People Behind the Book:

The Editor: Yvonne Hooker

[His] editorial hand ranged far, wide and deep, touching lightly but expertly … He seemed less an editor of any sort than the very best sort of guardian angel.

That was writer and critic Walter Kerr's tribute to fellow American Seymour Peck's editorial skills; and I imagine that any editor – after a little judicious blue-pencilling of the celestial connotations, perhaps – would recognise what he was getting at. And certainly after hearing Yvonne Hooker – in the business for forty years, the last dozen as a senior editor with Puffin – chatting about her work, concepts like far, wide, deep, expertise and guardianship spring readily to mind. A clear sense of the editor as guide, shaping and marking out the route, was very clear.

At various times during our conversation Yvonne referred to the editor/author relationship as "special", "close", "strange" (as in unusual: "You can be as close as can be, working together, and yet have nothing in common outside"). It is also "hidden", "secret" ("They don't necessarily want it known how many times their book has been re-written, for example"); a "private exchange" between author and editor. "Of course," she elaborated, "the 'closeness' can vary a lot. Some authors will do everything you suggest" – a situation that is not, from her point of view, her expression indicated, an entirely happy one – "others fight all the way." The basis of the most fruitful association, she intimated, lies somewhere between those two extremes; it is a malleable one, with give and take and a pooling of ideas and resources.

There is one proviso, however. "It can be a very close relationship – but no matter *how* close, *the book* is the important thing. The editor's task is to make it the very best it can possibly be, while remaining the author's book. *Writers* editing writers …" she pondered " … how do they do it?" How, in other words, do they resist the temptation to wade in and take over the actual writing themselves? "No, I have no wish to be a writer," she said, answering my question, with a smile and a shake of the head.

"It's vitally important, through all the stages, for the editor to keep the book alive, to keep the excitement going, to remind everyone of how good this book is. When you find a new book or a new author – and now that publishers' slush piles are things of the past, the manuscript will almost certainly have been directed to you by an agent – when you do discover something new, you take on something you love. And you then have to persuade everyone else of its merits." The editor functions as a sort of conduit, being the author's voice to the publisher and, vice versa, the publisher's to the author.

"You, remember, are the first reader – well, first *professional* reader – after the agent. It's lovely to discover something new," she said. "And from then on it's up to you to get the internal buzz going, to ensure that all departments are behind the *need* to publish this book. You have to have passion. You have to care deeply." And maintain a cool head. For it is the editor's job to oversee the entire progress of a book, from acquisition to publication, ensuring that it comes in on time and on budget.

"You have to make sure that the book you're taking on fulfils all the demands made of it. Which means that you work very closely with design, production, publicity, marketing, etc, etc. Children's editors deal with an amazing range and variety of techniques." Indeed, apart from printing, distributing and engaging in actual over-the-counter selling there seems little the editor does *not* do to further the progress of 'their' book, from making the offer and negotiating the contract to entering the book for every relevant prize. It is an involvement that begins with a manuscript and a financial spreadsheet and ends, hopefully, with entries in the bestseller lists.

Like many people who have been successful in a specialised sphere, Yvonne says that she got into publishing "by mistake". "I originally thought I'd be an academic. But I was doing a post-graduate degree at Cambridge and realised that I would only be a third class academic. So I decided that I'd like to be in publishing. I wrote to publishers. All those who'd published books that were

on my shelves," she added smoothly, making her inventiveness sound like basic logic.

Her creative approach worked. She had a succession of jobs with Macmillan, Harrap and Methuen, progressing from editorial assistant to editor. "I wanted to work in children's books. People seem to quickly come to the conclusion that they want to specialise in children's books. They work in children's books because they are passionate" – that word again – "about them. I think it's because children's books – the books we read as a child – are the books that change people's lives. They are the first exploration of all the big questions that we encounter. I didn't come from a very bookish family. But I was reading Alan Garner – *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* – in my sixth form, which was pretty unusual, so I suppose the seed must have been sown.

