BOTTOM-LINE PRESSURES IN PUBLISHING: A PANEL DISCUSSION

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This is an edited and abbreviated transcript of a National Arts Journalism Program panel on the effect of bottom-line pressures on the publishing industry held at Columbia University on April 17, 1998.

Panelists:

Susan Bergholz, literary agent based in New York City. Formerly a bookseller, Ms. Bergholz has also worked as a buyer for Endicott.

Lee Buttala, Associate Editor at Alfred A. Knopf, where he has worked since 1995. Previous to that, he was an editor at Interview and Metropolitan Home magazines.

Jeff Seroy, Vice President and Publicity Director, Farrar, Straus & Giroux. A graduate of Columbia University, Mr. Seroy was awarded a Kellett Fellowship for continuing studies at Cambridge University for the 1976-77 academic year, after which he entered the publishing industry.

Elisabeth Sifton, Senior Vice President, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and Publisher, Hill & Wang. Ms. Sifton has held editorial and executive positions at The Viking Press, Viking Penguin, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and Elisabeth Sifton Books, which won the Carey-Thomas Award for Creative Publishing in 1986.

William B. Strachan, President and Director, Columbia University Press. Formerly editor in chief at Henry Holt, Mr. Strachan has worked at a number of other trade publishers throughout his career including Viking Press and Anchor Press.

Moderators:

Ruth Lopez, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow, Book Review editor at The Santa Fe New Mexican.

Carlin Romano, 1997-98 NAJP Senior Fellow, literary critic, The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Attendees:

Anita Amirrezvani, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Misha Berson, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Doreen Carvajal, reporter, The New York Times

Anthony DeCurtis, 1997-98 NAJP Senior Fellow

Steve Dollar, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Samuel Freedman, author and professor of journalism, Columbia University

Alan Hess, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Michael Janeway, NAJP Director and professor of journalism, Columbia University

Molly McQuade, 1996-97 NAJP Fellow

Karen Michel, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Manuel Mendoza, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Christopher Reardon, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Andras Szanto, NAJP Associate Director

Calvin Wilson, 1997-98 NAJP Fellow

Opening Remarks

ROMANO: When we were thrashing about for a good topic, we wanted to be more specific than just having the kind of discussion that one has the day after the Bertelsmann sale, you know: "Publishing in Crisis; Anything is Allowed; Anything Can Be Said; Anything Might Happen." And so we came up with the idea "Bottom-Line Pressures in Publishing: Is the Critic More Important than Ever?"

I thought it would be interesting to hear from the publishing side of the business what they think critics should do in regard to the current situation, with this background notion: that at least to my eye there is more diversity than ever before in regard to books, which we never call "product" any more; that there are lots of small presses, more than ever before. One advantage of the chains' expansion is that many of these books are available in places they weren't before.

So in a strictly empirical way, one could in principle go to a store somewhere in the United States and get a very récherché book. But the reality of the business is that promotional money—marketing money—is directed at certain books and not at others, and anybody who watches the way the publishing business works, and particularly how the book review business works, sees a kind of trickle-down effect from the promotional budgets and marketing strategies of the houses, to Publisher's Weekly and Kirkus, to which books are then reviewed in the actual book reviews.

So, to my mind at least, the notion of the independent critic sitting back in the book office, perhaps reading the first fifteen pages of every actual object that comes into the office, and then deciding which books will be reviewed is pretty much a myth. But maybe it's a wonderful myth that should be returned to. Maybe publishers would like that. Maybe they would be frightened at the thought. The basic notion is to hear a bit about what they think we might do to make matters better in the current situation.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux historically and recently has stood for quality, but it's also a commercial house. You have to make commercial decisions, I presume in-house, about what books are going to get more money for support and advertising and promotion, which will get less, which you can actually acquire, given your budgets—and then you present them to the critics. You have a fairly even-handed catalogue, I think, in the way you distribute space to books; that is, every book gets a page. In some catalogues, it's very clear in the structure of the page which are the important books. What I often wonder is how much the editors at these houses want us to react to these signs? Do you want us, in a sense, to manipulate our reviewing almost perfectly in accord with the promotional strategy you have set out in your catalogues and elsewhere?

Bottom-Line Publishing

SIFTON: I want to interrupt, to start, about one thing, this issue of the meaning of the phrase "bottom-line publishing." All publishing, like any financial commercial enterprise, must make enough money to keep going. From the university presses to a small, independently-minded company like Farrar, Straus & Giroux to the large commercial houses, we all must think about the bottom line. It is irresponsible, as the great Helen Wolf said, not to; her husband, possibly one of the greatest publishers of this century, who began his career in Germany and ended it in the United States, thought about the possibility of bad sales the way you think about a guillotine removing your head from your shoulders.

So we all think about the bottom line. The question is how do we think about the bottom line? Do we think about plumping it up? Do we think about having it geared principally to income that we can derive from the intellectual property, which is the book, but have it be made elsewhere and not in the book market? Or is our principal interest in book trade sales or derivative subsidiary book club sales? Or, the classic business question, do we think about the bottom line short-term or long-term? The principal difference between the two big German owners of American publishing properties now is in their response to this question: Bertelsmann, as most corporations do, thinks about short-term profit; the Holtzbrinck people are famous for thinking about long-term growth.

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SEROY: I'd like to take what Elisabeth said and focus a little on the relationship between the marketing budgets, marketing dollars and marketing effort, and criticism, which is reviews. Certainly at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and I think at almost any other publishing house you can name, there is a baseline that is done for every title that's published, or nearly every title that's published. That baseline includes cataloguing a book: producing bound proofs for a book, most important in terms of criticism. That is what critics receive, and that's what they base their review on. They may receive that book with a letter. They may receive that book with some very fancily produced press kit. They may receive it with confetti or firecrackers, or all sorts of things. But every book is given a certain baseline treatment, and it is essentially one that goes to the pre-publication reviewers and to a set of book editors at larger papers, or papers with special book supplements, or publications that have long lead time and need to assign reviews in advance.

Marketing dollars can be spent on lots of things that don't have anything to do with critics and reviews. In fact, most of the time money is spent on advertising, touring authors, promotional gimmicks, buying real estate in the chains, which is basically buying positioning for your books. It's something that has been done classically in all other forms of retailing, and only in recent years has become a major part of the book trade.

Part of the question is about the relationship of criticism to cultural values and to market values. There's a certain level at which our promotional efforts do not compromise the integrity of the critical process. There's a certain point where it may start getting gray, but I don't see it as something about which to be paranoid.

BUTTALA: What's fascinating about what you're saying is that, for the most part, it is a truly democratic process in terms of how books are getting out to critics. It's interesting to think about how the review affects the book in return, because there are best-selling books that can have the worst reviews in the world, and if you look up and down the best-seller list, you can see hundreds of them throughout the year. Yet, despite reviews, those books will continue to sell on a certain level because they're somehow a part of the zeitgeist.

