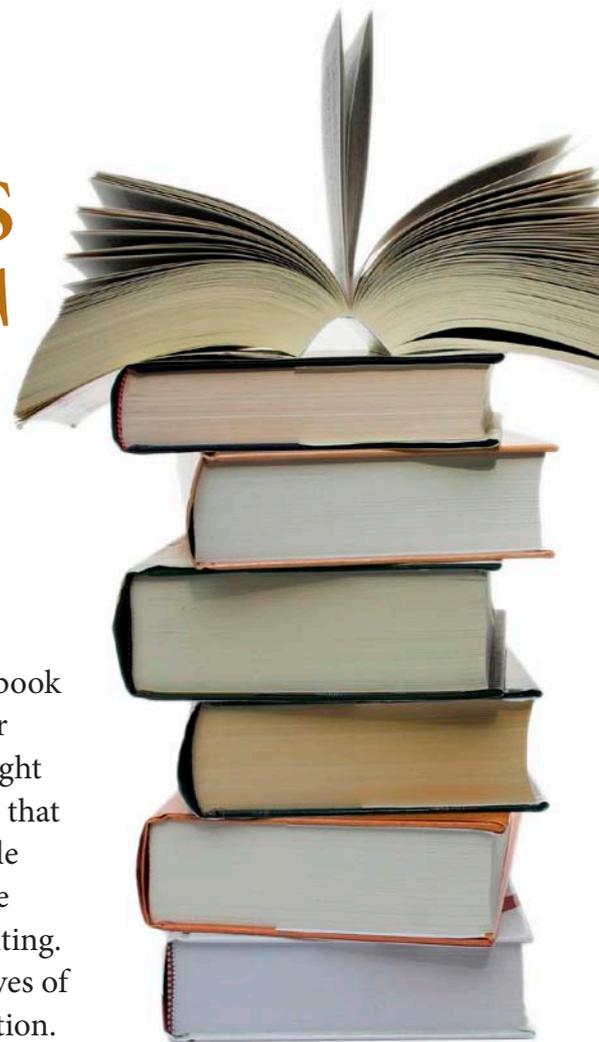


What book editors WANT



We surveyed 8 of them to see what's hot, and what's shot

By Maya Rock

ALONG WITH JUGGLING the demands of their current lists, book editors are perpetually on the hunt for fresh material. To discover what they're looking for, *The Writer* magazine checked in with eight top editors in New York City. Across the board, the group agreed that a great agent is crucial for getting ahead with them, and that while certain trends have had surprisingly immense staying power (like vampires), there's always room for genuinely original, quality writing.

Read on for more insights into what works from the perspectives of some of today's leading editors of commercial fiction and nonfiction.

BRENDA COPELAND, Hyperion

Brenda Copeland is an executive editor at Hyperion/Voice. She publishes narrative nonfiction, memoir and fiction and has worked with such bestselling authors as Cecily von Ziegesar, Dean Koontz, Claire Cook and David Dosa.

What she's looking for: I'm looking for projects with a strong voice and a distinct point of view. The subject doesn't have to be new, but the author's approach to it does. I'm publishing a wonderful first novel in the spring, *Minding Ben*, that tells the story of a young girl who works as a nanny during her first years in New York. It's a familiar conceit, but author Victoria Brown's protagonist is a 16-year-old from Trinidad, and that's not a voice we've heard from before. What's more, the book's exploration goes beyond the relationship between parent and caregiver to look at the playground politics between

the nannies themselves. That's a distinct point of view.

What's hot now and in the near future: Animal books continue to sell well, as do books based on blogs. I expect to see *Shi-- My Dog Says* any moment now.

What's not hot right now or may be fading: So-called stunt books are losing steam. A.J. Jacobs was the first and the best, I think. [Jacobs is author of *My Life as an Experiment: One Man's Humble Quest to Improve Himself* and *The Year of Living Biblically*.] Julie Powell took up the challenge with the very successful *Julie and Julia*, but there have been too many copycats. Douglas Brown has written about having sex every day for a year. Time to move on, I'd say.

How writers can gain an edge: Write the best manuscript you can, then

edit, edit, edit. Be aware of the market, but don't write for it. Get the best agent you can, and actually listen to what he or she has to say.

What separates winners from losers: Writers should demonstrate they know how to get the word out on their books. I'm a big proponent of Twitter and Facebook and have seen authors thrive due to their efforts there. Riverhead author Julie Klam [author of *You Had Me at Woof: How Dogs Taught Me The Secrets of Happiness*] is a great example of someone who's combined her talents as a writer with her talents as a social networker to great success.