"You *have* to know the market," she declared. "All the prize winners, for example – they're a must – there's always a queue of us editors waiting to read them. You *must* read around, know what's going on from other publishers, see what the opposition's up to. (Obviously, it's a great advantage to be a fast reader … although not all editors are.) Which of course means your reading is heavily weighted towards children's books – there's barely time for anything else." And barely office-time, either, for this 'investigative', extracurricular reading, which perforce must become a 'spare'-time activity. "It's very difficult to have time, at the desk, to do any reading that is outside the actual parameters of work."

When they're not liaising with authors or agents or attending fortnightly progress meetings or weekly cover meetings, and not making presentations at sales conferences or participating in book festivals, it's likely that editors are "sitting down with a manuscript." For at the heart of the editor's work is the will to achieve a final text that can be agreed upon by both editor and author. No one other than the editor has as much contact with the author; no one fights as fiercely for the author's voice to be heard. But, Yvonne avowed, "there is no real way of teaching *how* to be an editor." It requires intuition, acumen, patience, diplomacy; acute responsiveness to language and structures; instinctive know-how.

During a short tour of Yvonne's office, extensive, open-planned, we encountered other editors, her colleagues, variously engaged. One, returning from a working lunch with an agent. ("Editors cultivate agents, and vice versa; get to know each other's preferences," Yvonne elucidated.) Another, blinking and smiling broadly under arc lights, was playing her part in a promotional film. A third sat in one of the specially designated 'quiet' rooms, alone with a cuppa and a manuscript. A trio of tableaux, offering a hint of the diversity of editors' lives.

"It's one of the best jobs in the world. Such fun!" Yvonne concluded with quiet conviction.

My meeting with Yvonne took place barely a week before she was due to retire – something she was looking forward to with equilibrium, plus an editor's natural curiosity. I'm very grateful to her for taking time out to chat to me.

Chris Stephenson

NOW DON'T GET ME WRONG...

Chris Powling
Number 24: Clichés

...Clichés have a lot to offer. They trip off the tongue, they're easy on the brain, they can be smack up-to-date and, when deployed at length (whether in real life or as dialogue on-the-page) are a crucial indicator of a character's...well, character. Yes, I'm aware of the well-known observation that clichés are language on its way down as opposed to poetry which is language on its way up. But who needs non-stop uppity language, anyway?

So let's hear it for clichés, okay?

Okay...no problem.

Except when there is a problem, of course. Some clichés are so inherently dodgy that whenever we encounter them we should be on instant red alert. My current horror is "we must move on..." The intention here is to suggest that *not* to move would only be considered by masochists, sticks-in-the-mud and those of a wallowing disposition ie the kind of people who might feel there was some merit in hanging around for a while in order to:

a) apologise.
b) make reparation
c) set up safeguards for the future.

The "we must move on" gambit was attempted by David Milliband on a recent Question Time in a discussion of the Iraq War. He was given a very hard time by the audience. Almost certainly it had occurred to them, but not apparently to him, that one of the most urgent needs to 'move on' is felt by a criminal at the scene of a crime. It's a useful image to call up whenever this particular cliché is rolled out.

Here's another. When encountering a politician who insists "that's why we've put in place...' think of an empty stable, a locked door and a bolted horse. I couldn't help visualising all three when I heard Andrew Adonis's recent announcement that he'd put in place £300 million to foster music in schools which – for some reason he's utterly unable to fathom – has rather languished in recent years. Pity about all the pupils over the last decade-or-so who have missed out on this largesse owing to the fact that they have already 'moved on'.

Still, let's be fair, he may also have moved on himself – perhaps to putting in place a similar splurge of money to offset the damage this government's literacy 'reforms' have done to children's reading and writing for pleasure. Hold on, though. I sense another cliché on the way. Yes, here it comes...*maybe we'd better not hold our breath*.