

# AN EDITOR'S VIEW

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## MY CONVERSATION WITH PATRICK CANFIELD AN EDITORIAL ASSISTANT AT MACMILLAN PUBLISHING

BY SCHUYLER MILLAR

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As an aspiring writer, I run into the pitfalls of being overwhelmed by the amount of saturation in the field and how quickly rejection can be pushed my way. Initially, my thought process always seemed to lead towards assuming that if my writing was good enough someone would want to publish it right away. I can confirm that this is not the case.

So, after failing to grasp the concepts of publishing, and finding myself overwhelmed by articles on the subject, I decided to reach out to a long-time friend that has made publishing his career. Patrick Canfield is an Editorial Assistant at Macmillan Publishers and on a daily basis he goes through the process of working with writers to get their work published.



PATRICK CANFIELD

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## THE WORKLOAD

As my video call first connected, we caught up on our lives, sharing new experiences caused by the current pandemic. Being in New York City, Patrick expressed to me that he has had to buy a bike because even though the subway and taxis are still running, the risk is too high to utilize them. He said there was still a buzz around the city, but every day felt calmer and calmer as time passed.

So naturally, I asked him how this had affected his work. He responded briefly by saying, "Not bad, thankfully you can read almost anywhere." and chuckled to himself. I wondered what the truth to this was and asked him what someone could expect out of a normal day as an editorial assistant. "Yeah there are definite downsides to it, there are really long hours. Before the pandemic I would be in the office from 9 to

6, which is fine, but then the actual reading that I'm supposed to do would pretty much all be done at home after work. Cause when you're in the office it's more taking care of day-to-day things." I hadn't really considered the workload that a person in publishing faces. Not only do they have to communicate with the authors and write up notes on their book, but they also must constantly read those words over and over.

But that wasn't the total load of the reading either. I asked Patrick how many books at any given time he may be working on and the response surprised me. "Multiples. So, like publishing has three different seasons. Winter, Spring, and Fall are the three seasons. Winter is like January through April, Spring is May through August, and September through December is Fall. So, in any given season I'm working on anywhere from 5 to 10 books. Yeah, so it's a lot."

Damn right that's a lot! Reading one novel can be a time commitment in and of itself, but up to ten at a time can be a daunting task especially when his actual work hours aren't fully dedicated to reading through that material.

When I realized that that was just the reading aspect of it I had to inquire what all was expected of him editing wise for each book. "Usually we will write up a letter that's like 5ish pages and then send that to

the author that includes what our ideas are about the book and what we think needs to be better and what we like about it. We will probably send at least two of those letters per book." It quickly became apparent to me that you have to truly enjoy reading to survive in the world of publishing.

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## PICKING WHAT YOU WORK ON

I then began to think about what I liked to read or write about and how much I really focus on one or two genres. I wondered if

Patrick had any freedom in choosing what genres he could focus on. Patrick hesitated and then mapped out how it works, "So, the publishing world is pretty weird. Macmillan is a really big company with a bunch of little companies called imprints underneath it. The different imprints have different types of books they focus on publishing. My imprint mostly does non-fiction stuff, like kind of pop-science stuff, and we also do science fiction and fantasy books"



MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS LOGO

I hadn't realized that publishing companies branched out like that and had certain groups focus on certain genres. It struck me as interesting that when applying to a position you may have to consider your own preference of genre to avoid being stuck editing stuff you may not enjoy.

So, I started to wonder if in an editorial role, would it be more important to focus on books you think would be successful, rather than ones you may personally enjoy. Patrick had a sobering point of view mentioning, "That's how you get judged at the end of the day, basically, the company just looks at each book an editor has on their list and how much money when you take it all together is brought into the company. So, it can be kind of high pressure I think, where you may not love a book, but you think it can bring it more money." He went on to say that the way he finds a lot of the books he chooses to present to his boss are found in emails sent by agents pushing their clients' work.

The concept of reading through hundreds of submissions and potentially deciding to present a book to your boss based on the financial viability of the book seemed foreign to me. I thought that if I was ever in that role, I would be judging the book solely based on its content alone. It made me wonder if Patrick thought it all was worth it with him being an avid reader and lover of

books. "It's a tough job because it doesn't pay all that well, it actually pays pretty shittily, especially for New York prices."

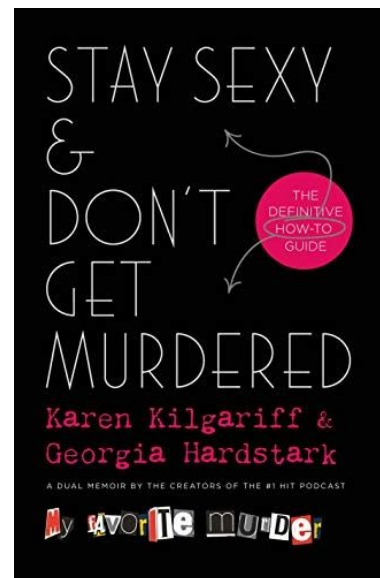
*"BUT IT CAN BE REALLY REWARDING SEEING SOMETHING YOU'VE BEEN WORKING ON FOR TWO YEARS COME OUT AND DO WELL, IT'S PRETTY COOL TO SEE."*

was his initial response to my thought, then he went on "But it can be really rewarding seeing something you've been working on for two

years come out and do well, it's pretty cool to see." The tone in his voice changed as he said that, and I could truly hear the happiness behind this sentiment. I wanted to pry further.

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## WHERE THE PASSION LIES



STAY SEXY & DON'T GET MURDERED COVER

I wanted to know where that spark in his voice had started and got him to tell me about his favorite project that he has worked on so far. "*Stay Sexy & Don't Get Murdered*

was one of the big ones we did, which was created by a podcast. That one was really cool because I got to do a lot of the work on the marketing side of things and got to go downtown and see one of their shows and meet them which was pretty cool.” I was a little excited at hearing this myself as I enjoy listening to the podcast *My Favorite Murder* which was the source of the book he had mentioned.

I was jealous of all the perks he had gotten to partake in but I could tell that that wasn’t what really stood out to him from the project so I pushed him further and finally he gave saying, “that book was really cool because you would see people reading it on the subway or ads for it, it was a really cool feeling. And that one was really cool because the editor who bought it was a really big fan of the podcast from day one and convinced them to do a book with her and then they kind of blew up after that happened”.

Seeing his work outside the office and in the hands of ordinary people had really brought to light why Patrick did his job. He liked the feeling of seeing something he had a hand in spread out everywhere. I also think that he enjoyed learning that if he was passionate enough about something that he could potentially reach out and help someone else’s voice be heard.

I learned many things about the publishing world through talking to Patrick. Your days as an editor are long and a lot of the work you produce is done when you aren’t even on the clock. Many different creatives can be looking to you at the same time to critique their work, and they expect it to be to the professional level of the company you represent. Your compensation may not be equal to the work you do, and you might not be able to help the books you care most about succeed. But the pride of the work isn’t found in financial gain or having autonomy. It’s found when all the work has been done and you pass by a park bench to see someone enjoying a book that you had a part in bringing to life. Oh, and as Patrick puts it, “The free books don’t hurt either!”□



PATRICK ON A GLACIER IN FJAERLAND, NORWAY