

Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship 2009–2010

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Report by

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THE BEATRICE DAVIS LEGACY

The Beatrice Davis Fellowship is something I have always aspired to win. From the very first years of my editorial life I was aware of this extraordinary award, and of its significance to the lives of the fellows who were lucky and talented enough to win it. The value of the fellowship is immeasurable to the fellows, least of all because it affords them a unique opportunity to expand their knowledge and expertise as editors; but more than this, it is also tremendously valuable to the entire Australian publishing industry. Every single fellow throughout the years has contributed enormously to enriching the industry, whether in the giving of their wisdom and know-how as freelance or in-house editors, or in the discovery and development of extraordinary Australian writing talent as commissioning editors and publishers. I hope that Australian editors will always have the fellowship to look forward to because, whether you think of it as an award or a training opportunity, its worth is inestimable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This fellowship would not be possible without the generous support of the sponsors, whose continued belief in the fellowship's significance gives Australian editors an advantage over all others.

Thank you to Dee Read and the Australian Publishers Association for looking after me before and during my stay in New York – I never felt alone!

Thank you to Sue Hines and Patrick Gallagher (and Allen & Unwin as a whole) for supporting me and encouraging me to apply for the fellowship, and to Patrick especially for paving the way for me to gain a placement at Atria.

My heartfelt thanks to Louise Thurtell for her unparalleled support over the years, and in particular the past year. There are people who actually enable others to realise greater achievements; Louise is such an enabler.

A very special thank-you to Jo Jarrah for her endless generosity and indispensable advice, and for calling me to tell me to apply for the fellowship. Thank you, also, to Colette Vella, who took me under her wing many years ago, and who never turns away a call or a question; you are an inspiration.

Clare Drysdale is a well of knowledge and support; it's because of her that I was able to contact most of the New York publishers I was interested in. Thank you, Clare, I don't know what I would've done without you! And I owe Valerie Parv and Linda Tate a huge debt of gratitude for introducing me to Mary Theresa Hussey – she's amazing.

My warmest gratitude to Maha Ismail, who not only gave me vital feedback on my application and edited this report, but who also helped me set up the blog

(nyminutes.wordpress.com) and continued to provide support over the three months whenever I needed it. Thank you, also, to Lawrence Kurdi for his critical reading of this report, Simon Paterson for his help with the business cards, and to Catherine Taylor for giving me feedback on my application and proofreading this report.

A mammoth thank-you to the authors who wrote such wonderful letters of support: Lisa Heidke, Christos Tsiolkas, David Francis, Robert Wainwright, Malcolm Knox and Stephen Scourfield. Editors are nothing without our authors!

Several people in New York made my experience exceptional. Selena McLemore, of Grand Central Publishing, was not only the very first editor I met in New York, but was also my first friend in the city. Mary Theresa Hussey, of Harlequin, braved several storms to show me her beautiful city, and gave her time and knowledge of the industry so generously that I can never repay her. Jane Starr was always there to lend support, and sent me *Publishers Lunch* and *Publishers Marketplace* every week without fail. Brenda Copeland offered much laughter and paved the way for a darn good massage! Finally, Alexandria Nahlous was a tower of support and a kindred spirit.

Thank you to all the US editors and agents who gave so generously of their time: Amy Berkower and Robin Rue (Writers House), Barbara Jones and Elisabeth Dyssegaard (Voice/Hyperion), Jamie Raab and the team at Grand Central Publishing, Judith Curr, Peter Borland and Greer Hendricks (Atria), Lauren McKenna (Pocket Books), George Witte (St Martin's Press) and Lucia Macro (Avon Books).

AIM OF MY FELLOWSHIP

I have always been drawn to women's fiction, in particular romance fiction. Although Australian publishing does produce incredible commercial women's fiction, romance fiction publishing is rare if not nonexistent, and whenever publishers do try to issue a romance novel, they encounter much resistance from booksellers and even their own in-house sales and publishing teams. Indeed, to say that the romance novel is much maligned in the broad Australian publishing scene would be an understatement.

New York is by far the largest producer of commercial women's fiction. New York publishers are many and varied, and they produce *New York Times* bestsellers time and again, in scope and volume unmatched in Australia. This isn't simply about larger country equals greater numbers; US publishers have made an immensely profitable, thriving business of women's fiction publishing, in particular romance. When I applied for the Beatrice Davis Fellowship, I wanted to explore intricately how US publishers achieve the successes they do, and to investigate the editing of commercial women's fiction in all its myriad guises: from contemporary, to chick lit, to romance.

What is women's fiction?

Women's fiction is a broad, varied area that encompasses books written *by* women and books written *for* women. Some people argue that women's fiction is simply mainstream, popular fiction and there's no need for such labelling. And when I asked New York editors how they would define the genre, some told me that you can't(!), while others said you can define it by saying what it's not: it's not a thriller; it's not a crime fiction; it's not a romance. It therefore is limitless, and can be anything, even literary. Whatever you may think about women's fiction, it is more than clear to any editor, publisher or reader that there are books that speak to women readers – often *only* women readers – and that they are an important section in every bookstore.

How the fellowship would work

My central idea was to gain placements with one large multinational publisher, one independent or smaller publisher, and an agent of women's fiction. I thought this would be my best chance to gain a thorough understanding of the editing process, as well as to compare the practices of multinational vs. independent vs. agent. I thought, by limiting my placements to one in each corner of the publishing arena, it would maximise my chances of having meaningful and in-depth interactions with agents and editors especially. I figured it would take time to build trust enough for these editors to give me real editing work, and that was one of my central aims: to edit with some of these incredible executive editors, and to compare notes and ideas about the whys and wherefores of women's fiction editing and publishing.

The specific questions I had were:

- How much editing do in-house editors actually do in general women's fiction vs. romance fiction?
- Are editors so specialised that they only work on certain areas: i.e. contemporary women's fiction vs. chick lit vs. romance?
- Subgenres: to what degree do editors and publishers seek out the creation of new subgenres? Or don't they? In other words, how organic is this process?
- What is the balance of the development of new subgenres between editors and publishers, agents and authors?
- Subverting the genre and subgenre rules and structures: to what degree is this allowed in considering making a book a success?
- How do editors and authors work within the structural constraints of women's fiction writing and publishing but still create something fresh and new and exciting?
- How do the publishers of successful women's fiction authors compare? Examples include Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Weiner, ATRIA, Gil McNeil, Voice, and Nora Roberts, who is agented by Amy Berkower of Writers House.
- What are the key elements that create successful women's fiction?

THE RESULTING PROGRAM

Placements

In organising the whole experience, securing placements proved to be the most challenging element. Notwithstanding time-zone differences, delayed responses from busy publishers, and the need to by-pass lumbering bureaucracy (such as Human Resources, where you can get stuck for several months without success), I was able to organise three main placements:

Voice/Hyperion

9 February – 12 March 2010

Monday – Wednesday

Writers House

1 February – 12 March 2010

Friday

Atria, Simon & Schuster

16 March – 23 April 2010

Monday – Thursday

Visits

It was crucial to have one day free during the working week in order to meet publishers and editors. During the first six weeks of my stay, I spent each Thursday talking to various editors within a publishing house, and in the last six weeks, I spent either a Thursday or Friday doing so, my schedule at Atria allowing. The publishers I visited were: Grand Central Publishing (Hachette Book Group), St Martin's Press, Harlequin, Avon Books (HarperCollins), Berkley Publishing Group (Penguin), Amy Einhorn Books (Penguin) and Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster).

A WORD ON FORMAT

The discussion of format is an important one, particularly in the area of commercial women's fiction. In general, US fiction is published in **hardcover** first, as that is traditionally the more treasured format. Books are published into paperback as a secondary format, and often in another imprint within the publishing house. In fact, many publishers will tell you books won't be reviewed unless they are in hardcover, and as reviews are crucial in the promotion of fiction, that could be disastrous for a book, hence there is a real reluctance amongst publishers to not publish in hardcover first.

In the past two years, however, the question of format has become paramount because of the sharp fall in book sales. As household economies have shrunk considerably, book buyers have been less inclined to spend the money on a hardcover title unless they absolutely must have the book; in other words, unless it's a bestseller. So booksellers have been raising the issue of **trade paperback originals** – as in publishing books in paperback as the very first edition – and it is a topic that is gaining momentum amongst publishers. The equivalent of the trade paperback original in Australian terms is the C-format paperback.

The commercial fiction world has often bypassed the hardcover vs. paperback debate as almost all commercial fiction, especially romance fiction, has always been published in **mass market paperback**, the equivalent to the A-format in Australia. It is very rare that romance is published in hardcover, unless the author is so successful that the publisher will take the risk of expecting readers to follow the author and pay the extra amount. Mass market paperbacks cost an average of US\$7.99, whereas a hardcover costs between US\$24.99 and US\$26.99, and trade paperback originals sell for around US\$14.99.

THE PLACEMENTS

WRITERS HOUSE: THE AGENCY PERSPECTIVE

1 February – 12 March 2010

Even if you have never picked up a Nora Roberts novel, you need only walk into any Australian Borders or Dymocks to witness her enormity in the women's fiction market as her titles can take up an entire display. Her impact is doubly so in the US.

Roberts is primarily a romance writer, but she also writes futuristic police procedural novels under J.D. Robb. She has published around 182 novels in total, she produces an average of five new novels a year, and, according to her agent, Amy Berkower, her average first print run is one million copies. To say that she is a phenomenon would be putting it mildly! As a writer, she exists on a scale that is incomparable. So I really wanted to know how an agent manages an author of that calibre: how do you keep her fresh and exciting, and how do you keep her selling?

My placement at Writers House was one day a week for six weeks. Writers House represents many of the leading women's fiction writers: from Nora Roberts, to Laurel K. Hamilton, to Stephanie Meyer (although she's technically YA) and Kresley Cole. I chose Friday because that was a good option for the agency – space is an important consideration for all agents and publishers, and Fridays had more available desks, mainly because many agents don't work in the office on that day (meaning: they don't need to!).

Most of my time at the agency was spent reading unsolicited manuscripts for agents such as Robin Rue, who is Kresley Cole's agent, and I sometimes brainstormed ideas for series titles for new acquisitions. I was hoping to be there for the next instalment of Cole's 'Immortals after Dark' series, but as it turned out the first 100 pages were being delivered the week after my return to Australia (sigh!). These were highly protected first pages as the previous book

caused a frenzy of attempts by Cole's readers to get their hands on the unpublished manuscript.

Kresley Cole's series is a paranormal romance, and her appearance in the genre has been hugely successful. She is published by Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster) and her editor is Lauren McKenna, who I was able to work with during my placement with Atria (I'll discuss what I learned from her a little later in the report).

Being in the agency was a totally new experience for me, and working with Robin Rue and Amy Berkower was a revelation, not only because they represent bestselling authors, but because they have such tremendous experience in the industry – over thirty years. They answered a lot of my questions regarding the level of involvement of agents in the editing and shaping process of books in the genre, as well as how organic the whole creation process really is.

For these two agents, women's fiction equals talent. Because the New York publishing scene is pervasive in this area, the fierce competition means that only truly talented writers hit the big time. From their experience, all the women's fiction authors they have worked with work very hard at their craft with a lot of passion and ability in order to achieve their great successes.

One of the defining elements of writers of this genre is that they are seen to be much braver as writers and people than many other commercial fiction writers. While they work within defined genres or subgenres, or constraints and conventions, they take risks in their writing that are unparalleled. Robin Rue and Amy Berkower believe this to be one of the reasons why the genre continues to morph and grow, and why they themselves continue to be passionate about their own work in this genre.

In women's fiction, there are trending waves that emerge every few years, and certain houses tend to ride on the success of a wave. That's why you'll see so many similarities in the types of books published, particularly in the packaging of women's fiction titles. The biggest current trend is paranormal fiction. It has been so for around thirteen years, probably since the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* became a cult hit, and it doesn't seem to be showing any signs of fatigue or slowing down. In fact, in the mass market, it is the only romance category that has continued to grow despite the recent financial crisis.

Women's fiction has changed dramatically over the last twenty years, and its writers and publishers have become prolific. It is the one genre where authors are enabled to, and indeed are expected to, write and publish more consistently and frequently. What's more, it allows authors to publish across genres, and to even cross-publish within genres, giving them more freedom, and giving publishers more choice, than ever before. The emergence of subgenres – which are as varied as the authors themselves – came about because resilient writers aren't afraid to flout conventions and push boundaries. Neither Robin nor Amy believe there is anything manufactured about these subgenres. In other words, no publisher, editor or agent has ever decided to create a subgenre of women's fiction; it is purely an organic, albeit complex, process.

In the mass market arena, women are a loyal reading group. What's more, romance writers are readers in the area as well, and writer and reader banded together form an unwavering, interactive organisation. Romance writers buy books to read even as they continue to write in the genre/category, thereby promoting and supporting other writers. For this reason, both agents believe that romance fiction will never die as a genre. The market for romance fiction is established and it has always had readers, and it will always have readers. It is not just a form of escapism and relaxation; there are just so many good stories in the genre, and readers will always be drawn because everyone loves a good story.

In general, commercial women's fiction takes people out of their ordinary lives with a positive bent: life doesn't fail them in these books. Romance fiction carries a sense of optimism that is addictive to readers. It takes people away from their lives and into intriguing worlds, and helps them to escape the drudgery of everyday existence. Here is perhaps the heart of their resilience to the financial crisis.

Packaging and targeting markets are central to the success of every women's fiction novel, whether commercial or romance. Packaging is something agents are most concerned with, and it is the one area where they will be actively involved every step of the way with the editor, particularly for authors such as Cole and Roberts. Finding the right place for a book within the marketplace is essential, and packaging is fundamental in achieving this. If readers can't define whether or not this is a suspense or a paranormal or a contemporary romance, they won't purchase a book. Likewise, if publishers don't make clear to booksellers where a book fits into this huge market, they won't be able to sell it either.

One example that Robin Rue cited was comparing romantic suspense writers Lisa Jackson and Karen Rose. Romantic suspense has been as strong as paranormal, and it has survived the past two years reasonably well. Lisa Jackson (www.lisajackson.com) has written over seventy-five romance and romantic suspense novels, and she has sold consistently well and has continued to grow in strength with every book. Karen Rose (www.karenrosebooks.com), on the other hand, isn't as successful in the US as she is in the UK. According to Robin, Jackson has fared better than Rose partially because she was released into the trade when the market was stronger and her packaging was spot on from the start. When it came time to release Karen Rose, her publisher struggled. They tried to package her in hardcover and it proved wrong for the US market. Readers of Rose in the US are women, and according to Robin, by putting her in hardcover, Grand Central had effectively packaged her for the male reader, hence the failure.

For agents of women's fiction, building their authors is paramount. In fact, the success of authors and publishing houses in the women's fiction market hinges on the publishers' and agents' abilities to build their authors. One of the emerging trends of building authors in this area is in series. Series have been selling strongly for quite a few years now, and both authors and editors are constantly trying to develop ideas into series in order to hook readers and build reader relationships with the authors. Series give readers the familiarity of characters – even though each book has a different hero and heroine – and of themes. This in turn is how agents and editors build bestsellers. But, of course, it all begins with a great first book.

As agents, Robin and Amy never edit. They certainly read their clients' submissions, particularly those attached to a publishing house, and they will alert editors to problems they may have found in the manuscript, but, they say, editing is subjective and it isn't the agent's job. An author has only so many rewrites in them before they start hating the book, so they refrain from that part of the process, otherwise there is a feeling that it becomes counterproductive.

An agent's role, therefore – especially with a bestselling author – is to support both the author and the editor together, while, of course, making sure the author's interests are protected at all times. Neither Robin nor Amy interferes with an author's writing in a particular genre: this is seen as jarring the organic ability of authors. Instead, the focus is on trying to build authors and eventually help them to move across genres, although that isn't always an option or a deliberate decision. It all centres on the author's desires and their ability to grow.

Not all agents are hands off when it comes to editing, however. At Writers House, agents such as Dan Lazar build manuscripts, working closely with their authors before submitting to editors, and even editing simultaneously to the editor, as I discovered when I read *The Gilby Salt Sisters* (by Tiffany Baker, to be published by Grand Central Publishing) and he

submitted a report to the editor. Similarly, agent Susan Ginsberg does a lot of work with her women's fiction and non-fiction authors and their manuscripts. For most senior agents, however, strategy is where their strength lies, and so editing isn't part of the process.

