Learning the business*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you talk a bit about your background, where you were raised and educated?

SAM VAUGHAN: I was raised in Philadelphia, in the city itself, in the section called South Philadelphia. And my wife was born a block away. Well, Jo is half Italian by ancestry and I’m not at all Italian by ancestry. My folks were leftover WASPs, and so I had the delightful experience of learning how to be a WASP minority. With a name like Sam, and a long nose, and a Welsh surname, going to school was quite colorful. But because my parents spoke English, I had a head-start program of my own, and, therefore, my teachers treated me very well, and I got the idea I was smart. And, despite the evidence of later years, I never quite gave it up. I went to Penn State, and, as I said, I majored in putting out undergraduate magazines. Terrible student in high school and in college. But I did learn something about pasting up off-set proofs, selling advertising, and trying to get writers — people who said they were writers — to write.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You read, though; a lot?

SAM VAUGHAN: I’m poorly-read. I suppose a number of people in publishing secretly feel that, because we’re surrounded by books. We had some books in my house, and my parents were readers; but I’m not well-read in any formal sense. I’m a person who needs a Great Books curriculum. When I got to college they tested us in English and I was put in an advanced-placement freshman class. All the teachers of advanced freshmen decided they were sick of the classics, and they taught, instead, off-beat books. Instead of *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*, they taught Olive Schreiner’s *THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM*—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A wonderful book....

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. Well, I read *EYELESS IN GAZA*, when I might have been reading *WAR AND PEACE*. Not to say that one book is bad and the other book is good; it's just I missed a lot.

After an interlude in the Marine Corps, I got out of college. There was only one place for me to work — an idea planted in my head by my peers — and that was New York. I came here and got a job, through a college-magazine friend, at King Features Syndicate, a Hearst organization. The big business there was comics. I had the most minor of editorial jobs, called, according to the union, a “desk-man.” I did proof-reading and the preparation of boiler-plate, the stuff that was sent out to small newspapers that couldn't afford to compose their own Sunday puzzle pages. I wrote *Minute Mysteries*, in one of which the bad guy's name was Italian. My boss rapped my knuckles; even back then he said: “You can't do that.” That was a lesson in what's now called political correctness: or, simply, avoiding stereotypes.

My boss was a good guy named Clark Kinnaird. He was very concerned, when he hired me, about whether or not I could, as a married man (I was married as an undergraduate, and had a child), make it in New York on \$77.50 a week. I assured him I could; and did; and three months later, he was even more appalled when he fired me.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A man with a heart.

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, it wasn't his doing. William Randolph Hearst had had the bad taste to die right after I was hired, and right after he died they started to clean house, and so, last one in, first one out. There was nothing unfair about it; I mean, they got rid of lots of people.

But Mr. Kinnaird did his best to help me find a job. After I had shopped around for awhile he said, “Would you like to have a job at the Washington *Star*?” I said, “I'd love it.” He sent me out to Washington, New Jersey, to a paper there at that time, for a job that I, in turn, didn't get. In any case, I made the rounds for months, and, meanwhile, delivered the mail in Washington Heights, and got a job at Doubleday, in a small arm of their rights department they called the Syndicate. I came in at the tail end of the time when books were fairly widely syndicated in newspapers in this country. The papers carried books in serial form. Doubleday had books that had made a lot of money by licensing them to outside syndicates, books like Fulton Oursler's *THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD*. The money had to be divided 50/50 with the syndicate, and then 50/50 with the author, so the author got 25%, the publisher got 25%. Then Doubleday, in its wisdom, decided to do it themselves. So, I got this job preparing books for syndication; also traveling to sell them. I wasn't notably good at it, but I got to see the country.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How did you prepare them? Did you actually do the editing, divide them into usable chapters, and so on?

SAM VAUGHAN: You would cut them into a week-long series, or a twelve part series, and it was learned by doing. It was surgery on the helpless body of the author. But I think we showed the cut versions to the authors, and they were usually happy to have some extra readership, publicity, and income.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Just for curiosity's sake, what was the money like?

SAM VAUGHAN: It ranged from \$50.00 to a couple of thousand. A paper would buy a series from us. A big paper in Chicago might pay \$2,000; a small paper anywhere might pay \$50.00. You had to give them territorial rights, because big papers tended to claim everything.

But one of the books my boss got interested in, when I was first there, was one by a young Dutch girl. He sold it to the New York *Post* for a small amount of money

before publication. But what we got out of it was that the *Post* did its own version. Every day I went down to the *Post* and got, hot off the press, their installment. I came back and typed it on stencils. Then we went on the road to sell it. My boss sent me, naturally, to Philadelphia. I sat down with a man named Stuart Taylor, of the *Bulletin*. He was an elegant fellow; newspapermen could be elegant in those days. Thinking back to what I had told my boss, I said: “This isn’t exactly good newspaper material, it’s a diary of a young girl who was a real pain in the ass. Who could love a teenage girl? I mean, that’s the worst time of life to love someone.”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And the book was—

SAM VAUGHAN: THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL, by Anne Frank. That was its first title, I believe. —

Stuart Taylor listened to my story and bought it from me on the spot, for very good money. I almost fell off the chair. We in fact only sold it to about ten or twelve papers; but it was part of the publication “buzz,” as they would call it these days. I had no idea that the book would last forever. I guess I had certain sympathy for what we knew of Anne Frank’s life and death, but I just didn’t ‘feel the mystery’ at that point. That was my first observation of a publishing phenomenon. It’s an interesting study, a publishing phenomenon. I don’t mean ‘bestseller,’ I mean books as phenomena. That was also my first example of a book that passes from the intended audience to an incidental audience, one of which happened to be young women.

I don’t mean that they’re incidental, but that nobody said, “This is a book for young women.” Nobody said, “This is a book for Jewish people.” In fact, you didn’t say that in those days, not out of any sensitivity, but because that was before the revolution in which Jewish writers became some of our most interesting and important writers. We published EXODUS [by Leon Uris] in that period, which we called “the story of the birth of a nation.” We published [Herman Wouk’s] MARJORIE MORNINGSTAR, which we described as a “love story of a young girl in New York,” never saying the word “Jewish.”

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Indeed, I remember hearing about those books when I was coming up, and it never even occurred to me that they were, as it were, separate from me.

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, “Anne Frank” was published as an adult trade book, and it sold extremely well as such, but then passed on, over the decades, into the hands of young people.

That’s a good topic to explore, sometime: the book that, published for one presumed audience, transmutes itself for another. For example, the book that is published as an adult book, and gets taken up by kids. Or, the book that is published for children and gets taken up by adults. There’s a history in that.

### *Selling books for Doubleday*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There you were in the syndicate department, selling syndicate rights; but that didn’t continue. Something changed.

SAM VAUGHAN: “Corporate culture” is a phrase used with a sneer, but any organization worth a damn has its own culture. Doubleday was proud of the fact that it trained its people well. It believed in certain sporadic attempts at formal training, but mostly, it trained by letting you move from job to job. In the first six years, I had three jobs, along a curious path. None were in Editorial. Well, the syndicate, in a minor way, was editorial. But all were in publishing.

Then I was promoted to become advertising manager. I did that for a couple of years, and loved it, because I thought that the book advertising was terrible, stodgy, and still do. Routinely, book advertising today is no better than it was then. It's what I call "the parade of the rectangles." Run a picture of the book, write a headline, quote some reviews, and get it out. It's a very limited view of what you might say about a book and how to present it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What is an expanded view?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, I tried to show books in context. I tried to show that books didn't float in air, they existed somewhere: in your hands, in your home, in your travels, or wherever. I spent a lot of money on photography. I suppose the peak of all that was when we got a Publisher's Ad Club award [1956] for an action novel called MR. HAMISH GLEAVE, by Richard Llewellyn. A wonderful novel, I fell in love with it, and I probably spent too much money on it. But I got a photographer to go down to Wall Street. I said: "The character in this book is a member of the British Establishment, he has been spying for the Russians for a long time, he's about to leave the country." And I had some idea of a situation, but the photographer came up with something much better. He photographed our guy in his Homburg and his dark suit and his tight umbrella, running down a very long flight of steps outside one of those Wall Street buildings. You just don't see a man dressed like that running; it was a marvelous piece of work. I wrote some short copy to go with it, and it was a very effective ad. That's the kind of thing I thought should be done, and still do. There's one consistently brilliant advertising manager, Nina Bourne, at Knopf, who can make an ordinary review ad look extraordinary. She never stops amazing me, and amusing me, with variations on that theme.

### *A so-called company man*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you look back over the works you've published, do you find continuities; do you find themes?

SAM VAUGHAN: One of the virtues of growing older is that you find the themes and the connections of your own life. I came of age as an adult in the '50s. One big question at the time was conformity, and therefore conformity is important to me still. Or, perhaps, non-conformity, while pretending to conform. Books like *BABBITT* and *THE ORGANIZATION MAN* were formative books for me. They had a lot to say to me. I've always worked for organizations, fairly sizable ones, so the question of whether you become a so-called company man or not was somewhere in the air. I've been a bit of a fraud because I've "passed."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Speaking metaphorically.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. I guess I looked the part. Once, a woman came up to me at a party and said, "Did you go to Princeton?" I said, "No." She insisted that I did.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Recently, I read an article about changes in publishing, with a similar theme. The author talks of a moment when publishers actually hired people who didn't have a 'good' college education, because they wanted to sell to the mass market. The claim he made was that, instead of the 'old school tie,' they used some other kind of criterion. I'm interested in that, because you very nicely go around that whole issue of class, while at the same time almost alluding to it in several of your pieces, as you did just now.

SAM VAUGHAN: Mike Bessie [*see Archipelago, Vol. 1, No. 4*] and I belong to an informal group of editors who meet for dinner six or eight times a year. The great Cass Canfield, who was the head of Harper for so long, once said to Mike, as we were sitting around the table: "Well, there's nobody here who hasn't gone to Harvard or Yale, is

there?” Mike had to point out, gently, that there might be a few who hadn’t. But that expectation may have been typical of the sort of people they let into publishing then. Doubleday was more democratic than some houses, in that it was more accessible as a place to work. They published a lot of middle-brow stuff, and they had a more national view. It was not a New York house, although it was owned by an old New York family. I used to say to people who lived in Manhattan, because I lived in New Jersey, that I lived “on the mainland.” Doubleday was interested in publishing for “the mainland.” We had a bigger sales force than most, and we thought that St. Louis and Detroit and Houston, and so forth, were important.

So, there was, I suppose you’d call it, a democratic moment, which was good for people like me — and also for women, ultimately.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: People “like you” meaning, you went to Penn State instead of an Ivy League school.

SAM VAUGHAN: Sure. Periodically, we were assigned to read an out-of-town paper, to see what was going on. I love that expression, “out-of-town,” as if everything outside of New York were “elsewhere.”

### *Popular literature*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you joined Doubleday, it was still owned by the Doubleday family. Why do you say it wasn’t a “New York house”?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, their interests were not confined — I’m exaggerating, of course — but their interests were not circumscribed by the Hudson River, as some houses’ seemed to be. There were some houses which were very “New York.” They seemed to cultivate the high opinion of literary persons in New York, they thought most of the important reviewers and critics were in New York, and that most book readers were, too. It was a sort of Lincoln Tunnel vision. At Doubleday, we liked popular fiction, we liked popular history, we liked politics, all sides — I was going to say except for extreme radical stuff, except that, in the ‘60s, we got radicalized, too, to an extent. The house was what they called “Establishment” — we liked to publish ex-presidents and such — and, at the same time, not an elitist house. The house had a healthy attitude towards the rest of the country, which wasn’t charity: it was good business. The Literary Guild, which Doubleday owned and ran, was not famous for biographies of Joyce and Eliot; that was not their fare, while the Book of the Month Club might take on such substantial works.

It was also a family-owned house, and it tried to instill, loosely, and with some success, a family-feeling among the employees who stayed there. We had a sense of who we were, and what kind of things we wanted to publish, and also, importantly, what kind of things we didn’t want to publish. There were some popular books which we felt happy to leave to others.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: For example?

SAM VAUGHAN: Once, when John Sargent was our chairman, we were at Frankfurt [Book Fair], and he said, “I received some information that suggests that” — I think it was — “Jacqueline Susann is winking at us. What do you think?” I said, “John, do you really think she’s someone we want to publish?” That ended the conversation, and ended the pursuit, at least on our side. Here I was being a snob; but it was the kind of book that wouldn’t have done well on our list, handled by our people.

One book that somehow got on our list was based on conversations with prostitutes; this was in the early '60s, I think, and, although the author was given a contract, that book hit an invisible wall inside the house, so it was as if it didn't get published.

Now, Doubleday has one blot on their escutcheon that I know about, and anyone who knows literary history knows about, and it's this. *SISTER CARRIE* was under contract to Doubleday; but the then-Mrs. Doubleday objected to it on moral grounds, and so it was what a friend of mine, the publisher-author Dick Grossman — I think he invented the term — called “privished”: that is, it wasn't fully published.

And some of it was edited out, apparently. The nice irony was that, decades later, a university press, I think it was, re-published the novel, un-Bowdlerized, or in the original version. That rare person, a wholly objective critic, writing in *The Nation* or *The New Republic*, perhaps, said it was better as first published. Dreiser may not have had a cloven hoof but he did write with both feet.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You had a feel, surely, for what then was popular. Was what you meant by “popular” then, what “pop” means now?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, you're on to one of my favorite subjects. It wasn't exactly what pop means now, because pop now may include the avant-garde — and, after all, there's Pop Art, which is not art for the masses, in a way. So I don't think it means the same thing. I meant that Doubleday lived for the most part on fiction by Herman Wouk, Arthur Haley, Leon Uris, historical novels by Irving Stone, and the women novelists with three names who wrote clean romances.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That brings to mind Edna Ferber. Did you publish her?

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes, we did. We published Ferber, referred to around the house as “Miss Ferber.” When she died she left her desk and typewriter to us. It sat in the hall for a long time, until we couldn't stand it. We finally donated it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: She was a presence, was she?

SAM VAUGHAN: She was a presence, and so were some of the other house authors. I never met Somerset Maugham, but Maugham was a presence. The house's first lists were built on a consummate Anglophilia: Conrad and Maugham and Kipling and any number of people came to the list from England. Mr. Maugham, as he was called, was a real presence, as if he had an office there.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said that it was because of him that Ken McCormick was named the editor-in-chief? [*Kenneth McCormick (1906-1997) was editor-in-chief of Doubleday from 1942 to 1971.*]

SAM VAUGHAN: That's the story. It wasn't only because of Maugham, but his endorsement couldn't have hurt.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: May I return to my question about popular writing? What would you consider “popular literature”? Did it feel as if you, at Doubleday, were speaking with your readership? Because I suspect that there was a relationship, there, between publisher and readers.

SAM VAUGHAN: I once had a conversation with the great Bob Gottlieb [*former editor-in-chief at Knopf, then of The New Yorker*] — and I mean great. We were in a cab going somewhere and he said, “Tell me about popular fiction: I really don't understand it.” And he was one of the great editor/publishers of fiction, who was candid enough to admit that he didn't understand popular fiction.

I ‘inherited’ Arthur Haley as an author. Now, when I came out of college, I was like any other smart-ass entering publishing: I was in love with prose style. If you could



write well, it didn't matter to me what you wrote about. I learned at Doubleday, because of feeling respect for popular writers, a decent respect for the well-written, straightforward sentence; for the well-plotted, sturdy novel of the sort that Arthur did. At first I was contemptuous of it, I mean silently, secretly; but as I got to know something of the people who wrote those books, and something about the readers who read them, I dropped all that nonsense. What I would read for my own pleasure was one thing. Popular non-stylists could flourish: and why not? They had something that people wanted to read.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I asked the late Marion Boyars [Vol. 1, No. 3] this question: What is commercial fiction? Her answer was, "I don't know!" But I would guess that it's not the same as what you mean by popular fiction; or, not wholly.

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, it's wonderful when a book that you and I might easily agree is beautifully written becomes popular. And that happens often enough to not be an aberration.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you give some examples of books that you consider such?

SAM VAUGHAN: COLD MOUNTAIN, recently; or SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS. But there are certain authors of whom it can be said that there is not much chance they will ever lapse into writing a 'popular' novel: they are too demanding of the reader. Now, some readers love to be demanded of. But, in general (if you can make a statement about a large group of people), they mostly just don't want to be taxed heavily. Now, there are degrees of difficulty. John Le Carré is popular but not an easy read, because he writes in a style that holds back information with English reticence, but he certainly is a commercial author, and he sells like a mass-market author. There are gradations of difference between popular and mass-market. Our tendency to divide everything into this or that annoys the hell out of me, but we find it inescapable. The Europeans love to refer to publishers as "serious" or "not-." We know what they mean, of course. But it's such a damning indictment that any publisher would not be considered "serious."

One of the things I dearly love about book publishing is its pluralism. I used what I call the "stewardess test." When I was flying somewhere I would ask the stewardess what she was reading, because they have a lot of down time, sitting in those fold-down seats. She would usually say something like: "I'm reading Taylor Caldwell," or Danielle Steele, or Barbara Taylor Bradford. But she might, instead, be reading Ayn Rand; or she might be reading WAR AND PEACE. Without meaning to, she refused to sit in a category. I have a file at home bigger than you are on the issue of what I call "pop and lit." It's an old argument that should have been resolved a long time ago. On the other hand, it fuels a lot of cocktail party conversation and reviews, so maybe I'll subside.

I remember a list we published at Doubleday, in the 1950s, when I was advertising manager. It was a very important list to us because it had four big books on it: Truman's memoirs; Robert Ruark's novel SOMETHING OF VALUE; André Malraux' VOICES OF SILENCE; and THE COLUMBIA HISTORICAL PORTRAIT OF NEW YORK. That's pluralism; that's diversity in publishing. That's why I've never wanted to be known just as a literary editor: because I find it too confining.

### *The mid-list*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Hovering, then, is a discussion about the mid-list.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. “Mid-list” is as imprecise as the expression “non-fiction,” which, too, embraces everything from the Bible to Peanuts. It’s the dreaded equivalent of “middling.” Still...

The new chairman of Random House, Inc., Peter Olson, was nice enough to take me to lunch recently. He was speaking with an almost embarrassed smile about having taken over when the business was going so well. That doesn’t mean that everything works, or that every division is doing well, but it means that, all over, the company is doing very well. “And,” he said, “it’s not only phenomenal books, the books like *THE CENTURY*, by Peter Jennings, and the Tom Brokaw book [*THE GREATEST GENERATION*], it’s a lot of the mid-list.” I was so delighted to hear a well-trained publishing executive speak affectionately of the mid-list. I’ve had other conversations with other publishers. When they start in on the mid-list, I’ve said to them: “If you published 500 books a year, 350 of them would be mid-list.” We once published 500 books a year.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That’s extraordinary, isn’t it?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, it was extraordinary. But if you published five books a year, three of them would be mid-list. There’s no escaping the mid-list. The fact is, the mid-list is the place where you lose the most money, and it’s also the place where you make the purest profit when a book works. That’s because you usually don’t have so much money invested.

An editor named Tom Congdon, who had been at *The Saturday Evening Post*, told me one day his editor used an expression which haunted Tom ever afterward. He said: “I don’t want a lot of little gray articles.” There are little gray books: which doesn’t mean they have no value or virtue. It means that a mid-list can be cluttered. Every book has a reason: a reason why the author wrote it, a reason why somebody decided it should be published. But it can also choke you, like too much wheat. On the other hand, there may be a baby in the bulrushes; you don’t know.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Can you give a sense of the texture of a mid-list?

SAM VAUGHAN: No, I can’t. A mid-list is the most assorted list. Books are graded in some kind of crude sorting. As for “mid-list”: all that means is that the book is not an obvious candidate for super best-sellerdom; or it’s not a first novel destined to be published merely because it should be published.

*ROOTS* was a mid-list book. *ROOTS* was not conceived, ever, by us as a blockbuster, as a phenomenon. You don’t predict phenomena: that’s why they *are* phenomena. But that book was signed up and written in the period when the attitude of the book trade was, “We’ve had enough black books, we’ve had a lot of them in the past decade, they’re over.” The book trade gets like that from time to time. Booksellers, in their wisdom, and in their sincerity, and in their dopiness, will make statements like that, and so do we. But what we couldn’t see coming was that this book, which was not bought for no money — there was money put into it, over and over — was going to strike a nerve: we didn’t see that. And, we didn’t see the effect of Alex Haley’s constant traveling and speaking to groups. There was an audience clamoring, practically hitting the door down, when we published. That had nothing to do with television. When the television series came along it multiplied the effect. Now, that’s not a typical mid-list book, but it came out of the mid-list. After all, Alex had done an earlier book, *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOM X*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That’s right. Had you published that book at Doubleday?

SAM VAUGHAN: Doubleday had it under contract and gave it up. It helps to recall the atmosphere at that time. Before the book appeared, Malcolm X was assassinated. Nelson Doubleday became concerned that, because of Doubleday's nearly unique situation — only Scribner had the same one: we had people working at street level in the Doubleday bookshops. There was real fear in the air. He became concerned that it might result in some broken glass, and people getting hurt. And so — I wasn't in the middle of this — we told Alex to keep the money we'd paid him and he was free to publish elsewhere, which he did promptly. It became a classic and sold forever, and nobody got hurt; but that's why, I was told, we gave it up. We managed somehow to keep on with Alex, and did the next book.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That's interesting. He wasn't 'your' author.