If you look at some of the smaller mid-list books, which according to the industry are disappearing and unimportant—which I thoroughly don't believe—these reviews are the backbone of making those books and bringing them from printing to printing. That's where the role of the critic is most important. It's also the discourse that's probably the most exciting for the critic to be involved in. It's the world of ideas and thoughts. It's the books of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, of Columbia University Press, that I would hope the critic cares about. I think that's the relationship the critic has with the publisher.

SEROY: There's probably a set of people in the universe, in the United States, for whom reading is a very compulsive and integrated part of their lives. These are the people who are driven by reviews to buy books. The books that are on the best-seller list, on the top of the best-seller list—which are probably where the chains make a great deal of their money because of the turnover, are not being bought by the same set of dedicated readers. You have a whole bunch of books that sell up to a certain level, and they're in this bubble that's kind of review-driven, and then you have all these other books that are shooting off in other directions and hitting the bell all the time.

BERGHOLZ: I don't think it's a democratic process at all, I'm afraid, and I certainly don't think there's more diversity than there has been. It strikes me that the democratic process extends for books that are predictable. You talk to publicists, and there is a level at which all books go to the same people. You have a book that's a little quirky, and that's what I do mostly, and they're lost. Then you have to come back to the author to find out who should be reading that book, who should be seeing it in a newspaper.

Very often we do not go to the book reviews. We go to the feature people, the people who are writing about the subject matter of the book rather than the criticism. I work a lot with Latino and Asian-American writers, and we have been so badly hurt by The New York Times because of the reviewing assignments they've made. Somebody at the Times, who shall remain nameless, not Doreen Carvajal,

but who assigned a book, and this was a devastating review, and I said, “It’s very odd that you would assign a Latino book to a Latin-American scholar,” and she said, “Why?”

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MATERIAL FOR THEMSELVES.

I think the process, up to a certain point, finds the right people, goes to the major reviewers. But when you have a book that has something very special, not just an ethnic specialty but a subject specialty, you really have to dig around to get to the right place—and sometimes it’s not on the book review page. I have a lot of problems with that. And I think it would be wonderful if critics took a more pro-active role in finding material for themselves too. At this point it’s so necessary, because everybody is going for the major thrust, for the larger books, for the obvious things, and it’s very, very hard to get that same kind of attention for books that have a difference.

Diversity

As far as there being more diversity, you just look in the face of publishing, and Walter Moseley has tried to do something about this by setting up this course for minority people to enter publishing. There are, I believe, two or three Asian-American editors, and there are maybe four African-American editors. I remember quite a few years ago sending a book into Random House and they got a fellow in the mailroom to read the Spanish edition. Fortunately, things are a little different now. With Spanish, for instance, they’re doing a very good job, so I’m not criticizing. But there’s nobody there who speaks Spanish except the assistant to the editor. She’s the only person who reads Spanish. She reads beautifully, and she’s a wonderful critic herself, but we have a very odd situation now. I really do feel that we all have to be more active in unusual ways.

STRACHAN: One of the things that has changed over the years is not just that the emphasis is put on the bigger books. The critics’ reaction to what’s being published has also changed.

If an author’s first book was fifteen years ago, and you looked at the old review clippings of those books, you would see that, once upon a time, all the local papers had their own book critics or book reviewers who found something in a book that’d speak to somebody in South Bend, Indiana, or in Minnesota as well as in New York City. Now, there’s a homogenization. It’s the chains of book-selling, the chains of newspapers, that have driven out that local critic who used to find what appeals to that audience. I think that’s one of the really awful things—the lack of choice that readers can go to for their information.

Encouraging Critical Skepticism

SIFTON: I’d like to add something to what Susan Bergholz said about encouraging the critics themselves to be more active. I would like to encourage them also to be more skeptical. I want to bring up a delicate matter which I feel free to do because I’ve had the great good fortune in the last twenty-five years to work with what I think are maybe the three best American publishing houses: The Viking Press, which doesn’t exist any more; Alfred Knopf, which could be said not to exist any more but does; and Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

I remember as if it was yesterday what it was like to go to work at Viking in 1968 and get the response that I got when I wrote a letter on Viking letterhead, like no other response I had been used to when I worked in a small publishing house whose name was unfamiliar to most of the recipients of my letters. One of the first things that Bill Lovard, the Director of Publicity at Knopf, said to me when I went from twenty years at Viking to Knopf, was, “Wait till you see what it’s like to sail with the Knopf wind in your sails.” I know that when I work at Farrar, Straus, the presumption is that every book we publish is of high literary value.

I would like to encourage all of you and your colleagues to be skeptical about these claims. Naturally I want to have my cake and eat it too. I want you to believe this, but I also want you to be skeptical about it. There are some wonderful books being published by houses that do not have the Knopf or Farrar, Straus or Viking name, and they’re glorious books, and they are continually overlooked by book

review editors who pay no attention because they don't think that that's a significant publishing house.

That is an outrageous presumption. I'm supporting Susan's view that you've got to push a little harder, open up the book a little more, and there are millions of ways of doing this. For the non-fiction books, you can look at the acknowledgments page and see where the cultural and intellectual world is that this writer comes out of. Who does he or she know? Where does this come from? With the fiction, you can see where else the person has published. There's a big difference between people who write for Partisan Review and people who write for Sewanee Review. There are a dozen ways to trace the background of a book and decide for yourself whether it has some merit.

I THINK YOU'VE GOT TO BE SKEPTICAL

ABOUT THE POWER OF THE IMPRINT.

JANEWAY: What is the universe in which decisions are being made to look harder at books from small, new, seemingly marginal presses: feminist presses, Ecco Press, or Steerforth? It seems to me that the Times, especially in the shorter reviews, is doing a better job of taking a look at those. What about stores?

BERGHOLZ: But they're also reviewing non-fiction over fiction by about six to one. If we count the number of men versus the number of women who are there reviewing, it's unbelievable. I remember when Rosemary Gray, an African-American, was there, you saw African-American books on the front cover of The New York Times Book Review. You do not see them now. And I think it's terrifying that one person could make that kind of difference, but we all know what one review in The New York Times can do as well. And it's very, very hard to recover from it.

Marketing and Publicity

ROMANO: Does it strike you that the literary press is just very quiescent and deferential in the way it receives the book and in the books it receives? I mean, for instance, you know, you have a Copper Canyon book in front of you in your office and you have a Knopf book and it's not as if one has a big building behind it in your office and the other has a little building. It's just two books next to each other. In principle, critics should be able to deal book by book.

You've all dealt with critics over the years. Just to concretize this for a moment, as someone astonished at the degree to which Publisher's Weekly reviews and Kirkus reviews control what is later reviewed in, say, mass media newspaper sections, what do you think of that process? Is too much work being delegated away by the book review editors and critics to the pre-publication reviews?

SEROY: Everyone's glutted by so much coming in that they probably use Publisher's Weekly and Kirkus, they probably are not skeptical enough, and they make decisions that are not adequately informed by their own instincts.

SIFTON: There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and we're all overworked. I will acknowledge that I under-publish a lot of the works I'm responsible for, because I simply don't have time. This is all so incredibly labor-intensive. The thing that Susan talked about is for a publisher thinking about promotion to say to the author, "You know more about your world than we do." We can't know everything about it. But you can work to draw out the writer to find out everything he knows. Who does he know? Who are his contacts? Say, "Lie down on my couch and free associate. Tell me every bit of you."