This begs the question, therefore: **are big-selling authors edited anymore?** Amy Berkower is always involved in discussing her authors' ideas for a new book, which are often simultaneous or complementary to discussions with the editor, and involve much to-ing and fro-ing, particularly if discussing the creation of a new series, and hashing out how to make it better or more interesting than the last. The mechanics of editing – both structural and copy – are left completely up to the editor and the in-house production process. But they don't hesitate to tell editors that they are over-editing, particularly for their established authors. As Amy said to me, 'If an author has sold four or five books consistently well, you have to trust that both author and reader are agreeing, so if an author is telling you they are being over-edited, you need to support them.'

It's pertinent when discussing **mass market paperbacks** to mention the **mass market superstores: Walmart and Target**. In America, most romance fiction, even for bestselling authors, is in mass market paperback format. With the demise of the independent bookseller, and the dominance of Barnes & Noble and Borders (although Borders has been struggling terribly) as the major bookstores in the country, Walmart and Target have become the biggest sellers of romance fiction, generating sales in the millions. It is universally acknowledged by publishers – large and small – that Target and Walmart play a hand in the success of a mass market fiction. This, of course, is a double-edged sword: while it can achieve massive sales and thereby give rise to incredible heights, it can also create new constraints. When considering targeting the superstores for sales, the packaging and content are subject to regulations reflecting the customer base of the stores, so rather than booksellers trying to sell a book purely on its merits, it becomes a case of trying to fit into the store's expectations of what a book should be. These are complex and ongoing issues. One author I spoke with, Sarah Lindsey, whose Regency romance *Promise Me Tonight*

debuted very well, told me that when Target read the advance reading copies, they complained that the heroine was far too young, even though her age was accurate historically (for a young woman coming out into society). Another author told me that she was informed she couldn't allow her characters to have sex before marriage because the Target buyer wouldn't accept that sort of behaviour in a historical novel.

VOICE/HYPERION

Blog: <http://www.everywomansvoice.com/>

9 February – 15 March 2010

The primary reason I chose Voice is that it is a unique and largely independent publisher, although it is part of the Disney group and is connected to ABC television. Voice describes itself as: ‘a new imprint of books for women at the center of life – fiction and non-fiction for smart, educated, busy, curious, seasoned women for whom reading is a passion. Women who want to read to figure out what they want next. An imprint by and for women – as women see themselves.’ Such an imprint dedicated to women’s writing intrigued me greatly and I wanted to find out what differences, if any, this engendered in their operation as a publisher.

Voice is strongly driven by Ellen Archer, the publisher of both Voice and Hyperion, and Barbara Jones, editorial director of Voice and Hyperion, but because the imprint is an intricate part of Hyperion, it is also led by the editor-in-chief, Elisabeth Dyssegaard. When I first approached Ellen Archer, she put me in touch with both Barbara and Elisabeth, and we were able to chat about the possibilities of a placement. They got back to me right away (a true miracle!), and my placement of five weeks worked out wonderfully because they were the perfect midway between Writers House and Atria.

I worked chiefly with Barbara Jones, which was a brilliant experience because I got to see a completely different side to publishing to the one I’d emerged from as an in-house editor. I attended acquisitions meetings, marketing meetings, sales meetings and book events. Amazingly, Barbara had organised for me to work on several of her titles (*Drop by Drop* – non-fiction, *Only the Truth* – fiction, *Hills Covered in Wishes* – fiction, *The Profiler* – non-fiction and *The Red Book* – fiction), which enabled me to discuss in detail with her the various aspects of editing and acquiring. I was even able to take part in mentoring the assistant editor who was editing and acquiring her very first book.

Acquiring vs. commissioning: There is a strong distinction in the US between these two terms. Whenever I said ‘commissioning’ to editors, they thought I was talking about a newspaper or magazine scenario – as in, asking writers to write certain pieces. Rather, they refer to what they do as ‘acquiring’ – buying manuscripts that have been written organically.

Barbara Jones has one editor and an assistant editor working for her and Voice directly, and she explained that although all the editors at Hyperion can acquire for Voice, particularly if there is a fiction that Hyperion wouldn’t normally take on, Barbara and her editor, Sarah Landes, do the majority of buying for the imprint.

I have to take a moment to praise **the setup** at Voice/Hyperion. Although the three assistant editors had relatively little editorial experience (in fact, one had only a year or so of experience), they were encouraged not only to be first readers for their editors and to actually edit, but they were also encouraged to acquire books. This was extraordinary for me, coming from the Australian industry where there is such a clear division between being an in-house editor and a publisher (acquiring person). This was atypical, though, even for New York – none of the other editors I spoke to or spent time with were in an environment where assistant editors are encouraged to either edit or acquire. Mostly, it depended on the individual editor, how they felt about ‘letting go’ of certain aspects of their job and what opportunities they were willing to make available to their assistants. This does cause frustration for editors trying to build their careers and experience, despite the clearly defined career path available in New York, which is so vastly different to the Australian scene. Editors aren’t discouraged from being ambitious; to the contrary, the path of assistant editor, associate editor, editor, senior editor, executive editor and editorial director is there for them to aspire to.

Attending the **acquisitions meetings** of Hyperion was extremely enlightening. The editors and assistants not only went through titles they were in the process of buying (and discussed issues surrounding each title), but they also explored ideas for potential acquisitions,

including brainstorming key elements. I had, of course, seen the results of this at Allen & Unwin because the meeting minutes were made available to editors, but most Australian publishers don't reveal this part of the process to their in-house editorial staff.

It was in these meetings that I discovered **how innovative Voice/Hyperion are**, and how determined they are to overcome the various difficulties encountered by the entire industry due to the financial crisis. There is a 'blog watch' team who keeps an eye on what is happening in the blogging world, particularly as there have been so many successful books to come out of blogging. Some editors argue that by the time you become aware of a popular blog, it is actually too late to capitalise on its success through a book, but Voice has been able to make this work because they have taken the risk at an early enough stage that they were able to capture the peak success of a blog. The book that had just been released as I was there (February 2010) was *The Bag Lady Papers*, by Alexandra Penney, the result of a blog on the popular media site, The Daily Beast.

This attitude filtered through to their entire list, including women's fiction. Sarah Landes says that now more than ever, authors and editors need to think outside the box in order to create success. The death of the independent booksellers has meant there is less word-of-mouth selling of books, so editors and publishing houses need to look for more creative ways to market their books and their authors. A lot of this includes the author's heavy involvement and investments in themselves as a product. Both Barbara Jones and Sarah Landes see their roles as involving guiding authors in marketing their careers. Authors need to be more active in selling their books, whether by using their social networks to promote their books, meeting people through PR opportunities outside the traditional media or creating a launching pad on the internet, in order to create potential for spreading the word and increasing sales. One great example is of Barbara's author Kelly Corrigan, whose books *The Middle Place* and *Lift* hit the bestseller lists. One of the things Corrigan was able to do was to connect with a clothing brand and convince them to sponsor her as an author. This helped her to travel the country to promote her book extensively. Was this directly

responsible for her great sales? It's hard to say. Certainly, the writing was of a standard that got her amazing reviews, and the packaging helped the book go out strongly into the market. Still, considering the resulting successes it's impossible to rule out the impact of that sponsorship.

Voice allows Sarah and Barbara to publish types of women's fiction that Hyperion haven't done before. What's really interesting is that they are building the imprint slowly but surely, taking the time to publish only books they believe in and that fit the profile of the imprint. When considering fiction, they look for a great read, a fresh narrative voice and strong characterisation. Because Voice is building a fiction list, and because Hyperion is a front-list publisher (where most budgets are spent promoting the front-list titles), the fiction has to be bought at a modest price (i.e., small advances of only a few thousand dollars, as opposed to tens or hundreds of thousands), and it has to be good enough to sell itself, in a sense. A great example of this is Sarah's acquisition of *The Beach Street Knitting Society and Yarn Club* (Gil McNeil), which sold 'quietly well' in hardcover (5000 copies with minimum exposure), and is now doing very well in paperback. Likewise for Gil's latest book, *Needles and Pearls*. Packaging is also crucial, particularly as Voice will always publish hardcover in the first instance. But, as Sarah happily told me, with fiction, there is a real upside in the paperback, and the hardback is almost used to set up the paperback. A rough figure is that a 20,000 print run in hardcover will translate into sales of 75,000 in paperback – something to really look forward to.

Whether publishing fiction or non-fiction, Barbara says that for Voice, because they are often publishing a book that is unusual for the company, it's crucial to begin the process of thinking and shaping the company attitude right away. For example, if a book is a memoir, from the very first company communication and editorial meeting, she begins to sell it to her own team as a memoir, so that it's a known and trusted quantity and it doesn't become lost in the myriad breakdowns that would be wrong for it. As she explains, someone who may not necessarily want to read a book about a parent struggling with an ADD child might

otherwise be drawn to a powerful memoir about triumphing over adversity, and an uplifting story. The process of marketing and selling books, she says, begins with the editor selling it to her in-house team in the way she means it to go out into the world. This is just as important for a women's fiction as it is for non-fiction.

Building authors is also an imperative aim of Voice. When considering a fiction submission, both Sarah and Barbara ask themselves if the author will be able to write three to four books, rather than the single novel at her desk. This hinges not only on the subject or content of the novel, but on the author's narrative voice and their profile. It also means publishing frequently – once a year rather than every two or more years – in order to build a momentum of sales and the author's profile. This puts pressure not only on the author, but the editor as well.

Ebooks

Hyperion was my first New York introduction to the highly topical issue of ebooks. All the editors and publishers I visited were talking about ebooks, the Kindle versus the iPad (which was due for release while I was there), Amazon versus the agency model, and much more. I have to confess to trying not to get too caught up in the subject because I didn't want it to overshadow my area of interest, but it would be remiss of me not to relay some of the remarkable things I learned about ebooks and how US publishers are engaging with digital publishing.

- All publishers are now actively publishing ebooks. Prior to the advent of the iPad, they were convinced that no book would be published for e-format only; in other words, they continued to work under the assumption that publication in any new format would append the publication of the physical book. But now, especially at Hyperion, publishing *only* ebooks is a real consideration. Which books will be chosen for this format remains to be seen.

- For the majority of publishers, about 2–4 per cent of books in their lists are already available in digital form. The challenge now for all publishers is to decide whether or not to digitalise all the titles on their lists, particularly when a new book by an experienced author is published now, giving readers the opportunity to purchase the entire back list.
- Ebooks, as an extra format, don't cancel out the usual costs of publishing: there are still advances to be paid to authors, publishers still have to print and distribute the physical books, and the infrastructure to produce ebooks is costly, so the financial loss through the lower price point of ebooks has yet to be fully measured.
- Women's fiction sells well in ebooks. It isn't that ebooks have increased sales in this genre – there is no evidence of this. The figures show that women are buying women's fiction for their e-readers, especially sexy and paranormal romances (the speculation being that it's probably easier for women to buy these novels online).
- On average, publishers are quoting a 176 per cent increase in sales for ebooks in the past two years. Hyperion has experienced an increase of 300 per cent. In particular, their 'How to' section is doing very well, as are cookbooks and diet books.

ATRIA, SIMON & SCHUSTER

16 March – 23 April 2010

Monday – Thursday

From my first meeting with Judith Curr, Atria's executive vice president and publisher, she showed me a series she'd just acquired and told me they were going to make it a bestseller. I loved the strength of that statement! I wasn't surprised by her confidence; Atria has, after all, published more than 165 *New York Times* bestsellers, and they publish some of the biggest names in women's fiction, including Jodi Picoult, Jude Deveraux and Jennifer Weiner. But I was rather impressed, and I looked forward to being a part of the team for the next six weeks.

Judith organised for me to work with Peter Borland, vice president and editorial director, and I was instantly handed over two manuscripts to work on: Shirley MacLaine's *I'm Over All That* and Portia Di Rossi's first memoir, *Unbearable Lightness*. This was wonderful because it gave me a solid daily purpose of tasks (and allowed me to do what I loved), but then I was able to break that up by attending meetings with Peter: from editorial, to marketing, pre-positioning and publicity, and then the Simon & Schuster sales conference.

Peter's experience is vast and his list is extensive. He specialises in quality commercial fiction, narrative non-fiction, memoir, biography and popular culture, and his author list includes Richard Doetsch, Mireille Guiliano, Spencer Johnson, Joseph Kanon, Spencer Quinn and Tom Watson. Atria publishes around 70 original books a year, and Peter's list comprises twelve to fourteen of those books. He is the only editor I met who'd previously worked as a freelance editor (more on that a bit later on). He was incredibly generous with his time, and paved the way for me to spend time with Greer Hendricks, vice president and senior editor at Atria, and who is Jennifer Weiner's editor. Peter also gave me a wonderful introduction to Lauren McKenna, Kresley Cole's editor.

Although I was astounded by Voice/Hyperion's innovative approach to publishing, particularly on the technology front, being at Atria showed me what it's like to have innovation at a much larger scale, and it helped me to realise that all publishers are grappling with finding new and creative ways to break through the financial crisis and continue to publish strongly in this rapidly changing environment.

One of the things in the process of taking off at Atria was the implementation of **iPhone Apps**. How does this apply to books? Readers can download apps about their favourite authors, such as Jodi Picoult, which for \$0.99 give you access to an entirely new side to the author. This includes seeing all the covers of their entire back list, visual author interviews, book reviews and articles – the possibilities are endless and are only limited by the technology. Rachel Bostic, Atria's marketing manager, was spearheading the implementation of all this, and she was frighteningly comfortable with the technology. I can't say that I absorbed as much as I should have from her, mainly because I have a problem letting go of the idea of having physical books to embrace the whole new ebook world, but she was very driven and focused on exploring all possibilities and trying to make them a reality. One of the things that terrified me was an iPhone app that allows you to place your phone over a barcode in the bookstore and immediately access a visual/audio author blurb or interview. Freaky! The question that remains to be answered is: will phone apps help an author to earn out their advance? That remains to be proved and, in the meantime, the company is trying to decide where costs for such things are allocated, and whether or not they are part of the book's publishing budget. (Atria's ebooks sub-label is Atria Unbound.)

I have to also mention **web-esodes** – as in, fictionalised episodes capturing some essence of the book, starring the author/s and made specifically for the web. These are all the rage currently, and two Atria books were in the process of creating them: Victoria Powell's *Secrets of a Soap Opera Diva* and Blair Underwood's *From Capetown with Love*. Of course it helps that these two authors are extremely high profile, and they can act! But, in general, web-esodes can net publishers \$250,000 worth of free advertising, and the average cost of making a web-

esode can be up to \$5000. The great thing about the current system at Atria is that they are determined to barter for free advertising through web-esodes – a seemingly worthwhile venture. Two of the media partners interested in web-esodes are E-online and people.com.

How Atria's editors work

What I really loved about Atria was that the editors and Peter Borland and Judith Curr all worked very closely together, mapping out all the various aspects of a book's and author's marketing, publicity and release into the world, and that they collectively make all the decisions necessary for their list. I was so surprised that there was no 'covers meeting' where Atria covers need to go through the greater Simon & Schuster sales and marketing team – the editor and Judith have final say on covers and packaging. As Judith said to me, 'We know what the book is about, we know what it should look like, and we'll send it out into the world as it should be.'

The same rules apply to acquiring titles: the final decision lies with Judith, but the editors have incredible freedom in acquiring books they believe in, as long as they can convince Judith of its worth. I was imagining a nightmarish situation where an acquisitions board has to approve any and all book buying, but, in fact, it's surprisingly independent, and the result is that the imprint is highly focused and closely directed in its purpose. Here, a qualification needs to be made about advances: if there is a million-dollar advance (not unusual in New York's publishing scene, which is one of the reasons why so many imprints ran into problems with the financial crisis), then there is a more formal acquisitions approval process, but otherwise Judith has the final say.

Structural editing vs. line editing vs. copyediting

One of the things that fascinated me while working with both Barbara Jones (Voice) and Peter Borland is the distinction editors make between these three types of editing. When I was first given the Shirley MacLaine book, Peter asked me not to make any marks on the pages, but advised that I was free to do a line edit. I took this to mean a copyedit, which

concerned me because I thought it was going to be highly complicated not being able to mark up the pages! But as he explained to me, line editing and copyediting are entirely different things: to line edit, you look at making specific notes on the text by page and chapter, but your main task is to look out for the overarching plot, tone, characterisation, story arc, etc. Copyediting, on the other hand, is seen as a highly technical, grammatical function, and most editors don't check or peruse copyedits, which are often done simultaneously to their line edits (often combined at a later stage by the production editor). So what constitutes a structural edit? It is as we understand it, but without looking too closely at the language.

None of the editors I met would ever send line editing to a freelance editor. Peter is the only editor I spoke with who had actually done structural and line edits in a freelance capacity, and basically that was a wholly unique situation because of who he is and his extensive experience. This fascinated and horrified me! Copyeditors are regarded well for their technical brilliance, but they would never be trusted to look at the manuscript broadly enough to constitute a line or structural edit. Although I didn't meet any freelance copyeditors in New York, I couldn't help but feel frustrated by the limitations placed upon them in this publishing scene.