SAM VAUGHAN: No; we became friends but he was first Ken McCormick's, and then Lisa Drew's author. Alex has a remarkable persistence. He wasn't what I would call tough-minded, because he did some things that showed he was soft; but he was durable and persistent. That book: again, I only brought it up because it came out of the mid-list; but all 'phenomena' are interesting to follow.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is it a canard that the mid-list is shrinking? We know that publishers are cutting back their lists.

SAM VAUGHAN: I hear it everywhere, and it's probably true. There are a lot of canards in publishing; but even fewer facts. I do think that the annual count of books published in the U.S. has declined or has held steady at a lower level than it might have been assumed. I think we were headed toward more than 50,000 new titles a year, though I don't think it's gone much over that. That's got to affect the mid-list, since the mid-list books are most books. But I don't know the facts. I know that the questions are asked: Who are we going to sell it to? Do we really need this book? — questions which, one way or another, have been asked for a long time, but are perhaps being asked more often than they were. I'm amused by the question: "Who's going to read this book?" because we know so little about readers. So it seems like a sensible question, but it's largely unanswerable.

### *Who needs this book?*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Your other question though, also is interesting because of all the directions it goes in: "Do we need this book?" Who's we? What does "we" mean?

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes, you're right. The editor may say, "*We* certainly do." It may mean that she needs the book, or he needs the book, as an ornament or as a potentially profitable part of his own individual list; or it may be that she sees a palpable need for the book out there. For example, Larry Ashmead, my friend at Harper, has always edited a differing stream of books, including books on what I call "popular diseases." I would first hear about a disease from Larry, and I would take his word for it that there was a need for a book to help people who had it, or thought they had it. Many books are done that way, because there is a real need. You may be premature; very often you are late in the field.

The question of need for books is interesting because there are so many books for which there really is a need. A lot of reading, a lot of bookselling, a lot of book publishing, is composed of utilitarian books. My favorite example is a book near the top of our back-list — which was a 4,000-5,000-title back-list for years — called *THE ASHLEY BOOK OF KNOTS*. Now, the *ASHLEY* was a big, bulky book with, I suppose, every knot ever

devised by man. We used to speculate about who was buying it. Somebody would say “Boy Scouts,” so we’d take that as part of an answer. I was very pleased to find that Annie Proulx used a quote from *THE ASHLEY BOOK OF KNOTS* for an epigraph in a chapter of *THE SHIPPING NEWS*, a most distinctive novel.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Or, it could be a book like *GRAY’S ANATOMY*. You see it everywhere, and all sorts of people buy it. I had a copy for years. Why? Because you might need it.

SAM VAUGHAN: Sure. We all tried to get the distribution of the *MERCK MANUAL*, for example. The *RED CROSS HANDBOOKS* are eternally useful. There’s a real, not very mysterious need for so much of publishing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I’d like to put in a word, although I’m sure I don’t need to, for the serious or literary writers: people who write out of that other kind of need: because there’s no help for it. They themselves say that they *need* to write. Or, you’ll read a book and know that this book *has* to be in the world. It’s that other kind of need, a metaphysical need, if you like.

SAM VAUGHAN: So many books are, or seem to be, written out of a need to communicate with another human being. We all know that there’s a meeting of at least two minds in a good book. There is so much loneliness in the world. It’s one of my favorite themes. If a book has loneliness at its heart, it stands a good chance of finding an audience eventually.... After all, we go through life alone. Whether we’re lucky enough to have people around us whom we love, and vice-versa, or not, every person walks alone. Think of the loneliness of Lindbergh, of Anne Frank, of what someone recently observed as “the magnificent loneness” of the principle figure in *THE STORY OF O*, of Quixote. *THE LONELY CROWD* was a work of sociology which sold rather well; but I don’t think it was an accident. It was inspired.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It was a late-’50s kind of book, if you want, appearing at the end of a time, but also becoming the mark of a time. And that would be, I think, your kind of book. It *was* ‘your’ book. Yes, I know you said that; but I can see why, now, in retrospect, having learned some of the themes that interest you.

SAM VAUGHAN: I guess what we’re talking about is the need to write, and the need to read, which are not very well summed up into simple statements. Many of the alarms about publishing are just that: alarms. I don’t think we generally realize that reading is not a passing fancy or an idle diversion. Reading, I really believe — or let me say, storytelling, one kind of story or another — is a human need as basic as bread. You don’t have to go far down the list of human needs: there’s something about the need for story that is immense. That doesn’t mean that people have to get stories in book form; but that’s one way to get them. As people will get stories, in whatever form they choose to get them in, whatever form they’re available in, some will tend to move in cyclical ways from books to movies to television to theater, and back again. We haven’t gone back to sitting around a campfire, but nevertheless, all the traditional means of telling stories are available. It’s only the illiterate who are really poor, in that sense.

### *The editor’s work*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you talk about the experience of making a book: finding the author; having the author find you; and, if you would, describe that whole adventure?

SAM VAUGHAN: It is that. If I liked fishing, I’d say it was like fishing. Where do the books come from? They come from writers. One of the great sources of finding

writers is other writers. Probably the most efficient source, because there's less waste when a writer recommends a writer. If your insurance man recommends his adolescent son who has a gift for verse.... Know what I mean?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Right.

SAM VAUGHAN: Another source, of course, is — these are all very obvious — reading. You have the greatest excuse in the world to read all the time. You can read anything. It's one of my challenges to myself, still, although I should get over it: when I pick up a magazine or a journal or a newspaper, I want to see if there's something in there that would lead to a writer or a book.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You have attached yourself to writers who write across a broad range of subjects. Do you find that still true? Have you narrowed your interests, or focused them?

SAM VAUGHAN: I've never wanted to be typecast as a literary editor, or a public affairs editor, or a history editor. It's very different than being a textbook editor, where you're expected to be, partly, an expert. I represent the 'great unwashed and unknowing.' I cherish my amateur standing. Also, it keeps refreshing itself more that way. I've often counseled younger editors who set out to be known as a literary editor not to put too much coal on that fire alone — be it, don't say it. Everybody has to be economically justified, sooner or later, and you have a better chance of doing it if you handle a range of books.

At times I've fallen into pockets of specialty. I did a lot of books by political figures, for a while, not by design but because that's the way it worked out.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: For example?

SAM VAUGHAN: Early on, I handled one of the books written by a man named Ezra Taft Benson, who was Eisenhower's Secretary of Agriculture. I 'inherited' a contract with him, from Adam Yarmolinsky, who was, briefly, an editor with Doubleday. It was for a staff-written book called *FREEDOM TO FARM*, I believe. The book was dull, and I've never been terribly interested in agriculture; but I got to know him a little. He decided, at the end of his time there in Washington, that he would write a memoir, which he did, because he was the only cabinet member to spend the full eight years with Eisenhower. So I went into that Mormon household a number of times. Mrs. Benson fed me, while I worked down in the basement on the manuscript and photographs. We got a rather good memoir out of it, because Secretary Benson, who was a church elder and became head of the Mormon Church, was a good storyteller. We also got some news out of it, in that he recommended the ticket of — I think it was — Nixon and Rockefeller, at the time: anyhow, it was a peculiar, or surprising, pairing, because he was more conservative than anybody else in the Eisenhower administration.

I went from there to doing a book by a man named Lewis Strauss, who was the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, and had been nominated by Eisenhower to be Secretary of Commerce, and, for almost the first time since the Civil War, had been denied that innocuous post by the Senate. I pursued him for a book.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Was there a reason he was denied? It was just a little before my time.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. The reason was that he was a powerful friend and a powerful enemy, and he had become an opponent of Robert Oppenheimer, and thus, the fans of Robert Oppenheimer in the Senate. He believed Oppenheimer to be a security risk. Oppenheimer's principal defender was a senator, from New Mexico, I believe, and he collected all his due-bills from his colleagues, and they denied Lewis Strauss the nomination.

Strauss wrote a book called *MEN AND DECISIONS*. It was reviewed on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, was taken seriously, sold very well, and exposed me to a kind of mind, and kind of person, that — again, I was about as likely to become friends with an ex-Kuhn, Loeb banker as I was with a farmer. I liked that about politics: it made me open my cheerfully-closed mind.

And then, it turned out that we got a contract for Eisenhower's post-Presidential memoirs. Ken McCormick had been the editor of *CRUSADE IN EUROPE*, the book published after the war. But he was the chief editor and couldn't spend the time required to do these two volumes; so I got posted to Gettysburg, at age 28. It was a good assignment. It taught me the usual lesson, which is: There are not two sides to every story, there are 24 sides. And it exposed me to a seemingly-genial, seemingly-bland, likable individual who had been turned out of office the way we send most of our presidents out of office, which is, in tatters, at a low point in public esteem. He was said to be the "chairman of the board" and "didn't really know what was going on."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It was not long after the U-2 incident.

SAM VAUGHAN: Not long after. And of course, he turned out to be a lot more complex than that. I watched the process go on, which still goes on, which is: the Eisenhower reappraisal industry. It's become a major activity in academia. It happens with other presidents, too.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Truman, for instance.

SAM VAUGHAN: Sure. So, that's the kind of thing that got me into politics. I worked with Republicans for a long time, because I was the only editor of my age and stage who spoke Republican. Most editors were liberals and left, to whatever degree they were left, and Democrats therefore; and so, there weren't many editors in our place, as middle-of-the-road as it was, that you could put with a Republican. I enjoyed myself. I had fun.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Are you saying that you were a Republican?

SAM VAUGHAN: No. I wasn't a Republican. And I'm not. Although my wife thinks I am.

Eventually, I came to work with Hubert Humphrey and Ed Muskie, and others; and I liked them, too. But, the experience of working on the other side of the street, politically, was very good for me. It is the dark side of my personality that I like politicians. How could you resist a guy like Humphrey? He overflowed with ideas and energy and invention and compromise and ideals, and all that stew! But then, eventually, when I edited a book for Senator Muskie, published on the day he withdrew from the presidential race, the book not only sank like a stone, it sank without a trace. And I'm afraid I burned out at that point. I've been less eager to get back into it, and have not done much in that line.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you say more about the adventure of finding and working with writers?

SAM VAUGHAN: When you start out as an editor, you don't have writers. You don't have what they used to call 'the following.' All the senior editors have all the writers, seemingly, and all the agents go to them, seemingly. But if you put out your lines, and you exert yourself — you read a lot, you write a lot of letters, and you make a lot of phone calls, and you see a lot of movies; you go to agents' offices and you try to get established, in their eyes, as a person — you eventually begin to see proposals and manuscripts. And it becomes cumulative, so that, when you're really an established senior editorial person, you're still looking, but things do come to you just because you're there. You get to be known for handling certain kinds of books well. Or, simply,

because you and the agent like each other; or you like a kind of writing, and when the agent turns up a writer in that category, you may get a shot at it. That part is fun — sort of disorganized; not measurable.

I have some good friends among the agents, but I've never been quite as dependent on agents as many editors. Not by design; it's just the way it is.

And I love the business of commissioning a book, when you have the idea for the book and you go out to find the writer who might want to do it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you describe such a book or situation?

SAM VAUGHAN: When I was in the political stream, it occurred to me that the great unwritten presidential memoir was FDR's. And so, I talked to a friend, who was working part-time as an editor for us, named Eric Larabee. We'll come back to him, because he had a wonderful expression I want to tell you about.—

Anyway, I said to Eric: "Find me somebody who might take this idea up, if it is an idea." He introduced me to a writer named Bernard Asbell, who had written a book about the end of FDR's life. We had a drink one day, and after we skirmished around politely, Asbell said, "What do you have on your mind?" I said, "I want you to write Franklin Delano Roosevelt's memoirs." He said, "He's dead." I said, "By God you're right, he is."

I said, "It seems to me that any president trying to write a memoir has to do a certain number of things in preparation. Why don't you just do that?" Well, Bernie Asbell is the kind of writer who is an editor's dream. He always gives you more than you asked for. He did this as a kind of report to Roosevelt, saying he'd been hired to help prepare for the memoir, and had taken the liberty of drafting some chapters. That's the way he got into it. He had captured the voice immaculately.

Turned out, he could only do the New Deal years; he couldn't do the whole life because it was just too full. So we did that book, which, thanks to Asbell, was a real *tour de force*, subtitled "A Speculation on History." What didn't happen was what sank the chance of doing the sequel. I expected the idea to outrage historians — and it didn't. They didn't get ruffled at all.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They probably loved it, especially the younger ones.

SAM VAUGHAN: And several senior ones, too. Well, let me tell you about Larabee's line, because I think it bears on so much. It has to do with, well, the readership and, quote, marketing. He wrote an essay once called "The Imaginary Audience." Part of the argument was, The audience does not sit there fully assembled, waiting for the performer. The performer assembles the audience.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That's nice.

SAM VAUGHAN: That, to me, is a mantra. The idea that the audience is sitting out there saying, "Send me a book about a Civil War soldier walking home from the war, or a story about the relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II" is, by-and-large, nonsense. The author assembles the audience; the artist does; the musician does.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The word of the moment, the one that goes along with "sell," is "branding." It seems to me that it's a sort of rubber-stamp idea, "branding." Well, Eric Larabee wasn't talking about something like "branding," was he? And you aren't? You're talking about the artistry of it.

SAM VAUGHAN: If 'branding' would work in the case of books, all you would have to do is do the same book over and over again, with variations. Some of that does happen. Some people would say John Grisham does it, or Stephen King does it. But that's to underestimate the writers. Their books are never quite alike. They assemble an

audience with certain predilections. But they're both adventurers, in a certain way, and they don't get credit for taking risks. They get credit for being acts, and formula writers, and pop stars. So, I don't think 'branding' works for human beings the way it does for soap or corn flakes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There's an awful lot of talk about it, though, in publishing, as if they think it might work.

SAM VAUGHAN: In publishing, there's always a certain amount of rueful envy of other businesses which are, seemingly, so logical.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And that make 'product.'

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes, and that make 'product.' Ken [McCormick], the gentlest of men, would throw a man out of the room who said "product."

### *George Garrett*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You're a senior editor; writers come to you—

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes; meanwhile, you continue to 'trawl.' You never give it up, really. And that becomes so satisfying, in a way. Although publishing means having to say you're sorry, quite a lot. But the only thing worse than having to say you're sorry is having nothing to say anything at all about.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: One of the writers who came to you was George Garrett. Would you talk about George Garrett, who, I want to say, is an American man of letters, the genuine article, in a time, perhaps, when that occupation is under-appreciated.

SAM VAUGHAN: It certainly is; and, to be literal, in George's case, he's a man of letters written on long yellow pads with a Mont Blanc fountain pen. When you take on George, as a friend or as an author, or both, you have to put a wing on your office to file the letters in. They're wonderful to have: scurrilous and libelous and funny and generous. I don't recall quite how we got together. The first manuscript I had anything to do with was DO, LORD, REMEMBER ME. But I can't tell you, at this moment, how I got to see it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I think he told me it was rather by accident.

SAM VAUGHAN: My facts are no more reliable than George's, so take that into account. [*See comments from George Garrett, following.*]

I think I got that manuscript in the mail, from an agent. It was kind of tattered, beat-up. There had been no attempt to pretend it was a virginal submission. I liked what I read, but I was uneasy about it. And then, before I did anything, which always takes time, another version of the manuscript arrived which was just as clean and presentable and dressed-up as I could imagine. We went ahead and published it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You're saying he'd done something more than erase the marks and—

SAM VAUGHAN: I'm not even going to attempt to say what he did, because I just don't know.

I remember the first book in the Elizabethan trilogy [THE DEATH OF THE FOX; THE SUCCESSION; ENTERED FROM THE SUN]. I heard about that; not from George, I think, but possibly. It was under contract, or under option, to a company like Appleton-Century-Crofts, which was busy going out of business at the time. They not only didn't offer him a contract, they didn't have anybody there to read it. So, it came over to me.



It was intimidating, because it was in three bright-orange boxes that took up half the office. I began to read it and of course was swept away, and still am. I got in touch with George, and we made a contract for it. I said, “George, the only editing I’m going to do on this” — because it’s long — “is, I’m going to draw a pencil line in the margin of any page where I fall off the rails, or fall off my chair, or fall asleep, whatever kind of barometer: because only you know what’s really important in this book, and I don’t know nearly as well.” So that’s what we did, apart from little dinky stuff like chasing the inevitable repetitions, and so forth.

I had the great fortune: I knew that it was a wonderful book, and it should *look* wonderful. The company I was with was not known for producing wonderful-looking books, because a lot of books were made close to book-club specifications, cheaply-made. Our printers had two kinds of paper. One was the cheap paper, and one was Bible paper. If a manuscript was beyond a certain length, it got printed on Bible paper. George’s manuscript was beyond all lengths, so we got it printed on Bible paper, which had some finish, some feel, texture. It looked like the goods, and it was the goods.

We did the second novel in a couple of years, and the third Cork [Corliss] Smith did, at Harcourt. I don’t know whether I had left Doubleday at that point, or whatever had happened, but in any case, the trilogy was finished with Cork, elsewhere.

Speaking of writers as a source of writers, George is a great friend to writers. He’s spent more of his life writing for little magazines and going to writers conferences than almost anybody I know. He has 10,000 friends and 10,000 due-bills, things owed to him which he doesn’t invoke very much at all. His wife, Susan Garrett, is good writer, too.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, she is: a very good writer. I loved TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN. A fine book; and the newer one [MILES TO GO] is, also.

### *Hannah Green*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You are the editor of Hannah Green’s posthumous novel. Would you speak about that?

SAM VAUGHAN: It’s not a novel, but it has a novelistic quality. Hannah Green wrote one of the most admired novels of the time, *THE DEAD OF THE HOUSE*. The posthumous book she left is quite different. For some reason, she never quite finished it: which is part of the challenge of the moment. It was finished; but she didn’t *think* it was finished, and she kept delivering it to me and taking it away. I used to talk and commiserate with her friend and teacher Wallace Stegner about Hannah. We both wanted to kick her hard in her fanny, because she would never finish the book. I didn’t think she was going to die before she did: that came out of nowhere, and should have stayed nowhere.

Anyhow, it’s a book about one day out of many seasons spent in a small village in France, called Conques, which sounds like the conch shell: apparently, the village is shaped like one. In that village reside the bones, or the relics, of Sainte Foy. Hannah and Jack Wesley, her husband, an artist, used to spend part of the year in that village. Hannah entered into a relationship, you’d have to say, with Sainte Foy; that is, Sainte Foy was a living presence to her. Now, this was a Protestant girl, from Ohio, I think, who was having a sort of Roman Catholic experience.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Initiation into the mysteries.

SAM VAUGHAN: I think you’re right. Actually, her love has no denomination. It’s a total immersion into the life of a little girl who lived a long, long time ago and was

a martyr to her faith. And so, Hannah's written this book which is partly meditation, partly poetry; has, I said, certain novelistic aspects; and, finally, is a love song to the village and the people of the village. The problem — I've never faced it before — is, I know how much Hannah resisted editing. Not that I edited *THE DEAD OF THE HOUSE*, but I was around the publishing house [Doubleday] when it was done; I think Ann Freedgood was the editor. But I know Hannah was very skittish about editing; polite but nervous; and therefore, I don't feel that I have a free hand. So, what I've done is this. There are two people involved with Hannah, out of many who liked or loved her. One is her husband; the other is a writer named Sarah Glasscock, in Texas, and whose first novel I edited [ANNA L.M.N.O.]. I think Hannah sent it to me. So, it's a love affair all around. I like Jack, and I like Sarah, and I liked Hannah; and vice versa.

Sarah helped Hannah with her book by typing endless drafts or versions, and if anybody on earth knows what Hannah's intentions were, it's Sarah. Having the widower and the colleague, or amanuensis, to rely on, I did some work on the manuscript. Then I gave it to a copy editor, named Virginia Avery. I gave her the background of the book and said, "I don't know how much you or I should be allowed to do. Why don't you edit a piece of it the way you would any other book? We'll show it to Sarah; we'll show it Jack Wesley; and, if they have no problem with it, we'll go ahead." And that's where we are. Because, on the one hand, I owe it to Hannah not to over-edit her writing. On the other hand, I owe her the duty of getting the best book out of it that we can, which is the task of the editor of any book. Having these other people helping to mediate the whole thing eases me immensely.

### *Economics of publishing*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Bill Strachan, the director of Columbia University Press, talked to me earlier about how things have changed. [see *Archipelago*, Vol. 2, no. 4] Trade houses, as they really could be called once, used to build their lists from editors' recommendations; but now, he said, perhaps bitterly, that method has changed. Now, in conglomerate publishing, marketers can have the final say about the list; and in academic publishing, peer-review committees, rather than editors, can reject books.