BERGHOLZ: But most publishers don't want you do that. I attach a clause in my contracts that says I want a marketing meeting with the publicity director, marketing person, whatever, six to nine months before publication, and people yell and scream, "What do you know about this?" I sold books for most of my life, I have done publicity. I don't want to do their jobs, but I do want to bring them in and look at them. You would be shocked at how difficult it is to do that. And I'm trying to help them sell the books. Now, Farrar, Straus is not one of those places, I can say.

ARE YOU SEXY? ARE YOU YOUNG?

DID YOU HAVE TO CLIMB MOUNTAINS

IN ORDER TO BRING MILK

HOME IN THE MORNING?

SEROY: When authors come in and we meet with them, oftentimes what I say to them is, "Look, there are book reviews that are interested in the text you produced, and then there are twenty other forms of publicity that have nothing to do with the book you've produced; they have to do with how good a public performer you are. Are you sexy? Are you young? Did you have to climb mountains in order to bring milk home in the morning? Did you come up with some incredible piece of research? Is there something soft? Is there something hard? Is there something this? Is there something that?" I'm just talking publicity; I'm not talking about the many other branches of marketing. That drives a lot of other kinds of publicity—the personality of the author, the story of the author, the story about the book, and so forth.

That enables one to get other kinds of print coverage, enables one to get television coverage, to do public events with authors. But it doesn't have to do with the critic and the critic's role in the publishing process.

BUTTALA: And I think the other danger, to go along with this publicity menu, is that the world of the media has become so huge and so incomprehensible to all of us that there's no way you can possibly get the books out to everyone you can think of. You have print media; you have news media; you have Amazon.com wanting mini-reviews of their books. How are we supposed to take all of this on?

STRACHAN: The bottom line is that there is a lot of pressure on critics to go along with what the houses are pushing, because that's what they've got their money invested in.

Book reviewers get yelled at if they haven't covered something—if they have covered something not very favorably that the house was pushing very hard and had counted on a good review for. I think one of the big problems is that not enough critics in this country have regular columns like Richard Eder, and you don't have that week-in, week-out space to knock down your fifty-two books a year or whatever you want to do. And that's an economic pressure.

Local, Regional, and National Interest

SIFTON: There's another issue, which is a specifically American problem, and that is the question of regional and local interest in an author and a book vs. national significance.

Most writers feel, as do many agents and publicists and certainly our sales reps, that the best way to sell and develop a book is to start at the base with where the writer is, and with the writer's immediate community, which may not be a geographical community. For the sake of my argument, let's presume it is a Pacific Northwest novelist or a Southwestern archaeologist. As the movie people say, you "platform" it, beginning with visual and moving out from there.

But how, in fact, will the newspaper and magazine editors respond to that if you begin to focus locally and not cover what the big buzz books of the American people as a whole are? That's a real problem, it seems to me, and I don't know how we're going to deal with it.

LOPEZ: I can talk about my newspaper, The Santa Fe New Mexican, which I think is pretty typical of small regional papers everywhere. The only way they're going to survive is to do their community well, and so the region is becoming more and more important, and they're getting over the idea that we have to do the best-sellers. In fact, I rarely do any. I just do the region.

ROMANO: This is an area, though, where I think a couple of our subjects come together, because as you know, the distribution of information to critics varies book by book, so in one case you get a big press kit that tells you everything the author has done since nursery school, and in another case you get a galley with virtually no information about the author. If we all got the file that you have on your authors when the publicity department goes to an author and finds out, "Where'd you go to school? Who do you know? Oh, you were at the University of Pennsylvania for four years." If we knew that at The Inquirer, that would make a difference, probably, in the way we would cover it. But we often don't have that information, or find it out months later.

So obviously we'd need another room. In addition to all the books we have there, we'd have all of the author files, right? But I would assume that some of what controls what information we get, whether we get a glossy press kit and a beautiful galley or just the plain paper version, is a money decision. And that's where, it seems to me, the effect of the business on what critics are able to do can be

spotlighted and maybe even changed.

BERSON: Carlin, just judging from my paper—and I'm the theater critic, but I'm close to the book editor, and I also review books sometimes—the regional stuff is of number one importance. That and the celebrity dog-and-pony shows, which come all the time. Seattle is the farthest away you can get from New York, and we get everybody. What I'm wondering about is all the people who are between David Gutterson and Paula Barbieri, O.J. Simpson's girlfriend. How do those feature articles affect your sales? And how do things that are relatively new, such as Oprah's book club and the whole network of book clubs, which is very big in my community? Those folks buy a lot of books. Do the reviews really have much impact any more outside of The New York Times?

The Impact of a Review

STRACHAN: Actually, I think that the impact of reviews has diminished in terms of the effect on book sales. When Elisabeth and I were together at the Viking Press, you used to see a spate of reviews absolutely drive sales. When William Kennedy emerged it was one of the most voracious confluence of reviews that pushed sales from three thousand copies to best-sellerdom [sic]. You can get that same concentration of reviews now for a book. I think that's what Jim Shepard's getting for Nosferatu right now—it's not driving sales.

FREEDMAN: This is really what's out there. I know through the twelve years since I started writing books, the most dramatic difference has been the power that a review carries. All of my books have gotten good attention—increasing attention as they've gone along. But I remember when my second book came out, and on the same day I had the cover of The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and The New York Times. On the same day, three covers, and everyone, me included, waiting for what was going to happen. And nothing happened.

STRACHAN: Nothing happened in terms of ads, or nothing happened in terms of sales?

FREEDMAN: No, ads don't matter. Ads are just bones to throw for the author's ego. But nothing happened in terms of sales, and that's where I said it was a real disconnect, and it was even more profound with the last book I've written, so that you have the sense that everything's going right but everything's going wrong.

STRACHAN: And I don't think that's strictly reviews. I think it's everything.

SIFTON: I think it's also part of a deep cultural shift, which is not restricted just to books. It has to do with television and mass media, as distinct from local newspapers and small publishing houses, of which I include large ones like Knopf. The mass media is driven more and more by celebrity buzz and less and less by critical evaluation of the performance, whether it's a book, a performance, or a theatre performance.

MORE AND MORE, THE ARTS AND LEISURE AND THE WEEKEND SECTIONs ARE ABOUT THINGS THAT ARE ABOUT TO HAPPEN.

The New York Times does this too, where more and more, the Arts and Leisure and the Weekend sections are about things that are about to happen. But then when they do happen, you wait for a long time before you know what the critics may think of what happened. We can't talk about the book review problem here losing its effect upon the sale of books without realizing that this is happening over the culture as a whole.

ROMANO: May I say it's that consumer model that is actually replacing a critical model? I think you're right, and we see it in books, and we see it in other places. What can we do to encourage resistance? I'll give you an example that I found strange: Reading about the Pulitzer Prizes the other day, and the 1998 prize for criticism to Michiko Kakutani of The New York Times, the nomination language that I read put forth as positive that she had done all the big books of the year.

