

## MELISSA SINGER INTERVIEW

We're going to have a little chat with Melissa Ann Singer who's been at Tom Doherty Associates (publisher of Tor, Forge, Orb, Starscape, and Tor Teen) for nearly thirty years. She edits a wide range of fiction, including both contemporary and historical women's fiction, horror, urban fantasy, medical and disaster thrillers, mysteries, romantic suspense, the occasional epic fantasy or fantasy romance, and a limited number of graphic novels. She has also edited nonfiction, including the *It's O.K. to Say No!* series.

She began her career as an editorial assistant in the science fiction and fantasy department of what was then the Berkley Publishing Group. A native of New York City and a lifelong fan of comic books and speculative fiction.

**For those who might not be aware of what it means to be an editor with an established publisher, might you be so kind as to perhaps walk us through a typical day and/or share what an editor does in general?**

This is actually a very difficult question as there is no such thing as a "typical day." In an average week, we have to meet assorted deadlines from other departments (including art, production, publicity, sales, and advertising and promotion) as well as participate in both formally-scheduled and ad hoc meetings. Some things happen once every few months; other things happen every month or every couple of weeks. It should also be noted that I can comment only on the state of affairs here at Tor/Forge; other places may run quite differently.

I do a fair bit of stuff that isn't editing at all. I set the schedule for 1/3 or so of the Tor/Forge/Starscape/Tor Teen list; I work with people in other departments to develop or refine internal processes and procedures; I review all the jacket, cover, and catalog copy for every book that we publish that isn't YA or teen. Tor sends out an electronic newsletter every month and I'm part of the committee that produces that. I regularly help other editors with their work, just as they help me with mine—we use each other as sounding boards when trying to work through difficulties.

An editor's workday can be heavily influenced by what turns up in her/his email in the course of a day; if a manuscript that is late for production finally arrives, everything else gets shunted aside so that project can take priority.

My workweeks are a combination of: answering email; writing copy; reading and editing manuscripts; writing editorial letters; attending or conducting meetings; editing copy written by other editors; modifying the publication schedule; working on cover concepts; trying to get quotes on upcoming projects from already-published writers; talking to other departments about projects or authors; editing the newsletter; preparing for a convention; working on matters related to the production of books; reading and responding to submissions; working through the

steps of the acquisitions process; solving all kinds of problems; and probably a bunch of other things.

**Wow. That's certainly not the old image one could bring to mind of a clerical-like setting in which the editor is cloistered away in solitude to focus on editing a single work. One thing you didn't mention and what might be of interest to the readers is what an editor does with marketing and publicity nowadays. Is it something you even do or is that left up to the marketing department? Or is it now solely the domain of authors?**

Given the number of books we publish in a year, publicity can't take advantage of every potential opportunity, so we do work closely with authors to try to "share the wealth," as it were. But that's not really new—many authors were active on the publicity front even when I was an editorial assistant.

When I started in the business, more than thirty years ago, publicity mainly had to cover these areas: book industry trade press and library trade press, major newspapers that ran daily reviews and/or had a weekly book review section, a handful of general interest magazines that covered books, and publications dedicated to specific genres, like *Locus* or *MysteryScene*. There might be a book segment from time to time on a radio or television program, usually a local program but occasionally a national one, if your author was big enough or the book had some timeliness.

I can't forget to mention fanzines, of course, since we're talking about genre fiction. Some fanzines reached a lot of readers even in the days of mimeograph machines and photocopiers (and some grew up to be *Locus* and *RT Book Reviews*). In genre fiction, the fanzine was always an important part of publicity's efforts.

In a way, things haven't changed much. Fewer newspapers, sigh, and fewer of the remaining papers review books more than once a week. But more general interest magazines cover books. Genre-specific publications are still with us, though some have gone digital-only. TV and radio—also still with us, also still a hard nut to crack, but not impossible.

Even fanzines still exist, some in physical form but many more in the form of blogs, vlogs, Facebook/GoodReads pages, etc. There are probably more people reviewing books now than there were when I started in the field . . . or, I should say, more people *publicly* reviewing books, because I'm sure that most of us know someone who has always read the latest thing and can tell us if it's worth our time. Nowadays, people aren't limited to just talking to people face to face about books—they can go online and talk to "strangers" about books.

