

Only Yesterday

My 45 Years in Publishing

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HENRY JAMES, in “The Aspern Papers,” famously dismissed publishers as scoundrels. It is hard to know just how, or how seriously, one is to take that condemnation, for it is spoken by a character in the story who has been provoked by an unscrupulous would-be biographer rifling through papers on a desk. James was a very private person—he made bonfires of his personal correspondence before his death—and perhaps his beef was with people prying into matters that are none of their business. I certainly agree with him on that point, but I tremble to think what he would have made of the *News of the World* scandal, in which a dead girl’s cell phone was hacked for the titillation of Rupert Murdoch’s readers and a bulge in his bottom line. “A cell what?” asks Henry James. Later, we’ll get to that later.

Thinking about the difference in manners and technologies between the present and the time in which Henry James lived makes me feel a good deal older than I actually am. Let me describe for you what it was like to go to work in 1969 at the publishing firm of W. W. Norton & Company, and you’ll see what I mean. Looking back, it feels almost as if I were in the room when Johannes Gutenberg had his eureka moment.*

The date of my employment, I believe, was December 1, and I had recently returned from two years of teaching English in the Peace Corps in Cameroon, West Africa. Prior to that I had spent a couple of years at Pembroke College, Cambridge, where I studied Anglo-Saxon and read a great many books, burnishing a

*Although my assignment for this piece was to write about changes in the publishing world during my time in it, I am not well equipped for that task. I am neither a journalist nor a publishing analyst, and my entire publishing career has been spent in the employ of W. W. Norton, doing just one thing: editing books. I used to explain, deprecatingly, that the reason I hadn’t moved around to other houses was that I had no confidence that I could find the Men’s Room or the Mail Room in another establishment. That may have been a joke to begin with. In any case, my observations on publishing here are narrowly solipsistic rather than broadly historical. For better or worse, this is mostly what happened to me.

. Futurists may disagree on what’s to come, but I believe we were in the right place at the right time.

competence in English literature that had, in my case, no practical or remunerative purpose in sight. Those were four magical years. What I would do next was a mystery, but I didn't worry much about it. I assumed someone would find a use for my liberal arts degree. Make that two degrees.

The Norton job came about through a friend of my wife's family, a kind and courteous man named Evan Thomas, son of Norman Thomas, the patrician socialist and perennial presidential candidate. Evan had recently moved over to Norton from a very senior editorial position at Harper & Row (formerly Harper & Brothers, and eventually to become HarperCollins). After many years there he had fallen afoul of internal politics arising from William Manchester's book on John F. Kennedy, *Death of a President*. Evan thought he had the cooperation of the family, but either he got that wrong or Jacqueline Kennedy changed her mind. She wanted a great deal of control over what was said in the Manchester book, and Evan tried to tell the Kennedys to go fish.

I was hired as Evan's "reader," almost certainly the last person to occupy such a slot in American publishing. The set-up at Harper's, and I assume at most other firms, had been that a senior editor, in addition to whatever junior editors might report to him (more on that pronoun later), had a reader and a secretary at his disposal. Evan's secretary had worked with him at Harper's and had followed him to Norton. Rose Franco was one of the best people I ever met in publishing. Tactful, effective, cheerful, intelligent...the list could go on for a whole paragraph. She would not have approved of being called "editorial assistant." She knew who she was, and was fiercely proud of her position.

My job was to read manuscripts that were submitted to Evan Thomas, either directly from the author or via an agent, and tell him what I thought about those projects. This wasn't an exercise in literary criticism, although we certainly cared about the reputation of the firm and tried to publish, as the motto of the house would indicate, "books that live." But the value of the books had to be established by their attractiveness to the reading public, and for the first time in my life I was being asked to make judgments about commerce. This is a delicate exercise with no absolute answers. If no one wants to read a book, can it possibly be any good? You'd think not, unless you happen to admire *Moby Dick* and remember that it sold practically no copies at all during the author's lifetime. And having everybody clamoring to read a certain book is surely gratifying to the author, but would you really take *Fifty Shades of Gray* to that desert island?