On the question of 'how much editing do editors do?', I'm so thrilled to report that all the editors I spoke with at Atria (and Voice/Hyperion) still do a lot of editing – structural and line. Greer Hendricks, Jennifer Weiner's editor, works in a similar style to Peter Borland: they both write very detailed structural reports that include queries about chapters, paragraphs, and lines in the manuscript. There's no shortcut for them, they simply have to do the work themselves because, although they both have associate and assistant editors working for them, they are the primary editors working on their lists, and their authors, particularly of the calibre of Jen Weiner, expect them to offer comprehensive feedback and guidance.

Format and packaging

Like all the editors and publishers I spoke with, Atria's editors are greatly concerned with getting the format right and putting the right package out into the marketplace. Although they continue to publish in hardcover in the first instance, they are also exploring the issue of trade paperback originals and their impact on sales and the industry as a whole. One of the things they were discussing, for example, is publishing more commercial books in the larger size as original trade paperbacks – equivalent to our C-format – for pricing, then reprinting them in the smaller paperback format but not in mass market – equivalent to our B-format. Of course, Judith is aware that this is how Australian publishing has been operating with regards to fiction for quite some time and that it's a formula that works well. However, because the pricing points differ so dramatically (their paperbacks cost around US\$16.99 whereas Australian C-format cost around \$32.99), it is a difficult issue for publishers.

The change in covers in the US is very close to that in Australia. (Did we follow them or did they follow us?) All women's fiction, whether it used to be published in mass market format or hardcover, has moved from illustrated, chick lit, playful, bright and light, to much more serious, photographic (aspirational photography rather than directive), with strong, dominant type usage for author names (to indicate their prominence in the marketplace), and almost always a quote of praise on the front cover, preferably by another hugely selling author in the genre. A great example to illustrate the impact such quotes and support from bestselling authors make is the success of Sarah Pekkanen, Greer's newest women's fiction sensation.

Pekkanen's debut novel, *The Opposite of Me*, was reviewed and loved by Jennifer Weiner. Not only did Weiner give an endorsement quote for the front cover, but she took it upon herself to launch a promotion on her website, offering her readers a free Weiner book for every Pekkanen one bought, thereby creating a pre-launch buzz that spiked pre-orders of the books by booksellers. This unprecedented support tapped into that community of readers and writers that romance publishers talk about, that builds support from within and creates writing and selling sensations all over the publishing world.

The question of chick lit: is it now simply ‘women’s fiction’?

Jennifer Weiner was the queen of chick lit. With her fifth book, *Good in Bed*, for example, she created a lovable heroine who is not normally written about: she’s overweight (or ‘plus-size’) and she is ‘good in bed’. This was a bit of a mark of chick lit: an unusual character, a comedic plot that is genuinely funny, and a larger-than-life scenario that still aims to be realistic. Chick lit spoke to women in a lighthearted, fun manner; it depicted slightly unusual, glamorous lives and offered an escape from the everyday. There was always a romantic element or romantic interest, but it pushed the traditional romance novel ideal of ‘Mr Right Forever’ and created ‘Mr Right Now’. Chick lit’s readers were working women in their twenties and thirties.

When I asked editors to define chick lit, they said things like, ‘a group of friends in the city’, ‘women shopping and playing’, ‘fun, laughter, sexy’ and ‘an extension on romance fiction’. Some editors told me chick lit filled the natural gap that was left by the romantic fiction world of the romantic comedy. If we were to examine various chick lit covers, you would certainly get these impressions from the packaging: illustrated caricatures of women and sometimes only body parts, with sexy legs, shoes, handbags, laughter and lightness. Sometimes, if the author was big enough, there was glitter and glamour on the cover finish. The type used on the covers was playful, swirly, screaming ‘Not Serious!’.

So what happened to chick lit? It didn’t die – in fact, Greer Hendricks says, controversially, ‘Jen Weiner is still chick lit!’ – its writers simply grew up, and their readers grew up with them. What we now call ‘women’s fiction’ can be described as having bigger storylines, deeper issues and more universal women’s concerns. There is still a romantic element, but it’s much more complex than the issue of ‘Mr Right’. It can still be humorous and fun, but, ultimately, the storylines and the characters are more multifaceted.

The packaging is still woman-focused. It must appeal to its readers, and although the type has become much more serious (emulating the big thriller treatment for author names) and

publishers now use photographs rather than illustrations, they are still clearly and definably covers created to appeal to women. If they didn't appeal, they would be lost in the marketplace.

Target and Walmart

Target and Walmart – the superstores – are significant sales channels for Simon & Schuster. When dealing with these giants, it takes four to six weeks to see big sales of books because they are treated as a product and need to compete with all other products in the store, such as batteries! For Simon & Schuster, in these chains, the trade paperback is doing very well, as opposed to the hardcover and even the mass market paperback. This is further confirmation that they need to be publishing more trade paperback originals.

Target has 1748 stores in the US, and they are focused on new release bestsellers in books (it has no interest in publishing backlist titles). There is a Target book club, and all publishers try to get their books into their selection list. The key is giving the buyers something to read early on in the process (five months is ideal), and, of course, the cover. Target buyers will choose most of their books based on the cover and title.

Walmart has 3579 stores nationwide, and they claim a billion dollars in sales per day (compared with Simon & Schuster's billion dollars a year). The Walmart stores are more open in design than Target's and are less cluttered, which seems to have a hand in increasing their sales overall compared with Target. The book categories space, however, has been reduced in 2010 by 15 per cent, but publishers and stores still have the challenge of selling the same amount of books.

In terms of ebooks, all Simon & Schuster's booksellers have an online presence, but not all of them merchandise books themselves. None sell ebooks right now, so publishers aren't able to convert book buyers into ebook buyers. Target, however, has announced that it will start selling ebooks and they are looking for e-tailers.

POCKET BOOKS, SIMON & SCHUSTER

I was so delighted to be able to spend time with Lauren McKenna, executive editor of Pocket Books, who was down the hall and around a few bends from where I sat in the Atria office. As I mentioned earlier, I was really hoping the first 100 pages of Kresley Cole's newest novel would arrive while I was there, but, alas, it wasn't to be. Nevertheless, I got to read and structurally edit a new novel of one of Lauren's biggest women's fiction authors, Mary Alice Munroe.

The Butterfly's Daughter (due to be released in May 2011) is a departure for Monroe from her very strongly selling American Midwest/Southern fiction into the much broader, more literary or, as some editors like to say, 'smarter' women's fiction. This was such a wonderful experience because I got to speak with Lauren at great length about the way she tackles certain editing issues and techniques, her offered resolutions to problems and how she helps the author achieve her vision of the book through her editorial work. I'm anxiously waiting to see the published book.

I also got to speak to Lauren about women's fiction in general, and her list specifically. For Lauren, when she buys a book, she needs to know that it's like something else – another book on the market – because sales and marketing and publishing teams, as well as booksellers and readers, want to relate it to an existing book, and sometimes they want more of the same of something that is already out there. The question for the new book fitting into the existing mould of 'women's fiction' is: is it better or more accessible and therefore just as or more saleable?

One of the big issues for women's fiction is branding. Branding is crucial for women's fiction authors, but it takes a while to achieve. It can't be done in one book. The packaging is the key player in branding an author. The brand signals to readers what to expect. In the case

of Lauren's list, it's about getting a rich story and a great quality of writing that they'll come back for time and again. The brand is about having people come back because the author is a good storyteller. The cover is of utmost importance; without a good cover the book will die because you have only one minute with the consumer to capture their interest, and that's the job of the cover. A great cover will see an increase in sales – that's been proved to her time and again.

Lauren is convinced of the longevity of women's fiction because, she says, not all women will read romance, but all women will read women's fiction. And although in women's fiction romance is the driving force of some of the stories, she looks for the great story arc and the characterisation to make it stand out from the rest, regardless of the romantic elements.

The two elements she looks for in women's fiction are a fresh idea and a strong/ fresh narrative voice. This is something all the editors in the genre have insisted on, and I wondered if it meant something different for Lauren. She says, it's hard to define the voice, and it's the sort of thing you recognise instantly when you see it. An editor can fix a problematic plot, but she can't change a writer's tone or voice. You can't make someone lyrical if they're not, or more descriptive if that isn't their nature. You can't teach voice, it is a style that is innate to a writer. The other elements she looks for are: plotting, plausibility, character arc and character development. In romance fiction, she also looks for the marketability of the author, the sexual tension between the hero and heroine, how sexy the novel is and the setting.

Lauren edits all her titles, and a crucial part of her editing task is giving suggestions and discussing possibilities with authors in conversation either in person or over the phone. She feels that with a report, there is always a lot of criticism for the author to deal with, so offering suggestions feels like giving back a little and it engenders authors to talk to you about the problems, rather than trying to deal with a barrage of criticism on their own. When

you write something down, such as in a report, it's more daunting for the author to deal with, so she uses her reports to address the larger themes and she marks up the manuscript for line, paragraph and chapter notes, but she prefers to have an in-depth talk with the authors and she asks them to call her within a day of reading her letter and report. Talking out large issues makes it seem less overwhelming, and it ensures both editor and author are clear about the problems and are on the same page with regards to possible solutions. The letter is a talking point only.

When it comes to her highly experienced authors, such as Kresley Cole, Lauren likes to map out the storyline and characterisation as the author is writing, so that when the first 100 pages are delivered to her, she has an expectation to judge by. These first 100 pages are crucial: for many of her authors, she will do a detailed edit of these pages, so that they can hash out all the issues that arise before the author has to complete the remainder of the book. This, she feels, and her authors seem to agree, is the best way to work with these skilled authors.

On the question of 'Is there too much sex in romances?', Lauren says she won't let her authors sacrifice the story or character development for the sake of sex. In today's climate, there is a strong demand for more sex in the sexier categories of romance and women's fiction, but Lauren takes a firm stand on it not becoming a character in the story.

Plateauing in sales is a danger for all authors, particularly when they reach a certain level of sales. If an author does plateau, Lauren will first look at the packaging, then the publishing month, and she will look at trying to skew the storyline of an individual story into something better. She will also look at the possibility of creating a series for an author, if they have only published single titles. With series, you are able to publish back-to-back titles every six or twelve months, depending on the author's abilities, which has been working quite well in this genre.

THE VISITS

HARLEQUIN

There is a widely held belief that romance fiction is a manufactured world; that big internationals produce titles in an artificial process that is focused on maximising sales and capitalising on an area of sale. This applies in particular to the subgenre creation, meaning the divides within romance: paranormal, suspense, thriller, contemporary, historical, and so on. In the case of a publishing giant such as Harlequin, category romances come into play. Some would argue that these have the same storyline over and over again, and that in fact Harlequin editors ask their authors to write certain types of stories because another author did so successfully, readers want more of the same and Harlequin wants the profits.

I got to spend three days at Harlequin talking to various editors, primarily with the executive editor of Silhouette, Mary Theresa Hussey, as well as attending some editorial (i.e., acquisitions) and covers meetings, and I was able to investigate these questions as a result. I was pleasantly surprised to find that, while the process comprises a complex mixture of elements, overall it's really no different to a regular commercial fiction publishing environment.

Yes, **Harlequin does strategically map out areas of success** – the company has a whole marketing machine that carefully documents the movement of books and authors – and they do target certain categories for sales. So, if an author is suddenly doing well in a new category such as paranormal romance, then Harlequin wants in on it as well, and the editors will ask their enormous register of writers to try to submit stories in this category. With regards to their category romance novels, they do produce ten a month, every month. But here's the thing that people who don't read or edit or publish romance fiction don't realise: the readers of the genre are the most discerning, most voracious of readers, and that makes them the toughest critics. They're also the loudest critics: they will get in touch with an author

immediately through their website (and, in the old days, via letters to the publisher) to make their feelings heard, as well as flood the internet with reviews and comments (a leading blog of such reviews and comments is Smart Bitches Trashy Books: www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com). So only the best stories do well, and when I spoke to these Harlequin editors and asked them to define how they judge the best stories, they all said: a fresh/strong narrative voice, character building, world building (in the case of paranormal, for example) and story arc. These are the foundations of all great stories, and it's no different in romance.

All the editors I spoke with said the same thing: **you can't manufacture the narrative voice**. It's a talent, a part of a writer that no editor can forcibly 'fix'. No editor can rewrite a novel, especially in this very competitive genre, even in the most formula-driven environment. And on the question of subgenre or category creation, it's a purely organic process – an author writes a new twist on a category, or writes in between categories, and suddenly critics and readers pick up the terminology and a subgenre is created.

Harlequin's editors are dedicated to developing brilliant books and fostering author building. That was one of the most impressive things about this publishing house: they are all about building their authors, and considering how tough a thing that has become in the publishing world, it's amazing that a house of this size is still heavily invested in building its authors. So many times I've heard from publishers in Australia that there's no more time to build an author – as in, you can't slowly build their careers over a series of books. If the first one doesn't do well enough, then it's harder for the second to do so. But in the women's fiction market, especially romance, author building is the key to turning authors into bestsellers. What's more, there is a real commitment from the Harlequin editors to protecting the integrity of their authors, and while they might encourage an author to break a pattern they'd developed, particularly in a series or category romance, they will only do so if it enhances the story. They will not compromise the author's own style for the sake of it.

Because I'm an editor, I wanted to know what this meant in terms of editing. A lot of editors told me that they develop their books and do structural and line edits, but the copyediting is managed by the production editor, i.e. they don't even see it. It is freelanced out, and is done simultaneously to the in-house editor's final line edit. This sounded like a complicated process to me: the author has to deal with their editor's comments about the structure, plot, characters, and so on, but then they have to deal with the close word-by-word copyedit from another source. These discrete edits, of course, are done on separate copies and, in the case of the big publishing houses like Harlequin, are generally done on-screen. (Harlequin and Penguin have made it company policy that all edits are done on-screen.) So the production editor has to combine all this into the one manageable manuscript copy or file, and then the author has to deal with the various layers of the two edits.

Because Harlequin is marketing driven, marketing has the final say on all covers.

Harlequin editors organise photo shoots for all their covers – they never use stock images. This is mainly because of world rights. The head office is actually in Toronto, and so is the art department, so there is quite a lot of talking in conference about covers over the phone. But they really research their readership and markets, and so the editors are supportive of the structure, even if they sometimes wish the cover they preferred had got through.

The editors at Harlequin have come from all over the publishing world: from commercial fiction, to thrillers and suspense, to text books. But they've all chosen to work in romance, mostly because that was an area they loved reading in, and they wanted to work with books they loved to read. As Mary Theresa Hussey, who has been with Harlequin for twenty years, said to me: 'I read a lot of bad books, unpublished in various genres, and if I have to read bad books over and over, I'd prefer to read something that contains hope for people and society, and that is what romance novels give.' And in terms of their professional freedom in acquiring their books, editors can acquire two books for a set amount on their own, but if the amount is more than that then Mary Theresa gets involved. Which means that editors, particularly in the category romances, can acquire the books they want. And

editors aren't confined to working within the one sub-category: if an editor finds an author, they can work with them even if they decide to write across into adult fiction, or young adult, series or single-title fiction.

In a place this large, there do need to be some **quality-control measures**. The first chapter of all books is given to a senior editor and an executive editor to read, and editors answer a series of questions to justify why they want to buy a book. This gives everyone involved a flavour of the writing and authorial voice, as well as placing the book clearly in the marketplace. Mary Theresa Hussey says the editorial reports that editors write their authors are her indications of their skills. Her only advice is that if an editor needs to choose between a good structure, good craftsmanship and a good storyteller, then always choose the good storyteller because, ultimately, these are the stories that will sell.

Harlequin is the only publisher that has an ebook-only imprint. Carina Press (<http://carinapress.com>) was launched in October 2009 and it publishes digital-only books. They have a normal publishing structure, including royalties and advances (although these are admittedly very low), but the major difference is they offer new authors an alternate path into publishing that is now wide open for possibilities. Most of the books sold as ebooks are paranormal, sexy or erotic fiction. No one really knows why these books sell the best as ebooks, but the thinking is that it's probably more comfortable for some readers to purchase these online than to buy them from the superstores or bookstores.

Harlequin also has a highly interactive blog with readers (<http://harlequinblog.com/>), an indication of the level of communication they have with their market. Readers, writers and editors can discuss issues of the day, review books and, of course, Harlequin can promote its titles to their target audiences. It's a wonderful setup that works for all involved, and I was thrilled when I was asked to write a short piece for the blog about

being an Australian editor in New York: <http://harlequinblog.com/2010/04/is-new-york-the-most-romantic-city-in-the-world-it-should-be/>

Lady Jane's Salon

It was through Mary Theresa that I found out about Lady Jane's, a brilliant romance authors' event at a bar called Madame X in Soho. This is a monthly romance reading series, which hosts an average of fifty people, and allows three to four authors to read extracts from their new novels.