Publicity tries to stay on top of all of this, but it isn't always possible, given the number of people in the publicity department and the number of books we publish. So we do ask authors to help.

As an editor, I try to make sure publicity knows what's special about an author or a book/series. Sometimes that means introducing the author to the publicity people far in advance of the book's publication, so they can put a face with a name. Giving publicists copies of manuscripts in

advance, so that they can really see why something is special. Making sure publicity is aware of everything an author is doing on her or his own all through the author's engagement with the publishing company.

More mundanely, I review the press releases for all of my books. I write the copy used in the catalog (which appears on basic galleys) and write special copy for special galleys (the ones with full-color covers). I pass information back and forth between authors and publicity (and vice-versa). I help make sure publicity knows which authors are going to which conventions. I help identify awards that my books might be eligible for. (I say help because our publicists are really good at this stuff themselves.)

Marketing and publicity do dovetail, though they are not identical. In terms of helping with marketing, again, we have a marketing department that is very good at what it does. So editors help in various ways, often again by providing copy (for covers, for sales materials, etc.), by suggesting places to advertise (for instance, a particular convention's program book because we know the author will be at that convention), stuff like that.

**According to some older interviews, your background had you getting into the genre side of fiction fairly young. Since you've been with it for so long, and now have a place of actually shepherding it to some degree, where do you see the fantasy/sci-fi market headed these days?**

I can't answer this since I don't edit a lot of science fiction or fantasy (I edit some epic fantasy, mostly by Mercedes Lackey and James Mallory, but I haven't done any sf in about 4 years, since the last book I worked on with the marvelous Kit Reed).

I am a generalist and edit a lot of different kinds of things: thrillers, mysteries, urban fantasy, gaslamp fantasy, epic fantasy, contemporary women's fiction, horror, romantic suspense, and various other goodies.

**Some of the people who are reading this are interested in getting their own work(s) to publication. And since, at this writing, Tor is still open to author submissions might you be willing to pass on what you look for in submissions?**

I think everyone really looks for the same thing in general terms: stories that make us want to keep reading. What that means in practice differs with every submission I look at. Sometimes I'll be captivated by an author's "voice" or writing style; sometimes a character jumps off the pages; sometimes a writer's plotting sucks me in on page one; sometimes it's the world, setting, or time period that is most fascinating. The best books combine more than one of these attributes, of course.

Different editors have different strengths. One of mine is plotting and structure. When I'm reading, part of my mind is always keeping track of the plot and sub-plots. And if those don't work—don't make sense, don't have internal logic, don't play fair with the reader—then I'm not

likely to take on the book even if I love the writing style and/or the protagonist(s) (or the villains—a good villain is a wonderful thing).

**What are instant turn-offs or things that have you pushing the “thanks but no thanks,” button?**

Bad or sloppy writing is probably number one. I see submissions that haven’t been spell-checked, and there’s really no excuse for that in this day and age. But more than that, bad writing is writing that just lays there on the page and never comes to life.

Stories that are obviously derivative of other works. When I was a science fiction editor, it was routine to see projects that were far-too-closely based on *Star Trek*, for instance. *Trek* can be a wonderful inspiration, but a writer must bring her or his own sensibilities to that foundation.

“Writing to a trend” is a similar problem. If there’s a big blockbuster movie about some aspect of speculative fiction—let’s say, unicorns—then in 6 months or so, a zillion novels about unicorns are going to land on my desk. All well and good . . . except that most things I buy won’t be published for a couple of years, by which time the unicorn craze is likely to be long over. Write the book you want to write and don’t worry about whether or not it fits into a “current” trend. By the time you’re done writing, there’s likely to be a whole new trend anyway.

It’s great when a writer does her or his research, but background and research should be worked into the text as naturally as possible, not just tossed in as what we sometimes call “info dumps.” The more formal term is “expository lump,” and where there are too many of them and/or they go on too long, stories become rather boring and characters fade into the woodwork. On the flipside, I can generally tell when something hasn’t been well-researched and that will usually bounce me out of the suspension of disbelief that is vital to the enjoyment of a work of fiction.