Thinking of what makes you and your book distinctive—using that to your advantage—will not only help you get published, it will help you when you get published.



Brenda Copeland

JUDITH CURR, Atria

Judith Curr is executive vice president, publisher and founder of Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster. Atria is the publishing home of many major bestselling authors including Vince Flynn, Mireille Guiliano and Jodi Picoult.

What she's looking for:

Memoirs, autobiographies, historical fiction, international fiction, inspiration, fashion, fun, beauty.

What's hot right now and in the near future: The incredible success of the Stieg Larsson thrillers indicates people are willing to read novels set outside of the United

States. As a result we have signed Liza Marklund, a Swedish author, who is currently co-writing a novel with James Patterson.



Judith Curr

What's not hot right now or may be fading: There is a decline in practical self-help, home reference and travel. Basically any topic on which you can get access to free information on the Internet.

How writers can gain an edge: They need to put forward fresh, original, succinct ideas. We look for a sense of enthusiasm and commitment to the project, as well as a sense of an author's willingness to participate and details of the author's platform. Ultimately, it always comes down to the quality of the content. Also the synopsis and the outline have to be consistent with the proposal.

What separates winners from losers: It's difficult to generalize; however, people who have a clear understanding of who they think their readership is and a talent for articulating their unique ideas in an accessible, intelligent way, are usually those who come out on top.

AMY EINHORN, Amy Einhorn Books

Amy Einhorn is the vice president and publisher of Amy Einhorn Books, which is part of G.P. Putnam's Sons. The first book Amy Einhorn Books published was *The Help*, the novel by Kathryn Stockett that now has more than 2.5 million copies in print in the United States alone and has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 70 weeks.

What she's looking for: The mission statement for my imprint is to find books that hit that sweet spot between literary and commercial. So I'm on the lookout for fiction that's well-written but also a real page-turner—examples of that would be *You Know When the Men Are Gone*, a collection of short stories by Siobhan Fallon, or *The Weird Sisters* by Eleanor Brown [February]. Both are books I'm in love with. Nonfiction is harder to categorize as it's a fairly broad range—I've recently bought a memoir by Jenny Lawson, aka The Bloggess, called *Let's Pretend This Never Happened*, that is the funniest thing I've read since I edited Amy Sedaris.

What's hot right now and in the near future: To be honest, I've never been one to follow what's hot, or cold, for that matter. Because from what I've seen, whenever someone says "This is the next [fill in the blank—*Da Vinci Code*, Stieg Larsson, etc.]," it never works. Because being derivative isn't a selling point for anything really, but definitely not for literature. I'm not particularly interested in trying to hop onto trends.

What's not hot right now or may be fading: One would have to think that something will come along and take the place of vampires, or zombies, but if I knew what that will be I wouldn't be saying!

How writers can gain an edge: I only look at agented material so the first thing is get a good agent. But the rest is really up to the book. You can have lots of bells and whistles, and promises of blurbs from famous writers, but it all comes down to the material itself delivering.

What separates the winners from the losers: Hmm, one thing I think authors and agents sometimes overlook is the opening of books. If the novel doesn't pick up steam till 50 pages in, that's a problem. Because often you don't have the editor's attention to page 51. And I can't emphasize enough how important the opening sentences of a novel are—they set the tone for everything. If something has a weak opening, it's hard to recover.



Amy Einhorn

JULIE GRAU, Spiegel & Grau

Julie Grau, along with Celina Spiegel, is senior vice president and publisher of Spiegel & Grau, a division of Random House, Inc. Spiegel & Grau is the home of a diverse group of authors including Artie Lange, Sara Gruen and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

What she's looking for: Always looking for new voices, great stories well told. Ideally, they enlighten us to a new way of looking at the world, or a particular subject, as they entertain. A former boss used to get frustrated and shout, "We need to acquire easy-to-sell nonfiction!" Oh, easy-to-sell nonfiction—why didn't you say so? As if it's there for the picking.

What's hot now and into the near future: The right celebrity memoir is always hot (until it bombs ...). There was a flare-up of "recession lit" earlier [in 2010], which probably will be in vogue for a while for any contemporary novel that reflects these times. And, of course, the popularity

of the Stieg Larsson novels has spawned interest in finding the next Stieg Larsson.

What's not hot right now or may be fading: Books by celebutards, I hope.