Now, to me that's a negative. If I were evaluating that, I'd say, "Well, you reviewed what you obviously had to review. What did you discover last year? If you're a first-rate critic, did you make any writer's reputation? Did you come up with a phrase that will stick with that writer for ten or fifteen years?" I understand why she had to do those books, but I also don't think that that is a spectacular

achievement of criticism, to do all the steamrollers that were coming down the tracks.

SEROY: The phenomenon that Sam Freedman was referring to is not where you don't see a sales impact, say, from reviews. It's not restricted to reviews. There's always flavor-of-the-month media, flavor-of-the-year media: It's Oprah, it was Donahue. You can get an author on Oprah and nothing happens; or it goes through the ceiling. And that's always been true with Donahue. It's been true with "Today" and with the cover of the Times Book Review, you can sell 3,500 copies or 350,000 copies. It's very unpredictable. There's no magic bullet.

BUTTALA: I'd like to respond to the idea that the book critic has lost his role in terms of helping sell books. I mean, Nosferatu has not gone through the ceiling, but it has received some increasing sales. And in those mid-list books, an increase of two thousand copies is the difference between a successful book and an unsuccessful book.

One of the things that we're really seeing in the marketplace—and I hate to use the word "market," and I apologize for it—is that we have Barnes and Noble and Borders and Amazon.com. Let's face it, these people couldn't hand-sell a book if their lives depended on it. And I think the role of the critic has become the hand-seller telling people what to go out there and get on a much more personal level than you've ever had to do, and it's a responsibility that you should uphold with pride and put great energy into. I think that we all lose sight of that in our own cynicism.

THE ROLE OF THE CRITIC HAS BECOME

THE HAND-SELLER TELLING PEOPLE WHAT

TO GO OUT THERE AND GET.

SEROY: Right, and also expectations change because of the mass distribution. You can have books turn into phenomena, and then if something isn't a phenomena, it's a "failure" when it's really a success. Sixteen thousand copies of something could be a huge success, but it's not Cold Mountain.

STRACHAN: Or the expectation, not just because it sold whatever number, but the expectation that was piled onto that thing at the outset and that it came up short, which is a false, self-imposed expectation.

JANEWAY: Do you observe cases in which reviews, even if they're exceptions that prove the rule, are selling a book? I mean, we all read about how Donna Tartt was made with heavy promotion and the right buzz and so forth, but what about Smilla's Sense of Snow, for example? Was that a review success or was that just out of nowhere?

SIFTON: I arrived at Farrar, Straus just after they published it, and that was an interesting example, because it's very typical of a certain kind of best-seller out of nowhere. The reviewers certainly were the ones who said, "Hey, wait a minute. This is really kind of a terrific book." But I imagine that that alone wasn't it. It's the review as the "first pebble that creates an avalanche" syndrome, which is that the word-of-mouth on this book was wonderful. But it was because somebody saw the review and got it and then read it, and then it was a best-seller. It's also true that the idea of a kind of oddball thriller with an unpronounceable author and a funny title, coming from Farrar, Straus, the peculiarity of it, made it attractive.

Roberto Calasso, a Knopf author who is himself a distinguished publisher in Milan, made a tremendous best-seller out of a thriller that FSG has just published. It has done moderately well here but not been a huge success as it was in Italy. It was a thriller called The Luneberg Variation. It has a chess theme and a Holocaust theme, and the author's name is Paolo Maurensig. When I stood on the Adelphi booth at the Frankfurt Book Fair and I asked Calasso why this book had been a best-seller, he pointed at the "G" in Maurensig's name and said, "If he had been Paolo Morenzi," an ordinary name, it wouldn't have been. So I think that can be true about the oddity of having a certain kind of book out of a certain kind of publishing house. Calasso is remorselessly highbrow, and many of his authors are great Italian classic writers who're dead. We tease him about that all the time. So for him to publish a living writer with a thriller was sort of interesting.

BERGHOLZ: There's an instance where we took a writer from Hawaii who writes in pidgin to Farrar, Straus, and if she had been

anywhere else, she would not have gotten the attention and the serious literary consideration that she got. There's no question.

SEROY: A couple of examples from last year: The first is the novel, Lives of the Monster Dogs, by Kirsten Bakis. The author, who's a lovely person, is so painfully shy she can barely walk out of the house in the morning, and she didn't do anything, and the book was entirely review-driven and sold probably about 30,000 copies in hard-cover, which is a big success for us. Then we had Ben MacIntyre's book, The Napoleon of Crime: The Life and Times of Adam Worth, Master Thief, and got reviewed all over the place and featured in The New York Times, the cover of The New York Times Book Review, and five pages in The New Yorker. Then someone from a commercial house called up the editor, and said, "God, that book must be selling like hot cakes." It ended up doing all right by reasonable standards, but it wasn't kind of flying out of here like The Next Best Thing, you know.

STRACHAN: If you want to say what we're trying to do, it's that we're trying to get our books in front of potential readers and that's where the critic gets that word of mouth going or just calls something to people's attention. We're just putting them out there as best we can.

Literary and Commercial Judgement

ROMANO: I wanted to toss a couple of other questions at you about real situations. One: you mentioned Smilla's Sense of Snow. Sophie's World, another case, by Jostein Gaarder, of a book that takes off. What about the follow-up situation? You come with the second book by Jostein Gaarder, and there's been a commercial success, and now it's a commercial item also for the house, and now you're really pushing a $100,000 ad budget, and you want the press just to take it for granted that this is not only a quality item but probably a big commercial item.

And then the literary press perhaps says, "Oh, well, it was an anomaly. We're not going to give the same kind of attention. We don't agree with you that it's your most important book of the season." How do you feel when the literary press then doesn't, in effect, accept your literary judgment and doesn't even accept the commercial judgment that has made the first book a hit, but you've made a big investment in that second book?

STRACHAN: You're ahead of the game, number one, because there's a number of readers who've already heard of this author, so from that standpoint alone, even if the literary press ignores the book, you've got an avenue in this competition for attention, and you're ahead in that. You may not have had as much of a commercial investment as you think, because you've bought the second book early.

SIFTON: Or because you successfully persuaded the author or agent that "You cannot possibly expect this to happen again, and we've got to negotiate this in reasonable terms."

BUTTALA: Right. But I would never underestimate the importance of product—the author being the product—because we have books that continually get poorly reviewed that had a first success, and their books continue to sell because…

READERS DISREGARD THE CRITICS AND

TAKE AN INTEREST IN A WRITER

THAT THEY'RE INTERESTED IN.

SEROY: Because readers disregard the critics and take an interest in a writer that they're interested in.

MICHEL: This is partly a comment and partly a question, because I feel that there's a kind of disconnect even though we're in the same room: You're saying what we do as critics, and it's a curious thing to listen as someone who gets assaulted by alleged publicists all the time.

One of the things we're always doing is looking for the quirky things. People can go to their local paper, they can go to The New York Times, they can go to Time magazine, and see the stuff everybody else is seeing. I think audiences—readers, listeners, viewers—like

to feel that they're special in some way, and that's where the quirk comes in, whether it's by a big name or a small name.

