

## Editors in Conversation

### *Loma Snooks and Renée Otmar in conversation with Pamela Hewitt*

*This interview was conducted in Melbourne during the 'Editing in Context' Conference held in October 2005. It is part of the Occasional Series on Australian Editors, an initiative of the Society of Editors (Victoria) convened by Diane Brown.*

Like most editors, Loma and Renée worked in other areas before discovering the editing life. Among her early experiences in the workforce, Loma was a casting assistant at Rank Films in London, where her claim to fame was recommending George Lazenby as James Bond. She travelled to the Nullarbor on the Fourth Bindibu Expedition and worked as assistant to the Governor-General, going to 'flash soirees' before becoming an editor. So, what led her to the profession?

'After my Honours Arts degree, I was all fired up about literature, and Australian literature in particular.' Her plans were temporarily derailed when the publishing house Loma planned to work for, the only one in town, closed down just after she graduated. A year later, she found herself, instead, working as an editor for Kinhill, a national urban planning, engineering and environmental sciences consultancy. When they won a high-profile contract, Loma was asked to manage the publication aspects, indeed hiring some of the former editors from that publishing house. It was the beginning of a long and distinguished career managing large publications projects.

Renée's move towards editing was a gradual, but not an accidental progression. 'I didn't comprehend that what I wanted was to be an editor, because I'd never heard about editing or editors. I was editing before I knew it was a skill and an art — and, indeed, a profession.' Finding her niche in editing was something of a process of elimination. 'I wanted to work in communication, but PR didn't have the substance I wanted. And I did radio production and I felt the same thing. I felt I could never get deep enough into what it was that I was working on.'

Loma and Renée have extensive experience in the in-house environment as well as periods when they worked as freelance editors. Renée works in a non-government agency at the moment and finds it quite different from working in-house. 'It's in the area of drug prevention, and it's such a highly political and politicised field. I find it fascinating—and sad. You know, everything all in one. So I love that environment, but at the same time I struggle with the rigidness of office hours and all the protocols you have to follow. I loved being freelance but I missed having people in the office all the time.'

Loma's experience echoed Renée's. 'I feel that too. I spent about five years freelancing and did some very interesting jobs. I liked the difference between these jobs. But what I really liked about in-house work, particularly when I was at Kinhill, was working in teams. When I look back over that Kinhill period, it was really a halfway house in some ways

# Interview



because although I was given the freedom to build up big editing teams, take them around the country and internationally in some instances, I also had to do a lot of marketing of our editing services in-house. It was very much like contracting, because each of Kinhill's project teams could decide, for example, to have another urban designer on the team or spend twice as much time on the research rather than spend money having the resulting study document or environmental impact statement edited.' Another aspect of in-house work that Loma liked was the sense of challenge. There were 'different people from different disciplines on each project, so there was quite a lot of variety'.

I asked about the changes they'd observed over the years. An obvious change is the influence of computing in editing, but Loma focused on the fact that highly skilled editors now spend a lot of time keying in their editing changes: 'In the early eighties when I started building up Kinhill's editing group, we used to have a team of word processing people. They'd work alongside us sometimes until three or four in the morning trying to meet deadlines. You could mark up things and then they'd type it. Now I still do substantive editing on hard copy and then I type it in myself, whereas I could be continuing to edit. While I know that this is part of the job, it's not as efficient in some ways. There's never really been much review of what that does to the costs.'

Renée raised the relatively recent practice of sending PDF proofs. 'You can see something in colour way before colour proofs are actually produced and all those sorts of things are terrific, but it's also the bane of my life. One reason this format is used is because somebody is too stingy to spend the money to print out good quality proofs. Another is that people feel they can make a million changes all along the way, adding many more stages to what should be just one or two proof stages. I find actually that the quality drops because people take their eye off the ball. They don't think, "Okay, this is the second proof stage, now I really need to take stock of this project or this publication and really work as though this is the final set". That was always my thinking. But there's always another time when they can change something, and I think people become sloppy. I hate it. But at the same time I love it, because I can see what the final product might look like.'

In the publishing industry, people often talk about the rate of change as a problem. It was refreshing to find that neither Loma nor Renée saw it that way. Loma said, 'I think editors are actually very adaptable people. I don't have concerns about what's going to happen. I have to say, in the late eighties, early nineties, I did try to postpone having to learn computing, but I got over that. It's just one more step.'

And for Renée, too, 'I think, in terms of changes that are coming, bring it on! The only concern I might have with new people learning about editing today, is that they should be taught something about the way things were done in the "old days". Something to encourage them to have an appreciation for the history of books and editing. Not to make them feel grateful or to make them feel inadequate, but I think it gives a good rounding to your understanding about what it is you're trying to do in producing different publications.'



