

Mother of Invention

Opening sentences matter a lot to Ann Patty. An executive editor at Harcourt, with 28 years in the publishing business, she sifts through 10 to 20 manuscripts every week, hoping to find the five or six gems she will steer into print in a given year.

“I don’t slog. If there’s a grammatical error on page one, I stop reading right there.” This may sound harsh to aspiring novelists—what about my brilliant scene on page 472?—but most readers will also put down a book if its opening pages don’t grab them. Patty’s criteria for choosing a book are stringent and highly personal. “I use my own taste, always have,” she asserts.

“If I start reading and don’t want to stop till I’m done, it’s for me.” When a literary agent sent her an unheralded manuscript called *Life of Pi*, Patty’s sister was visiting from Alaska. “All the way home [from the airport], I thought, ‘How can I tell her I have to finish this book?’” When her sister announced she was tired from her flight and wanted to rest, the editor was euphoric.

This passionate response to books has brought Patty an astonishing string of literary and commercial hits. She has edited books by literary heavyweights Steven Millhauser (the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Martin Dressler*), Mary Gaitskill, Lynn Freed, Harry Crews, Laurie Colwin, and dozens more; authors she’s introduced to the US market include V.C. Andrews (*Flowers in the Attic*), Michael Moore (*Downsize This!*), Clive Barker (*The Inhuman Condition*), Peter Hedges (*What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*), Olivia Goldsmith (*The First Wives Club*), Karen Finley (*Enough Is Enough*) and Frank Zappa (*The Real Frank Zappa Book*).

I’ve asked Rhinebeck resident Patty to meet

by NINA SHENGOLOD

at Gigi Trattoria, unaware that its winter hours don’t include midweek lunches. When I arrive, she swoops out of a neighboring menswear store, where she’s been scouring the shelves for a Valentine gift for her bicyclist boyfriend (“I have a tall, thin boyfriend who doesn’t have any clothes,” she grins with infectious delight.) We relocate to Terrapin, where Patty instructs the waitress to bring her mesclun salad with blue cheese, crumbled not creamy, and just enough balsamic vinaigrette to moisten it a little. She catches herself sounding “like a total New Yorker” and bursts out laughing.

Ann Patty laughs freely and often; clear-eyed and tanned from a mid-winter vacation in Belize, she gives the impression of a woman who loves every aspect of life. “I’m by nature very happy,” she says, adding, “Subject to change, of course.”

Patty grew up in Oakland, California. Her family was not literary. “I was raised on TV. My mother read Mickey Spillane and Reader’s Digest Condensed Books.” When her older brother went to college in Berkeley, a scant few miles north and a world away, he brought home books and words, which his younger sister devoured. “I used to make lists of new words and try to use them in sentences. ‘Benevolent’ was one of my favorites.”

Patty went to Berkeley as well, in the turbulent 1960s. She majored in literature. “My form of rebellion was to become *recherché*. My father was always after me to take economics courses, so I’d be able to make a living... I didn’t know the profession of editor even existed.” Eventually, a New York boyfriend brought her to a beach house party where

“there were all these editors talking about books. It was like a light bulb went off: That’s what I’ll do! I’ll go to New York and be an editor!”

Patty started as an editorial assistant at Dell and became an editor at Pocket Books. Her commercial track record impressed her bosses so much that they made her, at 29, the founder, publisher and editorial director of her own imprint, Poseidon Press. Patty describes Poseidon as “an outtrigger of Simon & Schuster,” within which she enjoyed a newfound autonomy. “I was always interested in literary fiction. First you pay the rent with commercial books, then you earn the right to publish what you like.”

She ran Poseidon until 1993, when her beloved imprint fell under the corporate axe.

Patty decamped to Crown, which she describes as “more marketing-driven” than Simon & Schuster. Four years ago, she moved to her current position at Harcourt. “It’s a literary house and always has been, it’s not driven by the million-dollar-sweepstakes game. The entry ticket is that the writing has to be good.”