Certainly, Copper Canyon is having incredible success with that. I mean, Sam Hamill alone is just a good spokesperson. But it strikes me that most publicists, at least those who contact me, are not at all knowledgeable about the product they are representing. It doesn't matter what the book is, it's going to kill it if somebody calls me and says, "You're going to love this book. It's perfect for the NPR audience." And then if I start asking them something about the book, they really haven't read it. This happens more often than not. More important, say they're pitching that authors from, say, India, are sexy now, but the publicist clearly doesn't know diddle about what they're talking about, can't even pronounce the author's name. There's big trouble here. So I think instead of looking at us as the culprits, look back at your own departments.

SIFTON: I agree with you on both comments, but this is, may I point out, a kind of self-selected group here of people who are committed to and care about this issue? As the critic John Hollander once said to me twenty years ago when I was still young and innocent and hopeful and we were talking about axioms and laws and principles that are named after people like Murphy's Law, Peter's Principle, and others, "I have one. It's the Hollander Principle: most people are not very good at their jobs." And when we say people believe the hokum that we press upon them, we don't mean you; we mean most people who are not very good at it, and you mean most of the publicists who are not very good at their jobs. We have to deal with it structurally, but a lot of times we're talking to people who are not up to the level that you are or that we want our readers and our colleagues to be.

THE ALLEGED ESTEEM OF THE

PUBLISHING HOUSE DOES NOT EQUAL THE QUALITY OF THE PUBLICITY.

MICHEL: Okay, then, to get at what you need, which is sales, I mean, how do you select a publicity department that can actually do something worthwhile? Because I have talked with publicists—not from Columbia University Press—and noted that the alleged esteem of the publishing house does not equal the quality of the publicity.

BERGHOLZ: But, you see, take The New York Times: go through, and we did it last year, and count the number of Random House and Knopf books in relationship to everything else. Well, maybe they've published consistently better books, but there's an awful lot of room that is not being taken up by all those other people, and somebody should be looking at that and saying, "Boy, this is slightly unfair even if it may be that these are the best books." They're not.

BUTTALA: However, in the past three years those numbers have changed substantially.

SIFTON: They have? Here's another problem: Who are the pool of people from whom you're hiring the editorial assistants?

LOPEZ: What are they earning?

SIFTON: My son, who's in his early thirties, graduated from Harvard and went to work for the legendary Byron Dobell when he was still editor at American Heritage, and one of the things he had to do was call up publicity departments and ask for galleys of books. And he called me up and said, "How can you work in this business?" Sam was earning less than $20,000 a year, and his two roommates were working for First Boston, respectively earning $180,000 and $170,000 a year, one year out of college. There are weird disparities about the way our society and culture is ascribing significance and importance to different kinds of work. And that is reflected in very bizarre performance and quality.

A Trickle-Down Economy

ROMANO: I think that it really is a trickle-down economy and quality situation in publishing, as if everyone first tried to publish a book with Knopf or FSG, it got turned down, they went to the next level, then they went to the next level, so in a way it's appropriate to make these inferences, because you're delegating that authority to the quality structure. If it got published finally by some obscure university press or small press, one inference is, "It's because it failed to get published for more money at A." We know that's not true.

SIFTON: Do you pay any attention to the editors who edit the books?

ROMANO: Sure. When I know, I try.

SIFTON: Because it seems to me that somebody such as Jerry Howard at Norton, you have to take pretty seriously. That's a small house, and they have limited money, and Lord knows they pay small advances, and yet if Jerry is involved in a book, you know at least it's serious, it's something to be considered, and it's on the level.

THERE ARE EDITORS AT VERY SMALL HOUSES

THAT ARE JUST SO CLASS-ACT THAT THEIR

BOOKS SHOULD BE PAID ATTENTION TO.

But I think that, again, if the critics are possibly a little more aware of who is involved in that publication, there are editors at very small houses that are just so class-act that their books should be paid attention to.

SZANTO: The irony is that what you said maybe in a way applied ten years ago. You had the bigger houses operating on the principle of quality, and people tried to get in, and then if it ends up with the small press, well, that's that. But today, because of the structural changes that some of you have addressed, it's beginning to fit. Some of the bigger houses, operating under corporate pressures, no longer can put out the quality, so it's in the very small shops that the real quality ends up, in some cases.

SIFTON: I question the facts here, and actually the old trickle-down process that you describe I didn't see as going from the big or famous houses to the small ones. I run the risk of sounding snobbish here, but it really isn't that. I have very complicated feelings about this, but I know that all of us who have worked in publishing houses know of another kind of trickle-down: a promising writer who gets very good reviews, published by a very good publishing house—now, this could be any of the ones we've mentioned or it could be a bunch of others we have not mentioned, it could be a small one, it could be Algonquin, it could be a small house in San Francisco or New Mexico or Georgia—and then the book becomes unexpectedly successful, for all the good reasons: good reviews, enthusiastic readers, and so on.

And then a greedy, vulgar, second-rate house with a lot of money buys the second book and over-publishes it but does not care about it in quite the way it deserves, and what you are seeing here is the first step in the degradation of a promising writer's career. And there are many, many examples.

BERGHOLZ: And writers are involved in that.

SIFTON: So are agents. And that trickle-down effect, which sometimes means going from the smaller house to the bigger house with bigger, more aggressively commercial, but actually not such a good house; that trickle-down effect used to happen and still happens.

ROMANO: Trickle up and out.

BUTTALA: At our fall launch we presented a book, and I wanted the third book by the author who'd always been published by Knopf, an outstanding literary author who everyone here I think would recognize and be very fond of, who's typically been undersold by us. And at the launch somebody said, "If this woman had been at any other house for these first two books, she'd be on the best-sellers' list both times, and this book would be huge." And the fact that by being at our house, she's been consistently overwhelmed by other titles, by other authors, by bigger fish, and that's why there are the appropriate houses for books. I don't think it's necessarily trickle-down.

Editing

SEROY: But there too, to pick up on what Elisabeth was saying, for two years in upstate New York, I organized a writers' conference.

The first year, the most promising and talented writer who came out of that had a manuscript that needed a great deal of work in order to get it up to snuff. She was hugely promising, and she signed with an agent who is a very good friend of mine who shall remain nameless. She wanted to come to FSG to work with John Glusman. John offered an advance. The agent, who, again, is a dear friend—typical agent ploy—took it to a new editor who had just arrived at a new publishing house who needed to acquire properties very quickly who offered three times the advance but was not the right editor for the book or for this kind of writer. The book got no attention, and the writer's career was over before it ever began. And now she calls up John Glusman once a month and says, "I made a mistake," and he says, "What do you want me to do about it?"

CARVAJAL: How was the quality of the editing?

SEROY: How was it? Nonexistent. When the bound proofs came in from this other publishing house with the letter from the editor, I took it to Glusman and I said, "The letter is not even grammatically correct. It has misspellings and grammatical mistakes. How can this be someone who is publishing a literary writer?"