NORTON, when I joined it, was a relatively small, independent publisher, owned by its employees. And that's still a useful description of the firm today, in spite of the fact that we probably take in more money every month than we did in the entire year of 1969. I remember distinctly that my salary was \$8000 per year. The brass was quite encouraging about that sum going up in due course, but I wasn't so sure. I was very conscious of not knowing the first thing about the job I had been hired to do.

I did my best to educate myself in the practices and technologies of publishing in those days. I read about half of a manual on copy-editing before leaving it on the seat of a subway car. I went on field trips to the Norton warehouse down in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and to printing plants in the area. There I saw compositors working on the linotype machines that cast a whole line of text in one go, and it was pointed out to me that this was a significant improvement over setting type by hand, character by character. Offset lithography, basically a photographic process, was the new new thing in 1969, and computers, as publishing tools, were out of sight down the road.

Anyone familiar with how a modern office works might well wonder how we ever got anything done with the stuff at our disposal. No, we didn't use quill pens or wear green eyeshades, but other machinery and techniques suggested that Bartleby the Scrivener might still be occupying one of the back offices. The first Xerox machine was installed in the stock room in the very early '70s. Before that, there was the mimeograph, with its lurid ink, for tasks requiring many copies. For correspondence and manuscripts, we had carbon paper, the bane of clumsy typists, and a couple of years into the job it got me into very serious trouble.

The carbon copy, which was often what editors had to work on, was a nightmare. The type on the flimsy onion-skin paper smudged if you looked at it, as did any marks made by an ordinary pencil. Evan had given me a manuscript by General Maxwell Taylor, a true hero of WW2, military adviser to President Kennedy, and author of a very influential book in 1960 on military policy called *The Uncertain Trumpet*, a bestseller that Evan had published at Harper & Row. As much as any man on the face of the earth, Taylor was responsible for the commitment of U.S. ground forces to Vietnam. The new manuscript, a fourth carbon copy as it turned out, was called *Swords and Ploughshares*. It was part memoir and part reflection on how wars could be fought and won in the 1970s.

Taylor was an unrepentant warrior-philosopher if ever there was one, and he had missed more than a few signs that the war in Vietnam was not going according to plan. His thoughts about the role of the United States in world affairs were punctuated by references to our national interest, and it would have been helpful—that is to say, would have rendered his argument intelligible—had he bothered to define the term. In the margins of the manuscript, I began drawing the author’s attention to this oversight, using a #3 or possibly even a #4 pencil to assure legibility. The problem was systemic and, I if I may say so, I did a very thorough job. My boss did not share my satisfaction. What really annoyed him was the permanence of my remarks on the carbon copy, which was the only manuscript we had. For all the effect an eraser had on them, my observations might have been chiseled in stone, and I was given a crisp lecture on deference to authority and editorial humility. The simplest solution would have been to fire me and apologize to the general for my mental breakdown. Fortunately that didn’t happen, probably because Evan knew that I wasn’t wrong about the book.

MY FIRST independent responsibility at Norton was to read and make timely decisions on the pile of unsolicited manuscripts and proposals known as the Slush Pile. Unsolicited meant that these things came from no agency, and their authors were unknown to the editors at Norton, or at least had not been properly introduced. The odds on finding something publishable there were notoriously low, almost infinitesimal, but the work taught me an important lesson about patience and paying attention to the job, no matter what it is. In that pile I found the following items: a first novel, *The Lasko Tangent*, by Richard North Patterson, who went on to write many legal bestsellers; a first novel by James Grady, *Six Days of the Condor*, which was the basis of a film starring Robert Redford called “Three Days of the Condor”; and a very lively and useful guide to personal finance by a rising star in the Princeton economics department, Burton Malkiel. *A Random Walk Down Wall Street* is now in its eleventh edition, never having gone out of print since 1973, a backlist staple of both our trade and college divisions.