SAM VAUGHAN: I'm interested, as you know, in the overlap and merging of what were once the duties and standards of university presses with what were once trade standards, and how their borders are as shaky as the Balkans'. It works in different ways in different houses and among the various kinds of publishers. At Random House, the marketing people do not have the final say on which books we publish, by and large. The editor proposes and the Publisher disposes, i.e., says yes or no. At other houses it works the same way; at still others, the marketing voice is loud, and in some cases decisive.

I'm not against the latter, by the way, depending on what kind of book is being considered. With a novel, or a book of poetry, the marketing director should not decide. Where a marketing person becomes publisher you have quite a different situation, of course. But as publisher, a marketing person should not be only a marketing mind, but should take the larger view. If the book at hand is a reference book on trees, say, or Italian cookery, the marketing voice should well be quite strong, especially when you know there are dozens of competitive titles in the marketplace already. I'm surprised, in fact, that the marketers don't come into the act earlier than they do, at least here.

But, a university press has obligations which a privately-held trade house doesn't have. As Bill said, I believe, some university presses publish a certain number of regional books to pay their debt to people of the region. That's an honorable thing to do, and sometimes makes money. But much publishing goes unplanned. The irony is that editors, in the conversations of others in publishing, are usually considered to be not very businesslike, to be a bit crazy, not to be able to add up a column of figures. That's how we're stereotyped.

Nonetheless, despite what is said about editors, we take full responsibility for negotiating contracts; for working out the economics in advance, projective economics. As for the list itself: unless there is some directive — “we will do this kind of book,” or “we don't do that,” which is rare — the list represents the combined interests, contacts, and, sometimes, friendships, of the editors. I think there could be a bit more planning involved, but I hesitate to say it, because maybe that day is coming. Many kinds of publishing you do in a general house, for example, like tending to the back list, are often honored in conversation, but not given very much attention. If you have four or five good gardening books, then you ought to have a couple of gardening books in development at all times, because if you've begun to publish in that niche, you want to add to it. And it makes sense to have strength in certain categories, if not in others. So I do think a measure of planning could be introduced in some houses. — But editors fight organization. We'll always think of ourselves as grossly underpaid, overworked, misunderstood, and downtrodden. Or if not downtrodden, half-trodden; and yet editors, like authors, like poets, are durable.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Well, *poetry* is durable. *Editing* is durable.

SAM VAUGHAN: Editors feel constantly under attack — but don't quite get wiped out. They go through convulsions at times, but they are like the theater: Always dying, never quite dead.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said a smart, interesting, amusing thing in your *Daedalus* piece, about the conglomeratization of publishing. You wrote: “It seems to me that the real risk when ‘nonbook’ people come into publishing is not that they know so little about books, but that they know so little about money.” Would you speak more to that?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, an example is Harold Geneen, whom I became friendly with when he did a book called *MANAGING*. Harold Geneen was the principle exponent of conglomeratization. When he ran IT&T he owned several hundred companies. He would meet in Switzerland, monthly, with the heads of his companies, because it was the only way to get them together. He had a brief case for every company. Hal Geneen said to me that he had sold off his book publishing company, because he didn't understand it.

Now, I don't know who advised him on the purchase in the first place; but, when you look at the financial history of many publishing houses, it's no secret that, as we are fond of saying, you can usually do better by putting your money in the bank. Some of the great owners have been asked, in the course of their lives, “Why do you invest your money in book publishing?” The answer is, “Because we *want* to invest our money in book publishing.”

That's a statement of a willful, independently wealthy capitalist. And if such a one of them really wants to be in book publishing—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: —he damn well will!

SAM VAUGHAN: I had a boss once, when I was in my 20s. I got promoted. He took me to lunch. He said, “Now, what makes you think the Doubleday family is going

to want to be in books, ten years from now?: And I said, “Because they want to.” I was grateful to him for making me try to think ten years ahead. I was accustomed to thinking about ten minutes ahead.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The conventional wisdom is that people don’t think ten years ahead. They think two cycles ahead.

SAM VAUGHAN: That is something I’m not terribly cheerful about. The up-and-at-’em, rattle-dazzle publishers who want to produce a good balance sheet for the next quarter, or the next year, are thinking short-term. They’re not thinking about whether they’re going to leave behind a publishing institution that’s worth more than it was when they found it. And since publishing doesn’t usually respond, even economically, to what you do in a year, or a couple of years, it’s a form of short-term thinking in what is, at heart, a long-term activity. I think there’s a dangerous tendency to want to make this year look good, and next year look good; and not to worry about the people who may have to tend the garden, five or ten or twenty years from now. That may be a sea-change in publishing. I think it probably is.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That people are looking at the short term rather than the long term.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. Not that they’re looking at the bottom line. There never has been a time when they didn’t look at the bottom line, more or less severely, or more or less myopically. But by putting seed-money down, it will reward you in some years to come, not in the next quarter. Partly, the situation is aggravated by publishing companies going public, where you have to keep an eye on the value of the stock. And as an author once said to me, the stock market is really a paranoid schizophrenic.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A paranoid schizophrenic gambler.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes, right. A Barthelme.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Two Barthelmes. (*laughter*) [*see* The New Yorker, *March 8, 1999*]

SAM VAUGHAN: I’ve had the luck in working for family companies, never having to worry about what the stock was doing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is that true also of Bertelsmann?

SAM VAUGHAN: It seems so. Families are quirky in their own way, but, for example, if publishers were as rapacious as we are often held to be, if we were as money-minded as we are now held to be, books would be published much more quickly. Because if you’re putting out millions to invest in a new list of books, you would think you would want your money back as soon as possible. But publishers insist on taking nine months, or ten months, or twelve months, or five years, to do a book. That’s not very smart, economically, but it’s part of the practice of the business. I can’t understand why someone hasn’t come in on that problem: that you can improve the cash flow by getting the books out sooner. Authors would like it. At least at first. But the books might get under-published, for there are reasons why the process takes a long time, and maybe should.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I think there is a certain pressure in some quarters. Not long ago, an editor of my acquaintance, who is young, beautifully educated, smart, publishes very serious books, and runs the adult trade division of a far-flung conglomerate, told me (because I asked him), that he could bring a high rate of return — I think he claimed 15% — while publishing very good books. He did indeed publish very good books, many of which I read. However, the question I didn’t ask, and should have asked, was: “What books have you turned down that you would have liked to have to have taken, because you didn’t think they would earn enough money?”

I suspect this is a more important question, even, than I think it is. It is the sort of question that might have to do with the mid-list authors I hear about so often, whose third or fourth book isn't being taken by their erstwhile publishers.

SAM VAUGHAN: It is a good question. I'm thinking about the DeLillo novel [UNDERWORLD]. I know an editor who read it in manuscript. She said, "It's really a very ambitious novel, he's really out to scoop up a whole handful of this society and culture at this time." You could tell that she really was quite taken by it. She is one of the very best editors I've ever known. And at the end, she decided not to encourage the house to pursue it up the auction ladder. It wasn't because she was afraid it wouldn't sell: she was afraid that she might have a lot of trouble selling the book in the house after we bought it.

You see, in effect, a book gets bought by a house more than once. The first time is when the contract is offered. Then it goes off everybody's screen except the editor's, for the year, or two years, or five, or ten, it takes the author to write it. It comes back, and, despite the fact that you have a contract, and that the contract may be big, it has to be sold again, in a psychological way. Now, if you've put out a lot of money for a book, and everybody knows it, it makes the editor's task a bit easier. All the flags fly when the book comes through. But that's for a very few books. The other books have all cost money. But whether the book costs \$50,000 or \$200,000, that fact, by-and-large, does not persuade anyone in the house. They've got to be persuaded by example, by the manuscript itself, ideally. Anyhow, she was concerned that the task of selling it a second time might not work, and she didn't want to go through that. Scribner's bought the DeLillo. I think they made something of a success of it. I don't know whether they made of it a publication commensurate with what it cost them.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And, they don't have a backlist of DeLillo's books. Everything he wrote is in print, but not at Scribner.

SAM VAUGHAN: That's a very good point. But on the other hand, it may have been an investment beyond the book itself, to persuade everybody that Scribner is alive and well. There are, sometimes, those extra considerations.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you think that New York trade publishing is more oriented toward, more interested in, more attentive to, the big book than it used to be?

SAM VAUGHAN: I don't think so, Katherine. At least, not for so long as I've been around. I've just described to you a publishing list of the early 1950s: I mentioned four big books. I'm a typical publishing animal, so I can remember that kind of event. I had instructions from my boss; there were two things I had to do: Get along with the sales manager, and not overspend. I went into see my boss at the beginning of that year, and I said, "There is no way we can do these four books, to say nothing of the rest of them, and not overspend. So, I just want you to know." He took that all right, because he knew we couldn't publish a recent ex-president, or couldn't publish André Malraux, or couldn't publish a big, important book like the COLUMBIA HISTORICAL PORTRAIT OF NEW YORK, and he couldn't put the Ruark novel over without—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Right. Without investing—

SAM VAUGHAN: — further in publicity, promotion, and advertising. So, chasing the big books at some risk to the others is far from over. On the other hand, if you don't do that successfully often enough, you don't have a publishing house to include the other books. It's commonly thought that the other books pay for the big books. It also can be argued that the big books pay for the other books. Certainly, it can go either way.

In a smaller house, public or private, if they have to put out several big authors in a hurry, the question is, how much money do they have to work with? In a bigger house, there is seldom a real shortage of capital; but there may be constrictions on what you can do in any year. Fortunately, not every book has to be pursued to the same degree. You couldn't get most authors to agree about that, of course.

The question implied is: What is publishing, if it's not working hard to make people know about the book? The definition of publishing Marion Boyars used, and that I use, is: "to make known." It's not, To make better; it's not, To make money: it's *to make known*. But there are ways of "making known" that don't cost a great deal of money. They usually cost a lot of time and effort. Because you know there are books where you can hear the jungle drums beating, and it's not a result of advertising.

### *Marketing, or selling books*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When the English publisher said, "Oh, aren't you market-seeking?", were you? That is to say, I hear the word "marketing" and I roll my eyes. Is marketing different than, say, advertising, or simply selling? What's the difference, now, between that, and what you were doing, when you worked for Doubleday selling books?

SAM VAUGHAN: That's splendid. We share the same annoyance at the word. It's an attempt to make grandiose what was formerly known as a series of separate functions called selling, promoting, publicizing, advertising, packaging. The use of the word "marketing," I think, must have been the way, at one point, to get a raise. So, if you're a marketing manager, you think of yourself as much more than a salesman, or saleswoman.

To give it its due: part of the idea behind the word "marketing" was, in its finest manifestation, to think, not of what *you* have, or what *you* are, but: what does *the customer* need, or want, or can be helped by, or provoked into needing or wanting? That's a perfectly decent idea; but much nonsense goes on under the heading of marketing. It's the subduing of importance, in a funny way, of the salesman. I'm using "salesman" as a narrow term.

I used to know the names of all of our sales reps at Doubleday. When I started there, we had ten or 12. We went to 30 or 35; we went to 80 or 90. I don't know how many they have now; but now they're *corporate* sales forces: they sell for the corporations. Therefore, editors have much less contact directly with the sales reps; from the point of view of the editor, contact has been cut off, or cut down. We go through what they call marketing people; and the marketing people speak to the sales people *for* us, or for themselves.

The old way had its abuses. In that smaller world, you'd go into a room for a sales conference with your reps, and you'd present the books directly to them. It used to be said that a book could be made, or killed, in that room. There was some truth in that. Certainly a book could be *made*. I saw books made, regularly, by an impassioned presentation, or by a very good one. Whether a book could be killed: I suppose that some books were really damaged by the process; but on the other hand, there was a natural limitation on how negative a sales rep could be, because if he only opened his mouth to say "The book won't sell," eventually, he wouldn't be selling it, or any others.

Now I will join the chorus of the complainers. Our principal form of contact with the sales reps is in the form of the written fact-sheet, which as somebody said, has to be revised four times, and the audio cassette.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The fact sheet is not the same as the P&L, the profit-and-loss statement?

SAM VAUGHAN: No, the fact sheet is a basic house description of the book. Calling it a fact sheet, basically, is to glorify it, because editors don't deal with "facts" so much as hopes, dreams, wishes and lies. It'd make a good movie title, wouldn't it?

That basic house description is circulated to just about everybody. We also do an audio presentation as a supplement; but that's all. There are meetings in which we may be in a room with one or two or three marketing people, of whom a couple may be in direct contact with the trade. I think something is lost there. It was a two-way education: we learned from the reps, and they learned from us. They had the smell of the road on them, they came into the room and slapped the dust off their chaps and tied up their horses, and said, "The books on such-and-such are not selling." We might or might not accept it, but we would take it as a piece of important information; and we were performing the traditional rite of the history of the traveler who would come back and tell you what was going on in China.

On the other hand, some editors were wizards at presenting. There's a perception in publishing, now, that to present a book, they should be polished and accomplished speakers. Well, there are a few editors who have leaped through the barriers, to talk directly at the sales conference. But some of the best presentations I've ever heard were by people who weren't so terribly good at speaking, but who knew a lot about the book they were doing. Jason Epstein, an editorial genius, is in many ways a terrible presenter, but in many ways a wonderful one, because he knows what he's talking about and he has such strong opinions.

I remember when Jason started *The Anchor Review* at Doubleday, in an attempt to run a journal along with the new line of paperbacks. He hired a couple of editors. One of them was Nathan Glazer. I had read *THE LONELY CROWD*. Glazer came in with his wild, woolly hair and his horn-rimmed glasses, and he sat up there and presented a book. He used phrases like "wrought-iron culture." It was like a graduate seminar, and I was dazzled. He was the prof. I never had. And it was all part of the ferment. Nathan Glazer wouldn't stand a chance at a sales conference today.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you notice that the marketing people have come from some place that was not devoted to books?

SAM VAUGHAN: When you work in a place like this, you notice that the marketing people are really good readers. There's a perception that all sales people care about is discounts and commissions and bonuses. But I don't know many who survive, at least, not in a house like this, who aren't readers, and who don't have some basis for their opinions. I'm not saying that all are well-read: I'll say, They read.

Now, in the old days, sometimes the rep could be negative. But he couldn't make a living being negative. He might be wrong about the book, but if there's anyone forgiven for being wrong about the book, it's the editor. There's no business that's so forgiving of mistakes as this one.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Why would you say that?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, how long would you last in television, or movies, or magazines, if you make as many mistakes as we make over the course of a year or two?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you mean that in editorial or commercial terms?

SAM VAUGHAN: All kinds. If you make a big, noisy mistake, say, getting a house to pay too much for the book, that's an obvious mistake. If you publish ten promising first novels and none of them rise to the point of ever being more than promising, that's another kind of mistake. Now this is, or certainly has been, a very forgiving

business. Everybody's worried about profit/loss statements being shown to editors and lashed over their bare backs. I've been shown profit/loss statements about my books, I think, twice. They're used a lot; but I haven't had them used on me, so to speak. But many editors will talk as if they had been routinely beaten.

Now, I don't know about all houses. I've only worked really, for two. I've done some books for other houses, though not from inside. If anything, publishing is really lax, in that regard. I find it interesting, if bracing, and a little chilling, to read the profit/loss statements on the books I've handled in any given year. Some books you think have made money, haven't; some books you think haven't made money, have. But you get to see the economic components of what went into publishing the book. Doubleday used to own its own presses, still does, and, periodically, we'd be encouraged to fly down to the plants, supposedly to see how the books were being printed. The subterranean motive was to have us see the remainder pile. They used to say, "Well, her novel really did pretty well, it sold 5,000 copies, and we only took 3,000 copies back." If you walk by 3,000 copies of a book, sitting on skids, you see a lot of paper and glue and press time, to say nothing of the author's life. It's a chilling experience.

### *Closely-held corporations in the history of publishing*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You've spoken about the differences in working for those three family-held publishing companies that were held, in fact, by different kinds of families: the Doubledays, the Newhouses [*former owners of Random House, Inc.*], and now — is Bertelsmann A.G. [*present owner of Random House, Inc.*] a family-held corporation? Closely-held, in any case. I'll suggest that, possibly, the family-held, or the closely-held, corporation is a sort of third entity, in publishing. There is the non-profit, effectively no-profit, press. There is the publishing conglomerate. But the third kind of publisher, the privately-held corporation, is also an interesting kind of entity. It is larger, let's say, than an independent press; it is a corporation rather than a small company.

SAM VAUGHAN: I think most of the history of the two or three centuries of American trade publishing will be spun out in the story of publishing houses which were privately-held or closely-held. I don't think publishers became public property to any degree until fairly recently. Even now, I think they've become attractive to the investors because they see us as being part of the media world. While we are, to an extent, we also are not; we are related to but don't quite blend in with the other media. The virtue of working for a privately-held company is that you don't have to pay attention to the day-to-day or month-to-month vicissitudes of the stock market. This just doesn't enter into your thinking. But if you're working for a big publicly-held company and you're watching stock prices every day, or somebody is, it does get into your thoughts.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Or they're watching return on investment.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. And, as I said to you before, it, if the acquiring company has done their homework, and they've really used due diligence, they could have seen that almost no book publishing has produced the kind of return on investment that they desire.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And it doesn't change. No matter what anybody does.

SAM VAUGHAN: Hasn't for a long time.



KATHERINE McNAMARA: What you say also implies a necessity of a very good back list.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes, it's a really big part of it. Year after year, with a good back list, the work of authors and previous publishing people shows how we go on selling those books, and creating a cash flow irrespective of what the new books are doing, which help you to weather the inevitable ups and downs of the charts.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you speak about your editorial relationship with Doubleday? It was a large corporation, wasn't it, but, also, it was owned by one family?

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes. It was both, in a funny way, a mom-and-pop shop *and* a large "impersonal" corporation. It wasn't impersonal, but people thought it was. I saw a piece in *The New Yorker* recently, about Goldman, Sachs, one of the great Wall Street houses. A woman said to her boss there, "Look at what I sold this week." He said to her something like, "We don't say 'I' sell things." That's exactly the way it was at Doubleday. I tried never to say *I* published anything, because I didn't really believe I did. It was a collective act; but it was also part of the house culture to be respectful of all of the other people involved in publishing, from the printers to the assistants to the sales reps. It wasn't just the ownership, or the editors.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Broadly speaking, do you think that's changed? That is to say, respect is a difficult attitude to come by, now. The notion of dignity seems to have gone away. Do you have any thoughts about this?

SAM VAUGHAN: I admire your announced theme, or inquiry, of "institutional memory." Mine is as shaky as most, but I had lunch last week with Eric Major, who is the director of religious publishing at Doubleday, which has always been an important part of our publishing there, as it is not here [*at Random House*], for example. Eric came to the States from Hodder & Stoughton in London, a house once somewhat similar in makeup to Doubleday. I said to him, "I suppose every evidence of the old Doubleday is gone." He said, "Yes, it has really changed — but there are traces of it in the corridors." You don't eradicate the traces very easily.

I think one of the most profound changes in publishing is, in effect, the disappearance of family names, the name that meant a family, from the spine of the book. Usually, when a book said Harper it meant *Harper*, and therefore, a kind of book; not a rigid category, but a kind of standard. Or there was Lippincott, or Scribner's, or Doubleday. Lists had a shape and a coloration. Harper in the Cass Canfield-Mike Bessie-Evan Thomas heyday had a lock on public affairs books: they published a lot of the Democrats in office, because Cass was an important Democrat. Doubleday insisted that it didn't have any politics, or any religion, meaning any single one, but you could tell the lists had a certain distinction, along with a great deal of out-and-out commercial publishing. Nowadays, we're all after the same books. Again, I'm over-generalizing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You mean you're after the same types of books?

SAM VAUGHAN: Types of books, and, sometimes, literally the same books. You can't tell much about who the house is, and much about the general run of publishers, with distinctive exceptions: New Directions, Farrar, Strauss, and, to an extent, Knopf, but I'm still not getting at what really counts. With the disappearance of the names — well, the names may remain but the people who bore them are not there. All of the standards and fancies and prejudices of the people who owned the name are gone. It used to be that, as I say, a house wouldn't do a certain kind of book because it wasn't "us." These days, I don't see that happening. Also, there was an air in the well-known

houses of — I don't know if *noblesse oblige* is the word or not. We felt we had a duty to publish poetry, for instance. We might or might not have had certain editors who loved poetry, but the attitude of the house was that we published some poetry; I don't see that, currently, in many places.

### *The Publisher*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you talk about your term, or your stay, at Doubleday? You were not only an editor, but also editor-in-chief and publisher. What did you do you, how did you manage, that triune obligation?

SAM VAUGHAN: I think I told you I worked in several departments before I got to editing books. I wanted to edit books; but I'm far from sorry I worked in other departments. And, eventually, I was executive editor, which meant, in those days, number two. I thought in due course I could become the editor-in-chief. But when the general manager of the Doubleday division left to go to Houghton Mifflin, a man named David Replogle (like the globes), I inquired of his superior the names on the list of candidates. I wanted to see whether they included people I could live with. He showed me the list and asked, "Do you want to be on it?" I said I hadn't thought of that. He put my name on the list, and they offered me a job as publisher.