SIFTON: I'm glad you asked that, because I would like to get on the record a statement that is true for all publishing houses: It's true for university presses, small, big, medium, commercial, and elegantly uncommercial. It's true for New Directions, and it's true for Morrow, and it's true for the University of Washington Press. And that is that editing is always uneconomical to do. It is always a drain on the budget. It is very labor-intensive. No publishing executive likes to walk down the hall and see you with your blue pencil. This is an 80-hour, 110 hour-a-week job, and you do it on weekends and in the evenings.

Editing is always uneconomical to do.

I hate to talk about corporate cultures and stuff, but the fact is there are some companies where it's taken for granted that that work has to be done, and it's honored. I've been lucky enough always to work in such a house, but there are plenty of other places where it is dishonored and you don't do it. You just don't do it. And this can get worse: you don't bother to proofread and copy-edit. This is, of course, notoriously true.

I have the opportunity to say that no English publishing house copy-edits and proofreads. The low standards of English work is scandalous in this regard. But there has been a falling-off of quality in sheer copy-editing and proofreading. The managing editor at Viking twenty-five years ago had worked before at Avon or some mass-market reprint house. She was in charge of the proofing of mass-market reprints of already published books, and the standard that she held her largely free-lancing staff of proofreaders to was that they had to maintain a standard of at least ninety-seven percent accuracy. If they found ninety-two typos and she found eight typos in the finished Avon reprint, they didn't get any more work from her. This is unheard of now. Distinguished publishing houses and university presses simply don't do that. So the question of the work done to support an author by editing, whether it's blue-penciling and proofreading or whether it's schmoozing with them and hanging out and saying things like "Do you think maybe Chapter 4 should be Chapter 2?" and doing all the structural stuff, whatever the editing is, it is never respected as an integral part of the company's expenses.

BERGHOLZ: There are houses, though, that still do it well. At Farrar, Straus, the editing is unbelievable, and there's no question about it. We edit each other.

SIFTON: You do it as a second job, absolutely. Bob Gottlieb, who is one of the greatest text editors who ever was, did it as a second job. We all did it as a second job. And Bob, by the way, is responsible for an absolutely nifty formulation of what Susan said earlier when we were asked, "What is the thing that makes the difference between—?" He was asked, as the president of a wildly successful conference, a really hard-ball question; this question came floating over the center of home plate: "Tell me, Mr. Gottlieb, since you're such a wonderful publisher, what's the difference between publishing a book well and publishing it poorly?" And Bob's glorious answer was, "You never know."

So you must attend, he said, to every detail of the book's publication as if that's the one that matters, because it may be. It may be that the price differential will be important, it may be that the jacket design is important, it may be that the typographical design is important, it may be that the timing is important, it may be the announced print run ... who knows?

He wasn't talking about the quality of the book, but presuming that the book is good and we want it to be a success, we must attend to every detail of the publication of it as if that will be the detail that will make the book.

The "Dullness" of Book Reviews

McQUADE: To me, one of the problems of book publishing that isn't often enough addressed, and it's really a problem inherent in book reviewing now, is the dullness, the unimaginativeness [sic] of book review editors and of book reviewers. Maybe it's more the fault of the editor because the reviewers rarely have enough choice, can't determine format, length, or a myriad of more interesting questions on how to review a book, or even how to cover it in a feature story. So I wondered if you'd respond to that postulate.

Americans seem to expect books to be worthy, but dull and intimidating.

SIFTON: I respond to it as another indicator of what seems to be true about our culture as a whole, which is that Americans seem to expect books to be worthy, but dull and intimidating. There's a lot of market study, and the chains have used this to their great advantage. When a market study shows that Americans are intimated by bookstores and don't know where to look, don't know how to browse around, don't know what to look for, that they need to be told what they want to read, that they don't know on their own, the possibility that the books are thrilling is not the conventional one. And this may infect us all, and that, I think, probably starts in school. My husband, Fritz Stern, who's a historian and teaches on the history faculty at this university, was fascinated by the statistics that show that most Americans who graduated from high school regard the study of history as an incredibly boring subject.

He says, "You have to be really talented to make history boring." But clearly, many people do. I think there's a world of book culture that somehow the general culture seems to regard as boring. I don't get it.

DeCURTIS: Part of that problem is within publishing. I mean, I think as somebody who's done books both at major houses and smaller ones about popular music—for Rolling Stone, primarily—that a lot of the people who are interested in that subject aren't necessarily the kind of people who've been wandering around the Taco Bookstore. On the other hand, they're a pretty rabid audience, and they can be reached by good stuff. And I have these just astounding discussions with publishers, where they ask, "What did you do with publicity?" and I say, "Well, here was our list of book critics, and we sent it to all those papers. " And they reply, "Maybe you could've talked to me, you know. I know the pop-music critic at every single newspaper in the country, maybe we could've sent it to them, or maybe there are other ways to get to this audience that is not the typical way that you think of."

A friend of mine was the editor at Vibe on that Tupac Shakur book that they did last year, and they had the hardest time selling that thing. They were going around saying, "That audience doesn't read; that audience doesn't read." Of course somebody bought it, it was on the best-seller list for two months.

And as a final act along these lines, a friend of mine had a very successful book last year, and I'd run into him, and I said, "Wow, you know, your book just blew up, and that was incredible. How did that happen?" He had lead reviews in Entertainment Weekly, reviews in both the daily and Sunday Times, and just a lot of stuff. He says, "I hired an outside publicist."

BERGHOLZ: That's why I took a publicity job: because I knew I would need to do it.

The "Down-Marketing" of American Culture

WILSON: Have you made adjustments in trying to put your books out there to allow for the increasing dominance of the superstores and the accompanying lack of sophistication? I can give you an example of what I'm talking about. I used to do a lot of the book work at my newspaper, and regularly I would get lists from the superstores of who was going to be appearing at them. Mostly it would be people pushing books about food, books about cooking, those kinds of things, but occasionally they'd have a literary author. One day I was looking at one of these lists from one of the superstores, and I'm going down it: cookbook, golf book, Paul Auster.

And I said, "Wait a minute. What?" I cleaned my glasses, but there was still Paul Auster. So I called the store up and I said, "I understand that you're going to have Paul Auster appearing at your store reading from his book." And they said, "Who's he?"

If you have people like that now working for the stores and you have the stores allowing for a huge chunk of how you get the word out, have you made adjustments according to that?

SEROY: Can I answer that question in three words? It's a problem. It's a big problem.

SIFTON: It is, and I think that on the part of the book review editors who are not imaginative enough in their assignments, and the bookstore staff who don't realize what they've got on their hands, there is an elitist snobbery in commercial operations that "Those people don't read" or "Our people won't like that" or "This isn't one for us," which we hear from the chains a whole lot, or "The people in the malls won't want to read this."

This drives me wild, absolutely wild. It's the commercial, middle-brow dumbing-down, down-marketing of American culture in the form of saying, "Readers don't want this," and then they talk about "market-driven product." But the men—and they were all men—whose names appear on the bottoms of the spines, Mr. Knopf, Mr. Doubleday, Mr. Holt, Mr. Rinehart—none of those people had that attitude. They all believed that if you gave at a good price, if you gave interesting books to the American readers, they would like them, respond to them, and believe in them. I find it shocking to work in a publishing and book-selling business where not very many people believe that any more.

