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Publishing and Other Near-Death Experiences

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**BODY:**

Why can't book publishing be the way it is in books? Where are those heady nights on Beekman Place, those working days on lower Fifth, those underpaid trust-fun girls with the clacking Smith-coronas and the clicking low-heeled pumps from I. Miller? Where are Bennet Cerf's entrepreneurial seeds, Maxwell Perkins's worshipful authors, Mary McCarthy's well-red bedfellows? Where are the editorial assistants lunching frenetically at the Oyster Bar counter? Where are the pneumatic tubes running directly from Vassar and Smith to Viking and Scribners, sucking young English majors down their channels and depositing them at chewed wooden desks with tins of lemon drops in the top drawers and manuscripts towering over the "in" boxes? Alas, lament entry levelers everywhere, the 30's are gone. So are the 40's, 50's, 60's and 70's for that matter.

There comes a time for every aspiring book publisher when she recognizes that her career, though inspired by Mary McCarthy's, will not resemble it. After a few weeks steeped in proposals for self-help books or unauthorized biographies of cable-access television stars, she realizes that there is no longer a May Day parade, a byline in *The Nation* is no longer immediately accessible to 22-year-old English majors, two-bedroom apartments on Jane Street are out of the single girl's price range, and Webster Hall is no longer filled with the literati but with drag queens. There comes a point when she notices that although she studied Homer, Austen and Melville, she will not be publishing them. There are a few holdouts from the "literary" camp, to be sure (the assistant may find herself remarking on the fact that here, in the world books, "Literature" is considered a category as specific as "how to" or "occult"), but there seem to be a disproportionate number of Oprah bios, guides to better sexual relationships and near-death-experience books, slugged for those on the inside as N.D.E. "A new N.D.E. title," screams the publisher, dollar signs glowing in her contact lenses. "Isn't this to die for?" To the publisher, N.D.E. means big excitement and big bucks. To the assistant it can also stand for "not doing editing," "not drinking enough" or "nasty, despondent employee."

I've had a number of different editorial-assistant jobs. Some of these were on high floors of midtown office buildings, stale and plasticky smelling, the kinds of places where employees fight to assert their identities by tacking Polaroids of boyfriends and cats on their cubicle walls. Others were sweet and arty, housed in the sort of wood-floored office space where the Mia Farrow character in a Woody Allen film always seems to work. Still another office was so mouse-infested that I found myself not just tapping but actually stomping my feet underneath my desk for hours at a stretch; it seemed that the moment I stopped a rodent would make its way from the floor to an open desk drawer, wherein I would later fish around for a pen and instead discover something that made me actually weep in disgust, and then yearn for a career in investment banking.

For the editorial assistant, every day is a new neardeath experience. As if "going toward the light," we chase after what literature there is, trying, at least in the beginning, to discover the genius in the slush pile who's going to elevate us from entry-level minion to up-and-comer with a brilliant eye. Our job entails pretty much what it sounds like: assisting editors. We open our editors' mail and log in the submissions. We keep track of flap copy and back-cover

blurbs. We notice when a typo appears on a jacket mock-up -- there's a fine line between "Prozac National" and "Prosaic Notion." We request contracts, fill out invoices and, mostly, answer the phone again and again. "Candy Whatzit's office," we say. "Jillian Dazzlewitz's line," and then, when our personal line rings with the promise of a friend on the other end or even an author whose manuscript is sufficiently unhot that we might actually acquire it ourselves, we answer obediently, with the name of the company, blurted unintelligibly because four otherlines are on hold. As all editorial assistants know, it is not acceptable to pick up the phone and deliver a simple "hello." This is a trapping of the editorial privileged, of those with more than one linen blazer and their own offices with radiators upon which cardboard--mounted book jackets are gleamingly displayed. I spent quite a lot of time in my editorial-assistant days dreaming about when I'd be able to answer with a "hello." I'd say, with faux nonchalance at 7:30 in the evening after everyone had left. This usually resulted in the person hanging up or my mother's voice emerging on the other end, insisting that such lack of professionalism surely wasn't going to result in a promotion any time soon.

So it's all in the phone greeting, the banter with authors and agents, the art of raising the pitch of our voices when we call the accounting department to ask what happened to that check for the \$100,000 advance because "the author is desperately poor and the agent is ballistic." (The truth is that we discovered the check request under pile of magazines on our desk two months after we were supposed to process it.) But the voice will fix everything. It rises when we're covering up our clerical errors, drops to sultry depths when we're schmoozing or gossiping or ordering a decaf cappuccino with skim milk from the deli around the corner. We're secretaries fully versed in Derrida, receptionists who have read Proust in the French. This is a land of girls. There are always at least ten of "us" for every one of "him." We've got decent shoes. We've got B.A.'s in English from fancy schools, expensive haircuts, expensive bags and cheap everything else. We've got the studio apartment with the half-eaten 100-calorie yogurt in the minifridge. We've got one message flashing on the answering machine (it's Mom again), bad television reception and a pile of manuscripts to read before bedtime. We've got annual take-home of \$18,000 before taxes if we're lucky, a \$100 deductible on the health insurance, which is useful about one year into the job when we reach that milestone of entering therapy (inspired by the books we're working on), when we remember that getting out of bed every morning is mandatory rather than optional, when we realize that the phrase "There's a lot of writing involved" as it pertains to a job is subject to interpretation.

Like all legends, the glamour of publishing that we read about in McCarthy's "Intellectual Memoirs" or Mary Cantwell's "Manhattan, When I Was Young" is likely to be shattered somewhere around the first anniversary of assistantship. Though our heroines were no doubt just as burdened by this age-old indentured servitude as we are, there's something in the retelling, in the breezy, we-can-laugh-about-it-now quality of such memoirs, that today's editorial slaves find confusing. It's as if a sepia tint had been imposed on a thoroughly fluorescent-lighted world. Unlike our predecessors, we find ourselves spending considerably more lunch hours waiting in line at Blimpie than at the Oyster Bar. We realize that we're spending a significant amount of office time changing the fax paper, chasing down botched contracts and writing flap copy for "Thin Thighs in Three Seconds" rather than inhabiting a publishing world like the one Dan Wakefield evoked in his memoir "New York in the Fifties," where "the booze ran freely and the talk was always funny, sharp, knowing, dealing with what we cared about most -- books, magazines and stories, the words and the people who wrote them."

To the dewy eye of the editorial assistant, there is something about this mythos -- the stiff patent leathers tromping around Madison Square, the particular literary drunkenness that seemed obtainable only from the taps of the White Horse Tavern, where Dylan Thomas met the shot glass that killed him -- that feels lost, abandoned in nostalgia's inevitable recycling bin. Instead, there are lunches eaten while hunched over a plastic container of tri-colored pasta salad from the Korean deli. There are hundreds of hours spent at the copy machine duplicating manuscripts, thousands of phone messages scrawled on carbon message pads and

a few attempts to raise our salaries to something resembling at least the annual tuition fee of the college we attended (not including the cost of books). Nonetheless we persevere, dreaming of the day when we'll become an assistant editor, and wondering how we'll survive the ensuing years until that fabled associate editor position is dangled before our eyes. If we make it this far without ditching the whole thing and going back to school for yet another graduate degree, one day we could be the star editor responsible for the true story of Howard Stern's near-death experience. A savory thought, yet one that threatens, like the devil, to drag us down by the sharp lapels of our Burberry raincoats. It's a good thing we don't own any. We can't afford them. Besides, they're not as timeless as they once were.

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