The bar has an upstairs lounge which is fitted out like a bordello-esque 1880s saloon, with everything in red velvet, from love seats and curtains, to carpet and lampshades (which have velvety-red tassels, too). The audience is mostly women who read, write or review romantic fiction. This is another example of the close-knit community in romance fiction that many editors and publishers believe is responsible for the continued growth and development of the genre.

GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING, HBGUSA

Grand Central was the very first publisher I visited in New York, even before my first day at Writers House. I had back-to-back meetings with editors and executive editors, who worked across romance, contemporary and ‘smarter’ women’s fiction, within the imprints Forever (which is their romance imprint), Grand Central and 5 Spot, which is the trade paperback imprint featuring women’s fiction and non-fiction.

Grand Central Publishing launched its romance imprint, Forever, in January 2003, and has introduced and nurtured such new talents as Larissa Ione (paranormal romance, with a bestselling ‘Demonica’ series) and Elizabeth Hoyt (historical romance), and built established authors like Sandra Hill.

Selina McLemore, senior editor, was the very first editor I met. On that first meeting she was an ‘editor’, but soon earned a promotion to senior editor. Selina was brought into GCP to run an upmarket women’s fiction publishing program for the Spanish-speaking (specifically Latino) market. These are English-language titles, but the marketing of the books is bilingual, in order to expose Spanish-speaking people to mainstream publishing. The program was launched in 2008 for 5-Spot.

Selina’s background is in romance, but now her list includes thrillers, mysteries, erotica, women’s fiction and non-fiction. The romance, she says, is priced well, which is so important in the mass market field. Reading romance is essentially a happy, positive transportation for readers to some place outside of reality. Her most recent discovery in romantic fiction is Jennifer Haymore, whose historical romance, *A Hint of Wicked*, has done very well. It created a huge controversy amongst readers (which was still being discussed a year after its initial publishing date at Lady Jane’s), because the heroine has to choose between two men she loves equally – her current husband and her first husband who had disappeared eight years earlier and had since come back from the dead.

When I read this title I was quite surprised by how far the author subverted **the golden rule in all romantic novels**: the central romance has to be known! But Haymore is adventurous in her writing, and this love triangle made the book broader than the average romance novel, even historical. The feedback the publisher has received from readers is that the author created a true love suspense, even though I personally felt she had gone too far with the question of who she will choose to be with in the end.

Selina says that **romance authors, the best of them, continue to twist the conventions** to give a new spark to the narrative voice. Often the trends are cyclical, especially with regards to historical romance, but it's always the new approach, the new/fresh voice, that stands out in these categories, and Haymore's is such a voice.

Trends are a mark of the romance novel. The paranormal genre is currently the trendiest, and Selina feels this may have evolved out of the increasing darkness of romantic suspense, making for a more comfortable switch for readers into an alternative universe. Also, because of the current popularity of erotica, violence and dark sex have made a bit of a comeback into the romance novel, and a paranormal setting gives authors and readers a more comfortable platform for exploring these themes.

The second editor I met was Amy Pierpont, who is a senior editor with Grand Central Publishing and the editorial director of Forever. Amy came from Atria and Pocket Books, Simon & Schuster, and she founded Downtown Press at Pocket. At HBGUSA, she runs Forever, which includes publishing romantic suspense, paranormal, erotica and contemporary and historical fiction.

Amy says that the **historical romance is strong once again** and has been for a few years. The contemporary romance is exploring new avenues: with small-town settings and a large cast of characters. These stories have started to work well also, particularly since the financial downturn.

These books share a core value, and while some are super sexy and others aren't, what is working for all of them is back-to-back publishing. **The format is crucial:** currently what is working is trade paperback, less category, in a larger format than the regular mass market paperback, which is cheaper and more widely available through the chain stores.

Forever has always been a mass-market paperback imprint, with a few exceptions (Julie Garwood, for example, is published in hardback). Here, again, it's all in the packaging. Covers are competitive, and need to have a leading edge to stand out against their competitors. What Amy says is she looks at giving 'big book' treatment to the mass market title, in order to make it stand out from the rest.

Having a second cover, a full-bleed step-back, is expensive but important, especially for the historical romance. For those who aren't familiar with the step-back, it is the full illustration of the hero and heroine that is often partially shown on the front cover, which is placed at the front of the book as the second cover. For the typical mass market title, 40,000 copies is the average first print run, even for an unknown author. For someone like Elizabeth Hoyt, the average print run on a new title is 130,000.

Historical covers are always shot and then illustrated. Amy commissions dresses to be made for shoots, so she employs seamstresses! The reason the historical romance is still illustrated – or, to be specific, painted – is that readers like to imagine the characters. It enhances the element of fantasy.

The other editors I met are Karen Kosztołnyik, executive editor, Grand Central Publishing; Caryn Karmatz Rudy, executive editor and editorial director, 5 Spot; and Beth De Guzman, vice president, editor-in-chief, paperbacks, Grand Central Publishing.

Beth De Guzman, who oversees all the imprints, says that although mass market sales have fallen more than other formats, **romance is the only category that hasn't dropped off**. She feels that it's in part because the romance novel isn't an impulse buy for readers: their

habits haven't changed despite the economical downturn. In fact, the romance fiction has been called 'recession proof' within the publishing industry. However, where they used to publish four titles a month, right now they are only publishing three – a sign of the changed economic circumstances.

Romance readers are loyal to their authors, and therefore, in this genre more than any other, author branding is vital in the packaging. In general women's fiction, there is less loyalty. Readers will still judge a book by their favourite author on its look: is it attractive enough? Is the packaging as good as the last one or better? Is the storyline as good or better? For the general women's fiction market, the packaging is also key in selling it, and Beth says that, despite the demise of chick lit, women's fiction still has a 'chick lit' feel in the way it looks, but it's a much broader subject area and has wider appeal.

ST MARTIN'S PRESS (SMP)

George Witte, vice president and editor-in-chief of SMP, organised a round-table meeting with a group of editors and executive editors, and I was instantly drawn into their circle and their enigmatic energy.

SMP prides itself on a determination to **only publish books they believe in**. The editors don't consider trends when looking at their acquisitions list. They think about the book first and foremost – quality first. They are still operating in a slightly old-fashioned way and it seems to be working for them. They certainly have fared much better than many other publishing houses in the financial downturn, not just because they only publish books they believe in, but because they don't pay a lot for advances as a rule.

All publishers and editors only want to publish books they believe in, books they fall in love with and authors who are, or can grow into, exceptional writers. But the reality of the business is that often imprints need to produce books to fill a particular need in the marketplace, and so editors have to publish for reasons other than passionate belief. That's not to say they don't spend time developing and editing those titles. Rather, they are stretched into an area that isn't satisfying in the same way, and eventually takes its toll both personally and professionally. But at SMP, it seems that the 50 editorial staff there – yes, 50! – publish more out of belief than by market necessity. They only have two imprints (aside from the Macmillan imprint Picador) – SMP and Minotaur – and everyone I met overflowed with a commitment to stay true to their reason for being who they are in the publishing world: quality first.

SMP publishes 140 books a year, mostly fiction, NYT bestseller genre books, with crime at the centre. The audience for these books is the reading groups market. On the women's fiction front, they may have a crime or murder plot driver, but they are not investigation-based novels. Janet Evanovich and Irish Johansen, for example, are very action-driven, their success showcasing the primacy of action in these sorts of women's fiction thrillers.

Currently, they are finding that the genre fiction market is strong, which is probably a sign of the times: escapist reading has proved to be popular in hard times. Historical fiction, on the other hand, tends to do consistently well. Other areas that are selling are supernatural books and erotic fiction.

The distribution channels have changed for all publishers, including SMP – there are less independent booksellers (comprising between 5 and 9 per cent of the book market), and more superstore and mega-store sellers. The mass market has contracted, too – in the ‘old days’ the average mass market print run for SMP was 150,000 copies, but now they can be as low as 25,000 and 30,000 copies. These are significantly lower sales.

SMP has had success recently with publishing **mainstream books**, because these books tend to work for a longer time, and because superstores like Target are the driving force behind getting mainstream books out to their customers. An example is *Sarah’s Key*, a reading group book, which went from 4000 copies in hardcover to selling 75,000 in paperback when Target took it up and SMP put a great commercial cover on it.

Even for SMP, Target is what’s making average-selling hardcovers into bestseller paperbacks. With the book *Pieces of Happily Ever After*, even though Target took it months after its initial publication, they catapulted its sales dramatically. They are able to take books into another step in the market and give it exposure that bookshops, even the majors like Barnes & Noble, aren’t able to do.

The key to SMP’s successful publishing, whether commercial or literary, is in **positioning**. Positioning books starts with a great book, then the title, then the package. All three are of equal importance. When it comes to women’s fiction, because it isn’t reviewed like other fiction, the package, price and distribution are what sells them.

AVON BOOKS, HARPERCOLLINS

I met Lucia Macro, vice president and executive editor of Avon, through Selina McLemore, and she showed me yet another side to women's fiction publishing and editing.

Lucia started out her publishing life at HarperCollins editing text books before she moved into romance fiction. She worked first at Berkley, then Harlequin, then finally Avon, before it was absorbed by HarperCollins. She has been at Avon for twelve years, and she works on 50 per cent romance, 50 per cent women's fiction.

Lucia says that publishing is too hung up on the issue of **format**. Avon publishes a lot of paperback originals as well as mass market genre titles. She feels that ebooks will be a great equaliser in the industry. On the topic of hardcover versus trade paperback original, she believes that if you're not an e-reader, you'll always buy the print, but if you are an e-reader, you will buy either the print and/or the ebook, and the result will be less delineation between the hardcover and paperback.

When I asked her to **define women's fiction**, she said that people call women's fiction 'women's fiction' because they don't know what else to call it! But she agrees these books are clearly not aimed at men, because men read more non-fiction, political fiction and big thrillers; the types of books that are not as relationship oriented as those aimed at women. 'Women's fiction' is used to describe books about female friendships and family, and which are not necessarily romantic.

When **editing** women's fiction, Lucia says she can tell very quickly if a manuscript works as a story. She reads women's fiction with a different mindset, as she is looking for books that work within the parameters of the genre, but she wants an author's personality to shine through. The author's voice is her biggest drawing card: she wants to be able to tear a cover off and identify the author through the voice.

When editing, particularly in the case of Stefanie Laurens, for example, she employs a light line edit because she doesn't want to ruin or interfere with an author's voice. Many genre editors, she feels, are over-editing and making authors rework their manuscripts too often. If you don't like the way they write, she says, why would you acquire it in the first place? She doesn't see her job as involving changing the voice, so she accepts her authors' style and focuses only on fixing plot and characterisation issues and the like.

In her position, she has to leave quite a lot of editing to the copyeditor because she is editing so many books at once. The good thing about this, she says, is that she avoids the problem that many genre editors have, of trying to make the books sound the same or falling into the trap of editing in the same way. She feels this is totally unnecessary, because when authors write within a genre, such as paranormal or historical romance, they are naturally inclined to go with the structures of the genre, because readers come to them for these rules, as well as their comforting and happy endings.

Lucia's favourite writer at the moment is Rachel Gibson (who has a most impressive website: www.rachelgibson.com/), because her **characters** are flawed in a way that romance characters normally aren't. They're larger than life but filled with self-doubt and angst because their lives are difficult. In one book, the woman is a stripper and is married to an eighty-year-old (a very hard life!), and when he dies, he leaves her the hockey team and the house. In another novel, the heroine was 'the first slut' who was always killed in horror movies and she leaves Hollywood and goes home after turning thirty. For Lucia, these damaged characters have a wonderful appeal, especially because they tend to overcome the damage with each other.

Unlike other editors, in particular those at Grand Central and Harlequin, Lucia never goes to **cover shoots**, even though the majority of her fiction covers are shot. Her in-house art director hires the artist, the artist books the models, and she receives the finished piece of art

at the end. What's more, similarly to Harlequin, Avon has a 'copy department' which writes up all jacket and cover copy for the editors.

Her only no-no for **cover copy** is revealing that the heroine is a widow! Her worst-selling book had a widow heroine and it was mentioned in the cover copy. This eliminated the fantasy for readers that there was only one man for the heroine, and because the destiny is the fantasy of the romance, if you mess with it, then readers don't respond, and that's why putting 'widow' on cover copy isn't allowed.

BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP, PENGUIN USA

I wanted to meet with Cindy Hwang, executive editor of Berkley Publishing Group, because she edits one of the biggest-selling (and my favourite) paranormal romance writers, Christine Feehan. Feehan is the author of many NYT bestselling books, and has four hugely successful series (Dark series, Ghost Walkers, Sea Haven and Leopard series) and numerous single titles.

Cindy works on romance and women's fiction that has a romantic element. She says the reason women's fiction and romance fiction are so similarly packaged, hence causing a blurring of the genres, is that publishers realised the power of the romance reader and they have been trying to capitalise on it with women's fiction. Hence, the often similar packaging, with those key signifiers that indicate the specifics to readers: if it's an erotic story, for example, publishers would try to indicate it is erotic on the cover.

Overall, 90 per cent of the success rate Berkley has had in women's fiction has been in the **packaging**. Covers with a sexier look sell better overall, but because not all the titles are considered sexy reads, if you put a sexy cover on a book that doesn't deliver, readers would feel ripped off and misled. That's why, although they try to be as sexy as possible with their covers, they are constrained by trying to stay true to what the book actually offers.

When working with urban fantasy, the women on the cover must be strong but feminine. The most common depiction on covers is of a woman in provocative, tight clothing, not necessarily baring skin but showcasing her femininity. In the romantic novel, the covers tend to be more male-centric, but they can't define the features of the man too strongly. They, of course, must have great bodies, but because the models used are young and the characters are not, not defining the features helps to avoid that disconnect between how the models look and the characters portrayed. With representing female characters and heroines, readers find it distracting to illustrate exactly what a heroine looks like.

Feehan was always traditionally published in mass market paperback, first with Dorchester with the Dark Series and then with Berkley, and was only published in hardcover three years ago. This is a risk that not many publishers can take with their authors, but Cindy felt that it was time in terms of sales, as they were a bit narrow. Her opportunity came with *Dark Celebration*, which, although it was the fourteenth book in the Dark Series, was a departure in that it unusually involved all the characters from the previous books in the series. Prior to this hardcover, Berkley tried some alternatives to the mass market paperback in publishing Feehan – they released a tall, skinny mass market format that is often used in thrillers and mysteries. But it didn't work for readers, and the conclusion was that romance is resistant to these taller books.

When I asked her **how much editing she does**, especially for an author such as Feehan, Cindy said she did quite a lot of conceptual editing with her experienced authors, where they talk about things ahead of time in the planning stages. Feehan likes to talk through plots, characters and story arcs before she commits it to paper, so this system works very well for her. However, other authors prefer to write it out first and then receive feedback. The trick for Cindy is finding the right balance for her various authors.

CONCLUSION

I thought I would end this report by answering the questions I posed in my aim:

How much editing do in-house editors actually do in general women's fiction vs. romance fiction?

It seems that most editors do structural and line edits for all the titles they work on, unless they decide to delegate to an associate or assistant editor. For the highly experienced authors, most editors seem to focus on discussing plot and character development before the author begins writing, rather than do a thorough edit of the manuscript on delivery.

Are editors so specialised that they only work on certain areas: that is, contemporary women's fiction vs. chick lit vs. romance?

Editors do specialise in the broad areas of women's fiction and/or romance fiction, but not in specific subgenre categories. Most of the executive and senior editors I met seemed to have lists comprising 50 per cent women's fiction and 50 per cent romance. But even within Harlequin, editors could work across the adult fiction or YA list, and could likewise acquire single titles versus series romances. And although many editors expressed their dismay at the snobbery that still exists within the publishing world (and sometimes within the publishing house) against romance fiction, their professionalism is no less respected than that of other editors and they seem able to move freely across the industry.

Subgenres: to what degree do editors and publishers seek out the creation of new subgenres? Or don't they? In other words, how organic is this process?

It's wholly organic, but it's complex. One need only look at the rise and fall of chick lit as an example – no one planned it! It's about tapping into a trend and living it out until it comes to a natural end or it evolves into something else.

What is the balance of the development of new subgenres between editors and publishers, agents and authors?

It starts first and foremost with a finished manuscript, then the agent sells it to the appropriate editor, then the editor acquires it for her imprint. It seems to me that it's equal parts author, agent and editor.