Nicely enough, the title of publisher had not been used since the time of the original Frank Nelson Doubleday, who founded the company. The term "publisher" was not commonly used in trade publishing at that point, though it's now used everywhere. To be called a publisher was kind of an honorific; it was something people said about you, rather than what you said about yourself. But it was so nice of them that I accepted. It pleased the ham in me. But I said, "I will only do it if I can continue to edit some books every year, because I don't want to be divorced from editing. I like the craft part of it." So, that was the deal. I did it for about a dozen years, and then I did become editor-in-chief, which was really a lateral move, but they wanted to get me out of the chair I was in. And I did that for a couple of years, until I decided to leave.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I will quote to you from something you wrote: "Among the roles of the publisher are to help console the author during the temper tantrums, to soothe his paranoia, to stimulate him when he is blocked, and so on."

SAM VAUGHAN: I resisted the title of publisher in part because I always felt that the publisher was the person who put up the money. Somebody has to pay for all of this exercise. Then I came to realize that that power or authority could be delegated to you, so I was really delegated to spend Mr. Doubleday's money, or the family's money, by investing in several hundred new books each year, and tending to that big back list I mentioned. The way I saw the role was like how Fitzgerald, in a wonderful passage in *THE LAST TYCOON*, understood the studio system. He said something like this: "You can take Hollywood for granted like I did, or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can be understood, too, but only dimly and in flashes. Not half a dozen men have ever been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads."

And the equation of the publishing business is what I think I understood, and what the publisher is asked to understand and to deal with. It is the major elements that the publisher can affect. I liked all parts of publishing. I like the editorial job; I like the publishing and promotion, the advertising job; I like the sales jobs. It was important to me to give everybody a fair shake. I used to have a weekly publishing meeting, which I was asked to run, because Mr. Doubleday wanted to be sure that everybody's point of

view should be represented who had a right to be heard. I had no trouble with that. That's the way Eisenhower ran his cabinet, and the way I don't think a cabinet has been run since, which is: everybody has a right to speak on any aspect they want, but in the end, you know where the buck stops, and where you say yes or no. I liked the power, if you will, of saying *yes* more than anything else about the job. I was willing to use that power to say *no*. I tried to say it as rarely as possible, but you had to, sometimes. I also liked the chance to let everybody be heard. Because when you have six or seven or eight departments represented, you're beginning to get a little cross-section of America. As Mr. Clinton would say, "It's inclusive."

The publisher has to have some role in maintaining standards. That is, is the book good enough of its kind? Now in a big house you can't know all of the books, so you have to bet on the people rather than the books.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: "The people" meaning, your people.

SAM VAUGHAN: Right. There were some people, some editors, say, who were sponsoring books whose word I would take absolutely; and there were others I might have some question about. But if the house has standards....

We were once confronted with a proposal to publish, or reprint, the official Nazi Party handbook. It was so banal and so bureaucratic, so much a run-of-the-mill sort of document, that it was chilling. What really pleased me was that a young editor came into my office after our meeting. He was steamed! I thought he was going to take my head off. He said, "You can't publish that book!" I said, "Why not?" And he said, "It's a terrible book! If it gets into the wrong hands it would—" His name was Mark Haefele. I explained to Mark that the question of that particular grotesquerie in history had been much discussed at the time of *MEIN KAMPF*, when Houghton Mifflin was offered it. They had decided to do it, but I think not without a lot of debate. I said, "We've decided not to publish this Nazi Party handbook, but not for the reason you give. Yes, it might fall into the wrong hands, but it will also fall into the right hands, and it will show how bureaucratically, how systematically evil can be organized."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And why did you decide not to do it?

SAM VAUGHAN: It was a question of a crowded list, and how much attention would we have to give it? You'd spend a lot of time explaining it away, I guess. But I was pleased with him for *caring*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Along that line, are there books or authors you passed on that you later regret having lost, or not having chosen?

SAM VAUGHAN: Sure. I'm afraid the list would be longer than I care to remember. One of them was just a simple business decision: I was friendly with a writer named Jim Fixx. I knew him when he had just been fired as the editor of *Life* magazine. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Not much, I've joined Mensa just for the hell of it." I said, "What's that like?" And he said, "It's not too tough. You don't have to be all that smart." So I said, "You know, Jim, if you have nothing to do, we have some interesting books on back list involving games. You might do a book of games for super-intelligent people, who are really smart, and believe it." He did that. He wrote a little book called *GAMES FOR THE SUPERINTELLIGENT*. It sold a lot of copies, and so we did a second.

Next, he sent a proposal for a book about running. His agent wanted some outrageous sum of money, \$25,000 or \$35,000. As it happened, I knew something about running. Now, a publisher should guard his ignorance; but I had a friend who was an expert in running and track and field; I'd been hearing about running for years; and therefore, I thought the running wave had come and curled and crashed. So I decided

not to put the money up. The book became a number one best-seller for Random House. I wrote him a letter saying, "It looks like I goofed." That's the type of book that you turn down with no great issue involved. But I think you want something more profound than that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I am thinking for example about Mike Bessie turning down Frantz Fanon's *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH*, which is still a bit of a scandal, I suppose, in that household. [*See Archipelago, Vol. 1, No. 4*] He also turned down *LOLITA*. You didn't turn down *LOLITA*; or did you?

SAM VAUGHAN: *LOLITA* was, in effect, declined but I didn't personally do it. Did I tell you it had been previewed by Jason Epstein in the *Anchor Review*? Well, it is interesting, because it does reflect on that "house culture" business. I first heard about *LOLITA* from Jason; I think I was in sales then. He gave me the Olympia Press edition. I read it over a weekend. I thought it was pretty interesting, not very pornographic, certainly not terribly erotic. But the talk about it was, it was dirty. Jason was doing a periodical then, a journal called the *Anchor Review*, in the Anchorbooks format. He put a piece of it in the *Anchor Review*, I think to sort of test-fly it. But it didn't succeed, because the word had proceeded the book that it was really dirty or pornographic, so he wasn't allowed to do it.

Now, you take that decision for what it is; but there's also background. Not many years before, the same house [*Doubleday*] — I wasn't there then — published Edmund Wilson's *MEMOIRS OF HECATE COUNTY*, a novel which was also accused of being scandalous or pornographic. The house defended it in the Supreme Court, I think, or the Supreme Court of New York State; and lost. They lost in court, and, I guess, lost on appeal, or couldn't appeal, I don't know which; but the book couldn't be sold in New York, for quite awhile. I think that experience soured the chairman, who was himself a lawyer. I think he had gone to the mat for the earlier book, and he didn't want that exhaustion and expense, and also, being typecast, again. Now, I'm giving this to you secondhand. So, you see, there was a context for the declining of *LOLITA*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What comes to mind is that book by John de St. Jorre about the Olympia Press, *VENUS BOUND*. A little sideline: I remember when *The New Yorker* published the chapter from that book about Dominique Aury as being the real author of *THE STORY OF O*. My husband [*Lee Goerner, late editor and publisher of Atheneum*] and I were having dinner with an Italian publisher, who said, "Why did they publish that chapter? We all knew she was the one." Lee and I looked at each other and looked away. *We* didn't know.

SAM VAUGHAN: I loved working with St. Jorre on his book because it was written in so cheerful a manner. It was great fun; it was full of publishing lore. I didn't think it would sell very well, because the number of people interested in the backstage lore of publishing did not seem to be enormous.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I notice that readers do seem to follow this series in *Archipelago* of conversations with publishers; so I think, yes, there is some sort of interest. I can't put my finger on it, except that people want to know how things work. Not necessarily technically — they want to know who these people are.

SAM VAUGHAN: I think you're right. It's become much more so as publishing people get to be much more visible. It used to be part of the compact that you stayed out of sight, that the "gentlemanly" publishers didn't care to be identified. You were publishing your authors; they were the ones who went public. But that has all gone by the board. The celebrity editor is a feature of the current scene. Michael Korda's book

[ANOTHER LIFE] is coming out here [*at Random House*], and the expectation is that he will sell very well, because he's a good storyteller.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: He is, in a certain way, a popular writer.

SAM VAUGHAN: Yes I think that's true, and I don't think he is striving for any more than that.

### *The editor, "retired"*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you repeat what Jason Epstein said about retiring?

SAM VAUGHAN: The reason we were chuckling about Jason was, he said "in retirement" he only wanted to do about eight or ten books a year. Well, if you want to have eight or ten published books a year, you have to be working with 30 or 40 or 50 authors, because they don't all deliver at the same time. Some authors take a year to write a book, and some take a lifetime. Your network, or your stable, or whatever unlovely image you use, has to be fairly sizable. This has nothing to do with the things that come in under the heading of serendipity.

Throughout most of my working life as an editor, I felt I should produce between ten and 20 published books a year. Some years more, some years less. Increasingly, it's become a matter of doing less, partly because the amount of preparation time each book takes is much more than it used to take. You want to produce enough books to pay your way; but you also cannot produce as many books as you might, say, edit, because editing is not the sum total of what you do. You have to reserve part of your time and energy for the promotion of that book, and the author of that book, within the house, and then a certain amount of it outside the house. At the moment, I'm only working on three or four books actively, which are in some stage of publication or other. Ordinarily, it would be many more.

I had a book a couple of years ago by a super photographer, on pickup trucks. If the agent had sent it to me six weeks before, I would have sent it right back. But in the intervening six weeks, I had been West with my sons, and my youngest son was crazy to have a pickup truck, and that dialed me into the American love of that particular kind of vehicle. And so we did a book which was a-typical for me, and it sold extremely well, which is a-typical for me. That's strictly serendipitous.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This is worth saying, too: you've talked about how authors really don't like to know that their editor is working with other writers.

SAM VAUGHAN: Ideally, not. The writer wants to think that he or she is the editor's—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: —the editor's only love!

SAM VAUGHAN: He might have a couple of others, in principle. But, as one of my authors, Fannie Flagg, says: "Don't tell me about the others! You may have other people, but I don't want to hear about them, or their work!" That's understandable. A writer wants almost exclusivity. The writer wants prompt response, which I've never been good at, but the editor who reads the manuscript overnight is beloved by his author. There are some, like Bob Gottlieb and others, who will do that, or will do it on occasion.

What I try to practice is what I call the 'slap-and-pat' theory of editing. Almost everything that's written needs some criticism. Almost everything that's written needs some praise, or deserves some praise. So you try to mix praise with criticism. Ideally, you do it sincerely. That is, you don't praise what you really don't like; but you praise

what you really do like. You don't write 12 pages of things that are wrong, without remembering to find something else you like, that is already right. There's a theory of editing that says you should read with a pencil in your hand; and there's an opposing theory which says you should put the pencil away. I do it sometimes one way, and sometimes the other.

Occasionally, there is a manuscript which doesn't need a thing. That has happened, in the years I've been doing this, two or three times. I wish I could retrieve the authors' names: they deserve to be enshrined. There is a kind of writer who is thoroughly professional. One of my mentors, Lee Barker, really admired the 'thoroughly professional writer.' The one who doesn't whine. The one who delivers on time. The one who delivers a clean manuscript — which used to be more of a problem than it is now. The one who doesn't need a lot of line-by-line work. I've had the happy experience of reading something and saying, "This will do fine." But most things — some of the best things — do deserve some talking over and/or working over.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In one of your pieces, you quoted Robert Giroux on the difference between line editing and book editing. Giroux said: "The truth is that editing lines is not necessarily the same as editing a book. A book is a much more complicated entity and totality than the sum of its lines alone. Its structural integrity, the relation and proportions of its parts, and its total impact could escape even a conscientious editor exclusively intent on vetting the book line by line."

SAM VAUGHAN: I'm still a little shocked by the fact that some editors, apparently, feel that they only have to do the big stuff, and they leave the lines for somebody else. You can leave it for the copy editor. I have great regard for copy editors: they make the author and the editor respectable. But I don't leave anything undone on a manuscript that I think I can do, even if I overlap with the copy editor. Now, my sense of punctuation is as erratic as the next guy's. But some other things I think I know something about.

One colleague of mine, Betty Prashker, said she likes to edit the author's head: by which she means, the kind of editing she enjoys is talking over the manuscript with the author. That's distinct from laying a hand on the manuscript. And I like that, too, although I've never found it wholly satisfying; but it's terribly important, and there are some editors who seem to practice their trade that way.

Some editors are demon line-editors. The danger Bob Giroux speaks of there is, you can spend a lot of time in the trees, and miss you-know-what. I'm beginning to edit a novel right now. I've talked it over with the author. I'm now going to write him a ruminative kind of paper, and talk it over further, because talking with him at first has clarified his intentions, and therefore, my thoughts; and so, I'm going to do a gabby paper which will go further with that process. Then, he will revise and extend what he's done, and he'll give it to me again, and I'll begin to edit, coming in closer on lines. It's kind of a long way around, but it works for him and me. I will edit it several times. And he is a famous, very professional writer.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I can imagine how many writers will read what you've just said, and sigh.

SAM VAUGHAN: There is a lot of useful wasting of time between the writer and the editor. I told you we went last night to see this tribute to Mike Nichols, at the Lincoln Center Film Society, and they were talking about how effective he is as a director. He uses a lot of metaphors, he quotes from a lot of other people, and he quotes from a lot of movies. He doesn't tell actors how to act: he tries to put things in their heads which will bring out the best in them. That's analogous to a certain part of

editing. You just have to talk for a while; or, if you can't get together, write back and forth, and see what erupts. By the way, the art of letter writing is not dead; it's alive and well.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You like writing. It's clear in the publications you've been good enough to send me: there's an obvious pleasure in the sentences.

SAM VAUGHAN: I do find pleasure in the play of language and ideas. I also write, as many people have said before me, to find out what I have to say. I write to clarify my own thoughts, or to bring some order to them. Recently, I sent a young scholar-writer an e-mail letter, talking about her book; and, 24 hours later, sent her another one, which turned out to be the one I should have written in the first place. But having written a decidedly imperfect one the day before, that second one helped me to crystallize what I really wanted to encourage her to do. And she said so; but that was fine — she was ready to quit after the first letter, and she was happy after the second.

### *The community of the book*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I'd like to ask the question, "Do we have literary culture?" But I think I'll alter it because I like very much your expression "the community of the book." Would you speak about that?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, I don't want to grapple with whether we have a literary culture. It usually satisfies a need, speaking of needs, of certain writers and publishing people to think we have a culture that is antagonistic to the writer, to the poet or painter. But, quite apart from that, to whatever degree it's true or false, we do have a community of the book. If you take the librarians and the teachers and the booksellers, and the writers and the editors and publishers of all stripes, and the people connected with the process at one remove, the printers or sales reps: they all, when you press them against the wall, would say they are in favor of the book. There's a kind of friendliness toward the book; there's still a kind of respect that the book doesn't always deserve. Even though we don't elevate our writers to the status of the National Academy of France very often, there's still a kind of automatic respect for the book — which I think we are eroding, by the way, with promiscuous publishing and promiscuous writing. But it's still there.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you illustrate what you just said?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, at the moment, I'm very conscious about having read last week a book-industry study-group report which says that the sales of the general trade books are off by three percent from the previous year, something like that. So far, we haven't heard the beating of the breasts, which is the favorite background music of publishing. I flip through the pages of the *Times Book Review*, and I find it basically boring. And if I find it boring — and I make my life out of it — what must other people think of it? We all have civilian friends who are not part of an active literary culture, but they are literate, and they read books, and they're not slaves to reading, but they want books as part of their lives. One of them said to me one day, about certain people who were getting a lot of attention, "Who *are* these people? Why should we pay attention?" That's not a bad question.

Also, there's a question of the book's reliability. Once, a reader tended to believe more of what was in a book than was in the *Daily News* or the *National Enquirer*. That was based on the research necessary, the time and art a book required. These years, we are publishing books by well-known authors, books of presumed facts, which are as

unreliable, as “unsourced,” as the Internet. There is much talk about how journalistic standards have slipped. Whether that’s true or not, there are writers and editors who don’t seem to have a grasp of even the most rudimentary journalistic standards.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You wrote an article for *Daedalus* called “The Community of the Book,” which opens: “The community of the book, it seems safe to assume, consists of those for whom the written word, especially as expressed in printed and bound volumes, is of the first importance. Little else may be safely assumed, including the question of whether it is, in fact, a community.”

It’s a lovely piece, and perhaps replies to my earlier question as well as any response might. I was quite taken, as well, by this: “Let’s look briefly at two of our common concerns — reading and, that neglected and maligned figure, the reader.” In all of this, your special concern has been for the reader. You are very much, I think, as an editor, on the side of the reader: not as opposed to the writer, by any means, but, you’re definitely there for the reader.

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, I think the reader has rights. They have the right to say, “I like it” or “I don’t.” They don’t have to articulate why. They have the right, in most cases, to clear writing, not willful obfuscation. There’s a difference, as you well know, between the subtleties of art and what I see is an almost perversely obscure style on the part of some writers. Readers are usually willing to work pretty hard, especially if they’ve bought the book and taken it home. The idea of the coffee table book that sits there unread: I never have believed that. If you like to read, and you’ve paid 30 bucks for a book, you’re going to work pretty hard to read it. In all the criticisms of publishing and our consumer society, there’s not enough standing-up for the reader. The reader doesn’t have a single voice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Nor should it be a single voice. There should be any number of voices.

SAM VAUGHAN: Right. Readers have the power of the purse, and when they exercise it negatively, I can’t get angry. Also, another thing, and I think it’s related, because I think there’s a value which makes the reader not just a reader. The reader completes the creative act, closes the circuit. The writer puts down words which attempt to convey a vision or a version of reality, say, and the reader follows through, finishes the vision, and of course affects it. It is a creative act complementary to the writer’s original act. We all know that novels, poems, essays and short stories compete with movies and plays and television and so forth. Many people participate in all of those, or lots of them. They go in and out of them with varying degrees of intensity. I’m one of them. I go to the theater not at all for two years, and then I go to five plays. If the theater can hold me, I keep going back, and if it disappoints me, I turn away, at least for awhile. I think that happens with books, too. There is a moment where you look at the papers and you say, “There’s not a movie I want to see!” You look at television and say, “There’s nothing on that I want to see.” You look at the book pages and say, “There’s nothing I want to read.” We are really trying to say something more than that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There are surely books that you haven’t read that you mean to.

SAM VAUGHAN: Oh, really. (*laughter*)

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Let’s say you can go into book-hibernation this summer: what would you read?

SAM VAUGHAN: Well, at the moment, I’m not waiting for the summer, or hibernation, which may never come. I’m listening to a series of tapes, in the car, of



lectures by acclaimed professors of the intellectual tradition of the West, about which I can tell you not three sentences. It starts with Aquinas and goes through Machiavelli, so far, in whom I'm deeply interested, by the way. There is a great blank in my education, and so, this is part of 'high school at home' or, 'college at home.' I'm enjoying them so far, and I hope to continue. That's because I don't have much personal reading time, but the car is useful. The recorded cassette, by the way, the audio cassette, limped along for years and didn't catch on. Something caused it to catch on a few years back; I don't know what it was.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes; but it has caught on. I often travel long distances by car, and recently began listening to taped books while driving. That is how I came to hear Jeremy Irons read *LOLITA*. He has a voice every bit as beautiful as James Mason's, yet very different from it, and, it seems to me, is reading that extraordinary novel with the most perfect intonation. Now I'm listening to a BBC production of the New Testament. I've never read the New Testament entire, and listening to it (perhaps because of those British accents) helps me understand a bit better why Nietzsche disliked Christianity. I'm surprised at that. The Gospel of St. John, on the other hand, is lovable. I've listened, also, to Shelby Foote read his book about the siege of Natchez. Once certain books were available unabridged on tape, I began to listen.

SAM VAUGHAN: It would be a good thing for all of us, not as duty, but because it feels good, to start each day, as some writers do, with a reading of the Old Testament; or, by listening to it. It is good in the same way that symphonic or classical music clears the mind and the head and the soul, all at once. It makes life seem more orderly and also longer-range, beyond the moment. You get a feeling of continuity when you absorb some of that beauty and serenity.

### *Afterward*

*In late May of this year, Bertelsmann A. G., the German publishing corporation that owns Random House, Inc. (including Knopf, Random House, Vintage, Pantheon, and other imprints) and Doubleday/Bantam/Dell (which includes other imprints, as well), announced that several formerly quite distinct imprints ("units," the New York Times called them) would be combined, including the distinguished but quite different paperback imprints Vintage (part of Knopf) and Anchor (part of Doubleday), which will have one director. Said the Times: "Critics call the move a triumph of corporate organization over literary values." While no doubt over-simplifying the matter, the Times' alarm was muted compared to the dismay heard among various editors and agents. In particular, women I spoke to were unhappy because so few of their sex remained at the highest levels. I phoned Sam Vaughan to ask what he knew about the reorganization, and what he thought about it. A man who, perhaps above all else that he stands for, wishes to speak accurately, he was reluctant to comment publicly before all the facts were in.*

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*Related articles:*

Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 3  
Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, Vol. 1, No. 4; *and* Vol. 2, No. 1  
Conversation with William Strachan, Vol. 2, No. 4  
George Garrett, "Whatever He Says Is Gospel," *this issue*  
Endnotes: "On Memory," *this issue*

## WHATEVER HE SAYS IS GOSPEL

George Garrett *talks with the* Editor of Archipelago

*George Garret, man of letters and friend, had suggested I ought to have a conversation with Sam Vaughan. Vaughan had published several of his books, I learned (though not first from Garrett), and had written the following: "But the finest historical novel I ever read arrived in two great boxes of manuscript written by George Garrett, poet, short-story writer, novelist, and teacher. George had written novels before, but nothing quite prepared me for the masterpiece that was DEATH OF THE FOX.*

*"The courage it required, indeed audacity, for this young American Southerner to take on Raleigh, Elizabeth's captain.... For me it was an exposure to two kinds of minds: the Elizabethan, so full of cunning and guile but so often in search of options and answers, none of them easy, in fact for wisdom; and the mind of a man, the author, who, in the Southern tradition, loves the past and seeks to recompose it, through fact and invention, in myth and song and smell, capable of re-creating the very humanity of those who walked the earth before us."*

*I asked George Garrett how he came to publish DEATH OF THE FOX with Sam Vaughan.* -KM

GEORGE GARRETT: Well, do you want the long story, or the short?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I want the long story.