And that sort of dumb-down commercial elitism or snobbery about the ability of the ordinary American reader to appreciate Paul Auster I find enraging. This is not an issue of high-brow, middle-brow, low-brow; it's a much bigger problem.

THERE IS AN ELITIST SNOBBERY IN COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS THAT "THOSE PEOPLE DON'T READ."

ROMANO: A lot turns, it seems, on how book review editors and critics see their jobs in regard to taste. I think it's probably true that most book review editors see themselves as conveying taste, the taste that exists in the culture, and they have to be somewhat in line with it or they may get fired. If they're too high-brow, if they're too quirky, some editor in chief type is going to say, "That's not what I'm interested in."

Now, what would happen if book-review editors decided they were going to create taste and condition taste? So suddenly the book reviews are being led with Milkweed, and I'm not saying that these are necessarily better books, but just different books, right? So you have Milkweed and you have university press. And I don't mean just in a given week, but week after week after week, if forty or sixty percent of the books reviewed are university-press books. Knopf occasionally gets one in. FSG occasionally gets one in. It may not be a fair system, but suddenly those are the book reviews you guys are dealing with. What would you think?

STRACHAN: I think the attention being given the university press books and smaller presses is actually increasing. It is partly reflected by the critics and the interest in the subjects. I think we all publish as publishers out of self-interest, and I think a lot of times reviewers review out of self-interest too. Right now, a bigger preponderance of university-press books are being reviewed than there were, certainly, twenty years ago, fifteen years ago.

SIFTON: But you're doing better books, and you are also doing some commercial books that have fallen out of Knopf's hands.

ROMANO: I think the percentage of your books reviewed as against all of the books you publish vs. the percentage of books that trade publishes is very small.

STRACHAN: Exactly. We have different review mediums, however, to appeal to as well. We have the learned journals; we have a number of other outlets that John Grisham isn't going to be reviewed in necessarily.

SEROY: But since you're publishing somewhat professionally, oftentimes, you're publishing books to people who absolutely need them to continue doing research. Whereas at Oxford University Press where I was for ten years, we used to sit around a lot of times and say, "God, this book is so interesting, but you can't read it unless you really want to." You know, just the quality of the writing for a general reader, for my dad, say, it wouldn't cut the mustard.

STRACHAN: Somebody said to me, "What's the biggest difference in changing from the trade to the university publishing world?"

and I said, “One of the biggest differences is fiction. We don’t publish a lot of fiction. We don’t publish it regularly.” And the consequence of that is you don’t have within the house people going around saying, “Oh, you’ve got to read this, because look what this writer can do with language.” And we know that that kind of talk can happen with non-fiction too, but it doesn’t extend to non-fiction unless it’s there as part of the fabric of the house.

BUTTALA: What I would promote even more than taste is the idea of balance. Obviously there are going to be commercially driven books that your readers do want to know about, and part of your job is to serve these people as well, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t devote a large amount of your space to books that you think are of larger importance and of equal interest to these people.

LOPEZ: I think most journalists are in the position of having to educate our bosses about what’s right and train them about what it is that needs to happen in the paper.

IF YOU TRY TO DO SOMETHING THAT’S

NOT SAFE, THAT’S NOT PREDICTABLE,

YOU HEAR ABOUT IT.

ROMANO: What Elisabeth said is so true, I think, within newspapers too. I wonder how much my colleagues agree that often if you try to do something that’s not safe, that’s not predictable, you hear about it. I remember once putting on the cover of my section a translation of Tirant Lo Blanc, a Catalan epic, on the dubious argument that maybe, you know, it’s the next Cervantes and it will endure in the culture. I got called into the office on that, and someone said, “Have you gone crazy?”

SIFTON: One just has to question. Don’t we all know that in life anyway? Certainly in the book business. I would think in entertainment and in art that a lot of this is sort of auto-intoxication: if you get tremendously excited about something, you can persuade other people to be tremendously excited about it. One of the great literary editors, Mr. Giroux of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, began his career before the war at Harcourt Brace, and now and again he tells wonderful anecdotes about working for the men he still calls “Mr. Harcourt” and “Mr. Brace.”

And one of them is about how he found what he thought was a very promising, very commercial book, and he himself personally didn’t like it very much. He was Virginia Woolf’s and T. S. Eliot’s editor. But he thought it was a really good book for Harcourt Brace to publish, that it would work well, and he gave it to Mr. Harcourt saying just what I’ve said. And Mr. Harcourt, without looking at it, handed it back across the desk to him, and he said, “I don’t think we should publish it because you don’t like it. If you don’t like it, how are you going to persuade anybody else in this house to like it?” The generation of excitement had to come, of course, initially from the writer; the editor communicates that to the house as a whole.

This is an interesting cautionary tale. A lot of unexpected or anomalous successes may be because people caught on fire and communicated the fire, regardless of signals saying, “Wait a second. Nobody’s going to care about this.”

Mr. Giroux also addressed the Whiting Foundation’s writers’ awards ceremony, so he knew he was speaking to young writers who were getting awards for their work at the very beginning of their careers.

He spoke about his work with great writers, and he talked about how those writers were almost universally poorly reviewed when first published, misconstrued and not understood by the culture. He could still remember fifty years later the early reviews of Virginia Woolf, the early reviews of Flannery O’Connor, the early reviews of a number of his great authors.

THE JOB OF A PUBLISHING HOUSE IS

TO STAY TRUE TO THESE WRITERS

UNTIL THE TIMES CATCH UP WITH THEM.

He said a memorable thing that really brought tears to my eyes, and everybody afterwards said, "'Course, nobody says this any more, he's the last of a kind," but I would like to think that we all still believe this. He said, "The job of a publishing house is to stay true to these writers until the times catch up with them." I thought that was really wonderful, because really original writers you may appreciate, and you may have difficulty getting your editors to see their originality, and maybe it won't work the first time around, but we have to stay true to these people because eventually the culture will catch up with them.

HESS: I'd like to ask a question, follow-up, because that's a very idealistic, very lovely idea, and it's certainly produced a lot of great literature but is it reasonable structurally in the publishing industry today? With the sorts of financial changes, book-return policies, with the corporate scale and corporate bottom-line impulses governing what is done, publishing is becoming much more of a mass medium. It's always been a mass medium, but certainly not as "mass" as television, or movies. But it still is a general sort of medium, and there are these incredible changes today, the way they're sold, Amazon and so forth. Is Giroux's attitude still possible? Or does it need to be completely redefined and retranslated for the world of today?

BUTTALA: I think it's not only possible; it's the only choice. And that may seem idealistic, but if you can't maintain your ideals in this business, it's probably not a business that you would choose to be in. No one's going to work 80 hours a week for, you know, minimal salary publishing books that 10,000 people read unless they're passionate.