Subverting the genre and subgenre rules and structures: to what degree is this allowed in considering making a book a success?

Women's fiction authors are brave and are constantly challenging rules and conventions. Sometimes, though, they are constrained by the type of book they are writing: if it's a historical romance, for example, then the author must stay true to the period she is writing about, otherwise the story's authenticity will be diminished. One editor did tell me that every now and then one of her authors asks if she can include 'anal sex this time' – the answer has been a categorical no thus far! But that's because romance readers aren't looking for that sort of sex scene. It's a different story in erotica.

How do editors and authors work within the structural constraints of women's fiction writing and publishing but still create something fresh and new and exciting?

They work on discovering a great, fresh narrative voice, a terrific storyline and standout characters. Then they ensure the cover is contemporary or sexy or thriller – whatever is needed to place the book correctly in the marketplace.

What are the key elements that create successful women's fiction?

A talented storyteller and narrative voice, a fresh idea or a twist on a traditional one, the right format (hardcover vs. trade paperback vs. mass market), the right price, the right cover and frequent publication (every twelve months) to build the author's profile and sales momentum. All this should brand an author for readers and publishers.

A PRACTICAL CHECKLIST FOR BD FELLOWS

While the placements are the major organising feat of the fellowship, there are various other things that are also important. Here are my useful tips for future fellows.

Accommodation

There are a multitude of apartments on offer on the internet, particularly on Craigslist. However, I chose the more secure option of an agency as Craigslist offers mainly last-minute listings from often dubious sources. The agency I chose was NY Habitat, mainly because their fees were much more transparent than other agencies. They have clear guidelines: the fee for a stay under 90 days is charged at half a month's rent; 90 days plus is a full month's rent. The apartment I ended up choosing was perfect: a one-bedroom walk-up located in Chelsea, on West 22nd Street. There were no extra charges imposed (some people try to sneak in extra costs for utilities, etc.); the rent was the only fee. Chelsea is an extremely central location (it was a short walk to many of the city's wonderful neighbourhoods, Chelsea itself being a fantastic area), and it was safe. The apartment details are:

Dupuy's Landing Guest House

433 West 22nd Street

New York NY 10011-2543

Web: <http://dupuyslanding.com/>

Email: dl433@mac.com

One of the editors I met at Simon & Schuster expressed her willingness to rent out her apartment for future BD fellows. I didn't visit her apartment, but she would surely be able to send photos and details to those interested. Her details are with the APA.

Visa

According to the Embassy of the United States website (<http://canberra.usembassy.gov/visas.html>), most Australians travelling on business or tourism for less than 90 days do not require a visa. What you must do is fill out a Visa Waiver Program application online. You don't need to print this out, it's registered electronically. You will need to clear customs at the first point of entry into the country, which in most cases will be Los Angeles or San Francisco airports. Then you can board your connecting domestic flight to New York (take note: domestic = no food! On a six-hour flight, you'll need some snacks).

There is no point trying to explain to a US customs official about the fellowship. The only straightforward way is to tell them you are on a holiday for three months (long-service leave is a good explanation), and show your return ticket as proof that you will be leaving the country in 90 days.

Business cards

Editors and publishers will ask for a business card as it confirms the fellow's professional status. The cards are simple enough to organise as soon you arrive in New York, and should include your address, email and US cell (mobile) phone number. There are any number of available online choices, and they will deliver them to your apartment. This whole process takes about four working days and should cost around US\$50.

You will need two logos, which the APA will provide. Websites often have styles of cards to choose from and create online. The only difficulty I found was that most websites are equipped to deal with one logo/image, and because there are two logos for the fellowship (the Australia Council and APA), I needed help in merging them into the one image.

Here is what my card looked like:

Alexandra Nahlous
Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellow

433 West 22nd Street, Apartment 3A
New York, NY 10011-2543
Cell: 1-347-497-8867
Email: nahlousalexandra@gmail.com



Cell (mobile) phone

It's fairly easy to obtain a mobile phone for use in New York. If your mobile is 'open', then you can simply purchase an American SIM card, obtain a US number and acquire a short-term plan from a store such as T-Mobile, which is a chain available all over the city. If your mobile isn't open, you can simply purchase a pre-paid phone. A cell phone is crucial for contact as you move around the city.

Internet and computer access

Most apartments offer free Wi-Fi access. You may need to install antivirus software to protect your computer from using unsecured Wi-Fi. There is a surprising shortage of internet cafes in NYC, but a burgeoning of Wi-Fi hotspots, including at the Chelsea Market, where you can also get a great coffee. For these reasons, and to enable you to transfer notes immediately, blog your experience or reply to email after hours, your own laptop is essential.

THE BLOG

NY MINUTES: AN ACCOUNT OF A BEATRICE DAVIS FELLOW IN NEW YORK, 2010

Blog: nyminutes.wordpress.com

Blogger: [bookworminbigapple](#)

February 1, 2010

[Waddling through the city](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 11:19 am by [bookworminbigapple](#)

Well, I'm here! I don't think I believed it until I was on that plane and there were American attendants asking me if I'd like cream and sugar with my coffee ... and although the customs man was quite astounded at the notion that I was being paid to take a three-month holiday, he let me in with a smile and was only mildly shaking his head in disbelief. I think I talked his ear off and scared him into thinking he'd have to show me the photo he took of me!

After spending my first night in a hotel (it's called The Pod and the room just fits a bed), I made my way to the apartment the next day. I was 15 minutes early, and the woman meeting me was 15 minutes late. It was SO COLD I actually started to cry! It hurt like nothing I've ever felt before – it was like being stung with sharp needles all over then blasted with ice to make it hurt that much more. Honestly, I didn't know whether I would survive. Then of course I found out (thanks Maha – what would I do without you to interpret these things for me???) that 20 degrees F actually meant it was MINUS 9 degrees. MINUS 9!!! Felt much less of a baby after that and quite frankly, felt pretty damn good to have survived in my pathetic Sydney jacket. And it didn't stop me from exploring – I just put on as many things as I could under my jeans and jacket and ran back out the door to explore.

Everywhere I looked, people were dressed in quilts – grey, black, brown, white, red. Fantastic-looking, thick, fitted jackets that start at the head with a furry hood and end at the ankles. I followed the crowds and went straight to the coat shop (I should say store). And I bought one! I love it! So although I am now waddling my way across the city, looking like a very odd, furry-headed, red-nosed girl with a ridiculously large smile on her face, I'm not cold! Well, not much. I should have listened to Sam Brett who told me to buy ear muffs ... next on my list I reckon.

[Permalink](#) [12 Comments](#)

February 3, 2010

[Let the empire guide you](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 1:16 pm by bookworminbigapple

So, for three days now, I have roamed and roamed, got lost and counted streets and avenues, and have had no idea about north and south and east and west. I got it wrong every single time and had to walk back the way I came and start again. It was slow going to say the least. And if I actually got to a destination, you can bet it was by complete accident. But my lovely cousin told me: look to the Empire State Building – it'll point you north, which means you go up in street numbers, and because I'm in the west, it also helps orient me towards east. It works! So I've shelved my empire-related cringes and shudders and embraced it as my guide. When in New York ...

February 5, 2010

[I need knee warmers!](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 10:01 am by bookworminbigapple

Is there such a thing as a knee warmer? I've got ice burns on the insides of my knees – ouch! Truly, ouch! There is a gap between where my coat ends, just above the knees, and where my boots end just below the knees – it's red raw and so painful from all the walking around in the icy weather. I can't believe it!

I had my first snowfall last night. It was so gorgeous sitting here in my apartment, looking out watching the snow gently cover all the cars, the footpath, the trees ... it was magical, like a movie scene. I don't think I've ever seen snowfall before. Although today was sunny, there is serious snowfall forecast for tomorrow and Saturday. Hmm, not sure what to do about those knees ...

Today I visited Grand Central Publishing, and met a wonderful team of editors and executive editors. Grand Central is part of Hachette Book Group USA, and the women I met today were from the imprints 5-Spot, Forever and GC. What a generous, truly friendly

bunch of people! They really covered the broad spectrum that is women's fiction: romance, mainstream and literary.

It's an enormous office – you can seriously get lost in the corridors. Sections are divided by colour of carpet (very funny) and you have to have your photo taken when you present at security on the ground floor. It was a terrible photo, of course. Everywhere you go it seems they take your photo, put it on a sticky label and give it to you to stick on your jacket – as if I was going to do that! It's bad enough the photo was taken. They always seem to take them at the exact wrong moment, when you're either looking weird or distorted.

One phrase I loved today: '... where the setting is the third character in the story'.

Some great HBGUSA books to check out: *Knitting Under the Influence*, *The Disappearance of Irene Dos Santos*, *Mating Rituals of the North American Wasp*, *Pleasure Unbound* (this is a demon paranormal romance) and from their biggest romance writer, Elizabeth Hoyt, *To Taste Temptation*.

February 6, 2010

[Why is something underground more intimidating?!](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 5:25 pm by bookworminbigapple

I grew up in Sydney catching trains everywhere. We never had a family car, so all treks that couldn't be made on foot had to be made by train. We never caught a taxi! Not even when we had hands full of shopping. My mother would make more of us go shopping so that there were more hands to carry. So I should be very comfortable with the subway here, right? Wrong! First chance to use it today, and I completely screwed up. I went uptown instead of downtown (sounds ridiculous, it should be bloody easy), I went on the M line instead of the F line and then to make matters worse, I hailed a cab from completely the wrong street and had to go around before being able to head south in the direction I needed. What the?!?

I guess there's something about going underground that makes me panic all of a sudden, and I feel like all my train-catching skills are irrelevant. There's no timetable or anything like that (that's because trains come every few minutes, all the time), and if you don't know exactly where you need to go, it's pretty hard getting general assistance. There was only one guy behind a booth today and he wasn't very forthcoming with information. In general, I'm finding that while most New Yorkers are quite friendly, anyone working in a customer-oriented role is totally uninterested in helping you in any way possible! In fact, they give you this look, like you're really dumb and they're so put upon having to listen to you! Is it the

fact that they are paid the worst? Or is it that there are just so many people everywhere all the time demanding their time and attention?

But anyway, the subway is actually quite complicated. You have to know what line you need, and there are different entrances on the same street for north and south (and then of course other places like Queens, Brooklyn etc), but once you're on the right line, it's so unbelievably easy. While it took a cab nearly 20 minutes to get me from 50th street to Tribeca, it took a subway train 3 stops, and what felt like 3 minutes. With some gentle guidance (thanks Alex!), I caught the subway home at 12.30 am, and got here safe and sound and in no time. The subway rocks!

February 8, 2010

House of writers

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 9:48 am by bookworminbigapple

Friday was my first visit to Writers House, which by all rights should be called Agents House. It's so quixotically located! It's a three-storey historic townhouse amidst a street of high-rises. Instantly, I knew that it was the right place to be at. It's very narrow and long, and the stairs are solid but pretty steep. On top of all the walking I'm doing around here, these stairs are guaranteeing my getting an all-round exercise regime in NYC.

Every floor is lined with bookshelves – the type I love, covered by glass to keep the books as pristine as possible. It's so impressive walking along the corridors and being surrounded by all these bestsellers and internationally renowned books.

My destination was the third floor as that's where Liz, Amy Berkower's assistant, was waiting for me. I got to sit in Amy's office all day, the only available office space as Amy's away for the winter, and I read a manuscript and brainstormed title ideas for a new romance series. Not bad for my very first visit I thought!

There are some extraordinarily brilliant agents here. I can't wait to speak to some of them and pick their brains about what they do. I did meet three agents briefly, and I was there to witness how they treated one of their authors – a hot new talent in YA, who was discovered by Jody, her agent, and whose manuscript was optioned for millions. Really inspiring stuff. Just the romantic picture you'd expect to see in a New York literary agency.



February 9, 2010

VOICE

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 11:52 am by bookworminbigapple

Today was my very first visit to Hyperion/Voice, and what a place! I should've known from the very first time I spoke with the two executive editors there, and how incredible their enthusiasm towards me was, that they were going to be the best. I was made to feel so welcome today from the first second, and I was wrapped up in the boundless energy of these two women, Barbara Jones in particular. They just shine!

And to make it really special, at lunch today we had a sneak preview of Jamie Oliver's new program to be aired soon in America, about tackling Huntington's eating habits and changing their attitudes about food. Huntington is America's unhealthiest town, with almost half the adult population obese. The schools typically serve things like pizza for breakfast, chicken nuggets with sauce for lunch, hot chips, other pretend meats and chocolate or strawberry milk for that calcium substitute. Go Jamie!

To make it the perfect American experience, after seeing this show, I went to the farmers' markets down the road from the office, in Union Square, where it was all about lush greens, beautiful local produce, delicious, healthy, organic etc etc.

[Permalink](#) [5 Comments](#)

February 10, 2010

[Falafels and rainbows ...](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 12:04 pm by bookworminbigapple

Hyperion's offices are right next to the Rainbow Falafel window – it really is just a tiny doorway with a counter that holds all the fillings and two young guys behind it making the sandwiches and taking the money ... had some today and it's good, but it doesn't hold a candle to your falafels, M. Yours are still the best (sorry mum!!!).

They sell them in the typical Palestinian way (not sure if anyone else in the Arab world does it this way, but this is how they did it all over the West Bank) – in a 'pita bread pocket' which is a fat little sack (which is what Palestinian bread actually looks like, but it's much nicer than the dry pita we get in the West) that holds everything in a big rounded ball, which you have to try to eat in a humanly fashion – it's impossible basically! It goes everywhere no matter how hard you try. But I loved it! The baba was good, fresh, just the right amount of tahini. They had delish pickles, too, and what looked like the genuine article in the olive department, although they didn't include any in my sandwich. Next time I want to see what those fried cauliflowers taste like ...

The young guy making the sandwich asked me if I'd like 'hot sauce' and I asked what that was and he said it was hot sauce, and I asked if that was chilli and he said it was homemade hot sauce ... maybe my English ain't all it's cracked up to be, hey?

There's a blizzard coming late tonight and tomorrow. The news is it's going to be a big one, maybe up to 9 inches of snow! Last weekend it only got as far as south Jersey, and we just got that beautiful covering of snow which was so gorgeous to watch. But they think this time, we're getting it big in the city – yay! Today at the office everyone was talking about the possibility of a 'snow-in day' – I have to ring a phone number at 6 am and a recorded message will tell me if the office will be open. Well, we'll just have to see!

February 11, 2010

[What's to be done in a blizzard?](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 6:26 am by bookworminbigapple

I knew it was coming, but I suppose I didn't know what to expect. That probably shows that I've never been skiing in the Alps or even New Zealand, right? Well, true, so there you go. I've never even been skiing in Mt Kosciusko ...

The snowfall looks absolutely wild. The thing that makes it look blizzardy is that snow is falling at a super-fast speed at a sharp angle from the left, at the same time as it's falling equally fast at a right angle. Somewhere in the middle line, a confused swirl of wind absorbs both directions and tries to right itself by making the snow fall in a straight line. It's out of this world.

It hasn't stopped all day, and I suppose all through the night before. The parked cars are almost drowned in snow. If anyone tried to get into their car, they would get a huge load of snow falling into the seat as soon as they opened the door.

And the street sweepers – I don't know why they're bothering because it just keeps getting covered much faster than they're able to clear the road. I suppose some people are still driving – those poor bastards! But if most companies cancelled the work day, I have to wonder why they're trying.

I didn't plan very well food-wise. I've waited as long as I can but I'm starting to feel seriously hungry. Hmm ... it is 2 pm so I'll just have to be one of the crazy people on the street braving the weather. Wish me luck!

[Permalink 2 Comments](#)

February 13, 2010

[What is a dime?](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 5:50 am by bookworminbigapple

This Middle English word, which is from Old French (according to the *Macquarie Dictionary* of course), is a 'variant of *disme*, from Latin *decima* tenth part, tithe, properly feminine of *decimus* tenth' is truly bothersome to deal with.

Although it's the same size as the one-cent piece, and it's silver as opposed to bronze, it somehow gets lost in my very shallow pockets (yes being very frugal here!) and then suddenly, I find that I have 10 of them, with no idea exactly how to use them.

No one ever says, ‘That costs a dime’, or ‘That’s 10 dollars and a dime’ ... no, they say, ‘10 dollars and 10 cents’, so why oh why didn’t the American forefathers create a ten-cent piece that is kinder to the eyes and brains of foreigners and others alike?

Whenever someone hands me back a handful of change, I honestly feel overwhelmed. Which is ridiculous, considering it was only a few years ago when we were dealing with one- and two-cent coins. In fact, it’s made me realise that maybe we don’t value our dollar as much as the Americans do? A cent still matters here, but we’ve rounded it to five ... the English are the same, they have a bunch of small-change coins that when faced with for the first few days of being in London, I just looked at with serious confusion until a nice person took pity on me and picked the right stuff out of my hand! I could only hope that they were honest enough ...