But even good writing requires a good editor. Editing is a mysterious art. As with many guiding professions—teaching, producing films, psychoanalysis—the editor’s contribution is all-important, but difficult for outsiders to quantify. In *The Forest From the Trees: An Editor’s Advice to Writers*, Betsy Lerner writes, “The art of editing is a dance one engages in with the author to help him achieve the best results. Only an author knows for sure whether an editor is making a serious contribution to and improvement of his work.”

To be sure, there are stories of editors who become virtual collaborators: the legendary Maxwell Perkins helped Thomas Wolfe carve a viable narrative from his million-word opus *Of Time and the River*; many credit Gordon Lish with the rhythms of Raymond Carver's best stories. But for the most part, the editor's job is to render her guiding hand strong but invisible. As Lerner notes tartly, "No reviewer ever says, 'By God, this book was well edited.'"

Patty describes her role simply. "I'm the mother of the book," she says, and details a book's upbringing. "You dress it up, give it good manners, try to introduce it to nice people. It's exactly like being a mom." (Patty has a grown daughter, who works at New York's legendary used bookstore The Strand.)

When she falls in love with a manuscript, Patty's first task is "conceiving": describing its contents and style in a sentence or two to her colleagues and boss. Then she contacts the author's agent to negotiate an offer. Sometimes there's simultaneous interest from rival publishers, and an auction ensues.

Once the rights are acquired, Patty says, "I work with the author to make a book its best self." This process can vary enormously. Sometimes a manuscript requires major restructuring, or detailed line-editing. Sometimes it's a matter of tiny refinements; as a colleague of Betsy Lerner's said of editing a meticulous author, "It's like polishing silver."

Interpersonal relationships with authors are equally varied, ranging from close friendships to divorce. Patty's favorite part of her job is sitting alongside a writer to edit in person. "Things start to be magical when you sit down together over a manuscript."

Editors also work intensively with marketing and art departments. Patty has strong opinions on book jackets. "I feel that every book has a vibe. The book jacket needs to reflect a lot of subliminal information." She often spends hours honing jacket and catalogue copy. "Writing copy is debased poetry. Every word counts."

Throughout prepublication, the editor does whatever she can to promote her book. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease. There are a lot of books published every year. I try to get people excited, both in-house and out, so my book gets attention."

Next comes publication, when the proud editorial mother gets to watch her book walk down the aisle in its cap and gown. Some of Patty's summa cum laudes at Harcourt include Booker Prize-winner *Life of Pi*, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, and *The Circus In Winter*, the title of which was the answer to a *New York Times* double acrostic last month.



Douglas Baz

HARCOURT EXECUTIVE EDITOR, ANN PATTY

"People ask if I ever regret turning down a book which went on to become a bestseller. The answer is no. I couldn't have made that book a bestseller, because I didn't like it," says Patty. Asked what she does like, she thinks for a minute, searching for ways to describe the heady sensation that lets her know she's in good hands. "I really care about voice. I want to feel, right from the start, that the baseline intent of the author is to tell the truth—not the facts, the truth. You usually know in the first page or two. You can almost run your finger over it. The good ones kind of glow at me."

Patty's gift for spotting "the good ones" has allowed her to shift her primary residence gradually from Manhattan to Rhinebeck, where she's owned a home for the past 20 years. Her move to the country was prompted in part by a serious illness nine years ago, which changed her perspective. "When you're staring at death for a year, a lot of bullshit drops

away. I put aside all false ambition. I try to stay away from things that make me unhappy."

Patty extols the joys of working for hours in her perennial gardens and taking long walks, turning over new books in her head. She reads a prodigious amount; on her Belize vacation, she logged 1,600 pages in 10 days. She's also pursuing a formal Buddhist training, and dreams of becoming a rescue squad worker.

But books come first. Some of Patty's upcoming releases include a new Jeannette Winterson novel, *Lighthousekeeping*; an "amazing" short story collection by newcomer Christopher Coake; and an audacious English novel by Christopher Wilson, *Cotton*, whose protagonist changes race and gender several times during the course of a very strange life. Patty's mounting excitement, as she describes *Cotton*'s narrative twists and turns, is contagious.

"All editors I know feel this way," she says. "It's a calling. What else would you do?" ●