



How did I get here?

Hannah Griffiths: The job of my dreams

Hannah Griffiths has worked in publishing for fourteen years. Starting out as a publicist, she worked at Penguin and Virago Press before setting up The Literary Consultancy (TLC), the UK's first editorial service. She then worked at the literary agency Curtis Brown where she built a list of writers including Mil Millington, Julia Darling and Bernardine Evaristo. In 2003, she joined the editorial department at Faber & Faber where she is building a fiction list. Her writers include Rachel Cusk, Kirsty Gunn and Jane Harris.

A pretty convoluted journey

I work as an editor at Faber and Faber. I've been in this role for two and a half years. My journey to this point has been pretty convoluted but I know that I've finally arrived in the job of my dreams.

In 1992, I graduated from Oxford University with a 2.1 in English and very little sense of what I wanted to be/do. As I applied cluelessly for jobs in the Media Guardian (curator at the Tate, archivist etc), I also wrote to publishing companies asking for work experience. I'd been told by my tutor at college that although publishing paid terribly, it was full of fantastic people. Penguin Books got in touch about an unpaid position in the rights department which I leapt at. After a couple of weeks, I heard about a job in publicity as an assistant and applied – embellishing my secretarial skills a little – and got that job.

After a few months, a rare editorial position arose at Viking, a hardback imprint of Penguin Books. The job was the assistant to a great

acquiring editor whose list included Jonathan Coe, Will Self and William Gibson. At the same time, a publicity job at coffee-table book publishers, Pavilion, was advertised in the back of *The Bookseller*. I was offered both but for some reason – I think on the advice of my father who told me to take the one that paid more – I took the Pavilion job.

Getting a job in editorial

Looking back, this was a seriously bad decision. For the sake of an extra £500 per year, I spent the next ten months stroking the egos of minor celebrities until escape came in the form of a job as a press officer at Virago Press. At the time, Virago was still very much an independent publisher, working out of shabby but homely offices in Mandela Street. I got my first taste of personal politics and union meetings and met women who would become friends for life. It was a real education and remains my most cherished memory of a workplace.

But things started to unravel in my personal life and, as Virago began its move towards becoming an imprint, I took my eye off the job

and soon was facing dismissal. Fortune came in the form, this time, of Penguin Books who were looking for a Publicity Manager for their Classics.

It seemed a good move for me: you couldn't really go wrong with dead authors. But to be honest, by now I'd fallen out of love with publicity and my itchy feet took me to the US, where I spent six months living on the ranch of the author, Pam Houston, who I'd met at Virago Books. Life seemed idyllic – big skies and Rocky Mountains – so I was amazed to discover that, when the Booker prize shortlist was announced that September, I felt this huge urge to come home. I really missed publishing.

Pam taught creative writing at a university in California. I attended her classes and for the first time, I began to see that there were elements of the craft of writing that could be taught – or at least improved through understanding. I had taken on these principles, partly imagining that I would write a novel myself one day. But when I got back to London, I realised that this actually was a newly acquired skill: I'd helped Pam 'mark' her students' work, which really meant editing their prose fiction. I enjoyed the process enormously so I turned my mind to trying to get a job in editorial but nobody at home in London would hire me.

Setting up The Literary Consultancy

A friend, Rebecca Swift, who had been made redundant from her job as an editor at Virago, was also looking for a new beginning. We started thinking of things we could do to continue working in the area. It was clear that there were hundreds of people whose manuscripts poured into publishers only to be rejected with a cursory pro forma note after months of sitting dusty in cupboards. Thus we came up with the idea of The Literary Consultancy (TLC), a fee-paying editorial service for writers wanting their work to be read and critiqued by industry professionals.

Operating out of our flats in North London, Becky and I muddled through the early stages of setting up a cottage industry and found we were inundated with new writers, eager to take up an offer of comments on their work.