*Occasional Series on Australian Editors Working Group (Victoria) left to right: Jenny Craig, Diane Brown (Convenor), Renée Otmar, Kerry Biram (Photo: Ron Thiele)*

I asked about projects that they looked back on with pride. 'Well, I suppose I'm proud of the *Style Manual*,' said Loma. In other English-speaking countries, authors, publishers and editors generally rely on the style manuals of university publishing houses. Australia is unusual because that place is occupied by a government-produced manual. Following the demise of the Australian Government Publishing Service, Loma led the team that won the contract to put together the sixth edition of the *Style Manual*. 'I'm proud of quite a few of the Kinhill reports that won industry awards. And more recently the hundred-page catalogue for the Namatjira retrospective at the National Gallery. That was an extremely difficult job and it was brought together at the last minute. It turned out to be excellent. I enjoyed the subject matter and it was a good experience.'

Renée made the observation that 'probably 99 per cent of the things I've worked on I feel proud of. And each project has brought something to me and has enriched me in some way, even when it's been really frustrating. But I'm probably most proud of the most recent things, the things I've been working on in drug prevention, in particular, and bringing important drug information to vulnerable communities. I can actually see these things making a difference in peoples' lives and when I see it, it brings tears to my eyes and I think, "I did that."'

Looking forward now, instead of reminiscing about past work, I asked about the national organisation for editors, which has been discussed for many years and which had received strong support at the 'Editing in Context' conference.

'I've always thought it was the only way to go,' said Loma. 'And doing the National Standards — I'm glad to have been involved in that. I think I had a lot to do with how they turned out. And I think accreditation is absolutely essential. The only way you can do it is nationally.' Renée expressed it vividly. 'I think a national organisation is the only way to go. I think we should keep our foot on the accelerator and keep going.'

During the conference, there had also been discussion, sometimes in pessimistic terms, about the threats to editing as a profession. Neither had any doubt that there is a future for editors. Loma, who is currently working in government, had this to say: 'I think there's a huge potential in government and corporate areas which produce mountains of documents and studies. They don't know about publishing and they don't really know what they need. It gives editors with initiative the scope to get in there and gradually build the things that these organisations need.'

What is it about editing that keeps us going? Loma finds working with designers rewarding. 'I really love design. I think that's why I've stayed in editing. It's the coming together into a final product that's crafted perfectly for the purpose and the audience. That's what I like.'

For Renée, it is the creativity of getting projects off the ground. 'I'm one of those people who likes the big picture. And as you said, Loma, you like starting things. I do, too. That initial stage of brainstorming, I get such an enormous rush from that. Starting things and pushing — especially if you're pushing uphill — then you'll have me along. I love having those



people around who are absolutely tied to the detail and I know that I can entrust it to them. So I have this big picture now and then I can go off and look at the next big picture. They'll take care of my baby.'

This raised the issue of perfectionism. The stereotype of the editor is bound up in the idea of always getting things right. But, as Loma commented, 'I think the greatest challenge I've had in editing is dealing with this question of perfection. I used to think in the early days that perfection was good. It was like getting high distinctions at university. But then after a while you think that extra 5 per cent, is it really a life or death matter? That's why I really love Kate Grenville's book, *The Idea of Perfection*. Reading that, I found was like listening to a soul mate. All an editor is seen to do is add value. And make things — finish them off, get them perfect. You might have spent months completely transforming this, rewriting it for the audience, but if there's a typo, someone will say "Oh, you've made a mistake there and therefore you've failed"

This struck a chord with Renée. 'That perfectionist side of things was part of my personality and part of the way I learned to be in the world. It wasn't in my work but in my private life that I discovered that it could be quite a problem being a perfectionist. I've learned quite a bit about that since, and the one thing I bring myself back to all the time is that saying of the Pakistani rug makers: "Only Allah is perfect" I cannot be, and I do not wish to be, perfect. If at the end of an enormous project there are one or two typos, I think ah, well, thank goodness there aren't fifty.'

**Renée Otmar** is an Honorary Life Member of the Society of Editors (Victoria). She has been an active member of that Society since 1992. She was a founding member of CASE, predecessor of IPEd. Renée currently works as publishing manager for a non-government organisation in Melbourne, and is undertaking a masters in public health.

**Loma Snooks** has more than 25 years' experience at a senior level in editing, information design and publication team management for professional services organisations and as a freelance. Career highlights include assembling and leading the team preparing the sixth edition of the Commonwealth's Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers; developing and managing a team of around twenty editors and designers working around Australia and in the US and Asia on high-profile public reports; and creating a new brand (including logo, marketing material, web site and writing guidelines) for a publicly owned legal firm.

Loma played a key part in the establishment of editing societies in South Australia and Canberra, and was Inaugural President of the Canberra Society of Editors, of which she is an Honorary Life Member. She was also the ACT representative on the National Editing Standards Working Group, which produced the Australian Standards for Editing Practice.

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