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The Realities of Jobs in Publishing

By Susan Basalla May

Graduate students in the humanities often imagine that a career in commercial book publishing would suit them well. Being paid to read and discuss literature seems like a natural segue from an academic career.

While publishing can indeed be an intellectually satisfying career, it is important to balance that romantic image with information about the practical realities of publishing, which can include low pay, limited job openings, and intense pressure to produce books that will sell well.

I interviewed two acquisitions editors -- one who works with college textbooks and one who handles commercial books -- to build a more realistic picture of the field. Sarah Wilson, who did not want to use her real name, is a senior consulting editor with a large college textbook publisher. She has a Ph.D. in history and has been in textbook publishing for more than 30 years. Matthew Carnicelli has an M.A. in English literature and was until recently an acquisitions editor with the McGraw-Hill trade press.

Question: Where did you earn your advanced degree and why did you leave academe?

Sarah: I earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of Rochester in 1971. My husband, who was also a graduate student there, and I decided that whoever got the best job would determine where we would go. He got a job in New York City, and I applied for many academic positions in the area. I came in second at a small college in New Jersey, but I needed a job, and so I took a job with Prentice Hall in the college-text division as a production-editor trainee. For a while I continued to look for an academic position, but gradually I realized that college publishing offered me a career that I seemed to be suited for.

Matthew: I received my master's from the University of Toronto but decided not to pursue a Ph.D. I was finding the study of English literature far too specialized and consequently lacking in relevance and meaning. I wanted to return to a field that allowed me to more directly affect the public discussion (or, to use a very academic word, discourse) on important subjects through trade-book publishing. I could never be a banker or a lawyer; I have to have meaning.

Question: How did you get your first job in publishing?

Sarah: I applied for several jobs in New York; one in educational writing, one in research, and the textbook-publishing position. I liked the idea of college-text publishing because even though I would not be teaching, I would still be in touch with academics and ideas and education, which were, and are, my major interests in the business.

Matthew: Trade publishing is one of the most insiderish, contact-oriented businesses, just like other media businesses. I interviewed for editorial-assistant positions during my last semester at Toronto. I had a number of information interviews with editors who knew a newspaper writer friend of mine.

Question: Describe your job. What do you do on an average day?

Sarah: Acquisition editors plan the list, trying to anticipate what materials instructors and students need in the subject areas in which we publish. We find authors to write the texts and accompanying supplements, both in print and electronically, and we help to plan the marketing campaign, and provide support to the sales representatives as they present the books.

During the academic year, acquisitions editors travel extensively to campuses and conventions, talking with customers, visiting authors, and looking for new authors. So a typical travel day would include meeting with about 10 academics on campus or meeting dozens of authors, potential authors, and customers at a convention. Back in the office, my day is taken up with meetings on editorial, marketing, sales, design, production, and financial issues; reading and evaluating proposals and manuscripts; communicating by e-mail and by phone with authors and would-be authors; and supervising the content development of new books and revisions.

Matthew: Until two months ago, I was an executive editor at McGraw-Hill Trade. Four acquisitions editors reported to me and I was expected to acquire 20 books a year. My time was filled with marketing and sales meetings, list-planning meetings, and being a mentor to my editors.

I left two months ago and started my own literary agency to work more deeply, directly, and closely with writers. My day is now spent writing e-mails to potential authors and signed clients, calling editors to find out if they're interested in the projects I've submitted to them, and editing proposals of my

clients. Today, for instance, I spent half the day editing a book proposal called "Lithobolia, or the Stone-Throwing Witch of New England: Witchcraft Before and After Salem." Fascinating stuff.

Question: Are the often-expensive "Introduction to Publishing" classes offered by various universities and other groups worth taking?

Sarah: My impression is that most publishing seminars are oriented toward commercial publishing -- that is, to books that are sold in bookstores. I have almost never seen a curriculum that included much about educational publishing at any level. Therefore, when I am hiring, I do attach a slight advantage to someone who has taken one of those courses, but it is not required. A person who has taken such a course would still start at an entry-level position.

Matthew: I've never taken one. I started working in publishing in 1990, when editors and assistants generally had to be involved in every aspect of publishing. Things are different today -- tighter -- with young people not getting the chance to go to sales conferences and be present at editorial board meetings until they've been on the job for two or three years. Because no one at large corporate publishers has time to serve as mentors for younger staff members any more, I bet some of the information from these seminars would end up being very valuable.

Question: Do you use skills you learned in grad school? What skills did you have to learn on the job?

Sarah: I certainly do use skills I learned in graduate school: Critical reading, efficient research, critical analysis of sources, and written communication are a part of many publishing jobs. I did not start at a higher-level position as a result of having the Ph.D., but I was able to move along more quickly as a result. It was also very helpful that I spoke the language of the academic community, that I was socialized in the attitudes and issues of the faculty, and that I had teaching experience from graduate school. I was thus better able to connect with the authors and customers than I might otherwise have been.

The skills I have had to learn are financial analysis and management of a staff. Both of those have been challenging and interesting.

Matthew: Certainly the critical-reading skills one gets from grad school come into play on the acquisitions side of publishing, both as an in-house editor and as a

literary agent. But then many of those skills can be obtained in your undergraduate years.

Question: What are the starting or intermediate salaries in your area of publishing?

Sarah: The most common entry-level position in the editorial area of college-textbook publishing is editorial assistant. Even someone with a Ph.D. may start in that position to learn the business. The typical starting salary for that job is in the mid- to high \$20s.

An experienced and accomplished senior acquisitions editor might make close to \$100,000, so there is a lot of space in between for people to move up through the ranks.

Matthew: Today, editorial assistants in trade publishing get between \$30,000 and \$35,000.

Question: What advice would you give to someone trying to break into the field now?

Sarah: Some of my advice would apply to any job in any organization. You need to emphasize your skills and what you can contribute to an organization. Too many candidates tell us what the company can do for them -- "This job would help me develop my skills," when what I want to know is what the candidate can do for the company. And of course you need to do some advance research on the company to know how you could contribute.

Some employers might be suspicious of a Ph.D., assuming you will leave the minute a teaching job turns up, or that you will want to be promoted before you have learned the business. So you need to emphasize your professional interest in education and publishing and your willingness to start at the bottom.

Matthew: Everyone who wants to get into publishing wants to become an editor, but there are not that many open positions around for editors and there are a number of other interesting publishing jobs you can get -- in subsidiary rights, say, or marketing.

Publishing is a very tough business today. Everyone seems to be just slogging away these days, trying to sign enough books or sell enough books. The corporations really have changed the business, applying unrealistic profit goals,

etc. But wonderful and important books are still getting published, and that makes it all worthwhile.

Susan Basalla May earned her Ph.D. in English from Princeton University. She is co-author with Maggie Debelius of *So What Are You Going to Do With That?: A Guide to Career-Changing for M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001). She works as an editor at America Online and also conducts career workshops for graduate students.