How writers can gain an edge: I'm sorry to say

that the edge to be had comes via a great agent, known for their good taste and keen ability to match editors and writers. We all have agents we prefer to work with—mostly because they are reliable partners in a book's publication. I think it's true of most publishers that we depend on agents to be the gatekeepers, because we just don't have the manpower to handle unsolicited submissions.

What separates the winners from the losers: Generalizing wildly here: Superb writing that captures you from the first pages and a firm grasp on the story. I



Julie Grau

continued on page 32

continued from page 31

acquired a proposal recently and was struck by how the writer, a journalist, was completely in command of her story. The word that kept coming to me was “mature”—she was clearly seasoned and had really put thought to the various elements of her story, the action, the flow of information, and the larger themes it addressed. It was one of those rare occasions when I read a proposal and thought to myself, “This is a book I am going to publish.” And then I pre-empted it [offered enough money to stop all bidding and cut a deal].

MEGAN LYNCH, *Riverhead*

Megan Lynch is senior editor at Riverhead Books, a division of Penguin, where she has worked since 2003. She has acquired and edits a wide range of literary fiction and nonfiction, including books by Dinaw Mengestu, Sarah Waters, Nami Mun, Wendy McClure and Meghan O'Rourke.

What she's looking for: I'm always looking for great writing that is original, confident and convincing, whether it's in the form of a memoir, novel, short-story collection, or reported nonfiction book.

What's hot now and into the near future: I try to stay away from trends, actually, and I think writers are better off avoiding them, too. Write the best book you can possibly write, one you can imagine people excitedly reading and talking about. A genuine approach always beats a cynical one.

What's not hot right now or may be fading: Books need to have a kind of timelessness. Because there are now so many more ephemeral forms of expression available for the written word, I do find myself asking the question “Does this need to be a book?” as I'm reading submissions. Sometimes a truly great idea is still best expressed as a magazine article or blog post.

How writers can gain an edge: Start small and begin building a reputation before your work is submitted to a book publisher. Publish shorter pieces in journals and magazines or on websites. Show a commitment to having a career as a writer (which doesn't mean you can't have a day job).

What separates the winners from the losers: It's the skill of the writer, definitely. The best hook or idea in the world won't sway me if the sentences and the storytelling don't inspire.



Megan Lynch

MARK TAVANI, *Ballantine*

After working briefly at a beer distributor in Pittsburgh and as a forestry aide in New Mexico, Mark Tavani earned a creative-writing degree and eventually joined the Random House Publishing Group, where he is now an executive editor. The list of authors he's worked with includes bestsellers Steve Berry, Justin Cronin and Bill Simmons.

What he's looking for: Distinctive voices, ambitious concepts and memorable characters.

What's hot now and into the near future: It can't be denied that

vampires are still hot, but I do think that it will get harder to publish into that subgenre in the near future—except in the sub-subgenre of paranormal romance, which is governed by a set of natural laws that I don't understand.

And certainly suspense editors are much more acutely aware of Scandinavian crime submissions, thanks to the success of the works of Stieg Larsson. Otherwise, whereas once upon a time there was a premium on books that fit into a mold already forged by suc-

TINA POHLMAN, *Three Rivers Press and Broadway Paperbacks*

Tina Pohlman is vice president and publisher of the Crown Publishing Group's paperback imprints, Three Rivers Press and Broadway Paperbacks. Throughout her career she has published a wide range of authors, including Temple Grandin, Colson Whitehead and Kelly Link.

What she's looking for: I am always looking for something fresh, something that defies categorization and creates one of its own. But at the same time, I am also looking to build on existing categories and brands that have proven successful.

Three Rivers has recently had great success in the humor category with *Awkward Family Photos*, and we have just acquired *Awkward Family Pet Photos*, which will no doubt take awkwardness to a whole new level of success. We're seeing some wonderful writing from further afield, such as Jennifer Steil's *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, about her life in Yemen, and Carl Hoffman's *The Lunatic Express*, about really extreme travel, both of which will be coming out in paperback on the Broadway list [this] year.

What's hot now and into the near future:

Trendspotting is a dangerous sport, especially when it comes to publishing. That said, I think it's pretty clear that in the fiction category one badass Swedish hacker chick [Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*] is supremely hot right now. Zombies are hot. Vampires are hot. On the nonfiction side, a certain cantankerous dad [*Sh-- My Dad Says*] is super hot. Humorous personal essays are hot. But the essence of all this hotness is a magical combination of imagination, story, characters and style that transcends time. These things have always been hot and always will be.

What's not hot now or may be fading: I think the answer to that question is best left to editors of fashion magazines.