We took on several more readers, some of whom were novelists, some ex-editors from publishing. TLC was seriously dedicated to helping the writers improve their craft, though we were keen to point out that we couldn't get them published. Of all the editorial work I've done, this was the most intense.

Many of the manuscripts were really far from being publishable but everyone got the same amount of attention. Our reports were in-depth and detailed. It was the best sharpening block for my editorial skills, to take a manuscript that was over-written, with no story and no voice, and to try to improve it. Doing this every day meant that I became confident at my ability to analyse what was going wrong on a page and possible solutions.

Becoming a literary agent

While at TLC, I read a novel which really impressed me. I called up Jonny Geller at Curtis Brown who, at that time, was emerging as the wunderkind of literary agenting. I told him about the novel and that if he read it and felt that it was special, I would put him in touch with the writer. He felt exactly like I did, that this was an original voice and idea, so he sent it out to publishers and sold it after a heated auction to 4th Estate. The writer got his deal and Jonny offered me a job as a reader, two days a week. The agency was inundated with unsolicited manuscripts and needed someone to read those that looked promising.

It was an absolute dream job for me. I developed my reading speed and could read two or three novels in a day. I would then write a report. There were a number of novels I read that went on to sell and everyone was happy. I regard this as the purest job I've ever had. I could read a

book and my only consideration was: do I love this book? I didn't have any of the anxieties of agents or publishers who also have to ask 'and will I be able to sell it?' I became confident in my taste – probably the most crucial development in my whole career – and learned that it's enough to just follow your instinct when reading rather than obsessively wondering what 'good' is.

I was still running TLC at this time but it became clear that I looked forward with real enthusiasm to the days at the agency. When they offered me a full time position as a reader for them, I found it quite an easy decision to leave TLC and become a full time member of Curtis Brown with the job title: Head of Development. By now I was also working on some of CB's existing clients' novels, doing some editing, working with the writers direct. Inevitably, the day arrived when I felt like I wanted to take on my own writers.

These were the days of six figure deals for first novels and commercial fiction. I felt there was a gap for books with less obvious big money appeal, books which showed that a writer had promise, books with a literary quality.

I started building a list. It was slow and disheartening at first. I couldn't sell the first three books I took on and had a real crisis of confidence. But then, an editor brought me an author and said 'I want to publish this, will you sell it to me?' and I was off. More deals followed and after a few years, I had a list of around fifteen clients including Julia Darling, Helon Habila, Mil Millington and John Harris.

The vocation of publishing

Totally out of the blue, over lunch one day, the Editor in Chief of Faber & Faber told me that they were looking to hire a woman editor and would I consider applying for the job? I felt hugely conflicted. Things at the agency were going so well, but the chance to be an acquiring editor at one of the most prestigious literary publishers in the world was tempting. After a

meeting with the Chairman, they offered me the job and I took it.

Faber & Faber is, without a doubt, the most stimulating place I've worked. Perhaps because it's an independent publisher in an industry dominated by corporate giants, its identity and beliefs are felt very strongly. The emphasis is on the very best writing and there is an uncompromising attitude towards acquiring that feels vital and necessary as the trade turns its attentions towards celebrity biography and best selling certainties.

My loose brief is to acquire fiction which will appeal to women readers. I get sent between 10 and 20 novels a week, mostly from agents, and only have time to read those that really appeal. The company is small enough for me to get really involved in the publishing of the books, rather than just the editing. Once the author and I are happy with the final draft, meetings are held with marketing, publicity and sales departments to discuss how to position, package and promote the book to reach its widest readership.

Publishing feels like a vocation in many ways. Most people involved in it are obsessed with books, book selling, writers. They're not paid very much but the work is fulfilling, stimulating, fun and the people are smart, thoughtful, dynamic. Working with writers is sometimes tough – they're a sensitive breed – but mostly a real privilege. And there's always that possibility that one of these books that you cherish, that you've lovingly taken from printed out page through to the bookshop, that you bought because you just loved something about it, might break out and be read by hundreds of thousands of people— it's a job which requires you to take a risk, but the payoff is potentially huge. Who couldn't enjoy that?