Americans have a greater appreciation for *everything* American. Correction (for all those people who hate generalisations): New Yorkers have a great appreciation of everything *New York*. I’m not talking about patriotism here, although surely that’s a good part of the equation. I’m talking about how much they love this great city, how they talk about it with such passion and reverence, and when they recommend a place for you to visit, whether food related or touristy or whatever, they do it with a true sense of wonder, which shows that they are still in absolute awe of where they live. And so far, everywhere I’ve gone that’s come recommended by locals (my neighbours, people I’ve met and my landlord), it’s lived up to the hype and made me blink in awe, too.

Character, charm, old-fashioned politeness (which I’ve yet to decide whether is truly genuine or just ingrained) ... and let me tell you, when it’s icy cold and dark, and gusts of thick, white fog begin to emerge out of the grills which are all over the roads, it feels like you really have stepped into Gotham City. In NYC, everything is underground, from the subway to the power lines, and one taxi driver told me, sometimes these actually blow from the heat, which sounds and looks like an explosion (luckily New Yorkers are quite chilled out about these, otherwise you’d imagine there’d be serious hysteria every time one blew).

Ah New York, there’s much to love about you!

February 14, 2010

[On quirks and insanities](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 10:38 am by bookworminbigapple

Today, in Chinatown, the Chinese-American community welcomed in the new year – it’s my year folks! The year of the Tiger. It also happens to be Valentine’s Day, and aside from the

fact that throughout the past two weeks, the commercial advertising has been blistering my ears at every turn, everyone today greeted me with ‘Happy Valentine’s Day’, as if it was Christmas! And, you won’t believe this, news programs actually featured people proposing today ... granted ABC’s story was about proposals on the ice-skating rink in the Rockefeller Center, which is somewhat unusual, but still, it’s just a bit over the top, people.

Much here is over the top though. Take the dogs. Everyone has a dog – you can’t take a step from dawn till dusk without running into someone walking their dog. And I’m not talking about small dogs here, although there are plenty of those, most people have dogs as big as horses! And they ALL live in apartments. Yes, there is dog poop everywhere – it looks so gross mixed in with snow!!! And these are seriously loved dogs – you should see the hooded dog coats, furry waterproof paw shoes, ear muffs – you get the picture. Curiously, I’ve yet to see a stray dog.

And then there is the recycling – it’s gathered in clear plastic bags that line the streets in massive loads of garbage until collection day. This goes against the grain for me – it’s a big no-no to put recycling in plastic, but that’s how it’s done here. Black bags are for actual garbage. At the moment, the most common sight all over the city is heaped mountains of garbage mixed in with heaped mountains of snow.

There are no windows in bathrooms – not a single apartment I’ve been to or asked about has a window in the bathroom. What were people thinking when they built these? Why not have a window in the bathroom so that, you know, you don’t get mouldy build-up from the heat and moisture, especially when most of the apartments are so old that the fans either don’t work or they never had one in the first place!

And what about their electrical sockets – I feel like I’m taking my life into my hands every time I plug and unplug things around here, whether at work or in the apartment. I can actually see the blue sparks of electricity every single time I unplug an electrical cord! There are no on/off switches. Freaky!

Amidst the Chinese new year celebrations and the insane Valentine’s Day propaganda, people were skiing today in Central Park. You read right, SKIING. There’s so much snow, that most people brought their kids to go sledding – lucky things! But there were a handful of people with full-blown skiing gear. It was nuts!

[Permalink](#) [3 Comments](#)

February 17, 2010

President's day & SMP

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 3:03 am by bookworminbigapple

I feel totally spoilt – I got a holiday day yesterday because it was Presidents' Day. Have no idea what that means, but I got a day off where I could do more roaming!

Before this, I visited St Martin's Press, and I've been puzzling over what to write about my experience there. I promised myself when I was reading over my predecessors' reports that I wouldn't use the phrase, 'Every time I went to a new publisher, I couldn't believe it would be better than the last, but it was ...' but I realise now why so many previous fellows wrote this phrase – it really does happen that way.

I've been so blown away by the people I've met so far that I wasn't expecting to fall in love with a place – especially not after one day! But something about SMP just felt like ... home. Terribly clichéd, I know, but that's how it felt.

Maybe it was the fact that I had a round-table meeting with a group of editors and executive editors, and was instantly drawn into their circle and taken into their enigmatic energy; maybe it was the strength of character that came off this team in waves; maybe it was the way they talked about the way they publish and their determination to *only* publish books they believe in ... something just felt incredibly right about this house.

All publishers and editors only want to publish books they believe in, books they fall in love with and authors they believe are, or can grow into, exceptional writers. But the reality of the business is that often, imprints need to produce books to fill that need in the marketplace, and so editors have to publish for reasons other than passionate belief. That's not to say they publish willy nilly or that they don't spend time developing and editing those titles. It's to say that they are stretched into an area that isn't satisfying in the same way, and eventually takes its toll both personally and professionally. But at SMP, it seems that the 50 editors there – yes, 50! – publish more in the area of belief than the other. They only have two imprints (aside from the Macmillan imprint Picador): SMP and Minotaur, and everyone I met overflowed with the commitment to stay true to their reason for being who they are in the publishing world: quality first.

More romantic publishing ideals to be immersed in ... What more could an Aussie editor ask for?

Some fabulous SMP books: Kristin Hannah's newby *Winter Garden* (she hit the NYT bestseller list with her book, *Firefly Lane*), Janet Evanovich's newest, *Plum Spooky* (can't wait to read that one), Lora Leigh's erotic novel *Guilty Pleasure* (yes, erotic, not romance) and Jackie Collins's just released *Poor Little Bitch Girl* (can you believe she's still writing as strongly as ever?).

p.s. It's snowing again, and my office here has enormous windows with views to the Empire State building (yep, empire again) and can I tell you, it looks magnificent amidst all the snow! And now that it's just got really dark, all the city lights are on and glowing and looking sooo New York and amazing!

[Permalink 8 Comments](#)

February 18, 2010

[More insanities ...](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 3:04 pm by bookworminbigapple

New Yorkers won't let weather get in the way of style! No siree, so what if there's snow? So what if it's so slippery that today, all the footpaths were coated with a thin layer of the slipperiest ice so far. That does not stop the very stylish New York set from wearing the daintiest, highest, most pointy boots imaginable. Oh, and short skirts, and really thin stockings. There were even some mad women with NO SOCKS and only wearing ballerina-style shoes. What were they thinking, I ask you?

As for the men, at the height of another mini-blizzard, where I could barely see while walking to work because the snow was coating my eyelashes with icy white flakes, the temperature was around 26 degrees F, however, the wind chill factor was, and I quote the weather man, 'making it feel like ZERO degrees F'. That's really, really cold. And what was going on in Chelsea? Gorgeous young men were exercising, on the street, in singlets and tight trackies. SINGLETs. It's freakin' freezing people! But they're so hot ... how can I possibly complain?! You've read about my ice-burnt knees, imagine the burns on these guys! I can't even think about it.

[Permalink 2 Comments](#)

February 21, 2010

[iPads, kindles, widgets, apps ...](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 9:07 am by bookworminbigapple

Ebooks are a hot topic here, and everyone I've spoken to has talked a lot about them.

Kindles. Mostly, when I've been reading manuscripts, they've been given to me on Kindles. I have to say, I haven't liked that very much. You have to click to go on to the next page, with your thumbs, and although you can use either left or right thumb to alternate, when you're reading a long book, it can get pretty tiring, not to mention annoying. Also, and this shows how little consideration Amazon gave to editors (how rude!), you don't know which page you're on, and there's no way to go back to a page other than clicking back page by page. What's more, the screen goes blank if it takes you too long to read a page, and then it takes a few seconds to come back (again, annoying). In my opinion, this is a poor substitute for a book.

Amazon owns the Kindle exclusively, and they decided all ebooks should be \$9.99, where publishers get half of that price, but have to pay the author's royalties from that half, and Amazon gets the other half without having to share it with anyone. So, publishers have been fighting this, and it looks like they've finally won that argument. It looks like ebooks will be about \$15 or \$16, depending on the sort of book (remember, mass market fiction here is only around \$5 to \$7). Kindles only became available in Aus in November 09.

iPad. What's helped (or, if you're Amazon, what's killed the Kindle), is that Apple has created the iPad – giving a clear choice against the Kindle. These are due to be released here in either March or April and are said to be around the US\$499 mark (starting price). These are much friendlier than the Kindle – the screen doesn't go blank therefore there's no waiting for it to come back, and among various other features, you can 'flick' pages, like you do on your iPhone, which is much friendlier to the hands all around. Also, while the Kindle is only B&W, the iPad will be in colour, just like the iPhone.

Apps & widgets. Most publishers here have got apps and widgets available for iPhones, so that readers can be up to date about an author. For example, if you love Stephen King, by buying the app for a tiny 99 cents, you can be updated about author appearances (of course it's all immediately updated and current), see other titles of his, even compare covers over the past x number of years. The covers business seems to work well if there's wi-fi, but if not, it tends to be very slow (depending on the number of covers).

Overall, I have to say, I like BOOKS. I think I'll stick to them for now, but there's no denying any of these things, no matter how much I'd like to ignore the finer technical details ... especially not here. And Aussies being who they are, they'll probably adopt the technology with a vengeance, so it'll be a big change in Australian publishing for sure.

[Permalink 2 Comments](#)

February 25, 2010

[Bring back the snow!](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 4:05 am by bookworminbigapple

The rain is so much less elegant than the snow! It's been raining consistently for the past few days, and it seems to me that New Yorkers really don't like the rain.

Everything looks way too gloomy when it's wet. And the misty fog that's been hanging over the sky is very rudely obscuring my view of the city's skyline, in particular the Empire State building!

Everyone disappeared from the office before it hit 5 pm yesterday! As people here don't get in before 9.30 (mostly 10), they generally stay till after 6 pm, but not when it's raining. It was like the quick escape! And the subway was fairly empty too. The subway is always running, always busy, even if the city is under a blizzard. But, so I've been told, when it does rain continuously, there is a danger of the subway being flooded. I hope I don't get to see that any time soon!

I do like the 10 am start (yeah, yeah, that's no surprise). It's a much more human hour to be greeting people and getting stuck into things (particularly when you're reading about the mating rituals of werewolves). And it works so well here – no one bats an eyelid that the office is empty at 9 am. But I guess that's what happens in a city this large and with so many people using the subway – you need a variation of working hours, and mostly people can choose between 8am-4pm or 10am-6pm. They all tell you 'We're always working at home anyway, so what's the difference?'. I couldn't agree more!

In the summer they work an extra half hour for four days and leave half-day on Friday ... doesn't that sound good too?

[Permalink 1 Comment](#)

February 27, 2010

I'm a spoilt brat!

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 2:46 am by bookworminbigapple

It snowed so heavily yesterday that there is snow up to my knees! Wooo hoooo!!! It's so beautiful, and so quiet today. The snow is so thick that you can't hear your steps on the street – and of course you sink right in and there is a gorgeous squishy sound. Everything is at a standstill today, work and school cancelled, hardly any cars on the road, it's just like a dream.

I finally understand why people just keep on shovelling the snow! Anyone who wants to get paid to shovel can call 311 and they're set up in a location for the day or days they're needed.

I'm spoilt in other ways too! I've been taken out every day and night this week by people I've met here. Last night the executive editor of Harlequin took me to lunch and then the movies in the evening on 42nd street and we watched Shutter Island (very strange film – she hated it!). Then we battled our way through the blizzardy streets as she gave me a brave tour of the show district. It was hysterical, we could barely see for the icy bits covering our faces and piercing through our eyes. She took a photo of me, but you can't really tell how heavily it was snowing.



The night before I went to a couple of bars with a Grand Central ed and we had some fabulous Belgian beer and New York style chips (i.e. fries) with mayo (not as good as Belgian chips though, they make them the best in the world – yes, in the world! And their mayo is incomparable). We then went to have a proper New York burger, and I thought I ordered chicken but I was pretty sure it wasn't! I let the beer wash away my doubts and hoped for the best, and hey, I'm still standing so it must've been okay!

March 1, 2010

Four-faced liars and strange Germans

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 10:51 am by bookworminbigapple

Went to a great pub in Greenwich Village on Friday night called the Four-faced Liar – clearly an Irish joint! Incidentally, right next door was a ‘shisha’ seller, but seriously, they were ALL BONGS. And no ‘shisha’ in sight.

On the way to the pub, where I met up with an author and a couple of eds, I stopped to answer a question from a fellow tourist, and lo and behold, he was asking about Greenwich Village, so I explained where I was headed and asked him where he was headed, and the next thing I know Heinz (yep, just like the ketchup) decided to tag along to the pub with me and my very new friends! After about an hour he left, much to the relief of my extremely puzzled colleagues, and then you wouldn’t believe it – he came back!

Needless to say, it took a concentrated combined effort to get the message across – leave please!!! The highlight was when he complained how loud the place was ... lesson learned? Don’t be nice to tourists? Maybe just the ones named Heinz who complain about pubs being too loud?

The author was Jason Pinter, check out his website:
<http://jasonpinter.com/content/index.asp>

March 2, 2010

Lady Jane’s Salon

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 2:41 pm by bookworminbigapple

Tonight I went with two Harlequin editors to a brilliant romance authors’ event at a bar called Madame X in Soho. Lady Jane’s is a monthly romance reading series, which tonight hosted around 45 people, which allows three authors to read extracts from their new novels.

This bar has an upstairs lounge which is fitted out like the most bordello-esque 1880s saloon imaginable: everything, and I mean everything, is in red velvet: love seats, curtains, carpet, lampshades (which have velvety-red tassels too). Tonight, it was filled with mostly

women who either read, write or review romantic fiction, and men who were either friends or lovers. The irony is that the downstairs area was jam-packed with young men from the nearby college, who looked so puzzled when they saw this procession of women going up the stairs that it was comical. I can only imagine what they were thinking when the first author started reading an extremely raunchy scene ...

One word mentioned tonight that I loved was 'stalkarrific'.

The authors tonight were Louisa Edwards (whose book *On the Steamy Side* is a 'Recipe for Love' novel, and was accompanied by 'The Miranda Cocktail' which is rose-petal-infused vodka – very nice! www.LouisaEdwards.com), Cara Elliott who read from her newest in the Circle of Sin trilogy, *To Sin with a Scoundrel* www.caraelliott.com, and the incredibly feisty and eccentric Mingmei Yip who read from *Petals from the Sky* www.mingmeiyip.com.

A new author to check out also is Sara Lindsey, whose debut historical novel *Promise Me Tonight* is getting wonderful reviews and has been in the top 100 in ebooks for the past month www.SaraLindsey.net.

March 4, 2010

Lift

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 1:56 pm by bookworminbigapple

Tonight, I went to a Voice book event, and it was so wonderful and moving I almost cried! The author is Kelly Corrigan, and the book is *Lift* – letters to her young daughters. She’s an extraordinary woman, full of wisdom and love for family, life (she’d recently survived breast cancer) and so eloquent. What made it really special was that it was in an enormous Barnes & Noble at Lincoln Centre, just across the road from The Julliard School, and the room held around 150 people. The author had her friend, who is a gorgeous singer (as in, original music and voice) named Mike Enrico, who was accompanied by a cellist and pianist, singing in between readings. It was so glamorous! So New York!

Here’s a pic of the cover.



March 11, 2010

Farewell Hyperion!

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 7:03 am by bookworminbigapple

It was my last day today with Voice, Hyperion – I’m rather sad! The weeks have just flown by, and I was really starting to feel at home here. It’s been such a wonderful experience, and I won’t forget anybody in a hurry.

This means I've now lost my gorgeous view of the Empire State building (sniff, sniff). The good news is that I finally have a camera and I've been able to take a picture from my office window to remind me of what it felt like to sit at this desk for five weeks.

Next week I'll have a whole new view from an Atria window ...

Incidentally, it's been so warm this week that I've swapped the quilt for a light jacket. It's all of 10–15 degrees, freezing by Sydney standards! It just tells you how quickly you can acclimatise. So while all the snow has sadly melted, I do believe the flowers will now begin to bloom. I've been told there's nothing more beautiful than the sight of blooming flowers at Central Park.

[Permalink](#) [2 Comments](#)

March 14, 2010

[liberte, egalite, fraternite](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 4:00 am by bookworminbigapple

Oh wait, that's French isn't it? But then, the French did gift the Statue of Liberty to America, and it's sooo impressive, and ENORMOUS! I guess that's one thing you forget when you've grown used to seeing a statue or building as part of the landscape of a foreign country through myriad television shows and movies etc. It feels really familiar and I suppose you grow complacent about them, thinking you know what they look like etc. But, it *feels* different when you see it in the flesh. And it leaves an incredible impression.