How writers can gain an edge: We don't accept unsolicited manuscripts, so the best way for a writer to gain an edge in submitting to me is to find the right agent. Part of an agent's job is to know editors—their tastes and the lists for which they are acquiring. So if you can find the right agent, you can probably find the right editor and publishing house.

What separates the winners from the losers: I think the winning submissions tend to be those that garner the most enthusiasm from the most number of readers in-house.



Tina Pohlman

cessful authors, I sense now that we're all looking for books that stand out, that do something original, and that will catch people off guard.

What's not hot now or may be fading: Legal and medical thrillers (which were successful not all that long ago) seem cold, and standard mysteries seem harder than ever to publish. The detective novel—just a few years back a mainstay of commercial American fiction—seems harder than ever to publish in a big way if it's not by an already estab-



Mark Tavani

lished author. (My own feeling is that after 9/11—which fueled a resurgence in the international thriller—the detective felt parochial to the American reader, but who knows.)

How writers can gain an edge: Deliver a novel or a proposal that is clear and gripping from the first sentence and that isn't like everything else I received that week.

What separates the winners from the losers: Clarity, originality, and uniqueness of voice.



www.WriterMag.com

Find comments from two more book editors, at Simon & Schuster and Penguin, at *The Writer* Web site. Just click on Online Extras.

MEGAN TINGLEY, *Little, Brown*

Megan Tingley began her publishing career at Little, Brown in Boston in 1987 as an editorial assistant in the children's book department. She worked her way up the editorial ladder, publishing a number of successful books, and debuted her imprint, Megan Tingley Books, in 2000.

What she's looking for: On the picture-book side, we're looking for well-crafted, satisfying stories for young readers including those with strong characters with series potential, original approaches to perennially popular themes, and books with clear promotional handles, including holidays, anniversaries and seasonal themes. I always tell people, imagine you are a bookseller and a parent has just asked you to recommend a book. It helps if your book has a defined theme or audience. On the fiction side, high quality middle-grade fiction with memorable characters, a unique voice, and a compelling plot. I'm reading all the Roald Dahl books with my 7-year-old son right now, and I keep thinking, "Why aren't there more storytellers like

this?" For YA, we're looking for work that is genre-breaking and accessible, be it narrative nonfiction, suspense, humor or science fiction. If it's original and well-written ... we want it.

What's hot now and into the near future: Parents don't have a lot of time for shopping these days and are considering purchases carefully, so I think with picture books they are looking for "home runs"—either familiar brands, such as *Fancy Nancy* or *Star Wars*, that they already know their kids like, or stories with a very clearly defined audience, such as *Ladybug Girl* (girls) and *Shark vs. Train* (boys). Also, I do think they are interested in books that feature values, such as environmentalism or peace, that are important to them and [that] they want to convey to their children. The bestselling picture books *The Curious Garden* and *The Earth Book* are perfect examples. In middle grade, school stories and diary/scrapbook formats are hot, while on the YA side, dystopia [stories set in alter-



Megan Tingley

native, nightmarish worlds] and paranormal romance are still strong.

What's not hot now or may be fading: I've heard it said that the "pink book" phenomenon [i.e., very girl-oriented picture books, usually heavily featuring the color pink] is fading, but it's hard for me to believe it when I go to a bookstore with my 4-year-old daughter! That said, I think the definition of "girl appeal" is being expanded beyond pink and that's a good thing. Again, note the success of *Ladybug Girl* or *The Very Fairy Princess*. For older readers, while dystopia and paranormal romance continue to be strong sellers, I'd say from the acquisitions end, both categories are on the precipice of being over-published.

How writers can gain an edge: Securing a great agent is key, especially given how many submissions we see. Reading our list and understanding the kinds of books we pub-

lish, as well as researching the appropriate editor for your submission, can save both the author and editor a lot of time. Also, being well-informed about competing books in a genre and presenting those successful comp titles in the pitch letter (and explaining how your book stands out from the pack) puts you that much farther ahead of the game, because an editor is going to have to do that research anyway to get your book accepted by the publisher. A great pitch letter never hurts ...

What separates the winners from the losers: When someone says "This manuscript is the new *Twilight*/*Gossip Girl*/*Harry Potter*/*Wimpy Kid*/fill-in-the-blank," I'm usually pretty skeptical. We're more interested in creating trends, rather than following them. The books that tend to excite me are those where I start reading and I think, "Wow, I've never read anything like this before" or "I have no idea where this is going but I can't wait to find out."

Maya Rock

Maya Rock worked in the publishing industry for seven years. She is currently a freelance writer and editor based in New York City.