GEORGE GARRETT: I had written a novel called DO, LORD, REMEMBER ME. Gillen Aitken was then my agent in England. He had placed it with somebody, I've forgotten who. Meanwhile, it was placed in the United States with Charles Duell, of Duell, Sloan and Pearce, a very nice little publishing house. Candida Donadio was my agent at the time, but that book I sold myself. Mr. Duell was a very handsome, very elegant old-fashioned deal-maker. We met at the Yale Club bar to discuss the book.

Now, this book is red-neck-rowdy. I had no idea why this man with his elegant accent, his hat and umbrella; very nice, but the classic Yalie: I had no idea why he would be the least bit interested, other than the fact that he was going out with my cousin. But in a way, Duell, Sloan was an obvious place to send it, because Mr. Duell had published most of Erskine Caldwell, so red-neck-rowdy was what he liked. He was the last one there. Sloan and Pearce had vanished. It was a one-man operation, with a nice list, a small Knopf, so to speak.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This was the early '60s?

GEORGE GARRETT: Must have been. I had written it in 1960, and had turned it in 1961, and Aitken had placed it pretty quickly. — No, he didn't, actually. The problem was, it was a very long book. I looked at it and suddenly realized that it could be cut *exactly* in half. Everyone was happy then. All I did was cut the comedy out of the story. It became very tragic. I managed to use some of the comedy in KING OF BABYLON, many years later.

Okay. We've done it: it exists in a version half as long. Mr. Duell accepted it. It was rowdier than it is now; he had seen the English edition.

Everything was going along fine. Then, the following thing happens: Mr. Duell suddenly calls me here at the University of Virginia, where I was teaching, and says, “Guess what? A very large publisher, which has no trade list at all, but publishes magazines, wants to buy Duell, Sloan, and Pearce.” It was *Better Homes and Gardens*. Their whole operation became known as Meredith Press. They had offered him, as he told me on the phone, a lifetime job there, and the ability to continue to publish his own list, under them, of anything that he wanted: with one exception: they’re *not* going to publish this god-damn rowdy red-necked novel. He said, “Now, here’s the deal. I will not accept their offer. I want to publish this. If *you* want to do it. It’s up to you. Here’s the rest of the deal: If you accept *this* idea, I will return the book to you. I will promise to publish, sight unseen, the next book you write: *anything* that you want to do. You just tell me a subject on the phone, right now, and the contract will be in the mail before the day is over.”

I thought for a minute and I said, “How about something about Sir Walter Raleigh.” He said, “Okay.” And I got, a couple of days later, a contract that said something about Sir Walter Raleigh, for a larger advance than I had ever had before. He also said that I was free to shop DO, LORD around — if I could do anything with it, which we doubted. On the other hand, all he had was the new topic, and they couldn’t turn that down; they had made that arrangement with him. I got the advance and commitment to publish this new novel. I thought, That’s fine. What could happen to Duell?

Well, Candida said, “I’ll send the book around.” The first place she sent it was to Sam Vaughan, at Doubleday. The story he told me at the time — he’s more dignified about it than I am; he’s a very dignified guy — was that the book was accepted and went immediately into production. I didn’t have much comment from him, just from the copy editor. He did comment about one thing. He had seen a “Rabelaisian scene” that is entirely based on flatulence, and it had to be cut because, he said, “Mr. Nelson Doubleday suffers from flatulence, and we don’t allow any books published here that have farts in them. It’s just a house policy. So you’ve got to take the fart out.”

Well, this was my first experience of editing by him. I said, “How about a very loud sneeze?” “Okay, then a loud sneeze it will be.” — “If only I hadn’t *sneezed*” begins the chapter in the Doubleday version.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Excellent. We can make an historical note about the Bowdlerization.

GEORGE GARRETT: Well, this has an end. LSU [Louisiana State University Press] brought out DO, LORD, REMEMBER ME, in their series Voices of the South. I said, “Would you guys mind doing the English edition instead of the American?” and they said, “Sure,” not thinking there was any difference. So, the only one that exists now is the ‘flatulent’ version.

I didn’t have much to do with Sam. In the interim I talked to some people in publishing, who said, “Well, he’s a really remarkable person, in several ways. One of them is that he is probably the *only* person, young or old, in publishing at the minute, who says what he means and means what he says. You can take whatever he says as gospel. There’s no excuse for paranoia dealing with Vaughan.”

Well, I did meet him, after the book was published. He had sent a letter of congratulations and said he’d noticed a few little things he wished we had had more time to work on, but “next time we’ll do something better.” We met in New York. I said, “Because of the fact that it went directly to the copy-editor and you really didn’t have much time to work on it, I’m going to ask you a couple of questions. One of them

is, Why did you do this book? Other than the fact that you like red-neck stories, why in the world did you do this book?”

He said, “You really want to know? I’ll tell you.” He said: “I had two young interns” — very attractive young women; I had seen them walking up and down the hall. The interns had a room in the Doubleday building, which he showed me, where they all go and have coffee in the morning. His interns were annoyed, he said, because all the others, working for other editors, had stories about the wonderful manuscripts coming over from Candida Donadio, and *they* never got any. They asked him why, and he said he didn’t know why he never got any manuscripts from Candida Donadio, but that, if he ever did get one, he promised that he would publish it like *that*, sight unseen. And, sure enough, in came a manuscript from Candida, and it went to him.

There was another factor as well, he said. “We made much more money on the Eisenhower papers” — which was the big thing that he had edited — “in this quarter than we had anticipated, and so we were caught in a complicated tax bind, because we didn’t pay enough. We had made a guess, and it was way off. We were so successful that we desperately needed some paper losses, right now. This came like a wonderful blessing to our publishing house.”

I said, “As I understand it, you people classify writers as either ‘prestige’ or ‘profitable.’ What sort of niche do you have in mind for me, Mr. Vaughan?”

And he said, “Neither one, neither one.” He said, “At the moment, I think of you as a *tax loss* writer. Don’t put on a long face. Somewhere, at any given moment, there’s always a publisher desperately needing a paper tax-loss. You could go right through life being valuable.” He may have said other things, but that one sort of stuck.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This may be the truest insight into publishing economics I’ve heard from anybody.

GEORGE GARRETT: Well, I accepted it as absolute truth. He may not remember it exactly that way. Then, there was the question, What next? And whatever it was I had in mind interested no one at Doubleday, so we amiably parted company.

Meanwhile, I had finished a version, a draft, of the Raleigh book [*which became* DEATH OF THE FOX, *first volume of the trilogy*] and turned it in to Mr. Duell.

But, by the time I turned it in, Mr. Duell was dead. His assistant, a young man named Ralph Woodward, had been absorbed into Meredith Press. And I had lost Candida ... we had just sort of drifted apart. I was agent-less, and had not kept up with the fact that Duell was dead. Meredith had quit doing fiction, so this would be their only work of fiction in years. This was later in the ‘60s. They said, “We’re going to publish it, but if you want to send review copies out you’re going to have to come to New York, wrap them yourself, mail ‘em out. All we’re going to do is print and bind. There’ll be this big stack of books. It’s up to you, after that.” They also wanted their money back.

The manuscript kicked around for a while. A man named Perry Knowlton, my editor at Scribner’s when I had done a collection of stories there, years before, had become an agent, and ran Curtis Brown. I thought, Well, I’d better have one. So I went to see him. Perry Knowlton sent it around to various people. There were many rejections. It was a rough and raw draft, and some people just can’t see how you’re going to take that and turn it into something.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There’s nothing like an editor with no imagination.

GEORGE GARRETT: They say, “This is not ready to go to the printer.” That’s right: but it’s *going* to be. I’m working on it right now. I just wanted you to see the lines.

Ten or twelve publishers turned it down. I really thought nothing was going to happen. Then Knowlton called me and said he had had a call from Gottlieb [*Robert Gottlieb, editor, later editor-in-chief, at Knopf, then of The New Yorker*]. Gottlieb had heard about it. Gottlieb said, "I'm sort of an expert on Raleigh and the Renaissance, and if this book has any merit at all, I would really like to do it. So send it to me, and I can give you a prompt response."

Well, no prompt response. Nothing. I was to find out much later that, almost the same time he received the manuscript, he went on jury duty, and it was a long case. Eight, ten, twelve weeks went by. Meanwhile, summer had come, and we were at a remote ranch, the children, Susan, and I. Susan's parents had set us up at a very expensive, wonderful ranch deep in the heart of Teton National Park. The only other ones in the park were the Rockefellers. The nearest real phone was in Moose, Wyoming. I got a message that Mr. Knowlton in New York was calling me, and I should call back immediately. The only way to do that was to drive down to Moose.

I drove down from the mountains thinking this through. 'He wouldn't bother me, knowing I was out here in the deep boonies, if it wasn't — he must have gotten good news to tell me, otherwise I wouldn't have to come down here all the way, twelve miles, and contact him.' It turned out not to be that way at all. What Gottlieb had said was, he liked the structure, the general design of the book was perfectly fine, the content was okay: it was just the *language*. It was terrible. I said, "I'll change all the words!"

So, that was that. Perry then said, "Well, what do you think we ought to do with this?" I said, "I don't know. Seems to me like the last thing in the world he'd want, but why not send it back to Sam Vaughan? He was at least friendly." Knowlton said, "Oh, this is probably not a Doubleday-type book." I said, "Well, let's try it anyway."

So he sent it over there, with no explanation. Vaughan read it and said he would like to do it. We did that one together. And the next one, too [THE SUCCESSION]. He was more helpful, in a way, with that one, because we didn't have many big changes to make on the first one. Didn't have to change all the words.

Not long ago I wrote this incident up, and I was trying to think of a way to bug Gottlieb, if he should ever stumble on it. There's a book by Frederick Busch, just out, called LETTERS TO A FICTION WRITER. Letters about all kinds of things. Some of them are real letters, like Flannery O'Connor to John Hawkes, and some are made up, and some are to students. Towards the end of the piece I wrote, I tell that story about rejection, and describe what happened and how it really makes me angry again, so I get my guns and drive out into the country and set up a lot of bottles and cans and imagine I'm blowing Gottlieb away. Thinking, Some day, someone's going to say, 'Hey, somebody's out there who wants to blow your head off!' And, with the world the way it is, it could make someone nervous.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You probably don't want to publish that. Although, you already did.

GEORGE GARRETT: It's already out. It isn't quite put that way. This makes me sound like a very violent person.

So, Sam and I did those two books [DO, LORD, REMEMBER ME and DEATH OF THE FOX], and we did a book of three novellas, called THE MAGIC STRIPEASE, and then we did THE SUCCESSION [*second volume in the Elizabethan trilogy*]. He then plugged me in to Bill Strachan [*former editor, Anchor Doubleday, now director of Columbia University Press*], to write introductions to a series of Anchor paperbacks. This was an annual of poetry and fiction by people from the Associated Writing Programs, people like Barry



Hannah and Carolyn Forché; many, many people. Strachan was a young editor at Anchor Books then. Sam Vaughan said, “Here, do these with George.” I don’t think Strachan had a lot to say about it, but he was very nice. There were eleven intros before the series died, and four of them were done at Anchor.

I was working on the last book [ENTERED FROM THE SUN, *third novel in the trilogy*]. Sam was by then publisher of Doubleday. They had a big dust-up there, and he ended up taking early retirement; he didn’t tell me any details about it. But I was stuck there, though I didn’t have to be.

By this time, Jane Gelfman was my agent. Doubleday had hired Herman Golub from somewhere; Harper’s. We didn’t owe them anything, at this point. Jane and I went to lunch with Golub and Steve Rubin, who’s now the big gun over there, I guess, and he said, “Let us do this book. Finish up your trilogy with us, and we’ll show you how we can publish it really well.” As if they hadn’t been trying too hard before that.

It was up to me. Jane said, “They’ll probably do as well as anybody else.” But she didn’t get along with Golub at all. I ended up publisher-less. The book came out in hard-cover, and I could see what was happening. The Germans had come in by then [*Bertelsmann A.G. bought Doubleday*]. Golub left there pretty soon afterward. But he and the agent had fought, and, while he was extremely nice to be with, he really wasn’t interested in the book. Meanwhile, Morrow had put the first two volumes in paper; but they dropped that line. I’ve got boxes of those books.

Then, Cork [Corliss] Smith brought all three of the Elizabethan novels in paper. Then he brought out WHISTLING IN THE DARK. Then he retired, but he went back, and he was the one who brought out KING OF BABYLON.

*George Garrett is the author of a number of books: poetry, essays, short stories, novels. He is Henry Hoynes Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia.*

**(Selected) Works by George Garrett:**

George Garrett, KING OF THE MOUNTAIN (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957)

—, DO, LORD, REMEMBER ME (Doubleday, 1965)

—, DEATH OF THE FOX (1971)

—, THE SUCCESSION (1983)

—, ENTERED FROM THE SUN (1990)

—, THE MAGIC STRIPEASE (1973)

—, AN EVENING PERFORMANCE (1985)

—, WHISTLING IN THE DARK (Harcourt Brace, 1992)

—, THE KING OF BABYLON SHALL NOT COME AGAINST YOU (1998)

—, BAD MAN BLUES: A Portable George Garrett (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1998)

**Other:**

Frederick Busch, ed. LETTERS TO A FICTION WRITER (W.W. Norton, June 1999)

*See also:*

A Conversation with Samuel S. Vaughan, *this issue*

A Conversation with William Strachan, *Archipelago*, Vol. 2, No. 4

# ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion  
www.archipelago.org

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## Reminiscence

LEE GOERNER

Editor and Publisher (1947-1995)

*Literary history, of which publishing is only a part, is marvelous and fluid. The publishing of books is itself a curious undertaking. In Europe and America, the organization, financing, distribution, and expectation of profit of the industry; that is, its entire structure, scarcely resembles what it was a dozen, or even half a dozen, years ago. The 'accidental profession' of an older generation, with its good manners and care for literature, has been all but replaced by corporate publishing, which banks on the mass-entertainment values of a media-based 'global' culture.*

*Substantially, however, what has changed? Do people read more bad books than ever? Fewer good books? Why should a marketer's opinion matter at an editorial meeting? What has become of the editor's art?*

*I thought I would ask certain notable book people what they thought about these matters, and they have been telling me, at length. Our conversations appear regularly in Archipelago, and may serve as an opening onto an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current establishment, reflecting on its glories, revealing what remains constant amid the present flux. Despite their surround of gentility, these publishers are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.*

*-Katherine McNamara*

What has become of the editor? This is a more intimate question than I have asked before. I will write of a man I knew well, Lee Goerner, formerly at Alfred A. Knopf, latterly the last editor and publisher at Atheneum, and my husband. Though relatively young at his death, he was of that 'old school' now eclipsed. In a sense, historical circumstances overcame him.

Atheneum, founded in 1959 by Pat Knopf, Michael Bessie, and Hiram Hayden, had merged (as Michael Bessie has recounted) with Scribner's by 1978. When Lee Goerner became its publisher, in 1989, Atheneum was owned by Robert Maxwell, the notorious British capitalist; the imprint belonged to Maxwell's American publishing corporation which also held Macmillan, Scribner's (as it was still called), The Free Press, Collier Books, and technical branches. In 1991, Robert Maxwell died amid questionable circumstances. As his English holdings were bankrupt, the American corporation was put up for sale to cover costs. For two or more years Atheneum and its publisher labored under a cloud of uncertainty while rumors of imminent sale destabilized his publishing program. When at last the new owners were announced to be Simon & Schuster, the news was a blow to him, because he saw their corporate philosophy and practices as antithetical to his own.

Simon & Schuster had recently been bought by Paramount Pictures (and tried on the short-lived corporate identity of "Paramount Publishing"). Paramount Pictures

had itself been bought by the enormous Viacom, owned by Sumner Redstone. It is à propos that I write of this now, as Redstone has just bought the CBS corporation. A thorough reorganization of this bivalved new conglomerate is promised, under an executive with no publishing experience; Simon & Schuster (deep in whose vaults lie the remains not only of Atheneum but also the old Scribner's) is rumored to be for sale again.

There is a warmer reason, however, for remembering Lee Goerner in these pages: to mark the appearance of Lynne Tillman's *BOOKSTORE*, telling the life and times of Jeanette Watson and Books & Co. In Manhattan, for twenty years Books & Co. was a delight to both serious and fashionable readers, until historical circumstances, once again, led to its closing. Many writers have given readings in that wonderful bookstore. I remember very well the night Isabel Allende read from *THE STORIES OF EVA LUNA*, her fourth book, published by Atheneum, where her editor and friend, Lee Goerner, had gone from Knopf. The upstairs room was crowded, and the crowd was expectant. Lee, who was to introduce her, did not care for public speaking. He was a slender, finely-dressed man who did nothing to call attention to himself, while observing the scene from behind his glasses and plotting his getaway. His voice was quiet, unemphatic; there was mordant humor in it, and, often, tenderness.

*Lee Goerner introduces Isabel Allende  
at Books & Co., 1991*

“I first read Isabel Allende eight years ago in rather extraordinary circumstances. I was working at another publishing house at the time, and we received the Spanish language edition of the book you know as *THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS*. No one knew anything about this writer, the agent didn't explain much about this writer, and all we had was the book and a rather charming photograph of this very attractive young woman. Since I was the only person at that house who read Spanish, it fell to me to read the book. And I took it over on a Friday afternoon to Carl Schurz Park and read the first chapter over a couple of hours — my Spanish was rustier than it is now — and I thought, This is OK. I then went home and proceeded to do some more homework over the weekend. As the week went by — I can tell this now, I would never have told Isabel before — it took me a week to get back to the book. I read some more in Carl Schurz Park on a Saturday, and then I stayed home all day Sunday; and I'd begun to get drawn in to the story, all the magical events. Then I stayed home Monday — I didn't go into the office until I finished the book — my Spanish was getting better all the time — and I went to Bob Gottlieb, who was then head of the distinguished house of Knopf, and I said, 'I don't know anything about her, you don't know anything about her, but this is the book we have to publish.' He looked at me and blinked. He said, 'Well, OK.' We were extremely lucky in this regard because, as we found out later, three other North American houses had turned down this book. And as I said, that book was *THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS*, and I'm sure that's where you first heard about Isabel Allende.”

From *BOOKSTORE The Life and Times of Jeanette Watson and Books & Co.*,  
by Lynne Tillman  
(New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999)

## Lee in Retrospect *Katherine McNamara*

When Lee Goerner was a young man he lived for two years in a small apartment on Laguna Street in San Francisco. By day he worked in a cigar store. By night he wrote a novel. A year later he finished the novel, read it over, decided it wasn't good enough and burned it. Tired of his own company, he abandoned the writer's solitary existence; but he wanted to be in books. He drove his VW Bug back across the country, spent six months looking for a job, and entered publishing as a junior assistant at Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Someone asked me if he really had burned the manuscript. He must have; it was not among his papers. I thought I had found it; no, it was the translation of Isabel Allende's first novel, *THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS*. He had read her book in manuscript, bought it, and then so disliked the translator's work (and worked with another on the subsequent books he published) that he rewrote much of it. Of his writings known to me, these exist: an elegant newspaper piece about Machado de Assis, whom he admired almost as much as he admired Chekhov, which was a very great deal; and hundreds of letters, scattered among writers and other friends across the country. The ones I've read are good: the tone is distanced, balanced, never too personal. The editor disliked talking about himself. An English publisher wrote me that unlike most Americans Lee understood irony, and knew how to 'deploy' it. During his five years at Atheneum he published between eighty and a hundred books, most of them novels, nearly all edited by him. He used to say he stayed in publishing because he liked the writers – liked their company, liked listening to them, and working with them. He loved editing. He loved books, even physically: their heft and color, binding stamp, rough trim.

After his death, oftentimes one of his writers would phone me. We would talk about this and that, life going on, until there came a pause, a long breath held. One of us – I, probably – mentioned Lee's name. The listening writer was silent for a kind moment, a steady heartbeat, then said: I think about him a lot. He's not here, but I find his mark everywhere – books he sent me, a note, tapes he made.

