

Profile: Mary Cunnane

This month we spoke with Mary Cunnane, who has worked in the publishing industry for more than 30 years with a range of high-profile authors across the US and Australia. We are delighted to have her involved with our HARDCOPY program again this year.



You have an extensive background within the publishing industry, can you tell us a little bit about it? Including how you found your way into the editing profession?

Someone once referred to publishing as the “accidental profession”. This was certainly true for me. I stumbled into publishing at WW Norton & Company in New York as a temporary assistant to the then editor-in-chief. After a week of typing letters to, and taking phone calls from, among others, Shirley MacLaine and Anthony Burgess, I knew that book publishing was what I wanted to do with my working life. I left Norton two decades later as a vice president and senior trade acquisitions editor. Norton was then and still is a major independent publisher—with trade, tertiary, and professional divisions—and is unique in that it is wholly owned by its employees. I worked in sales and publicity, as a copyeditor, and as the assistant to the president before being promoted to editor and British rights manager in 1981. All that experience across various aspects of the industry was invaluable. In acquiring and editing books, and in representing authors as an agent, it helps enormously to know the entire publishing process. (I even worked briefly in international sales.)

What has been your biggest career highlight to date?

It’s hard to pick one, so let me name several: publishing Richard Dawkins’ prize-winning *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*; helping to establish Norton’s London operation in the 80s; attending the Miles Franklin Awards dinner in 2011 when my author, Kim Scott, won for *That Deadman Dance*; and, with Nicholas Jose, getting *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Allen & Unwin 2009) off the ground.

What kind of books do you most enjoy editing?

I’m a generalist and enjoy working on just about everything—except cookbooks and YA/children’s books, which are pretty much off my radar screen.

You now run a successful freelance editing and consulting business—we have been lucky to have you involved with our 2014 (fiction) & 2015 (nonfiction) HARDCOPY program—what kinds of services do you provide through this?

I provide in-depth editorial evaluations, as well as line and structural editing, and advice about developing book proposals for both the ANZ and international markets. As a consultant, I have advised cultural and educational institutions here and in the US on their book-related projects and plans. ■

Mary Cunnane was vice president and senior editor at WW Norton & Company. After leaving Norton she was a principal in The Cunnane Jordan Group, publishing consulting firm. On moving to Australia in 1998 she worked at Transworld before founding The Mary Cunnane Agency in 1999–2013. She has also served as vice president of the Australian Literary Agents Association and the Sydney PEN Centre.

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