Even in a made-up world, “reality” is important. In a fantasy where characters ride horses, it’s important to remember that horses need to eat and drink and can’t be ridden at a gallop forever. Unless the writer has created magical horses, of course, in which case, she or he needs to make sure that the reader knows that. Internal consistency is also important—if a work contains an established convention like, “the hero doesn’t shoot people,” and then the hero does exactly that, the writer has to deal with the fact that she or he has broken an internal law; the hero can’t just pick up a gun, blow someone away, and walk off like nothing happened. He has to have a reason to act this way; he may have a reaction to having killed someone for the first time.

If there is a mystery or suspense element to the story, the writer has to play fair with the reader—when the investigator/detective/protagonist solves the crime or catches the bad guy or whatever, the clues that the protagonist draws on have to have been available to the reader in the course of the story.

**Assuming you find a work you were willing to take on, what are some things that you wish authors knew about the whole publishing process?**

That is a tough question to answer, because so many authors these days seem to know a great deal about the publishing process, because they've read up about it, done some self-publishing, gone to conventions and conferences and heard people talk about it, etc.

I guess the thing I most want people to understand that publishing is a business. At the end of the day, even if we really love a writer or a project, if that writer or project doesn't make at least some money for us, it's not likely that we'll sign another project by that writer. That can be really hard, especially when an editor has a long-standing relationship with a writer or has a deep love for a particular genre or subgenre that has fallen out of fashion.

Then there's the money thing. If you're lucky, you'll make enough money to keep writing. If you're really lucky, you'll make enough money to be able to quit your day job. But most writers don't get rich from writing. A couple of decades ago, a survey of published writers said that their average yearly income from their writing was around \$8,000. Painful as that is, I'm not sure that number has changed much.

The other thing I always tell writers who are new to the business is that it's okay to ask questions. We don't think, "oh, what kind of an idiot is this person who doesn't know X?" We just explain X. That's how most of us learned our jobs in the first place—by having someone explain things to us—and that's how we pass on our knowledge to others.

**You're also in a rather unique position for an editor in that you enjoy and acquire prose novels and graphic novels. What do you look for in graphic novels that differs from prose novels?**

It's still story for me. The story has to work.

**Do you still read in the genres you work in or have you found it too much like work and drop it all together or just look to other genres to read?**

I don't read for pleasure anywhere near as much as I used to—just don't have a lot of time for it these days between work and being the parent of a teenager—and I often read narrative nonfiction, partially because it gives me ideas to talk to writers about and partially because I love learning new things. When I read fiction, it might be a genre I edit or it might be something completely different (like romance; I don't edit romance at all but enjoy reading some).

What I can't do is read the genre of the book I'm currently editing. If I'm working on a big, swashbuckling fantasy, I'll read a nice, toothsome mystery; if I'm editing a horror novel, I'll read something light; if I'm editing an historical, I'll read something contemporary. This allows me to maintain my mental focus on what I'm editing and makes it less likely that one author's voice

will bleed into another's. I read quite a bit of short fiction as well and usually read two or three different things at a time. It can take me a long time to get through a novel as a result.

I don't have a favorite genre; I jump around a lot, just as I do in my editing.

**Given all that's constantly changing in the publishing world, what advice do you have for authors looking to break into the business today?**

Write a really good book. Then put it away for at least three months (you can write something else in the meantime). Then look at it again, and try as much as possible to see just what's on the page, not what you have in your mind. If it's still a really good book, submit it! If it's not, revise, or throw it away and start over.

Look at what the house you want to submit to is publishing and don't send your book there if it doesn't fit into the list. People send us all kinds of stuff we don't publish, from poetry to children's picture books to humorous mysteries. This is a waste of the writer's time as well as ours.

Read and follow submissions guidelines; they exist for a reason.

Try to remember that a rejection is not personal and that editors aren't out to break writers' hearts. We use form rejection letters because of the high volume of submissions we receive, not because we are mean. At the same time, writers should understand that rejection is the most common fate for submissions. We literally receive thousands of submissions a year and publish only a few hundred books—the majority of them from writers we have long-term relationships with. We say no to almost everything, from established and new writers alike.

And of course, every editor and publisher has different likes and dislikes. If a work is rejected by publisher A, send it to publisher B.

And with that we're going to wrap this interview up. Thanks to Ms. Singer for letting me pick her brain for a bit. It's not every day an editor is so willing to allow it. And feel free to learn more about Tor and the books they put out by heading over to:  
<http://us.macmillan.com/Tor.aspx>.