To get to Liberty Island and Ellis Island, I got the subway to Battery Park (a really interesting place itself), then bought a ticket to catch the ferry that takes you to both islands. I bought the ticket from two officially dressed guys just at the entrance of the ticket office, which was completely legal. But when I looked at the ticket, it said 27 January! So I asked the ticket office if they would swap it for one that was today's and they said no, that it's not their responsibility because I bought it from the two guys outside. Isn't that crazy? They're wearing official uniforms, selling official tickets which get you onto the ferry with valid barcodes etc, but the ticket office isn't responsible for the fact that they're selling tickets that are two months old. Go figure!

But that aside, you go through a full security check, needing to go through metal-detecting gates, taking off jackets, scarves etc, putting all camera, phones, bags, in trays before you can proceed. What you don't realise, is that around 1000 people are going through the same

process. That's a conservative estimate I reckon, because it looks like 3000 people when the line just goes on, and on, and on.

Once you're through, you're stuck in this sheltered spot just at the dock, waiting for the ferry to arrive and for people to get off so that you can get on. This takes ages. And it's a bit of a crush. But once you get through all this, and get to Liberty Island, it's worth it! From there, I continued on to Ellis Island, and spent over two hours exploring the museum. It's such a wonderful monument to all the immigrants who came through this place – 12 million people landed on Ellis Island trying to get into America since 1892. Some of the stories are beautiful, others completely heartbreaking. The one I remember best is this:

'They told me America's streets were paved in gold. But when I got to America, I found three things: there was no gold on the streets, the streets weren't paved, and I was expected to pave them.' An Italian immigrant

[Permalink 2 Comments](#)

March 15, 2010

[To window or not to window ...](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 11:57 pm by bookworminbigapple

Should there be a small window between the pub date of a book and making it available as an ebook? Publishers here say NO WAY, because they want to maximise exposure of the book and make sure every sort of reader has the chance to buy the book immediately. But some authors I've spoken to, and some agents too, say, why not wait three months after the release of a hardcover (that's the equivalent of our C-format) before releasing the ebook? This has happened a couple of times that people have been able to recall recently, and it seems to have worked well for the hardcover. But publishers I've spoken to say there is no evidence that ebooks cannibalise the physical book, and they would fight against any attempt by authors and agents to change this as it would really complicate the issue.

What do you think? (Dare I ask?!)

[Permalink 2 Comments](#)

March 16, 2010

[Gospel Queens & Carolina Chocolate Drops](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 11:44 pm by bookworminbigapple

I have so much to write about this week because it's been such a crazy one! I've done so much, and seen so much, and finished up with my first lot of placements – I can't believe it's been 6 weeks already and I'm now into my seventh! It's going so quickly!

The most incredible thing though, is a live performance I went to at the Bowery Ballroom in the East Village. I went to see a band called the Carolina Chocolate Drops, who are from North Carolina and play roots music. I was expecting them to be good because I'd read that they were original and energetic, but they surpassed good. Good is such a weak word! They were insanely good! Superb! Outstanding! They had me stomping my feet and clapping so hard my hands felt like fat cooked hotdogs afterwards!

They are a three-person band, two guys and a gal. And they play roots Southern music, with a fiddle, 5- and 4-string banjo, resopbonic guitar, a jug (yep, a jug!), snare drum, bones, frame drum (just to name a few). And of course, they are so incredibly talented that all three write music and sing with the most extraordinary energy I've ever seen. They play so fast and so hard they broke strings and I expected to see sparks flying around! They also spontaneously dance and jump around the stage, making sure you're in no doubt about how much they love performing this music and how deep it is from the heart. You have got to check them out. They're on Youtube, Myspace, Facebook and all the usual suspects. If you don't think you're into roots music, then at least listen to their version of 'Hit 'em up style' originally sung by Blu Cantrell: www.carolinachocolatedrops.com.

Their support band was Naomi Shelton and the Gospel Queens. Have you ever seen a live Gospel show? Oh my God, I cannot describe the power and beauty of this woman! She's in her sixties (if not older), and she is a living legend, looks it, but is so humble in her performance, and she moves like James Brown! I don't mean she was dancing around like him, but her actions and presence were reminiscent of him for me. But she is her own presence, and what a presence: www.myspace.com/naomisheltonthegospelqueens



March 20, 2010

On food ...

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 4:09 am by bookworminbigapple

There is SO MUCH food in NYC. And all sorts, all levels (good, great, mediocre, horrible). If I was to stay here for three years with the sole task of tasting every type of food and restaurant/cafe/diner/bakery here, I think I would only get through a small fraction.

The food you'll find most in abundance, is **pizza**. There could be anywhere between three to four pizza counters/restaurants on every block. The best pizza places are: Grimaldis in Brooklyn, and Joe's Pizza on Carmine St (near Bleecker). The latter has a line-up around the corner on any given day. There are lots and lots of 'Joe's Pizzas' around, so you really need to be sure you get the right place!

The best **salad** is Chop't. You'll hear lots about Cosi (I don't like them, they drown the salads in gross toppings), and you'll get a reasonable salad at just about any decent deli that has a salad counter, but none compares to Chop't. They are outstanding. Variety, freshness, quality ... I'm addicted!

I couldn't go past trying a **pastrami sandwich** at Katz's Deli – hello! Incredible! The meat is so tender and juicy (cause it's boiled) and of course it's hot. And don't forget the mustard! Now, it is a sandwich made for two because the meat is stacked so high on there, but the waiter tells you right away so that you can take the other half home with you (before putting on the mustard).

There are so many **French** restaurants here, but not all are fab. Although Le Bergamote makes yummy pastries, as does Le Pain Quotidien (with quirky variations like cheese-filled almond croissants), the best one's Pastis (a bar/restaurant). The atmosphere and food are just amazing. And unlike Le Bergamote, which makes disgusting croque monsieurs with steak ham (eek!), Pastis makes to-die-for croques, and just about anything else you see on the menu.

And, of course, there's a lot of **Mexican** food here too. I can't claim to have tried a variety, but a Mexican ed told me not to bother, as it's all pretty average (there's a 'Burritoville' here, which is a kind of McDonald's of Mexican). But one place that I thought was delish is Rosa Mexicano at Union Square. They make the guacamole in front of you, and it's so fresh and tasty and beautiful. Loved that!

For all of you who insisted I go to Magnolia Bakery, I have to tell you, I was pretty disappointed! The **cupcakes** are fairly boring, with way too much icing, and even their red-velvet cakes weren't the best. Billy's Bakery on 9th Ave makes much better red velvet ones!

Coffee: There is decent coffee here! But it's harder to find than I'd like. Starbucks is Starbucks, and won't be mentioned further. And every coffee stand claims they make a latte but they don't. Le Pain makes a drinkable latte. Many people will tell you the best coffee is La Colombe in Tribeca. Yes, it smells good, and looks great, but they don't have soy milk! So I was forced to drink regular milk, which I abhor, and I wasn't able to enjoy the coffee! However, Ninth Street Espresso, in Chelsea Markets, makes beautiful coffee. Proper latte, with soy and normal milk (both organic). Yum, yum, yum. And Cafe Grumpy on 20th Street makes a nice latte, they even have 'flat white' on their menu, and it actually is one! But their coffee is a bit on the mild side so if you love it strong, you'll think it's too weak, and they don't respond well when you ask for a double shot! Weird!

Hale and Hearty **Soups** makes the most delicious, enormous variety of soups I've ever tasted. The one I've been going to is close to home at Chelsea Markets (yes, yes, it's true, the markets is a great place although I really don't like the whole under cover business with lots and lots of food smells and overheating) ... mmm.

I've been told that the Shake Shack makes the best **burgers** in NYC. I haven't tried them yet, although I have of course had burgers a few times. I think Empire Diner (a historic icon, was in the opening scene of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*) makes a really tasty burger, as does Moonstruck Diner, except the latter's was so big I seriously thought I'd eaten an entire cow!

I've only tried one **hot dog** so far, but it's one I'll never forget. I went to the Brooklyn Diner on 57th Street, and I thought I'd try the hot dog. What no one tells you is that it's the size of a 17-inch laptop! I swear, no exaggeration! It was the longest, fattest hot dog imaginable. In fact, I don't think I could have imagined it to look like that! It was very tasty, but I seriously don't recommend trying to eat the whole thing by yourself. They're naughty for not telling first-timers how large the servings are!

There's a fairly well-known, and highly praised, **Lebanese** restaurant on 5th Ave – illili. They do have one dish, which is incredible – an appetizer called mhamarra – but geez are they are a rip-off! I've never paid so much for Lebanese! And their fatoush was horrible – who puts sprouts in fatoush?! Yuck. Ruined it for me. There wasn't even a hint of Pomegranate molasses either!

I'm going to end on Tanoreen, the most incredible **Palestinian** food I've ever had. It's deep in Brooklyn (on 3rd Ave), and took about 45 mins on the train (get off at 77th St), but oh my God is the food exquisite. They make proper sayadiyeh (which you just can't get anywhere in Sydney), and NABLUS KNEFI. It was heaven. And you bet I refused to share mine! Go Tanoreen!

[Permalink](#) [3 Comments](#)

March 23, 2010

Rain, sun, rain, sun, rain ...

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 2:16 pm by bookworminbigapple

It's pouring rain tonight, but last week, while I was so sick I was coughing like a fat seal (actually, I'm still coughing but it's getting more manageable) and felt thoroughly sorry for myself, it was boiling hot almost every single day, with the clearest, bluest sky imaginable. Isn't that always the way?

Take 'boiling hot' with an Aussie grain of salt ... it was 16 degrees! But hey, it felt really hot. Too hot for boots, too hot for a jacket, hot enough to wear thongs (that's Aussie thongs, American flip-flops – it's so funny when you say thongs here! You should've seen how high some eyebrows shot at first mention! I know better now). Especially since the apartment heating is still on (not sure when they turn it off actually, hopefully not too long from now). I actually got too much sun last Thursday while trying to get some fresh air ... ridiculous!

But the result of my unwanted forray into sealhood was that I had to delay starting with Atria until today. People are really wary of colds here. I think it hasn't been long enough since Swine Flu. They just don't want you to come into the building if you're poorly, which is actually the best way. And so finally today, I got to step into their doors.

Honestly, it's such a cool place! They're so lovely, they even had my name tagged to my desk in the same style as everyone else's, like I really belonged. I took a photo on my phone I was so chuffed! Judith Curr and Peter Borland are looking after me, and already I've been rewarded with amazing ms's: Portia Di Rossi's first book, and Shirley MacLaine's newest ... can you believe that? Shirley's madly fun, so already I love it!

I'm sitting in the middle of Pocket Books and Atria, which is perfect because these are the two S&S imprints that publish women's fiction. I've just finished reading the latest book in a Pocket Books series called 'Immortals After Dark', by Kresley Cole. It's amazing! This series has vampires, werewolves, valkyrie (my first introduction to this species of immortal women), sorceresses and witches. What more could you want?

In the editorial meeting today, there were two mentions of how well Kate Morton's *Forgotten Garden* is doing ... good on you Kate!

March 25, 2010

Triple caramel chunk ...

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 10:36 am by bookworminbigapple

Today, a couple of the eds said, 'Do you want some ice cream? Ben & Jerry's are giving away free ice cream'. I dropped everything and went along.

They do this twice a year. They give away a single scoop in either a cup or a cone, all day until 8 pm. The line was so long it took almost 15 minutes to get the ice cream, but it was so worth it. I got the triple caramel chunk ... it was heaven. Luckily my throat felt better!

There's a whole world under the S&S building that you'd never know about unless a local told you. It's absolutely enormous, is connected to the subway and the Rockefeller Center, and has a gazillion shops and eateries. It's mind-boggling. It makes me wonder how many underground treasures there are buried all over the city. I'm sure there are hundreds. Aside from the Rockefeller Center area, which is between 48th and 49th Streets on 6th Ave, there are numerous major stations, like Grand Central, 42nd Street Penn, 34th Street, 14th Street Union Square ... and many more than I know about with my limited knowledge. One day, when I get sick of the sunshine, I'll have to devote some serious time to looking into these.

Can you imagine how many underground bars and clubs there are too? I tried to get into a jazz bar called Smalls one night. It's just a door on the street, and you have to go down the stairs to enter the bar. And boy is it SMALL. It's so small that I was at the top of the stairs, with the line all the way down the steps and into the club, and no one was moving. Talk about a serious fire hazard! But apparently it's worth the wait – you have to wait until someone leaves so that you can fit in, and I waited over half an hour and just couldn't cope with the stuffy stairs. Next time.

March 26, 2010

[Avon ... that's books, not the 'ladies'!](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 10:22 am by bookworminbigapple

I had a great visit to Avon Books today, which is an imprint of HarperCollins. They're actually just up the road from S&S, which is handy! The executive ed is such a great character – really, really New York! So quick-witted and wickedly funny, and so knowledgeable! That was really a great meeting.

One of her biggest-selling authors is Stephanie Laurens, who is an Australian! In fact, a Melburnian (apparently, she lives in a 'Green' house, and to the horror of her editor, doesn't have a dryer!). I love Stephanie's writing, she's such a fresh voice in the historical romance genre, and her new series (a quartet) is a cracker. You have to watch the trailers (*The Untamed Bride* and *The Elusive Bride*)! They're available at her website: www.stephanielaurens.com

During last year's Romance Writers' Conference in Aus, Stephanie was quite vocal about the dire situation of romance fiction publishing in Australia – the fact that authors need to go to the US to be published and that they don't have much industry support. She also praised the hard work of two romance bookshops, and most of the eds I've spoken with here have told me how much they've heard about these two bookshops, which seem to import the bulk of romance fiction to Australia, from their authors, and obviously from their sales teams: Rosemary's Romance Books (www.rosemarysromancebooks.com) and Intrigue, The Romance Bookstore (www.intrigueromance.com.au). These bookshops are dedicated purely to the art of selling romance (cool, huh?). But there are others too: Rendezvous in Melbourne (www.rendezvousbooks.com), Ever After in Wollongong (www.everafter.com.au) and Temptation Books in Perth (www.temptationbooks.com).

Considering that the independent bookshop is a dying entity in NY, I reckon these dedicated folk deserve a shout out! Also, interestingly, the bestselling book of the past year, which is again at number 1 this week, *The Help* (Amy Einhorn Books), was made a bestseller because booksellers loved it and hand-sold it. Says a lot doesn't it?

[Permalink](#) [2 Comments](#)

March 29, 2010

[Give him some praise!](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 8:46 am by bookworminbigapple

You might well think I've taken up religion – after a day spent in Harlem, no one could blame you for being tempted to! Today is Palm Sunday, and I've spent the day on a Harlem Gospel Walking Tour. It was supposed to be a three-hour tour, but because the service was so big and busy, it turned into four hours, and I wasn't complaining.

The tour starts with meeting at the Harlem Cultural and Heritage Centre, then you proceed to the Canaan Baptist Church, to be part of a service. I absolutely loved every second spent in this church and amongst the congregation. It could've been the quiet dignity of the churchgoers, the absolute sense of respect and reverence with which they treated the church and the service, or the sheer joy (not to mention brilliance) of the choir/music and praise – it was a sublime experience. And to make it really special, twin girls were dedicated during the service (equivalent to baptism I think?) ... it was such a moving experience. Not only are they prayed for, but they're given to the community to raise – a reminder that it takes a village to raise a child. And at the end of the dedication, in honour of African tradition, the eldest elder present places her hand on each child's head, to symbolise the passing on of knowledge, faith and heritage, from her hand to the newest member. Isn't that just beautiful? Honestly, it brought tears to my eyes.

The thing I learned today is that in Harlem, religion, whether Christian or Muslim, is often the only political and social voice the average black person has. The tour takes you on a walk that showcases the transformation of the area, from complete wasteland with decrepit buildings and rubbish strewn all around, to gentrified condominiums and building restoration. It's the local imam and minister who have taken up the call to the borough governor to complain about the lack of housing affordability, or the price of food, or, for example, when Giuliani tried to stop street sellers from trying to make a living in 1994 (by forcibly removing their stalls from the streets), it was the imam who took up the cause of creating and funding a local market area where sellers can showcase their wares, hence the name Malcolm Shabaz Market.

