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Writing Within Trade Publishing: Efficacy and Rhetorical Situation

INTRODUCTION

Trade publishing is one domain of the publishing industry that shares fiction and non-fiction general-interest books written for and sold to the general public (Thompson, 245). The discourse community of trade publishing is comprised of the types of writing trade publishing calls for, and of those who write them. This paper is not interested in inter-organizational communication and legalese: rather, I will discuss the rhetorical situations surrounding the writing performed by editors: acquisitional and content-focused. I will also address the efficacy of the writing they read, although such writing is not necessarily rhetorical and thus not rhetorically critiquable. I will call upon definitional and instructive texts put out by members of the discourse community as well as an interview with a professional children's book editor, Alicia Duran of Blue Apple Books. I will argue that the style of the publisher you represent is the guiding principle you must adopt to write well in the trade publishing discourse community: this "style guide" mandated by a publisher constrains the writer through differing exigences and audiences, showing style to be the main governing factor in effective and successful writing in the trade publishing discourse community.

WRITING IN ACQUISITION EDITING

The three elements of a rhetorical situation are exigence, audience, and constraints (Bitzer, 6). The rhetorical situation surrounding acquisition editors is variable as there are multiple exigences, but only one true audience: submitting writers. The constraints are the style guide, mentioned above, and in order for their writings to be rhetorical in nature they must respond to the exigences. Interestingly, publisher style is also an exigence of acquisition editors: taking in manuscripts that match this publisher style is a goal that editors reach with their writing. Acquisition editors write to accept or reject solicited and unsolicited manuscripts (Falcon), and may write copy (Ginna, 26).

Acquiring manuscripts that fit the publisher's mission is the main exigence of acquisition editors. Acquisition drives publishing: although writing rejections falls under acquisition, writing acceptances is what creates the material for publishing success (Ginna, 17). The first step of both types of writing is to identify practical elements of the publisher's style guide such as the "book list" of manuscript types the publisher is looking for. This informs the exigence, as the editor's response must connect to the desired and acceptable style of manuscript as per the list, and acknowledge the suitable and effective styles that reach the proposed audience of the manuscript itself. To summarize: this situation (acquisitional deliberation) and its exigence (acceptance of fitting manuscripts for potential fiscal success after publication) constrain what the editor may write (acceptance or rejection) as well as how they write it (style).

However, before an editor can respond to such a proposal they must read it. Agents typically know what publishers want, and send them manuscripts that align with their list. A query letter is a document that introduces the author and manuscript to a publisher and is sent by unrepresented authors to publishers along with their manuscript. In most areas of trade publishing, where manuscripts are long, the query letter is of great importance because editors

cannot read every submission. The query letter must inform the editor if the manuscript could fit on that publisher's book list: if not, the manuscript is not even consulted. Effective query letters, to editor Alicia Duran, “are very short; succinct. I'm a big fan of bullet points... [and] if the query letter tells me a very brief synopsis of the book and why this is unique, what's different about this manuscript than anything else, that's all I want to know.”

If the query letter proves effective, or an agent has recommended a manuscript, the editor looks over the manuscript in terms of execution. Execution does not necessarily mean perfect prose; according to certain editors “the ideal acquisition combines a bestselling author, an exciting subject, and superb writing. But a project that ranks high even on two out of three of these can be a viable one to publish” (Ginna, 33). However, manuscript efficacy is always a concern, according to Duran. Because she works in children's publishing, efficacy for extremely young readers surrounds

creating interactions and getting children to be excited about literally holding a book:... as far as the writing is concerned [there should be] minimal text, but it has to be effective because there are so few words. And repetition [is] really important. Rhyming, alliteration, these types of things when you're dealing with so few words: they can sound really lovely to a very small child's ears (Duran).

The efficacy of the words and style in telling the author's story is paramount. In other types of children's books for slightly older readers:

It's about making sure that the story flows, makes sense, [and] then the nonfiction books: the challenge with those is to present complex material in a simplified format that doesn't talk down to the kids, but also, [isn't] too difficult... It's a matter of simplifying things and making them of course entertaining at the same time (Duran).

Once acquisition editors identify effective manuscripts that align with the publisher list, they must decide if they are fiscally viable, and if so, can choose to acquire them (Ginna, 25). Once acquired, manuscripts are sent over to content editors for refining.

WRITING IN CONTENT EDITING

Content editors do the actual editing and revising of manuscripts. They also converse with the authors surrounding the content, so the writing that content editors perform can be much less formal, although it is just as constrained by the publisher style guidelines. While there are various types of content editors, all have the goal of “working with [the] author to make the best book possible, [and] also selling the book to colleagues and to the world, making sure it finds a readership, publishing it” (Ginna, 59). Editor Robert Gireaux called this empathy: “the capacity not only to perceive what the author’s aims are, but to help in achieving their realization to the fullest extent” (Ginna, 61). Per Duran, “something that’s very different from adults writing fiction or nonfiction is that we’ve got this third person in there who’s the illustrator. And at least in our company, it’s this three-way collaboration between the author, the illustrator, and the editors, and it moves around a lot until it’s done.”

This collaboration entails not just the rewrites and revisions of the author and illustrator, but also the line edits, notes, and conversations between all parties focused on developing the manuscript to a publishable state. As manuscript style is primarily an acquisition question, style is not focused on during editing rounds (Duran). Rather, the primary obligation of the editor is to the writer, not the book. There is an emphasis on creating and sustaining a relationship with the writer, rather than pushing the writer to create content the publisher wants. The content has already been decreed as desirable by its acceptance onto the publisher’s list, which changes the nature of the list itself to better reflect characteristics the manuscript exhibits.

The exigence of writing in content editing is thus to produce an effective book, fiscally and in terms of content. Constraints still include publisher style, but now writing must also further a relationship between editor and author (and potentially illustrator). The audience of the

writing that content editors perform is indirectly future readers, hence the emphasis on story effectiveness, but directly the author, who receives the notes.

The concept of reading like a writer, as put by Mike Bunn, is an interesting one I think editors apply to their interactions with authors and their manuscripts. Bunn argues: “instead of reading for content or to better understand the ideas in the writing (which you will automatically do to some degree anyway), you are trying to understand how the piece of writing was put together by the author and what you can learn about writing by reading a particular text” (Bunn, 72). However, editors do not aim to learn about writing, so Bunn’s proposal must be revised. Editors do try to understand how the piece of writing is put together—not to gain deeper insights into the writing process but rather to gain insights into the efficacy of the writing in general. The writing within manuscripts must be purposeful: it must all *do* something. Readers may participate in close reading of published fiction books; non-fiction titles are considered poorly written if they contain extraneous bits of writing or take too long to get to their point; and in children’s books, as pointed out by Duran, when there is not much text in a manuscript, it must all serve a purpose. This concept of purposeful writing informs its style. The writing performed by content editors is informed and constrained by this, so the concept is part of the exigence of their rhetorical situation.

CONCLUSION

In the trade publishing discourse community, style across various publishing houses is focused on efficacy: efficacy of the manuscript in fitting publisher needs and matching publisher style on the acquisition side, and efficacy of the author in telling their story on the content side. (Effective) style is also the main agent of the rhetorical situation surrounding writing within the trade publishing discourse community. Although situations differ case to case, the publisher’s

style is always part of the exigence and constraint, and therefore members of the discourse community cannot write successfully without adopting and furthering the relevant style.

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