We consoled ourselves with those brief, intent moments of attention to memory and objects. We could not, for a long time, quite comprehend his absence, even as we learned of other deaths, lost friends, as we learned to live with our own illnesses and the terrible insecurities brought down by on us by the corporations that direct our life. Someone remarked: I'm cataloging deaths among our generation: the AIDS deaths, and this other kind. We began to understand – not our 'mortality': we don't know what that is; we understood: "I didn't return his call, now I can't"; and, no more lunches marked by his humor and irony and high gossip about publishing; and, *He's not here*. The physicality of his absence was what surprised us.

One day he named a novelist whose work, though acclaimed, he didn't care for, though he didn't say why. He never liked to give 'reasons' for his choices – he thought such things were after-the-fact reductions of emotion not easily, perhaps not wisely, articulated: although, once when we were speaking about how popular fiction, the movies, and the news seemed like variants of each other, he said, in a rare pronouncement: "You cannot deduce motivation from action." If he was stubborn about what he liked, he worked from a carefully-wrought aesthetic. During his first freshman week at Cornell, he sat down in the undergraduate library and read V., *DON*

QUIXOTE, and THE LABYRINTH OF SOLITUDE. He thought the purpose of a university education was for reading books, not talking about them, not taking them apart out loud, in front of strangers. Formally, he studied history, not literature; literature was a creature you had best come to on your own. In fact he studied Black history; this was in the late '60s, then the early 1970s, for graduate school at the University of California at Davis, and the war was on. He studied Black history, he read Spanish, he went to movies, he hated the war. He was an angry young man; it took him a long time to learn to live with his anger, then to go past it.

I don't know if he read Cervantes and Paz in Spanish that freshman week. He could have. He read and spoke Spanish: he had first encountered it in high school, in Venezuela. He said once that listening to Spanish had been like overhearing his mother-language, from the first the words seeming half-remembered, warm, as with friendship and knowledge. Later, he was one of the two or three book editors in New York who read Spanish. The formidable Catalan agent Carmen Balcells told me that in the early '80s, when Lee came to Barcelona (then, as now, the conduit-point for Latin American literature), the writers and editors thought he had brought them the publishing version of the Marshall Plan. Carmen Balcells gave a reception in his honor to which everyone came. Lee stood in a corner and blinked when anyone approached him.

He loved movies, and was interested in writings about movies. In the early 1980s, I'd guess, he read an article by an English film critic named David Thomson about Warren Beatty, and, excited by this writer who was new to him, showed it to Robert Gottlieb, then editor-in-chief of Knopf. To his intense disappointment, Gottlieb wouldn't let him buy David Thomson's book. Later, Gottlieb became David's publisher and Lee, his editor. Powerful older men often thwart gifted, rising young men – the young bucks who challenge the alpha stag, but cannot (not yet) vanquish him? Perhaps Lee himself turned into that stag. He encouraged some very smart young women coming up in publishing – he liked intelligent women as persons, and wasn't afraid of them – but I observed several young men who carried battle-marks after working with him. "They're full of themselves," he would say; and – this, more and more often – "They don't know how to read." He wondered when he heard young editors talk about going out to clubs at night. "When do they edit manuscripts?" he asked. Nearly all his adult life he spent his evenings reading manuscripts. He had that high shoulder you get from years of carrying a heavy briefcase home from the office.

He began at Knopf in 1973, as a very junior assistant to Robert Gottlieb. Among the first books he was given to edit was Michael Herr's DISPATCHES. When Michael Herr turned in the manuscript, no one at Knopf knew how to edit that hyped-up rock-and-roll language. Lee hovered in the hallway by Gottlieb's office, his face glowing. Gloria Emerson, the war correspondent, watched him and said, "Give it to that young man." DISPATCHES, a report of the war that poisoned our generation, was Lee's first big book. The war didn't leave him; one of the last books he published at Atheneum was ACHILLES IN VIETNAM.

DISPATCHES ends:

"I saw a picture of a North Vietnamese soldier sitting in the same spot on the Danang River where the press center had been, where we'd sat smoking and joking and going, 'Too much!' and 'Far out!' and 'Oh my God it gets so freaky out there!' He looked so unbelievably peaceful, I knew that somewhere that night and every night there'd be people sitting together over there talking about the bad old days of jubilee and that one of them would remember and say, Yes, never mind, there were some nice

ones, too. And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there."

In late 1988, soon after we married, we were at dinner with Carol Janeway, his old friend at Knopf, who is also a fine translator, and her husband Erwin Glickes (d. 1994), who directed The Free Press. They knew that Lee was looking to leave Knopf (when I first knew him he said he wished he could have a year off), and Erwin asked if he would like to consider coming to Atheneum. At the time, like The Free Press, Atheneum was an imprint at Maxwell-Macmillan. Lee said yes. When he started at Atheneum he told me that he expected to have five years there – not that he meant to stay just that long; it was a different sense of timing; and he was right, almost to the month. In January 1994, the new corporate owners decided that respected literary imprint should no longer exist (profits were said not to be high enough) and its editor would have no place in the new order. He persuaded them to let him publish his spring list. Atheneum ceased to exist on June 30, 1994. The last title he published, wonderfully, was John Hale's *THE CIVILIZATION OF EUROPE IN THE RENAISSANCE*. He had nearly another year: his year off. He listened to opera, read piles of books, watched movies, talked on the phone, went to lunch, napped in the afternoon. We traveled, and took walks. He didn't wake at three a.m. so often anymore.

He must have lived with his own death, which announced itself as he began at Knopf. A physical exam was required. He learned then that he had juvenile diabetes. It was an inexorable disease; ameliorated, not cured. He was a Stoic; he faced the shadow, without flinching, until the end.

One day – I think it was during the unsettling year before Atheneum was shut down – he and Thomas Pynchon were saying goodbye after lunching together, when Pynchon took him lightly, affectionately, by the lapels and half-growled, "Only publish good books!" Lee did not reply; perhaps feeling he did not have to. When, later, sturdily, I defended Pynchon's plea, he exclaimed, perhaps in despair, "That's easy for him to say."

A week or so before he died he had lunch with a younger editor whom he had befriended over the years. They talked about publishing and the state it had come to. Recalling the conversation, he look disturbed, almost hurt, then indignant. "He said I was cynical. But I'm not cynical: and you know why?" He tapped my knee, for emphasis. "Because I've never done anything for my own advantage."

He loved Chekhov's letters, though not the plays; many of the stories, however. A day or two after he died a piece of paper floated up; two passages on Knopf note paper, probably once scotch-taped to the wall above his typewriter.

Chekhov to a friend:

"In general, I am finding life tedious and, at times, I begin to hate it – something that never happened to me before. Lengthy, stupid conversations, guests, people asking me for favors, handouts of a ruble or two rubles, or three, having to pay cabbies for patients who don't give me a cent – in a word, everything is so balled up that one might as well run out of the house. People borrow money from me and don't pay it back, walk off with my books and don't consider my time of any value. The only thing lacking is an unrequited love."

Chekhov to S.N. Plescheyev, May 14, 1889:

"Write me a letter, my dear. I love your writing; when I see it, I grow cheerful. Besides, I shall not hide it from you, my correspondence with you flatters me. Your

letters and Suvorin's I treasure and shall bequeathe to my grandchildren: let the sons of bitches read them and know what went on in times long past."

***Books and Authors mentioned:***

Michael Herr, DISPATCHES  
 Isabel Allende, THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS; THE STORIES OF EVA LUNA  
 THE SELECTED LETTERS OF ANTON CHEKHOV, ed. Lillian Hellman  
 Machado de Assis, DOM CASMURRO; PHILOSOPHER OR DOG?;  
 EPITAPH OF A SMALL WINNER  
 Octavio Paz, THE LABYRINTH OF SOLITUDE  
 Cervantes, DON QUIXOTE  
 Thomas Pynchon, GRAVITY'S RAINBOW  
 David Thomson, WARREN BEATY AND DESERT EYES; SUSPECTS;  
 DICTIONARY OF FILM BIOGRAPHY  
 Lynne Tillman, BOOKSTORE  
 Jonathan Shay, MD, PhD, ACHILLES IN VIETNAM  
 John Hale, THE CIVILIZATION OF EUROPE IN THE RENAISSANCE

***Among the authors and translators edited by Lee Goerner:***

Isabel Allende, Max Apple, John Avedon, Cheryll Aimee Barron, Elizabeth Benedict, John Berger, William Betcher M.D., Anne Billson, James Bishop, Jr., Robert Olen Butler, James Campbell, Benjamin Cheever, James Colbert, Jim Crace, Robert Cullen, Kiana Davenport, Thulani Davis, Don DeLillo, James Dickenson, Ivan Doig, Sergei Dovlatov, Jennie Fields, Robert Fisk, Jonathan Freedman, Sarah Gaddis, William Gaddis, Gabriel García Márquez, James Preston Girard, Lesley Glaister, Laurel Goldman, Phyllis Grosskurth, Edith Grossman, Jay Gummerman, John Hale, Stephen Harrigan, Tommy Hays, Michael Herr, Linda Hogan, Andrew Hurley, Samuel Hynes, Charles Johnson, Lieve Joris, Helen Elaine Lee, Osman Lins, Hilary Mantel, Linda Hogan, Paule Marshall, Joseph McElroy, Tom Miller, Alanna Nash, John Nichols, Tom Nolan, Michael Ondaatje, Roberto Pazzi, Margaret Sayers Peden, Joan Perucho, Nélida Piñon, William Pollack M.D., Abel Posse, Reynolds Price, Ishmael Reed, Augusto Roa Bastos, Howard A. Rodman, Richard Schickel, Helen Schulman, Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., Richard Slotkin, Randall E. Stross, Elizabeth Tallent, David Thomson, Rose Tremain, João Ubaldo Ribeiro, Sebastiano Vassalli, Armando Valladares, Sara Vogan, Geoffrey Wheatcroft, Edmund White, Richard Wiley, Carter Wilson, David Winn, Larry Woiwode, Nancy Wood, Rudolph Wurlitzer

See also:

A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago* Vol. 1, No. 3  
 A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, Vol. 1, No. 4; Vol. 2, No. 1  
 A Conversation with William Strachan, Vol 2, No. 4  
 A Conversation with Samuel H. Vaughan, Vol. 3, No. 2  
 Books & Co. News at Turtle Point Press <<http://www.turtlepoint.com/booksco/booksco.html>>



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Vol. 4, No. 1 Spring 2000

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*Autobiography:* LARRY WOIWODE  
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*Testimony:* JAMES BROUGHTON  
from an Interview, and Afterward  
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*Essay:* SUSAN GARRETT  
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the Editor of Archipelago

*Endnotes:* On the Marionette Theater

*Recommended Reading:* Diane Johnson, Fae Myenne Ng  
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## A CONVERSATION WITH ODILE HELLIER

Proprietor of the Village Voice Bookshop

Paris

Katherine McNamara

*“If the bookseller has disappeared, and is only a salesperson, it means that there is no vision. It means that there is no knowledge. It means that, if you sell Gertrude Stein, you put Gertrude Stein at the same level as [John] Grisham: it makes no difference, a book is a product. Thus we have seen the leveling of the meaning of books.”*

*For three years I have been asking notable publishers and editors about the book business, its history, and the remarkable alteration we have seen in its structure. Generously, these persons have told me how they entered the trade; spoken about writers they’ve published and declined to publish; described the (changing) class structure of their domain; talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism; described their way of practicing responsible publishing. Without exception, they are serious readers, usually of more than one language. They recognize that times have changed. They speak with wary-friendly observation of the generations coming up. They speak from the old values and traditions of book-publishing.*

*But, once books are published, where do they go? To the bookshop? More likely, to the chain store: Barnes and Noble, Borders, Chapters; and to Amazon, the internet octopus.*

*Where are the small independent bookshops, where a thoughtful reader may browse at his leisure; where an insistent reader expects to find the new titles by her favorite authors? Where can any reader go, now, to inquire of a bookseller who knows his stock, indeed, who knows books at all? These booksellers and shops exist. Serious readers all know one or two of them. They prefer to buy their books there. They resist driving to a chain store, or ordering from Amazon, which tracks their purchases – even their movements – electronically and presumes (by computer) to know their taste. A conversation with an independent bookseller would, I thought, offer another insight into the chaotic business of books and why we all still need and want them.*

*Excerpts of these conversations about books and publishing will continue to appear regularly in Archipelago, and may serve as an opening into an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current corporate structure, reflecting on glories of its own, revealing what remains constant amid the flux. Despite their surround of gentility, these people are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared, and continue to be sold, a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.*

-KM

*See also:*

A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 3

A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, Vol. 1 No. 4 *and* Vol. 2, No. 1

A Conversation with William Strachan, Vol. 2, No. 4  
 A Conversation with Samuel H. Vaughan, Vol. 3, No. 2  
 Reminiscence: Lee Goerner (1947-1995), Vol. 3, No. 3  
 Institutional Memory (pdf)

### Odile Hellier, of the Village Voice Bookshop

In 1982, Odile Hellier opened the Village Voice to a city suddenly awake to the vitality and diversity of Anglo-American literature. Today, the Village Voice is ranked by *The Bookseller*, the British trade journal, as the best independent literary bookstore in Europe. In the intervening eighteen years, the world has changed; where better to reflect on it than amid Odile Hellier's well-stocked bookshelves?

The proprietor and her bookshop can be found on a small street off the rue du Four, in the glittering shopping district that the old literary neighborhood of St.-Germain has become. Still, she survives. Her shop is filled. On display tables are the new hard-cover titles from all the leading publishers, handsomely stacked, intelligently arranged. On the shelves, where her thoughtful hand has placed them, venerable paperbacks seem to talk to each other. They invite the browser into their conversation. Odile Hellier herself, slim, serious (until her face breaks into a warm smile), is always running. She greets you, leads you to the table of new books, puts into your hand a volume she thinks you'll want to see, then darts off to pick up the phone, speak with a book representative, answer a question, confer with a colleague. She races up and down the stairs; she shifts cartons (which are always arriving); she checks the computer; she replies to a fax. Her colleagues run in her wake.

In the early 1980s, Odile Hellier had returned to Paris after a decade spent in the States and, before that, graduate studies in the Soviet Union. Unwilling to work in the corporate world, vividly aware of the openness of American society, she realized that Paris needed the books and authors she knew were important. (She is considered by many writers and academics the best-read person in France of contemporary American and English literature.)

Odile and I are friends. I stay with her when I am in Paris. I spend hours in the Village Voice. I arrived there four and a half years ago, after my own life had changed, with an introduction from Sarah Gaddis, an American writer who had lived for some years in France. At once I was welcomed. Immediately began our long conversation, Odile's and mine, about books, and society, and life. When, the next year, I was organizing *Archipelago*, she only encouraged me, though she dislikes much about the internet. She agreed, despite her terrifically busy schedule, to become a contributing editor.

Recently, we talked over the course of an evening in January. It was an interesting moment. We had entered a new century; already, life was changing around us, in ways we wanted to chart. AOL had announced to an electrified media that it was going to buy Time Warner. The following week, the World Economic Forum would be convened in Davos, where the electronically-based "new economy" was to be the topic of conversation among world leaders of politics and business. (In the *International Herald Tribune* I would read that Yassir Arafat wanted first to meet Jeff Bezos!) Vodaphone, the British manufacturer of telephone hardware, was about to acquire Mannesman, the enormous German communications corporation, promising Europe an advance into e-commerce. Three months later, Steven King would surprise his publisher by offering a new novella only as an e-book. The 44-page story was

downloaded from the web in an immense number of copies, surprising his publisher even more. Thus was the direction of publishing changed; again. So everyone would say.

Meanwhile, the semi-annual *soldes*, the great sales, had just begun in Paris and London, and hordes of shoppers had brought traffic in St.-Germain to a halt. We sat in a quiet room surrounded by books. A bottle of wine was on the table. I asked Odile about the future of bookselling as she saw it.

### *Why she became a bookseller*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you tell about how you started the Village Voice Bookshop, and when? What was the circumstance that led you to become a bookseller?

ODILE HELLIER: It was only eighteen years ago, but it feels like yesterday. At the same time, it feels like half a century ago, because things have changed so much in the last twenty years. I started the Village Voice on returning to Paris after ten years in the States, which I called at the time an open society, with its variety, its diversity of cultures. Some of them I was just discovering: African-American politics, culture, and literature. Ralph Ellison, Baldwin, Richard Wright: these writers were an incredible discovery for me. Native Americans, who were beginning to make themselves heard; and – complement of the '70s – the feminist movement, which was then flourishing. All those fundamental books by women who were writing about their lives, the lives of our mothers' and grandmothers' generations, about their history, their oppression. But more important, these women were giving us the tools to think, live differently. They envisioned what could be the life of free, responsible women. How exciting it was!

There was a lot of humor, as well. It was a wonderful decade, in that respect. And so I came back to France, in '80, '81. I had been a translator in the States, in technical matters: oil things, political things, from English into French. Coming back to France, I found a job at an international corporation. But I was not yet forty, and I knew that such a sterile life was not for me.

I took many walks around Paris. In the course of one of these, visiting bookshops which carried English books, the idea came upon me. The shelves and the piles on the tables looked dull to me, and dusty. Where were all those books which had opened, stimulated, my mind? Where were all those books which revealed the vitality of a country which had been able to put a stop to the Vietnam War, a country where women were making deep inroads into all fields, political, social, professional, and so on; a country where the African-Americans – the Afro-Americans as we called them at the time – were revolutionizing the country? These were ebullient times. And so, the idea literally crashed upon me: "This is it! Why not open a bookshop?"

And also, I wanted to have a café. In Washington, D. C., there was a certain café-bookstore, and I found the combination very attractive.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Oh, yes: Kramerbooks – I remember it well.

ODILE HELLIER: And so I said, "Maybe a small café-bookshop would be nice." Unconsciously, what I was probably trying to do was to build a cultural bridge between those ten years in the States that formed me and my new life in France, a country that, by now, I hardly knew.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You had also spent time in the Soviet Union, hadn't you?

ODILE HELLIER: Right after college I had gone to the Soviet Union to complete my graduate studies. I had come back to France to teach Russian, but I could not wait

to get away. That was a decade during which I had traveled all over, on almost no money.

And also, deep, deep in my childhood is buried a story which involves books.

In September 1940, my father, an officer in the French Army, was in Strasbourg at the time of the invasion of the east of France by the German Army. He was made a prisoner. But before being taken away, he had been able to send a message to my mother: "Take the last train to Nancy." My mother left during the night. The house, the neighbors reported to my mother years later, was immediately taken over by some members of the German Army. But they were not too pleased by what they found in my father's library. They found the works of Karl Marx and a large portrait of Lyautey, who was a famous officer in the French Army and a figure my father certainly admired.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But that is almost a contradictory combination, Lyautey and Marx, isn't it?. General Lyauty was the head of the African administration of 'overseas France.\* He was – can one say it? – almost an enlightened colonialist. He also believed, in some way, not in self-determination – am I correct about this? – but in the voice of the local people; and yet, he turned to a policy of suppression.

ODILE HELLIER: He was a colonial administrator of liberal tendencies. At any rate, this is the story I heard in my childhood. Anyhow, Marx and Lyautey triggered the wrath of the new 'owners,' and they took all the books of my father's library out on the street and set them on fire. I was not born then, but this is a story which, together with all the atrocities of the war – my grandmother savagely killed by the Gestapo, and my father, who fought in the Resistance, killed as a member of the Resistance, by a mine – has stayed with me. Hence, maybe this attachment to books. I have those memories of myself dragging everywhere I went suitcases filled with books, from Moscow, England, Yugoslavia, England, the States.

With some distance, one could almost call it a manic behavior. Deep in myself, I do believe that it was my thirst for knowledge, and it is the need I still feel today, of partaking of the experience of the authors and their vision of the world. It may sound pretentious, but this is the truth, the way I feel.

Given what I have said, it is not difficult to understand why the idea of a bookshop was so appealing to me. Of course, there is a big gap between a seductive idea and the reality, especially since business is not something I had ever thought of doing. The idea of opening a shop never, ever crossed my mind. But somehow, a bookshop was not an ordinary shop. Books made the whole difference.

And, instead of being discouraged by people around me who said, "Are you crazy? What are you going to do?", everyone said, "This is perfect for you." I had incredible support from my family and from two friends. I started on a shoestring. And yet, it became a success. It was the first bookstore with a café in Paris. It looked very modern, high-tech at the time. My brother designed it. Today, it is difficult to imagine that this crowded space was high-tech, but it was, at one point!

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\* Louis-Hubert Lyautey 1854–1934, colonial administrator and marshal of France. Cf. André Maurois, *MARSHALL LYAUTEY*. Tr. Hamish Miles. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1931. Alan Scham, *LYAUTEY IN MOROCCO: Protectorate administration, 1912-1925*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970. Lyautey (Marshal Louis-Hubert-Gonzalve): *LETTRES DU TONKIN ET DU MADAGASCAR (1894-1899)*. Two volumes. Paris. William A. Hoisington, Jr., *LYAUTEY AND THE FRENCH CONQUEST OF MOROCCO*. New York: Macmillan /St.Martin's Press, (1995)

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The thing to say about your space is that it's filled, and filled, and filled, and filled. It's an astonishing range of books that you carry.

ODILE HELLIER: So, this is the way I started.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You had the café for several years?