The Slush Pile no longer exists at Norton, a victim of the anthrax scare after 9/11, when boxes of uncertain provenance were deeply suspect. But by that time the gold in the stream was pretty well played out anyway; agents had become ever more central and omnipresent as arbiters of publishing taste, and authors began to experiment with being their own publishers rather than waiting to be discovered in the Slush Pile. Still, I regret the passing of this institution from the republic of letters. It was like being paid to play the lottery, and there is much to be said for making up your own mind about the worth of a book without other people telling you what to think. It is remarkable in hindsight that on two of the most important books I ever acquired, Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm* and Michael Lewis’s *Liar’s Poker*, there were no other offers on the table. In the latter case, an agent whom I will do the favor of not naming had turned the sample chapter down, saying that it was the work of a callow youth. May those words be written on her gravestone.

A brief digression on the shifting demographics of publishing may explain my earlier choice of a masculine pronoun in reference to editors. Historically, the important editors and publishing executives were men, as might be said of any industry or profession. But by the time I joined Norton a significant transition was in progress. Women, notably my brilliant colleague Carol Houck Smith, had risen from secretary to

senior editor. More importantly, the firm was no longer hiring secretaries in the trade department, but editorial assistants.

As you can see, I was an outlier in this system. Perhaps the assumption had been that editors were born rather than made: young men were hired as readers—for a little seasoning—before moving on and up to be editors. If that sounds like a remarkably stupid system, it was, especially when you consider that then, as now, the preponderance of book-buyers and readers were women. True, there had existed, at the larger publishers, editorial training programs open to men and women, but these were deemed cost-inefficient because other publishers hung around the exit waiting to snap up the trainees. The surest way to a real editorial job in 1970 was to submit to a couple of years of slaving as an assistant, which, before the days of the computer, meant a steady diet of typing and filing. Very few of this new breed were male, probably because they scorned the work or couldn't type, but also, just possibly, because the hiring editor thought the position was beneath a young man's dignity.

From the point of view of male supremacy, this policy, or trend, was suicide. Editorial assistantship was now the only training ground, and if you worked in such close quarters with an editor, handling all the correspondence and complaints of the authors, and watching the sales patterns, you learned the business swiftly and surely. Which is why, I think, the pendulum in the '70s and '80s swung the other way, and so many of the successful executives and dominant personalities of that era in publishing were women. And now? Well, pendulums do what they do, and young men, reading the tea leaves, flocked to those previously disdained jobs as editorial assistants. The balance of editors at Norton, at any rate, is pretty even.

I HAVE delayed long enough any discussion of the present and future of publishing, which is the part of this account you may be most interested in. But before I make that attempt I offer you an anecdote to illustrate where I am coming from. I was interviewed, around the turn of the century, on the subject of electronic publishing, and I was asked what my reaction would be if electronic books—then in development and selling quite modestly—eventually swept the field and made the physical book a relic of the past. My evasive answer was that it didn't matter very much to me, because by the time that happened, and if it happened, I would be dead. A while later—months? years?—the item turned up on the front page of the *New York Times*, by which time e-books were beginning to make a pretty good showing, and it seemed that I might either have to eat my words or accelerate my own demise. That comment, as it turned out, was my fifteen minutes of fame.

But recently I have been feeling more confident about the statement, partly because the growth of e-books relative to print has slowed, and they may be approaching their high-water mark. I know there are many people my age who have embraced the technology of the e-book, and one of them said to me at lunch recently that being able to carry a dozen books in his pocket was a wonderful thing. I do wonder about that. Why would one want or need a dozen books in his pocket? Does reading mean the same thing to him as it does to me? Answering for myself, I would say that because I spend most of my time in the office reading on, or at least looking at, a computer screen, it is a relief and a satisfaction to sit down at home with just one book, the one I have chosen and to which I can devote my entire attention. I can't believe I am the only one who feels that way.

Furthermore, I have noticed an interesting trend in the reading habits at Norton. There was a time a few years ago when e-books were gaining ground so rapidly on print that you didn't bother to ask whether colleagues wanted to read a proposal or a manuscript in hard copy or electronically. Yes, there were a small number, among them myself, who preferred real pages, but most editors and the sales and publicity staffs wanted the electronic version. Not so now. There has been a steady erosion of the electronic majority, probably for several reasons, but largely because it is easier to backtrack and navigate through the hard copy. Some of you may find this hard to believe, or don't want to believe it, but I am merely reporting what I know to be fact, and I think it augurs well for the survival of the book as we have known it.