Some tips for getting into publishing

Meet as many people as you can but don't be pushy. Just ask for twenty minutes of their time. It's much more likely they'll think of you for any openings if they've met you.

If ever asked what books you like, make sure you mention contemporary books rather than just classics.

Read everything. Develop your own taste. Work out where your taste fits within the range of literary and commercial, non-fiction and specialist publishing (i.e. mind, body, spirit, science-fiction etc).

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Useful links

The Association of Authors' Agents
The professional body for literary agents.
www.agentsassoc.co.uk

bookcareers.com
An independent careers and coaching organisation specialising in the book and publishing industries. Keeps a register of those who are seeking work.
<http://www.bookcareers.com/>

The Bookseller
The leading information resource for the UK and international book industry.
www.bookseller.com

Book2Book
Free daily book trade news e-digest. Subscribe online at www.booktrade.info

Curtis Brown
One of Europe's oldest literary and talent agencies, representing writers, directors, actors, playwrights and celebrities.
<http://www.curtisbrown.co.uk/>

Diversity in Publishing Network
Aims to promote the status and contribution of people from diverse ethnic groups in all areas of publishing. Membership is open to anyone in publishing or a related trade, or who is seeking to enter the industry.
<http://www.diversityinpublishing.com/>

Faber & Faber
The last of the great independent publishing houses in London. Occasionally has openings for work experience.
<http://www.faber.co.uk/>

Independent Publishers Guild
Provides independent publishers with advice, ideas and information to help them to do better business.
www.ipg.uk.com

The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP)
The international trade association for not-for-profit publishers and those who work with them.
www.alpssp.org

The Literary Consultancy
Leading manuscript assessment service, providing expert, market-aware editorial advice to writers at all levels writing in English.
www.literaryconsultancy.co.uk

The London School of Publishing (LSP)
Offers range of practical courses including editing, proofreading and feature writing.
<http://www.publishing-school.co.uk/>

Pavilion Books
Publishes wide range of non-fiction books with a particular emphasis on cookery, popular culture, lifestyle and art..
<http://www.anovabooks.com/imprint/pavilion/index.jsp>

Penguin Books

Founded in 1935 by Allen Lane, Penguin is now a global business and publishes a vast range of books. For details of working at Penguin, including their two-week work experience placements, see their careers website at http://gs12.globalsuccessor.com/fe/tpl_penguin01.asp

The Publishers Association

The leading trade organisation serving book, journal and electronic publishers in the UK. Website has comprehensive *Careers in Book Publishing* section.
www.publishers.org.uk

The Publishing Training Centre at Book House Offers around 70 open courses covering the complete range of publishing skills plus distance learning programmes.
www.train4publishing.co.uk

Society of Editors and Proofreaders

Professional association for employed and self-employed copy-editors and proofreaders.
www.sfep.org.uk

Society of Young Publishers

Membership organization open to anyone in publishing or a related trade (in any capacity) or who is hoping to be soon. Branches in London and Oxford. Services include a Jobs Bulletin.
www.thesyp.org.uk

Virago Press

The largest women's imprint in the world. See website for vacancies or send CV to Personnel Manager.
<http://www.virago.co.uk/>

Women in Publishing

Works to promote the status of women working in publishing and related trades by helping them to develop their careers.
<http://www.wipub.org.uk/>

Publications about getting into publishing include:

How to Get a Job in Publishing: A Really Practical Guide to Careers in Books and Magazines by Alison Baverstock, Steve Carey and Susannah Bowen

Ideal for anyone who wants to work in publishing, whether on traditional books and magazines or online publications.
(A & C Black Publishers Ltd, 2008)

Inside Book Publishing 4th Edition by Giles Clark and Angus Phillips

Designed for students of publishing, authors needing to find out publishing secrets, and those wanting to get in or get on in the industry.
(Routledge, 2008)