

It's Just Good Business:
Genre and How Editors Help Authors Fit Their Art into the Business of Publishing

Sarah Weiner

Professor A. Goldblatt

ZENG 304 Literary Editing

Northeastern Illinois University

Fall 2020

It is an incredible thing that writers can connect with complete strangers all over the world through their books. The journey a book takes from the author's mind to readers' eyes is a long one, and there are many people involved in the publishing of a book, including editors, marketers, copyeditors, proofreaders, and designers. Some books get to go on that journey, but unfortunately some do not. See, the publishing industry is not only about promoting and distributing art. It's also a business. And like any business, the goal is to figure out the best way to sell a product. A significant focal point in making books sellable is genre—the categories under which books are sold, such as mystery, fantasy, young adult, etc.

People generally like having categories and comparisons to associate with—not only with books. When we meet someone new, we judge them on what personality type they fit, what actor their voice reminds us of, or what era their fashion seems to be inspired by. When we shop for clothes, we look for what color we like, what fit feels comfortable, or what style is “in” now. Even when we are kids, looking at toys, we are attracted to the toys that resemble our favorite TV characters, toys that have lifelike details, or toys that are similar to what our friends have.

People are constantly making associations based on what they are already familiar with, and that can affect what they feel connected to or gravitate toward. There is a psychological concept called the mere-exposure effect, whereby simply being exposed to something causes a preference to develop.¹ This may be why genre has so much power in book publishing.

“The universe of books is so vast that some kind of categorization is essential just to make the marketing (or buying) of books manageable,” says Peter Ginna. “Imagine going into a

¹ R. B. Zajonc, “Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10, no. 6 (December 2001): 224-228, http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/mere_exposure_gate_way_to_the_subliminal.pdf.

bookstore or library that had no sections and was just endless shelves.” Ginna, with whom I conducted an email-based interview this November, is the author of *What Editors Do: The Art, Craft, and Business of Book Editing* and was the founder, publisher, and editorial director of Bloomsbury Press, an imprint of Bloomsbury USA.

Not only is genre helpful in physical categorization, but genre also helps frame readers’ expectations and guides authors in their writing. Authors may even play with genre conventions and subvert readers’ expectations intentionally. For example, a writer might blend genres unexpectedly with a heist story set in a futuristic moon colony.² The thing about genre, subverted or not, is that many books can fit into more than one. However, as Ginna points out, they can only be shelved in one physical section, so a best-guess choice must be made about where the most readers for that book would go to look for it.

The readers are the ultimate target in publishing, so decisions are always made with them in mind. If there are changes in how readers connect with certain genres or conventions, publishers will work with them. “Publishing always reflects society at large,” says Ginna. “And within genres, there are always trends and changing tastes, which may reflect big social trends or may just reflect that some topic or style got ‘hot.’”

Large publishing companies have multiple imprints for specialized categories or audiences. For example, HarperCollins has many imprints, including Harper Voyager, a global imprint specific to science fiction and fantasy; Avon Books, specific to romance and women’s fiction; and Katherine Tegen Books, for literary and commercial fiction geared toward teens and children. But

² Rob Hart, “10 Great Books That Defy All Genre Labels,” Crime Reads, 20 August 2019, <https://crimereads.com/10-great-books-that-defy-all-genre-labels/>.

even within imprints or in smaller publishing houses, every piece of work will be diagnosed in some way.

Editors are directly involved with the designation of a book's genre from the first moment they consider acquiring it. An important deciding factor in whether to acquire a book is if the editor is passionate about the project. For Sara Schonfeld, currently an assistant editor at Katherine Tegen Books, the HarperCollins teen-and-children's fiction imprint, some genres might just be difficult to connect to because of personal taste. "Because books can be several years behind the current market, making sure that I love a book regardless of genre trends is vital," says Schonfeld in an email interview.

Some editors, explains Ginna, might become known for working with a certain kind of book, so agents and authors pitching similar books will tend to seek those editors out. For instance, the editor of a bestselling post-breakup travel memoir can probably expect to receive several very similar manuscripts over the transom. Whether or not an editor works exclusively with certain genres, the process of looking for quality projects is the same. "I am always looking for something that is of high quality in its category," says Ginna, "but what 'high quality' means in romance novels is different from what it means in cookbooks." Where a high quality romance novel might have a thrilling plot and dimensional characters, a high quality cookbook might have carefully researched recipes and artful photographs.

There are also other factors involved in acquisitions. Schonfeld explains that she must also make sure a book fits on the imprint's list. An imprint's list is the list of books being set for publication in that sales season and can reflect the kinds of books that the publisher or editorial heads of the imprint want to be known for. At Katherine Tegen Books, the publisher—Katherine Tegen herself—has final approval of what fits on the list.

Additionally, in corporate publishing, a book needs to pass the Acquisitions board, which is composed of the leaders from all the imprint's departments. According to Schonfeld, "the heads of marketing, publicity, and sales are also tuned into demand in certain categories and are knowledgeable about the publishing throughout HarperCollins. They might also be wary of certain genres based on sales in the past."