Gentrification has brought its own set of problems – yes people want safer, better-looking streets (who doesn't?), and getting rid of derelict buildings, and having the wonderful vibe of cafes and restaurants, but they don't want to be forced out of the area because the yuppies are moving in and pushing up their housing project rental and food prices to ridiculous amounts. It would all be well and good if everyone got a decent pay (can you believe a vast number of people here work for tips only? It's unconscionable), and if you had free health

care and education, but you don't (despite the historic new health care reform, which will take some time to implement and filter out benefits to the locals). You can't have building development without developing the community as well. What will happen?

This was my second visit to Harlem, and while I was trying to find the great soul food eatery where I'd been the last time, Amy Ruth's (where I had fried catfish, collared greens and candied yams – the latter was so sweet my hands shook from the sugar hit!), I stumbled onto a tiny window that looked like it had a few seats in a serene atmosphere. It turned out to be one of the best cafes I've been to here in New York! And it's much bigger than it looks. Gorgeous owner, gorgeous food (sweet potato fries – heaven! I can never have normal fries again!) and gorgeous atmosphere. The place is Caffe Latte on Malcolm X Blvd (between 119 and 120 St).

April 1, 2010

Say wha?

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 12:42 pm by bookworminbigapple

It's the last day of March, which means that from tomorrow, I have exactly 27 days to go. How did that happen? Do you think if I just stayed anyone would notice?!

I've had such a big week, I'm basically stumbling home every night and crashing into bed. Give New Yorkers a bit of sunshine and they go crazy with socialising! Although, the last three days rained so much I honestly was starting to think that the end of March couldn't come fast enough! But today, lo and behold, not only sunshine, but flowers have been planted in small beds all around the streets (the brightest yellow daffodils all over 9th Ave) and I noticed that the trees have all started to flower. Hooray!

It's a completely different New York in the sunshine. Suddenly, all the cafes and restaurants come out onto the streets with outdoor seating, and the atmosphere and vibe is just fabulous. Places that were previously dreary and quiet suddenly are inviting (like Amsterdam St, midtown). It is a bit repulsive in some parts – as in so ludicrously exclusive and snooty that I wish I hadn't seen them because it almost ruined Chelsea and the meatpacking district for me. But I just totally bypass that scene so that I can live in my very 'real' picture of the city.

I went to a great show/bar/club/whatever called Cafe Wha? Yep, that's what it's called. And they have a wonderful band that plays there Wed – Sun, and a Brazilian band the other two days. The place is jam-packed with people, and they get so excited by the music (which is great, except for the crazy emcee – more on him in a tick) that they start dancing in the aisles. Mind you, the aisles are so tiny that two can't dance side by side, and amidst all this, waiters

are trying to walk through carrying trays full of drinks, and other patrons are trying to get through to the toilets, not to mention coming in and out for cigarettes and the like! Insane! But great atmosphere and really talented band. They all sing: from rhythm and blues to soul to rock'n'roll ... the wonderful (and only) gal even sang Tina Turner and not many people can!

The emcee though ... is a confused Rod Stewart-cross-Mick Jagger, with the most ridiculously shaggy, blow-dried, sprayed-to-death hair. And he sings! I wish he didn't though! It was very difficult to overlook the hair and concentrate on the music when he was centre stage. And, honestly, he paid tribute to his hairdresser who was in the audience! Need I say more?

I have to add two places onto the food list: Joe's Shanghai restaurant on 56th St – the most delicious, delicate dumpling soup ever! Mmmmmmmmmmm. And S'mac – for mac and cheese on 12th St. I don't really care about mac and cheese, but New Yorkers do, and if one more person told me to go there ... so I finally did, and was so impressed! I love the way they serve them, in skillets (that's American for pan), with cheese perfectly crusted after being baked in a woodfired oven. It's not at all what I expected, and there's a variety of great flavours (not to mention cheeses). Definitely worth it!

April 7, 2010

[Back to the X](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 10:10 am by bookworminbigapple

Last night, I went to Lady Jane's at Madame X's for the romance writers' April readings. It was even better than last time. They had four fab new authors, one sci-fi and three historical. Although mass market sales have been down overall in the past couple of years, historical romances have made a big comeback. A Gallery Books ed told me that only two types of historical romances sell: Regency and Victorian. But the Harlequin executive ed says they also find Medieval sells very well for them, but by far Regency is the most popular.

Although all four authors were wonderful, my favourite was Sarah MacLean: she had a really fresh writing voice, and a wonderful sense of fun, which you can get a great sense of just by the title of her book. To give them a plug, the four authors are:

N.K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (www.nkjemisin.com), Miranda Neville, *The Wild Marquis* (www.mirandaneville.com), Kate Noble, *The Summer of You*, and Sarah MacLean, *Nine Rules to Break when Romancing a Rake* (www.macleanspace.com).

On an exciting note, Harlequin asked me to write a piece for their blog, so I did! You can take a look if you like:

<http://harlequinblog.com/2010/04/is-new-york-the-most-romantic-city-in-the-world-it-should-be/>

p.s. the photo is of me at FAO Schwarz (where the 'big' piano lives) ... isn't it a magnificent kaleidoscope?

[Permalink](#) [1 Comment](#)

April 12, 2010

Race

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 7:29 am by bookworminbigapple

Have you heard of this? It's an extraordinary new play starring James Spader, David Alan Grier, Richard Thomas and Kerry Washington. It's about ... race! It's mind-blowing. So brutal and ends so suddenly! I guess that's the power of the acting, you don't even realise it's been an hour and a half and all of a sudden, the curtain comes down, and the actors are bowing in thanks. I don't know if this will come to Australia, it's probably one of those enchanting theatre experiences that'll only happen here, but if it does, you should definitely see it!

I also went to see the Top of the Rock at night. I'd seen it before during the day, but it's something else at night. You get this other-worldly view of the city, 360 degrees, all the wondrous lights ... it's pure magic.

And I went to Brooklyn Heights! I walked over the Brooklyn Bridge, again for the second time, but this time I tried to explore Dumbo and Brooklyn Heights with serious intent. I walked for hours! Got lost several times because the 'downtown' area isn't obvious at all, and much of the waterside area at Dumbo is under construction – you can tell it's going to be a really fabulous park when it's all done. I can't believe it's taken them this long to fix it all up! You've got views of the city right in front of you, and the Statue of Liberty, and of course you're on the Hudson River!

Brooklyn's so peaceful compared with the city. There are parts that seem really deserted too, but then you get to the downtown area, which is where all the shops are and so on, and it's another world! There are loads of parks everywhere, and because it was a beautiful day there

were people everywhere playing football, baseball and basketball (these two are such American scenes!).

I also went to the Metropolitan Room for a live Jazz performance. Saw Cherisse Bradley and her band ... what a powerhouse this girl was! It's such an intimate space, but she was fearless, totally owned the stage, and what a voice! So strong, so beautiful. She sang Nina Simone, Sade and loads of her own original songs. She was smashing!

Have you ever seen American bees?! They're gigantic, almost the size of sparrows! One came in here the other day, and it was some challenge convincing it to leave! The only other time I've seen bees this large is in New Zealand – for a country with no predators, they make up for it with their bees!

Last night, when I was buying beer at the grocery store, the checkout chic asked me for ID. I was so shocked I said, 'Are you serious?' and she said to her colleague, 'You believe that? Girrrl, as though she's eighty-three! Lorrdd have mercy!' It was a distinctly American moment. Loved it! And I thanked her for thinking me under 21!

[Permalink](#) [2 Comments](#)

April 16, 2010

Too many exclamations?!

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 1:57 pm by bookworminbigapple

Someone, who shall remain nameless (you know who you are TDH!), dared to say I use too many exclamation marks. Really! Well, firstly, how rude, and secondly, how dull the world would be without exclamations. Exclamations are the mark of excitement, and although at times they may make a person seem a little excitable, there's nothing wrong with that I say!

Onto EXCITING stuff ... I finally got to have a burger at the Shake Shack. I lined up at Madison Square Park, and luckily Matrice was there to chat away the long wait, and forty or so minutes later, we got to order. (Incidentally, there are two lines: the A-line, where you line up for food and shakes, and the B-line, where you can only get drinks and ice cream ... they're very strict about the lines.) And then another ten or so minutes later, we got our burgers and shakes.

They're extraordinarily small but chunky things. Loads of variations (double stack, 'shroom stack, double shack and on and on), but worth the wait. The bread is no bigger than your palm, and it's a really thin bun which is perfect because you can get more of the flavour of

the contents. The fries aren't great though. They're the crinkly, old-fashioned type, and they're just a bit *un*exciting, even with cheese dribbled all over them (you can get 'fries' or 'cheese fries' – makes no difference, neither is great).

The shakes are so chunky and solid they're called 'concrete'. Luckily, they don't taste like concrete, more like heaven. Yummy! But there were a few odd flavours and ingredients on the shake menu – like peanut butter. Why do Americans love peanut butter so much? Matrice says, that as well as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, kids' favourites include peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches.

I realised today that I only have 12 days left. That's just too little time to see everything I need to see. How can three months go so quickly?

[Permalink](#) [4 Comments](#)

April 20, 2010

[I have two words for you ...](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 3:09 am by bookworminbigapple

SPA WEEK

Every year in mid April, spas all over the city offer an hour massage for \$50. You don't realise how significant this offer is until you try to find a decent, useful massage under \$200 (not kidding, and don't forget gratuity). Not all spas offer them, but a lot do, and when a Hyperion editor said to me, 'Are you interested in massages at all?' I almost jumped out of my seat with anticipation.

We went to a spa on Lafayette Street, not far from Little Italy. I got lost – it's a tough part of the city because the streets are named not numbered, and I couldn't figure out east from west, so I was too late to be taken in along with Brenda and her friend. So I sat waiting for about 20 minutes, very jealous that they were enjoying having all the knots pummelled out of them.

And then I met Maggie ... a tiny girl with the strongest hands I've ever encountered. I think my height makes me look tougher than I am, but really, I can't take pain! It was the most painfully wonderful hour ... I had to give her a hug afterwards in thanks.

When the other two women emerged – much like me: red-faced, hair all over the place, a disoriented, drugged look in their eyes – it turned out I was lucky to be late. They got taken

down to the 'basement' for their massages – they thought it was the 'discount' room for the discount massage. But I got a lovely room! Glad I was late!

Today marks my last week with Atria. I've just finished editing Portia de Rossi's memoir, which is so moving, with harrowing details of her struggle with anorexia, and I'm in the process of finishing Mary Alice Munroe's newest novel, *The Butterfly's Daughter*. This was such a surprise. She normally writes southern-based storylines, but this one has a Mexican-American protagonist and is so wise and beautifully written, weaving in Aztec mythology, it's been difficult not to write thankful/positive comments on every page. I can't wait to see the final books. I'm really hoping the lovely Atria and Gallery eds will send me copies so that I don't have to wait to import them.

I tried to attend a gospel service at the Abyssinian church in Harlem yesterday, but the line of tourists was wrapped around the block - the *entire* block. It was impossible. It reminded me of the three-hour line trying to get into the Vatican! Only there's no point in waiting here because they can only fit so many people in the church and the service time is limited. Oh well, I'll just have to enjoy listening to the choir through their website and buy a CD.

[Permalink 1 Comment](#)

April 24, 2010

[The time has come to say goodbye](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 11:12 am by bookworminbigapple

I finished up with Atria on Wednesday, and although I felt a bit funny in the stomach when I walked out of the building for the last time, and I got a bit teary-eyed when I farewelled Judith, Peter, Rachel and Lauren, I also felt a sense of anticipation. I knew that although the time had come to say goodbye to this glorious city, that it was also time to look ahead and forward to going home, and to starting a new chapter of my life there.

It was a wonderful last day at Atria. We had cupcakes, and lunch, and lots of hugs and well wishes. This is a really cool place, and I hope they have a brilliant year ahead (they had a tough one last year, as did most people). Their list is fabulous, and because I got to be part of the sales conference of this billion-dollar company (that's Simon & Schuster), I could see how strong Atria's list was compared with all the other imprints.

Portia's epilogue arrived as I was leaving, so I'm still editing that part of the ms, otherwise these next four days are all my own to bid New York adieu in my own way. And I was so, so,

so lucky, to start my farewell with going to the Apollo Theater (US spelling, don't get judgemental on me!) Amateur Night in Harlem. OH MY GOD!!

There, got all my exclaiming exclamations out of the way.

Wow, what a memorable, incomparable experience. I would never, ever, ever, be brave enough to stand in front of thousands of people who are ready to boo me off the stage the second I opened my mouth. And that's what happened to the first act, a Brooklyn comedian, who opened with, 'I told ya I was comin'', and by the time he said, 'I met a girl', the crowd had gone insane, booing him so loudly that he literally bowed his head and left the stage in crushed defeat. And they did it again, and again, until the third act came out. Luckily the girl could sing, and they clapped at her first note and actually let her finish the song, but eventually booed her to get off as they got tired of the slow notes. The girl who eventually was voted the winner – by the volume of cheers and claps and stomps – was exceptional. All the performers were young, some I reckon as young as 15, but Trisha looked about 18, and she sang so beautifully, so powerfully that I screamed and screamed in support, wanting her to win so badly. She faltered at the first note, and the crowd almost started to boo, and then she just belted it out, and won them all over. The audience is so brutal. But I suppose there's a tremendous sense of triumph when you beat their boos and make them clap and cheer and scream for you.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Apollo, it's the home of talent discovery that was responsible for unearthing legends such as James Brown (who was honoured this week), Ella Fitzgerald and numerous others. Amateur night is on every Wednesday night, and the top three winners (voted by the crowd's level of cheers) eventually go through a final. James Brown, for example, won three times in a row.

I can't tell you that any experience could top that, because it's so unique, but yesterday was the highlight of my entire stay. I won't bore you with details about my going to Macy's for the first time (can you believe how long I've resisted? And with all the sales?), and struggling through the seven floors to walk away with only two items of clothing, but it ended on my going to an evening of blues and jazz at the legendary Lennox Lounge in Harlem. How do I describe this evening? The maitre d' Mary is the most gorgeous, outrageous woman I've met so far. She is 52, has 14 grandchildren, 9 of whom are from the one son through four different mothers (I said Mary, why the heck haven't you grabbed him by the ears and told him to behave like a man? and she said, 'Honey, if you saw him, you'd understand why women throw themselves at him!'), she's wild and warm and she looked after our table the whole evening, even though I wasn't the only foreigner in the room. But we just clicked, and her presence added that extra special dimension to the evening that is indescribable.

And the musicians ... where do I start? The band playing yesterday were Dakota and Nite Hawke, and to say that they are world-class musicians would be meaningless because unless you can hear the astonishing power and talent of the lead singer, and unless you can see the

way the saxophonist wielded his instrument as though it was a part of his body, and unless you can absorb the sheer genius sounds of the guitarist and drummer and keys ... words fail me. The singer sang for nearly four hours, and only got better as she went on. She sent shivers up my spine continually, and moved me to tears so many times. And then she would say, 'hurt me' to one of the musos and they would take off in a wild solo until they had you shouting and whooping and clapping so hard your hands hurt in response! That deserves some exclamations!!!

To my surprised delight, the food at the Lennox was amazing. I had cat fish stuffed with jumbo shrimp in a buttermilk sauce, with potato salad and steamed broccoli ... yum, yum, yum. It was so out-of-this-world good. The night before, I had dinner at Sylvia's, another legendary soul food restaurant in Harlem, and I have to say that their fried chicken, garlic mashed potatoes and green beans kicked butt! I thought Amy Ruth's was wonderful, but Sylvia's is the queen of soul food I reckon.

April 27, 2010

[Goodnight and Goodluck ...](#)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) at 3:00 pm by bookworminbigapple

It's 1 minute to midnight on Monday 26th April, which means it's my last 16 hours in New York. It has rained nonstop the past two days, which has hampered my farewell walks over the city, but I made a good effort nonetheless. I've farewelled my absolute favourite street – Bleeker in the West Village; my favourite building – the Flatiron; my favourite coffee shop – at Chelsea Markets; my favourite station – Grand Central Station; my favourite landmark – Columbus Circle; and of course the very humble and soon to be closed forever after 30 years of being an iconic part of the city – the Empire Diner. Can you believe they're closing on the 15th of May because they're having problems with their landlord and won't be able to afford the new rent? It's a horrible loss.

I had to pay a small homage to Central Park (because it's soaking wet and unbearably muddy), Times Square which looks like daylight any time of the night and has more people than an SCG footy night, FAO Schwartz because of the Big Piano, Broadway between Houston and Canal Street (because it's so architecturally special), the Brooklyn Bridge (because it's just so wonderful and I discovered the Flea Markets in Forte Greene inside a historic old bank building built in 1928 which has the vaults open to the public on the ground floor – superb), and the Rockefeller Center and Empire State Building because they're just so darn special.

Goodbye New York. You have been a generous, gracious and glorious host.