ODILE HELLIER: For three years. But very quickly I could see that this was not something I enjoyed. People were coming for the coffee, for the vegetable dishes, the cappuccino, for my brownies, my carrot cake (*laughter*), but it was too much work. I was working at night, and crying at night, in the kitchen. I could see how I was being pushed by the accountant to develop that side of the business. There was no end to it. It was much, much too much work. And, above all, it was not why I had opened a bookshop.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In this *arrondissement* are great cafés: the Flore, where publishers go; Deux Magots; Lipp. There were great, old bookstores around the Place St.-Germain. La Hune, where I used to look at beautiful art books I couldn't afford. Le Divan. But now, La Hune has moved around the corner, Le Divan has moved – to the sixteenth! – and the old Le Drugstore, where I used to hang out, rather self-consciously, is now an Emporio Armani.

ODILE HELLIER: The *Sixième Arrondissement* was once a world of publishers' offices and bookshops. Now it has been taken over, almost entirely, by smart cafés and expensive boutiques. And they all look alike.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They do look alike: people, clothes, interiors. St.-Germain feels like South Kensington or Madison Avenue. It's for shopping.

### *The Village Voice*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: From the beginning your bookshop was called the Village Voice. You made an agreement with the newspaper in New York.

ODILE HELLIER: What happened was this: I called them up, and they checked into their bylaws to see if opening a bookshop in Europe was a problem. I called them back, and a woman, one of the lawyers, said: "We don't see any reason why you could not, as long as it is not a magazine."

The *Village Voice* people, right from the beginning, were very supportive. They came to Paris and brought me all kinds of little things from the paper, like the aprons. For a while, many people from *The Village Voice* would come to Paris to check on the Village Voice to see if everything was well and right. And from day one to this day, for the past eighteen or nineteen years, I have carried *The Village Voice* every single week.

Also, do not forget that this neighborhood is called *le village* St.-Germain, and so, there was already the image of the village.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And also, St.-Germain is, or was, at least, the center of publishing.

ODILE HELLIER: Yes, and so the name 'Village Voice' made sense for more than one reason. But it all sounds better in English than in French.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What were the first books you bought to sell in the store?

ODILE HELLIER: I remember that one of my first bestsellers was *THE WHITE HOTEL*, by D. M. Thomas. Another one which was really, really important to me at the time was [John Kennedy Toole's] *A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Who were your customers?

ODILE HELLIER: Something happened which I wasn't expecting, in '81, when Mitterrand came to power. With Mitterrand came a certain image of France. With Jack Lang, his Minister of Culture, came a certain idea, an image, of popular culture. On the one hand, because of the installation of a socialist government, the franc collapsed and the dollar went up. On the other hand, the novelty of the young and dynamic minister of culture attracted many young Americans to Paris. It was the last time they would be able to find inexpensive *chambres de bonne*, good food on a small budget, and small jobs on the sly. Good reasons for American youth to flock to Paris and imagine they were the new Hemingway or Henry Miller!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Or were Jean Seberg selling the *Herald-Tribune* in the streets.

ODILE HELLIER: Well, all these elements combined created an incredible vitality in Paris. Suddenly you had a flourishing of literary magazines. You had, at one point, six English-speaking literary magazines, and all of them were giving readings at the Village Voice: launching No. 1, launching No. 2 – every week, there was a launching at the Village Voice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It must have been thrilling, a '*bouillon de culture*.'

ODILE HELLIER: It wasn't that I was making a tremendous amount of money; no; but it was a place where things were happening. For instance, you see that huge painting I have in the staircase: that is the work of a famous Argentine painter in exile, Ricardo Mosner. He made the painting during a bilingual reading. The bookshop was packed; and yet, he had one wall, on which he was painting. This was given to the Village Voice – I just paid for materials – as long as it would not be moved out of the bookshop. It's been there now seventeen years, sixteen years, and it's still as vital. I cannot put it anywhere else, and I don't know an apartment with walls big enough to hold this, so it has to stay there!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I don't think there is a wall anywhere outside the Louvre big enough to hold that painting.

ODILE HELLIER: So, just to give you an idea. For instance, Ray Carver came several times. At the first reading he gave, in the room were Edmund White and Peter Taylor. Another time, he read with Richard Ford. It was an incredible *creuset*, a bowl where things get mixed; a crux.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Did the French come also?

ODILE HELLIER: The French came also: poets, translators, university professors, students and so on.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The '80s, then, at least the first half of the '80s, were a boom time.

ODILE HELLIER: American literature was at the pinnacle, and the Village Voice was where it was all staged.

### *Who were the writers?*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Who were the writers, then, whom you thought were important, and who were important, literarily.

ODILE HELLIER: Pynchon was extremely important. [Thomas] Pynchon was really at the center of all discussions.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Did he come to your store?

ODILE HELLIER: No. Never.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You're sure?

ODILE HELLIER: No. (*laughter*) People would have recognized him.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You think so?

ODILE HELLIER: [William] Gaddis was extremely important. We had the opportunity to have him twice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: He read?

ODILE HELLIER: Yes. To be more precise, he talked. It was a landmark event. The first time Mr. Gaddis ‘read’ at the Village Voice, he was introduced by one of the leading Americanists in France, Marc Chenetier. Marc Chenetier is a university professor who has written extensively on experimental American literature. Mr. Gaddis was on his way back from a trip to the Soviet Union, and he talked. He talked about everything touching literature – publishing, books versus ‘products’ (already!), commercial writing versus literature. His dry humor would send the audience into fits of laughter. The bookshop was filled with people, it was a memorable evening.

The second time he came, it was for the launching of the French edition of *CARPENTER’S GOTHIC*. It was an official event, co-organized with Ivan Nabokov [*director of foreign literature, Librarie Plon*], his publisher in France. What happened was that Ivan Nabokov organized a private reading of several chapters, by two famous French actors. One of them was Dominique Sanda, who was so beautiful. An interesting evening; but I certainly would have preferred a talk by Mr. Gaddis. He came by the Village Voice a few other times, once with a huge bouquet of flowers. I was touched by this. He also attended the launching of his daughter’s novel [*Sarah Gaddis, SWALLOW HARD*], which we celebrated at the Village Voice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I should mention that it was Sarah Gaddis who introduced me to you. I came to Paris after my husband [*Lee Goerner, former editor and publisher of Atheneum*] died. He had been her publisher.

ODILE HELLIER: She had lived in Paris while writing the book. And, as she read, it was obvious that he was a pleased and happy father.

Another person who was extremely important at the time was Ray Carver, whom I mentioned earlier. He gave two readings which could have converted the illiterate tough into a lover of literature. Richard Ford read, many times: his contribution, he would say, to “support the Village Voice.” We had Russell Banks. [Don] DeLillo came later on; DeLillo came in 1992.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That would have been for...

ODILE HELLIER: For MAO II. He read from MAO II; it was for the French edition.

Early in the ‘80s, just before he died, Julian Beck of the Living Theater, came. Michael Ondaatje read several times. The first night he read here, he had just published this little gem of a book, *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*; but he was hardly known. Through the grapevine the word went around, and people crowded in to hear him read. They immediately showed an immense enthusiasm for him.

Stephen Spender came. Mary McCarthy came to the reading by Stephen Spender, but did not read at the Village Voice because I was too shy to invite her to read. I remember that very well! Diane Johnson read. Many poets; the Language Poets; Michael Palmer, who is well known as a Language Poet. Someone who read, many times, was Robert Coover. Paul Auster came often to the Village Voice but never read, because each time he postponed it, until it was too late, because he was too famous. (*laughter*)

So, that gives you a little hint of what was happening. It was like a roller coaster. I am grateful to all of them, because there is no doubt in my mind that it was with their support that the Village Voice became what it is, a place with a certain aura. I am aware



of the marks that all those writers have left on the place. I am deeply aware that all those books in the shelves and the tables represent layers of thought, art, civilization. At times when I am depressed by all the paperwork, the bills, the cartons which get lost, the orders which do not arrive – all the complications that make up our days – I pause and look around and say to myself: “Take the longer view. All these books: they are what count.” And I can assure you that when I say ‘all these books,’ I do not mean ‘products,’ but magical objects which contain layers of civilization. What a treasure this is. Especially when in the relatively short life of the Village Voice so many writers who had read, not only once but even several times, have died, most of them young and at the height of their creativity. Ray Carver. Michael Dorris. Matt Cohen. Alan Jolis. Kathy Acker.

### *The next decade*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This, then, takes us through the ‘80s. When did that ebullience began to lessen?

ODILE HELLIER: I would say in ‘89-’90. There was the fall of the Berlin Wall. Suddenly, the central attraction was in the East, and Prague became *the* place. France was in the process of integrating itself into the European Economic Union. Life here wasn’t as inexpensive any more. Unemployment went up. American corporations opened branches and offices as never before. Disneyland sprang up and Paris was no longer the same. The crowd of young future potential Hemingways disappeared. (*laughter*) They all went to Prague. And they were replaced by the business suits.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When I first lived here, in the mid-‘70s, it was a different city than now; and when I came back for the first time after twenty years, I hardly recognized it. I had lived behind the Église St.-Germain-des-Prés. My old neighborhood was the village of St.-Germain, and at that time it was dark, it was sweetly grubby. (*laughter*) Not any more. Even your little street is different, shinier, than four and a half years ago, when I first came to the bookshop.

ODILE HELLIER: We started to see a different kind of clientele. Today, I would say that my clientele is the intellectual middle-class.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is that a large clientele? Is it shrinking? Is it changing in age?

ODILE HELLIER: It’s difficult to assess. We still have Americans, tourists, of course, but I feel that we get more people who are used to dealing with books: professors, writers. I would say that French people – again, professors, students, researchers, journalists, professionals – make up sixty percent of our business.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And, certainly, every writer who comes to Paris comes to you.

ODILE HELLIER: They come, yes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Whether they buy books is another question.

ODILE HELLIER: Often they do.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Nikki Gemmell [*who had given a reading the day before*] was buying books this morning that, she told me, she couldn’t get in England.

ODILE HELLIER: She bought a nice pile of books. Richard Ford buys books each time; so does Michael Ondaatje. And what I appreciate most is that they pretend they are buying books they had meant to buy, but could not find elsewhere. An elegant gesture on their part

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But it does feel that way. You have so many books there that I would have expected to find at Books & Co., in New York; but that bookstore is closed. If I see them in the *New York Review of Books* or the *London Review of Books*, I can ask my local bookseller to get them, but she wouldn't necessarily carry them in her shop. If I were closer to your bookshop, I would pay your rent with the books I would buy.

ODILE HELLIER: You know, this past year, more than any year before, a number of customers, mostly Americans, have come to us asking, "Who buys the books? How do you make your selection?" It is a compliment which warms my heart. I don't do anything special. I just do what other booksellers and buyers do: that is, read and make notes. For instance, this is Monday night. I will read the *New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, my *Publisher's Weekly*, the *London Review*, the *T[imes] L[iterary] S[upplement]*. Basically, each week I have five magazines, plus my [book company] representatives, plus the customers. The customers will always tell us, "You don't have this book, but I think you should have it, this would be interesting for you," and immediately we react. I know that the customers who appreciate our selection are the ones who share the same interests as we do.

I also get from customers acrimonious remarks: How is it that we do not have a better selection of comics, science fiction, et cetera? One cannot, given the space we have, and the means, make everyone happy. One of my criteria is that I and my colleagues should love the books we sell. New books arrive every day, and every day we feel an incredible appetite for all the new releases we display on the tables.

### *Writers of the last decade*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Turning back to America and England during the '90s, I wonder what writers – how can I put it? – what writers do you read with renewed pleasure; do you find your customers wanting to read? Who are writers whom you think have added something to literature?

ODILE HELLIER: Don DeLillo comes to mind. Russell Banks comes to mind. Gaddis, definitely. Ondaatje, who is not American but Canadian: Ondaatje is read all the time. Now, Hemingway is selling again. [Saul] Bellow, [Philip] Roth: it's incredible, how they sell. Roth – the last three novels he wrote are a marvel. I would say that people like D. H. Lawrence are in a phase where they are not much read; Malcolm Lowry, not much read.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I always thought that UNDER THE VOLCANO was one of the four or five American books of the century; but it went out of print!

ODILE HELLIER: I know that it's going to be back in print. But to me it's inconceivable that, simultaneously, it is out of print in both England and the United States. [*It is being republished in April 2000 by HarperPerennial.*]

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What English writers do you pay attention to? And what writers who are not English but who write in British English.

ODILE HELLIER: [Salman] Rushdie is one of the top authors. We sell many books by Hanif Kureishi: he is very, very popular in France.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What younger writers, would you say are notable; or, if not younger writers, those whose star rose in the '90s?

ODILE HELLIER: I would phrase it differently. I could, for instance, speak about books which were important to me in the past years. They are very eclectic. I would say

that FUGITIVE PIECES, by Anne Michaels, was very close to me. THE UNTOUCHABLE, by John Banville, struck me deeply.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Indeed. It's an astonishing book, isn't it? The bravery of that writer assuming the voice of a character so unlike himself, even a sort of enemy.

ODILE HELLIER: TOO LOUD A SOLITUDE, by [Bohumil] Hrabal, is a book that is necessary for me. It's a metaphorical book, about a kind of Kafka-esque character who works in a factory where books are being burned.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Oh, that's an extraordinary book. His spirit, grave and ironic. The irony of the compassionate man who knows the world is a vale of tears.

ODILE HELLIER: Another one which is a very strong book, is by the Australian writer David Malouf book, AN IMAGINARY LIFE. THE HOURS, by Michael Cunningham, was dear to me.

Another book, in a totally different spirit, is by Mordechai Richler: BARNEY'S VERSION; a very good book. Of course, to me, this year the important writer would be [J. M.] Coetzee.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: DISGRACE.

ODILE HELLIER: DISGRACE: And all of Coetzee. He ranks very high.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I read DISGRACE a few months ago. It doesn't go away. As I recede from it, it grows – not so much solid: it's too *bony* to be 'solid' – it grows and becomes indestructible in memory.

ODILE HELLIER: It means that it is part of your life. And this is what I mean by books that change your life: they become part of your mental make-up...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Your mental landscape. Your nourishment.

ODILE HELLIER: For the past fifteen years I have been saying that I would like to add more space. Now, I feel that my strong point is selecting, as much as I can, and having fewer titles: but titles I believe in. Over the years we have, I would say, created a sort of 'Village Voice list' of books we love and which we try to keep in stock. Some of these, besides those we've mentioned: Cyril Connolly's THE UNQUIET GRAVE, David Malouf's AN IMAGINARY LIFE, Coetzee's WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS, Ondaatje's RUNNING IN THE FAMILY, and, of course, Hrabal's TOO LOUD A SOLITUDE.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Perhaps you haven't fewer titles than before – I don't know – but they are strong. On every shelf – on every shelf! – I can find five books I would like to have and read.

ODILE HELLIER: It's the same with me. But where is the time to read as much as we would like? I easily spend twelve hours a day in the bookshop, and there is all the professional press to read. The work is endless. I manage to read an average of two books a week, and my colleagues the same. But by the time we have read and fallen in love with a book, the fashion has already died away. THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW, by Washington Irving, is an example. There was a movie based on it [*"The Headless Horseman," directed by Tim Burton*]. The book sold very well – for two weeks. The movie is over, the book is dead.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But do you ever find that your customers seek unheralded or nearly-forgotten writers? Writers re-discovered without advertising?

ODILE HELLIER: There are book addicts. There are not many, but they still exist. I can find them books; they do not have to leave with empty hands. But it is a question of drawing on classics, of drawing on older books. For instance, recently we have been selling a lot of Malaparte.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Malaparte? How unexpected. I know the name of this author, but ...

ODILE HELLIER: Yes, Malaparte. *CAPUT* and *THE SKIN*: we reorder them every week.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I don't know his work. Do you have any idea why this is happening?

ODILE HELLIER: Well, he's a rediscovered writer, a writer who was forgotten, a little bit. He is a writer of the First World War. He describes the war in Italy. He is raw, violent, very strong.

### *The rules of commerce*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Let us talk now about the structure of your profession and how it is changing. You are the proprietor of the best independent bookstore in Europe selling English and American books, according to *The Bookseller*, the British trade journal. We are in a new century; there is reason for optimism; and yet, you've told me over the last year or so that you aren't entirely optimistic about the future of bookselling. Would you speak of that?

ODILE HELLIER: This is a question which covers many different aspects of bookselling. I will start with the obvious: that many independent bookstores have disappeared in the States, are disappearing a little bit everywhere in the world at an alarming rate.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Even in France?

ODILE HELLIER: In France, booksellers are still relatively protected. But for how long? Under the *Loi Lang*, a law that was passed in 1981, in the first year of Mitterrand's government – it was named for Jack Lang, his minister of culture – books could not be discounted more than five percent. This allowed every bookseller – chains such as Fnac and independents, alike – to have theoretically equal chances. I stress the word 'theoretically,' for the situation is much more complex.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How so? You import books, you don't sell French titles.

ODILE HELLIER: For booksellers like me, those who import books, the law is full of arcane twists and loopholes. In theory, once I have put a price on my books, I cannot discount it as I wish. For example, a few years ago, I was selling English textbooks to a French university, with a ten percent discount offered to the students, just on the day I was there. A local bookseller, although he did not sell English books, as I did, used the *Loi Lang* to start a lawsuit against me. He tried, without success, to take that business from me! Yet, at the same time, given the competition in the field, importers of English books practice all kinds of discounts. Because of this, a university professor came one day to announce loudly to me that I would never get his business, since he was getting a twenty-five percent discount from one of my competitors.

Now, since it is the importer who sets his own prices, we have to define what it is we chop ten percent, twenty-five percent, off of. There was a time, not so long ago, when the exchange rates practiced by some importers were so outrageously high that they could very well afford to give a twenty-five percent discount. I tried to explain to this professor that it is the *importer* who fixes the price, and that this importer, my competitor, may have used a different rate of exchange – multiplying, for example, every dollar of the cover price by ten, instead of seven or eight, francs to cover transportation and VAT. You see, he was discounting from a higher selling price, to begin with. But the only thing our loud teacher could grasp was whether the discount he received would be five, twenty, or twenty-five percent. So, as you can see, for

importers the *Loi Lang* is far more complex. But as far as French booksellers are concerned, this *loi du prix fixe* has been very positive.

Now, to come back to the question of optimism, or pessimism: two recent events have badly shaken the foundations of the French system. The first is the death in England a few years ago of the Net Book Agreement,\* a real Trojan Horse on the European landscape of bookselling. With its end, the fixed price disappeared, opening the gates to the installation of giant American discount stores, with all the consequences that we know. And the second is the spread of electronic commerce.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Ah, we are in new territory.

ODILE HELLIER: Now, don't get me wrong: business is business, capitalism is capitalism. If you are going to be in business, you know that you will be confronted by competition, and you accept the risks.

However, until the emergence of what is called the 'new economy,' which includes e-commerce, the rules of commerce were the same for everyone, except – oops, what comes to mind is the Mafia, which was involved in big business and never bothered to abide by the rules. But at least we can say that, officially, on the surface at least, they were not part of mainstream business.

Basically, it used to be that, if you bought goods and resold them, you had to make a profit and pay taxes, which are of three kinds: a local tax which is the equivalent of the European VAT, the value-added tax; a tax on profit; and taxes on labor, for social security. In France, the great majority of people still wish to benefit – each individually – from the various tax-funded public institutions, such as for those for education and public health, or, for retirement, their pensions. But now, the novelty of e-commerce is that this new form of doing business gets around the necessity of paying those taxes, while traditional commerce continues to pay them. As we say, *Deux poids deux mesures*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You're speaking of Amazon now.

ODILE HELLIER: I'm speaking of any kind of business. All books bought on the internet are exonerated from the VAT, which represents for the buyer some sort of discount. In a bookshop, he would have to pay that VAT as part of the price of the book, and each month, by the nineteenth, the French bookseller must pay *le Fisc*, the Internal Revenue, five and a half percent of all his previous month's turnover. Given the ruthless competition which is going on because of the huge discounts granted on the internet, we often do not include in our selling price the five and a half percent VAT, but still we have to pay it. In other words, we can say that the VAT reduces our margin and is yet another drain on our cash flow – a tax the e-commerce ventures do not have to bother about.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And, your tax burden is quite a large percentage of your gross income.

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\* "The net book agreement prevented English booksellers from discounting the price of new books; it collapsed in September 1995, when several large publishers and a major book retailer withdrew from the agreement; other publishers soon followed. In 1997, suit was brought by the government's Office of Fair Trading to abolish the agreement, as it was now ineffective. A defense of the agreement was mounted by a number of publishing and literary figures, including John Calder. In the meantime, Waterstone's and Dillon's, the two largest booksellers, have launched web sites; a British-based on-line bookstore now exists, as well as Amazon, the US-based on-line book service. The British sites will also offer books published in the US, before they appear in England. In 1996, 101,504 new titles (including 9,209 new works of fiction) were reported to have been published in Britain, compared to 95,064 in 1995." – see "A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago* Vol. 1, No. 3.