Something editors have to keep in mind is whether a genre is particularly crowded at the moment. Publishing can run a couple of years ahead, so if there is a particular influx of a certain kind of book in the marketplace, editors might avoid acquiring that kind of book to be published in two years, when readers could possibly be fatigued with those stories. For example, Katherine Tegen Books published *Divergent* during the post-apocalyptic craze. "Nowadays, Katherine is highly selective when it comes to post-apocalyptic," says Schonfeld. However, trends in publishing are cyclical, so Schonfeld expects the post-apocalyptic trend to be back several years down the line.

Although too much of the same thing is to be avoided, at the same time, it is good for books to have shared qualities because a lot of the publishing industry is based on competitive titles, or comps. According to Schonfeld, "Once a book has a proven track, other books will try to follow that formula for success." This idea of comps is where the classic "X meets Y" pitch comes from. The mere-exposure effect is at work here again, as an editor's experience with a past project will influence their understanding of a new project. "If I couldn't think of any comps," says Schonfeld, "I probably wouldn't aggressively pursue it. Again, something that's entirely 'new' is actually bad—we'd have no idea how to design, market, and sell something that was actually 'new.' That said, most things have similarities to already-existing projects!"

Once an editor acquires a book, they will also share their ideas with the rest of the publishing team, and this could impact how the book is marketed. If the editor suggests potential marketing hooks related to genre as part of their pitch, the marketing team might reference or build off those suggestions later. Ginna expounds on this: “The editor’s vision of the audience and the way the editor pitches and positions the book are critical to how other departments in the house—from design, to marketing, to sales—go about their tasks. The marketing strategy is ultimately in the hands of the marketing department, but their first understanding of what they’re selling will come from the way the editor presents it in house.”

An editor’s vision for a book’s genre has direct influence on other aspects of publishing as well. “We can influence these sorts of [genre] designations,” says Schonfeld, “by how we write copy, metadata like BISAC codes (how libraries file books, etc.), and our discussions with other departments like design.” The editor is the spokesperson for a book. How they describe it affects how others interact with it. For example, a graphic designer who is told by an editor that a book’s language is “deceptively sparse” and “stripped down” might be more likely to offer a minimalist cover with bold text to complement the author’s style.³

When it comes to the actual editing of a book, in general, editors try to avoid making unnecessary edits to a book to fit it into a particular genre or readership if that is not the author’s intention. “In general, when I edit,” says Ginna, “I’m thinking more about what’s in the pages in front of me rather than some preconceived readership.”

Also, Ginna explains that there really are not different rules for editing different genres. The intentions are the same when editing a science fiction novel or a literary novel. No matter the

³ Vyki Hendy, “Nathan Ryder on Designing The Storm,” Spine, 2020, <https://spinemagazine.co/articles/nathan-ryder>.

book—generally—characters should be believable, dialogue should sound authentic, and the writing should be well-paced and captivating.

That said, editors do want to do the best they can for a book, and that might include making suggestions that would emulate a genre. Ginna asserts, “As an editor, what you’re trying to figure out is, what is this book trying to be and how can I help it be the best version of that? Along with that, what is the most effective way to get this book to as many readers as possible?”

For the editor, the bottom line is helping a book find the best home. Ginna gives the following example: “Sometimes a book that isn’t written as a crime novel can be most effectively marketed as one. You might say to the author, ‘I think we can really sell this as a mystery, but it’s challenging to sell a debut mystery that’s 500 pages long. I have an idea for cutting 150 pages out of it.’ But I would only do that if I thought the cut actually made the book better, not to meet some arbitrary idea of what the genre was.”

Similarly, according to Schonfeld, an editor might suggest genre conventions to an author and allow them to decide whether to adhere to or disregard the conventions. Schonfeld offers an example: “I recently got a submission that was historical fantasy. I spoke with the author and she agreed to reimagine as contemporary fantasy, which I (and my coworkers) felt would give the book a stronger platform for telling the story she was trying to tell.”

If the editor reads a book as a different genre than the author intended, and the author is not open to adapting it, either to better fit the intended genre or the editor’s read, then the editor would likely not have acquired the project to begin with. “That’s a big mismatch on vision,” says Schonfeld, “and editing is mostly about that work relationship.”

Because publishing is a business at the end of the day, getting something to sell is the bottom line. The harsh reality is that genre is a large focus in marketing, and the idea of “what sells and what doesn’t” is an intimidating prospect for writers. Who knows how many writers get turned away from acquisitions because their idea for a romantic thriller set in space just would not fit on this particular publisher’s list? It can be disheartening to be told that a book won’t sell unless it were reenvisioned in a fundamental way. Writers might not be able to look at their work objectively. Some see it as art and have trouble reconciling that with the publisher's need to turn it into a commodity. A good editor will be on the writer’s side while knowing the business enough to strive to do the best for the book.

For readers, finding a new book to read is like meeting someone new or shopping for new clothes. The importance of categorization and preconceived expectations in any aspect of life is why genre matters so much in the business of book publishing. Readers buy books because they are hoping to engage with art, learn something, or acquire new experiences, all of which are connected with the reader’s own identity. Genre helps them find books that align with those desires. In a perfect world, publishing would have less of a business focus and more genuinely connect readers and writers through art. Perhaps, changes could be made, but for now, being aware of the process might help writers feel more comfortable with the publishing industry and how it works, enabling them to be in the best possible position to get their work successfully published.