Quality

SZANTO: Right, when you say "ideals," I presume you're alluding to the concept of quality in some way, and the stories you tell are instructive mainly in the sense that they speak of a time when there was total agreement or seemed to be very, very strong agreement on what quality is. But isn't it the case, to follow up on what Alan is saying, that a lot of the malaise in the critical community, is because of our breakdown in the agreement about what quality is? And isn't that really in a sense the price we pay for the very diversity that we would like to have and for the embarrassment of riches? Do you all feel in your own track that over the ten or twenty or thirty years that you've been around this business that your own sense of quality is just as strong as it was when you began?

STRACHAN: No, for all of us, the realities of the business have changed. But I don't think you necessarily change your stripes. What you're in the business to publish, as I said earlier, I think most editors publish out of self-interest: "This is what I'm really interested in. This is why I'm in this business. This is what I would like to do with those books." I don't think that's changed very much.

SIFTON: And the argument about the breakdown of a consensus on what is quality is a 200-year-old argument. Reynolds and Johnson were fighting this out two or three hundred years ago, and it was claimed to be an old argument then, that the classical ideals of the ancients and moderns of the 17th century had long ago been trashed.

WILSON: Are you going to expand that audience if you think you need to expand it? Much as The New Yorker gets bashed, the first place I read Junot Diaz, the Dominican-American writer, was in The New Yorker, and I enjoyed his book Drowned very much.

And then I thought, "Well, I will bet that almost zero young Dominican-Americans are going to be reading this book." I just thought how ironic that was, that here he is writing out his experience, and I know in The New Yorker who is going to be reading him, but I don't know too many young Dominican-Americans reading The New Yorker. He actually winds up writing for upper-class white people.

BERGHOLZ: No, I know quite a few Dominicans who read The New Yorker, and some of them who've been published long before Junot Diaz.

BUTTALA: Having been at one of Junot's readings, I think that you would be amazed by the audience that he has; at the breadth of it and the excitement, the energy, the youth.

BERGHOLZ: The audience is very mixed. He can read at the 92nd Street Y and he can read at the Nuyorican Cafe, and the marketing of that was incredible. But what he sold I've never been able to find out; apparently it was around 20,000 or 25,000. But the amount of publicity this fellow got? You've never seen anything like it. Relative to what was happening, he is a guy who went to Cornell and was speaking in a very correct way until he came to New York and was warned, "You'd better be humble." So he changed his personality

because he saw he was going to sell that way. He's a bit of a chameleon and he's a very clever fellow, but he's a great writer. And the fact is, he did crack something there that is quite important.

In his acknowledgments in the book, he thanked Bill Buford for discovering him. But he was discovered by his professor, a Latina woman at Cornell University. Nothing about her. So, you know, people make some choices there, and I think when people are ready to make that commercial jump, they make it.

WILSON: I think there's a vast audience out there that has not ever been addressed and is still not being addressed.

BERGHOLZ: I think you're absolutely right. And it's very hard to get publishers, because we do not have a lot of people from different backgrounds in the publishing houses making the decisions. It's very hard to get them to pay attention. You have got to stand on your head, really.

Oprah and Book Clubs

BERSON: That's kind of like the snobbery around Oprah. We had a panel of literary folks in here last week, I mentioned her and her show and its effect on sales and her book club, and everybody's eyebrows shot up and eyes rolled. But our paper did a story about the prevalence of book clubs in all levels of community: There are black book clubs; there are black mother/daughter book clubs; there are Asian-American book clubs.

And I'm wondering if you pooh-pooh that. I mean, I can't imagine so many people buying an Ursula Hegi book. But Oprah recommended it, and Ursula wound up near the best-seller list.

SEROY: That was considered by the industry a mistake, because it didn't sell as well as her other selections because it was too heady.

SIFTON: Oprah Winfrey—and I think I speak for all of us when I say this—has the kind of commitment I mentioned that publishers once had to the beliefs that ordinary Americans will want to read these books and that is now absent in the business. But I regret that she's the only one doing this. Why aren't there more of them? Why aren't there regional ones? Why aren't there local ones? Why aren't there people who have that power within a given city? I want not just a neighborhood one. I would like to see that kind of energy and zest and enthusiasm at a higher level.

SEROY: I want to turn this screw that Elisabeth just put in a little bit further. I think I and everybody else thinks it's really wonderful that Oprah can get "x" number of thousands of people to read a certain book. But if an Oprah booking and that quantity of sales becomes the cart driving the horse in publishing so that everything else looks like small beer compared to it, that's really a bad situation. It's like saying there are two ways to pay the rent: You can go in to work and do a job every day. Or you can buy lottery tickets and cross your fingers. Getting the book on Oprah is like buying lottery tickets, and if that is the only goal that everybody is working towards all the time—if that becomes the cart that drives the horse—then we are all up the creek.

GETTING THE BOOK ON OPRAH IS

LIKE BUYING LOTTERY TICKETS.

AMIRREZVANI: A report from the field for you about my newspaper, The Contra Costa Times: We started a book club kind of like Oprah's, recommended a book—an art book, not junk—every month. People have responded really beautifully. The bookstores sell out of this book every single month, people write in, and I just wish you all would pay more attention to what's happening regionally.

Attracting and Developing Future Readers

BERGHOLZ: I think publishers are more aware that if they don't have young readers, they're not going to have people buying books. Whether there are real programs I don't know, but I think that every time I sit down with publishing people who have some kind of executive position, they're always talking about what's going to happen when children don't have books any more.

SEROY: I think that's one of the things that Pat Schroeder is trying to do at the American Association of Publishers, and I don't know how successful she'll be, ultimately, but I think that's part of what she sees her mission as.

SIFTON: This is an issue that the publishers can't possibly address alone—one of the integrally related developments in the book business. In the 1980s there was the decline of the local community library, the local school library, and the growth of the big independent bookstores, which the chains then modeled their superstores on. This was because the 1980s were a decade when Reagan was in power and cutting library budgets left, right, and center. It absolutely suited the reactionary Republican agenda to have this "privatized," as it were, and have the community literacy programs, which had once been in the schools and public libraries, taken over by private corporate interests—namely, the superstores.

Oddly enough, the first and best of the big superstores developed this sense of a bookstore as a community center. They were largely staffed by old radicals from '68 who had taken a sharp look at the intelligent way in which the chains computerized their inventories and became smart about business, as many independent booksellers had not been before—they had been English graduates who loved books but didn't know how to run a store—and applied their social energies to developing bookstores as community centers. That's great that they did it, and I love those stores. But in a better world, the government should be reconsidering the funding of libraries and schools.

BUTTALA: I can name five schools in Harlem that don't have a single book in their libraries, and I send boxes of books to them regularly, and all of my leftover books, and I think where this stuff really can be done is on the individual level.

BERGHOLZ: You can embarrass them into it. An instance—and I'll tell this because it's a long time ago—a writer who is very popular in the Harlem community went up there, and they asked if they could have some signed books. The author turned to the publicist and said, "Can we send some books up?" and the publicist said, "Oh, no." And so the author said, "May I buy a box of books and sign them and have them sent up?" And she embarrassed the publisher into bringing those up in a limousine the next day to these children.

I think what you're saying about the one-on-one and people taking hold of this and doing things is there are ways to make a very, very big difference and push publishers, push the publicists, push the critics. We have to get more personally involved.