ODILE HELLIER: It is. Plus the fact that, in France, we have to pay those huge taxes on labor, which explains the high unemployment rate here. It is between ten and eleven percent of the population. Of course, there is tax on profit, but it is not as huge as tax on labor. And the third element is, as I've said, the VAT.

But this VAT business is only the tip of the iceberg. E-commerce, and also the superstores, practice discounting on a scale unheard of before. What business practices do those discounts reveal? We are speaking, of course, of discounts on new books, new releases, which can vary from fifteen to fifty percent! Either, publishers grant those giant ventures huge discounts, or, those ventures do not make a profit. If publishers do in effect grant huge discounts to those ventures, then their practices are unfair toward independent booksellers, and they are, in the end, responsible for the chaos which has turned the bookselling business upside down.

If it is not the case, then it means that the ventures are selling at a loss. And if they sell at a loss, they are not going to pay taxes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Because you pay taxes on your profit. And, depending on how your form of incorporation is structured, you must make a profit, at least where I live, to be considered a legal corporation.

ODILE HELLIER: As I said earlier, one of the tenets of commerce is that you make a profit. How is it then that, year after year, e-ventures show losses – and the greater the losses, the stronger they are on the stock market? All this, of course, is new: the 'new economy,' the economists call it, and it is detrimental to independent and traditional businesses.

For us booksellers, what it comes down to is that the rules of commerce have radically changed over the past few years. In the past, the rules set the framework within which we all could practice a profession we had embraced out of our love for books and knowledge. Today, traditional business continues to be taxed, while e-commerce escapes all of it. You can now be a capitalist and possess no capital, make zero profit, and still continue in business and be universally admired! The market has become a jungle where bullying is the code of behavior, leaving hardly any place to books – I am speaking of real books, not 'products' – and even less to book-lovers.

### *Poor publishing; poor bookselling*

ODILE HELLIER: I would also say that two other elements come to my mind. One is that publishing of good books is becoming very poor, I feel.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How do you mean, poor?

ODILE HELLIER: Poor in the sense that the range, the diversity, the quality of books are shrinking. You know that, if a book is working well, suddenly you are going to see seven books on the same subject, from seven different publishers. They are commissioned books. They are not books created by inspiration, springing from the soul of an author. I see a huge deterioration in the quality of the content of books. I would not say in the quality of the form, because so many people attend writing seminars and schools that, in fact, people write very well these days. But inspiration: where is it? Where are the books to get passionate about? They are rare. They are few and rare.

But they are there, you know, they are there. But in comparison with the huge heaps of books being published—. When I go through all these catalogs with representatives, of course I may find a pearl. But how many such pearls are there? This

is my work, the work which I feel is extremely important for me to do: to get the pearls out of the heaps.

This is where I feel that my optimism comes into play. The heaps are going to be everywhere. The thousands of titles are going to be there, on the internet, in the big bookstores, and so on. But: the selection has a *raison d'être*, a reason for being, and only a bookseller can do it. Not a salesman: not a salesgirl: a bookseller. And it is true that the business is becoming like any other business. You have products and you have salespersons....

KATHERINE McNAMARA: ...instead of a bookseller.

ODILE HELLIER: Instead of a bookseller. And that is my second point. That is, a bookseller is someone who has learned a little bit about books, who has read a lot, but also, who has a certain mind, a certain taste. You have as many selections as you have booksellers, and this is what makes it interesting. In the past, you would go to a certain bookseller, or a certain bookshop, because you would know what kind of selection you would find there. It is the variety of selection through the prism, through the mind, through the knowledge of that bookseller which is interesting. And this is disappearing.

### *It's no fun anymore to look at book catalogs*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I've heard other booksellers – independent booksellers – say that it's no fun anymore to look at book catalogs.

ODILE HELLIER: It's not simply 'no fun,' it's often embarrassing. Representatives make the effort of coming to visit us. They come from afar, from the U. S., the U. K., Germany, the Netherlands, and, obviously, they come to sell us books. We open the catalogues, and with dread we turn page after page of drivel. Recently, in an article in *Le Monde*, André Schiffren [*formerly the publisher of Pantheon; now of The New Press, a non-profit house*], observed that, reading through the seasonal catalogues of the three major U. S. publishing corporations – Random House, which is really Bertelsmann, Simon & Schuster, and HarperCollins – out of five hundred titles, there was not one French translation, not one serious book of history, not one serious scientific investigation, and no philosophy or theology. All these are subjects which used to be the core of publishing. And I can only agree with him. There are still very good books, of course, but although they may be published, they are not visible even to a bookseller. They get lost in the slush of books which repeat *ad infinitum* the themes of a handful of bestsellers. How utterly boring!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You buy a great number of books from smaller trade and independent publishers.

ODILE HELLIER: The problem with small-press books is that they do not always get reviewed in the media, and therefore the public is not aware of them. Now, it used to be that the role of the bookseller was to bring the books to the reader. It still is. But the power of the media is such that the public tends to trust the review they have read in *The New York Times*, the *Herald Tribune*, or in one of the weeklies, and not so much the personal taste or recommendation of the bookseller. Now, that being said, I have wonderful stories to tell about readers who thank us profusely for bringing into their lives a book or a writer. This is how it should be.

### *Quality v. entertainment, and return on investment*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you think the number, of good, or interesting, or necessary books is smaller than it used to be? Or does it just seem smaller in comparison to this flood of sort of mass-sensibility or entertainment books?

ODILE HELLIER: It is difficult to say. Good books continue to be published; otherwise, we would not have the selection we have. However, they are lost in the clutter of hundreds of titles which I will compare with the kind of food which fills you up but does not nourish your body. I will even go further and say: which slowly but surely poisons your system. Likewise with books: hundreds and hundreds of them read very much like magazines at best, tabloids at worst. What counts is not the expansion of the mind, but ‘entertainment,’ the sacred word.

And as everyone tells us, this is what people want: entertainment. What we are not told is that it is easier to sell a few titles, made into bestsellers, from which the publisher gets a high return on investment, than to publish a wide variety of books, whose return on investment will average a mere four or five percent, the regular rate in the trade.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When I’ve spoken about this with publishers in this series of conversations, they have all said to me quite definitely that book publishing is by its nature a business in which you cannot expect a high rate of return on investment; and, if you need such a return, you had better not own a publishing company.

ODILE HELLIER: The fifteen, sixteen percent return on investment set as a standard by the book industry is totally unreal. In the process, it is killing the trade as we’ve known it. According to André Schiffren, in the article I mentioned, the German publisher Klaus Wagenbach divines the fifteen percent level of return on investment as the *todeszon*, the death-zone, where no publishing of value can survive. This same publisher was quoting Hans Magnus Enzenberger as saying that over the past forty years he has not found in the Bertelsmann catalogs a single title that would last.

This economic pressure of raising at all costs the level of profitability has affected everyone involved. For the independent publisher who is either pushed out of business, or is bought up and cannot, within his ‘own’ house, exercise his intelligence, his discrimination, his taste, and has to publish according to criteria which have nothing to do with excellence, but which have to fit the economic plan of the corporation. For the editor who becomes a simple cog in the machine. For the writer who will not be considered unless his book will sell well enough to reach the magical mark of fifteen percent profitability. To sell in huge quantities, a book has to be scandalous, one way or another: horror, sex, violence, personal horrifying stories. And – or – the writer has to have a saleable face or body, something in his look which will appeal to the viewer’s thirst for glamour; or, the opposite, something outrageous, weird, shocking, ugly.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, so often it does seem that way. But let me point out the unexpected successes of several books in the last few years. Dava Sobel’s nice little *LONGITUDE*, which is non-fiction. The novels *SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS*, by David Guterson, and *COLD MOUNTAIN*, by Charles Frazier. Ondaatje’s *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*. It was booksellers who sold these books, we’re told. Their success took their publishers, or at least, the marketers, by surprise. On the other hand, I know of a novel by a well-known, respected writer – and it can’t be the only one this has happened to – which was practically killed by a bad review in *The New York Times*, because Barnes & Noble immediately cut back their orders and returned the books they had in stock. The writer, who was shocked, said to me, “What is the life of a book – two weeks?”



ODILE HELLIER: It seems that the first two weeks are vital for a book. In the past, I used to order new releases in relatively small quantities. I preferred to re-order rather than have huge stocks sitting in the bookshop. But several times, when I re-ordered a book immediately, I would get in reply an O/S, Out of Stock, or R/U, Reprint Under Consideration. How could this be possible? There must be a mistake. Finally, I understood what was happening. I was told the story by an insider in the trade. The print-run is based on the figure given by the pre-orders. Once the book is published, the copies are dispatched to the selling points, and the lion's share goes to the chains and wholesalers.

Just this week, I sent an express order for a certain title which got lost in transit. I was told two weeks *exactly* after the publication of the book, and one week after the book made the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, that the publisher did not have a single copy left, and there was no reprint in view. I could only get it from a wholesaler. – Yet, after a certain length of time, many, many copies – the returns – will flood back into the publisher's warehouse. But in the meantime, bookshops like mine cannot obtain the book from the publishers they work with.

Yet the credit departments are never slow to claim your payments. One moment past the last day of the month, and their computers send you threats. When we ask them to apply the same efficiency to shipping books on time, they reply dryly, "Not our responsibility."

Another thing that is worrisome is that many authors are not published anymore, many voices are unheard, because they do not conform to the criteria I listed. Many are the believers in the miracles of the world wide web who reply: The answer is on the internet! Very well. An internet magazine like this one is a feast. But how, across the internet, is one going to sort out what is good, and what is mediocre? One can imagine hours and hours being spent surfing over the waves looking for the right text. What I do know is that quite a few failed writers have succeed in being published on the internet, and now pretend to be published writers!

That reminds me of a wonderful quote about Auden, which fits perfectly here in our discussion. I found it in Shirley Hazzard's memoir about Graham Green on Capri. [*She goes to find the book.*] Here it is:

Shirley Hazzard writes: "Creative writing, which, alone among the arts, seems delusively accessible to every articulate person, has immemorially attracted that confusion of esteem and envy, centered on the independence in which it is conceived and composed: a mystery of originality that never loses fascination for the onlooker, in W. H. Auden's view.

"This fascination is not due to the nature of art itself, but to the way in which an artist works; he, and in our age almost nobody else, is his own master. The idea of being one's own master appeals to most human beings, and this is apt to lead to the fantastic hope that the capacity for artistic creation is universal, something nearly all human beings, by virtue not of some special talent, but of their humanity, could do if they tried."

Could we not say this is a perfect definition of one reason why the internet is such a success? The illusion that, if you are writing something on a screen, you might be read by millions of potential readers and become visible? One of the roles of the editor, and of the bookseller, likewise, was to sift through the pebbles and give the gem to the reader. Now, anything goes, and everything is equal: equally good, equally bad. It does not matter, since all tastes are equal. The internet – the great equalizer!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Ah. Well. In principle, I don't disagree with you. I've heard would-be writers speak this way. They are hungry for – what? That connection? They want to appear in print, on paper, and are denied that chance. A friend of mine who is a publisher called the matter of being published a “lottery.”

But I know, equally, that the internet was invented to allow for fast, direct communication among scholars, especially scientists, who needed to see each other's work without having to wait for publication, because discovery came so fast. I know, also, that much interesting, specialized work is available at particular places on the web. I speak of the noncommercial sector of the web. And I know, very well, that serious publishing is serious publishing, no matter the medium used. For myself, I was so dismayed by the state of book publishing, and by its brutal treatment of so many serious writers, that I wanted to act. When an editor suggested to me that I put my incipient journal, in which I meant to publish ‘shadow’ literature, the kind of writing that was being turned down in New York, on the world wide web, I thought: There are serious readers everywhere in the world. If I can put literature on the internet, they will find it. That has been true, I would say.

But, I admit, I spend as little time on the web as possible. I tend to go only to sites recommended by people whose taste I like. I see it as a means of distribution, and it serves me well. But I know that – because it is amorphous – it allows anybody to post anything they want, and claim ‘millions of readers.’ Whether this is true or not remains to be seen.

ODILE HELLIER: I would say that, with the spreading of the chains, and the fast development of e-commerce, a page has definitely been turned in the book trade, and it will never be the same. Yet, the last word has not been said.

[*In early March, about six weeks after this conversation, Steven King's novella RIDING THE BULLET was published as an e-book exclusively on the web. More than 500,000 copies were reported to have been downloaded. It was reported, as well, that the sales of e-books by other writers and publishers rose accordingly.*]

### *The bookseller, the publishing industry, and the book as product*

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You spoke earlier of what you thought a bookseller was: a person whose taste, intelligence, immersion in certain kinds of books makes her shop, his shop, its own place. How has the role – or, perhaps better, the *treatment* – of the bookseller changed, especially in the '90s?

ODILE HELLIER: It changed the moment the book became a product, no different from any kind of other products. It was then that publishing *business* became the publishing *industry*.

And now we go back to the negative point of Amazon: a book at Amazon is just a product. Amazon was not created for the sake of books. It was created because the book was a product saleable and marketable on the internet. There was a market survey done, and the book came first on the list as the ideal product to be sold on the web. So, it's not sold because it's a book.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But because it's a portable product. The book was already a 'product' before Amazon came along, however.

ODILE HELLIER: Yes, it was. But it was certainly not as much a product as now.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When did that happen, do you think?

ODILE HELLIER: I would say, in the past five years. Book publishing is an industry, like Hollywood. The bookseller has become the salesperson.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Ah. And that, also, in the last five years?

ODILE HELLIER: In the last three years. The bookseller is not perceived as someone special. We have requests all the time from people who want to work as salespersons. I get c.v.s from people who have never read a book!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So many of us have gone into these chain stores where the salespeople have never read books, they don't know books.

ODILE HELLIER: Yes, but this is part of the industry. I speak about Amazon, but the chains have absolutely helped this process to accelerate. If the bookseller has disappeared, and is only a salesperson, it means that there is no vision. It means that there is no knowledge. It means that, if you sell Gertrude Stein, you put Gertrude Stein at the same level as [John] Grisham: it makes no difference, a book is a product. Thus we have seen the leveling of the meaning of books. There is no difference between *this* and *that*. Of course, if you want to make money, you are not going to carry Gertrude Stein, you are going to carry Grisham, because then, what counts are the figures. The product dictates the figures, and the figures are Number One, now. It's an industry, you are a salesperson, and you have a product. So, you have not only the content of the book to take into account, if you are in the business, but you have the figures, also, to take into account.

So, figures are primary. A representative comes to us. First, before starting to discuss and be shown books, we are shown the figures over the past few years. A book is presented to us *based on the money which is going to be involved in the promotion of the book*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, I see them announced that way in *Publisher's Weekly*, also.

ODILE HELLIER: So much money is going to be put into the promotion of the book *because* the advance was so much. You have to recoup the money. So, you are not going to promote a book when you have paid nothing to the young girl who wrote it. You have to recoup the money when you have paid \$17 million to, to—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: —to Grisham or Tom Wolfe or Steven King—

ODILE HELLIER: Exactly.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I noticed you had some paperbacks by Steven King. I didn't notice if you had any John Grisham.

ODILE HELLIER: Oh yes, I do, of course.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you have the new book? How does it sell in comparison to others?

ODILE HELLIER: Of course. Usually I take a few copies of Grisham in hardcover, because I know that I will sell a few copies.

But let us go back to figures. Either the bookseller disappears altogether, because he is not recognized, because he is like any other salesperson; *or*, with dinosaurs like me, you still believe in how a book can change a life. And for me, I know that my life would have been different, and much sadder, a life of greater solitude, if I had not had books to talk to me, change with me, to nourish me. And I know other people like me, because so many readers have sent me letters, or have called me, and said, "I thank you so much for the book you gave me to read. You cannot imagine how important it was."

I think, also, of what William Gass said. He said, All the books you see are the thoughts of people who have lived. They contain the experience of people who have lived. They contain their thinking, their beliefs. And when you have shelves of books, like in the bookstore, like in the library, like in the house where there are books, they are not just books, but layers of civilization. Thought is there. Life is there. How is it

possible to imagine a book as just a piece of entertainment to spend eight hours with on a plane? That way of thinking can exist, but it cannot be the only way.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This week, AOL announced that it is going to buy Time Warner. Their intended conglomeration has caused huge reverberation on both sides of the Atlantic. I want to read to you something rather terrifying in today's *Herald Tribune*. This is from an editorial column by Jeremy Rifkin.

ODILE HELLIER: Jeremy Rifkin wrote *AGE OF ACCESS*, the book I mentioned to you several days ago.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: The headline is "The New Capitalism Is About Turning Culture into Commerce." Here is what he says:

A great transformation is occurring in the nature of capitalism. After hundreds of years of converting physical resources into goods, the primary means of generating wealth now involves transforming cultural resources into paid-for personal experiences and entertainments.

The announcement of the merger between America On-line and Time Warner [*in fact, America On-Line bought Time-Warner, which is another story altogether – KM*] underscores the shift to a new form of hypercapitalism based on commodifying human time.

AOL-Time Warner, Disney, Viacom and Sony Corp. are not just media companies. They are global arbiters of access to a vast array of cultural experiences, including global travel and tourism, theme cities and parks, destination entertainment centers, wellness, fashion and cuisine, professional sports and games, music, film, television, book publishing and magazines.

The capitalist journey is ending with the commodification of human culture itself.

....

By controlling the pipelines that people use to communicate with one another, as well as shaping much of the cultural content that is filmed, broadcast on television or sent over the internet, companies like AOL-Time Warner are able to affect the experiences of people everywhere. There is no precedent in history for this kind of overarching control of human communication.

Social critics are beginning to ask what will happen to the rich cultural diversity that makes up the ecology of human existence. When a handful of information, entertainment and telecommunications companies control much of the cultural content that makes up our daily lives.... (*IHT*, January 17, 2000)

ODILE HELLIER: Yes. I am aware of that. I am aware of it every single day, and that is why I want to fight. I want to be there, to survive there: not just for my own sake, but because I believe in a life of books. Small places like mine, like the Village Voice, can be a pocket – not of the past, but of the future. If we, because of a certain knowledge, experience, vision – and I would say 'vision' is the essential word – can survive, I feel there might be a resurgence of the humane person we envision. I know that there is still a certain kind of person who is going to need the book, not to be entertained by it, but to live with it. I believe there will still be those readers who thank us for having found them the book which made a difference in their lives at that moment. It seems to me that this vision can co-exist with that other, in which all cultural life is processed.

What I have said may sound elitist, in a way, but not because of social background or money. If I sound this way, it is because of reflection. If I have become 'elitist,' I have a certain right, because I work to get there. I work to have the right to think as I think, and not to think in the processed way controlled by the entertainment companies which Jeremy Rifkin writes about.

This is what *THE RESURGENCE OF THE REAL*, by Charlene Spretnak, deals with. The Rifkin book, also, is strong. Richard Sennett's *THE CORROSION OF CHARACTER*, about the effect of the new kind of work on us, is very good. Many people are trying to think differently. Of course, it's not because they are trying to think differently that they are going to change the course of history. The course of history is AOL and Time Warner, it's Amazon, it's definitely the internet. But the human mind may also rebel against this. The human mind is, in the end, what is stronger.

The next two or three years are going to be difficult. But, I feel, people will become tired of consumerism. It seems to me that they are going to look for something different. And that's why small 'pockets' like mine don't have to be huge, but they have to exist, and to continue to exist. The future of the literary, convivial, neighborhood bookshops may still be rosy. As the owner of such a bookshop, I can only hope for the best.

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*Authors and (selected) books of the time, mentioned in the conversation:*

Kathy Acker, *BLOOD AND GUTS IN HIGH SCHOOL; DISORDERLY CONDUCT; DON QUIXOTE:*  
 Which was a Dream; *EMPIRE OF THE SENSES; IN MEMORIAM TO IDENTITY*  
 Paul Auster, *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY; HUNGER; INVENTION OF SOLITUDE*  
 James Baldwin, *GIOVANNI'S ROOM; THE FIRE NEXT TIME; NOTES OF A NATIVE SON*  
 Russell Banks, *CLOUDSPLITTER; CONTINENTAL DRIFT; THE SWEET HEREAFTER*  
 John Banville, *THE UNTOUCHABLE; ATHENA; GHOSTS*  
 Saul Bellow, *HENDERSON THE RAIN KING; HUMBOLDT'S GIFT; THE DEAN'S DECEMBER*  
 J.M. Coetzee, *DISGRACE; WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS; FOE*  
 Raymond Carver, *WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE; CATHEDRAL; ELEPHANT*  
 Marc Chenetier (tr.), *RICHARD BRAUTIGAN; BEYOND SUSPICION: NEW AMERICAN FICTION*  
 SINCE 1960  
 Matt Cohen, *COLORS OF WAR; ELIZABETH AND AFTER; FLOWERS OF DARKNESS; FREUD:*  
 the Paris Notebooks; *THE BOOKSELLER*  
 Robert Coover, *PRICKSONGS AND DESCANTS; A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES; BRIAR ROSE*  
 Michael Cunningham, *THE HOURS; A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD; FLESH AND BLOOD*  
 Don DeLillo, *WHITE NOISE; UNDERWORLD; LIBRA; RUNNING DOG; MAO II*  
 Michael Dorris, *CLOUD CHAMBER, A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER,*  
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