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Behind the Scenes

By: Vivek Kaul

A memoir of a long-term relationship between a writer and editor beautifully explores the bonds that develop over decades and how professional ties can evolve into lasting friendships. Literary connections can endure and flourish without frequent contact, even in an age of constant communication.

Robert Gottlieb, who died in June 2023, was one of the foremost editors in the post-World War II era of English language publishing. In 1961, he suggested that the then unknown Joseph Heller [change the title of his book to *Catch-22*](#) from the earlier *Catch-18* to ensure that there was no confusion between Heller's book and Leon Uris' *Mila 18*, which had been released earlier that year.

Then there is the story about the journals of American writer John Cheever, which were published in 1991, nearly a decade after his death in 1982. These journals were edited and put in shape by Gottlieb. In the editor's note that accompanies the published journals, he mentions that the total length of the journals would have been anywhere between three and four million words, and that he must have cut them to around a twentieth of the original length.

These examples featuring Gottlieb showcase the two main jobs of an editor. First, to figure out whether there is a book in an idea, like was the case with *Catch-22*, which was nothing like anything written before. And, second, to make the text submitted by the writer into that book.

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As far as editing and the publishing trade go, these are great “war” stories. Nonetheless, the greatest Gottlieb story is his partnership with American journalist and writer Robert Caro, which lasted more than 50 years. Gottlieb edited Caro's first book *The Power Broker*—based on American urban planner and public official Robert Moses—and expertly cut it from its original length of more than a million words to around 700,000. *The Power Broker* was published in 1974.

Since then, Caro has been working on a biography of the 36th US president, Lyndon B. Johnson. Four volumes of it have been published, with the first in 1982 and the fourth in 2013. These volumes were also edited by Gottlieb. At the time of Gottlieb's death in 2023, Caro was working on the fifth volume. Of course, he will now have to make the difficult decision of finding another editor.

The relationship that Caro and Gottlieb shared was the subject of a very interesting documentary titled *Turn Every Page*. This was directed by Gottlieb's daughter Elizabeth and released in 2022. Other than documenting their broader working relationship, it goes into the micro details of how the two would argue even over placing of a semi-colon.

It is perhaps this documentary or simply the relationship that Gottlieb and Caro shared that inspired Ramachandra Guha to write a book on the relationship he has shared with his editor turned friend Rukun Advani over the decades. As Guha puts it at the very beginning of *The Cooking of Books: A Literary Memoir*, “In an author's life, the person next in importance to his or her romantic partner is his or her editor.” After saying this, he proceeds to establish it over the rest of the book, primarily using letters and emails that he and Advani have exchanged over the years.

Advani was two years senior to Guha at St. Stephen's College in New Delhi in the 1970s. While they knew of each other, they were not really friends or even acquaintances for that matter, given that Advani at that point was already living the life of the mind while Guha was more the sporty type and fancied himself as a cricketer. (On a separate note, given that St. Stephen's is a very important part of the setting of the book, do watch out for cameo appearances of writer Amitav Ghosh and former bureaucrat-turned-politician Shashi Tharoor.)

So, the relationship between the writer and his editor did not really begin until 1982, when Guha ran into Advani at a wedding. Advani at this time was an editor at Oxford University Press and Guha was doing a PhD in sociology from the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta (now Kolkata).

A few years later, Guha sent his PhD thesis to Advani. In May 1986, Advani showed his interest in publishing the thesis as a book, albeit with revisions. This is how the editorial relationship between the two really started. The process of turning an academic treatise into readable material took time, with the book finally being published in 1989. It was titled *The Unquiet Woods*.

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Soon after, Guha and Advani worked on a “chatty, non-serious” cricket book, *Wickets in the East: An Anecdotal History*, which was published in January 1992. It did not sell well. Of course, every cloud has a silver lining and this book set Guha on the path to writing on cricket. Over the decades, this writing has included lots of columns in the mass media and a few good books, including the wonderfully written *A Corner of a Foreign Field—The Indian History of a British Sport*, which was basically Advani’s idea.

After *The Unquiet Woods*, the duo got working on a biography of Verrier Elwin, a British-born Indian anthropologist, ethnologist, and tribal activist. Guha recalls how Advani made him work really hard on the book. As he writes, “Advani was asking me to adhere to scholarly rigour while eschewing scholarly jargon; to write for both [André] Béteille and [Mukul] Kesavan simultaneously ... André Béteille was the pre-eminent Indian social scientist of the day. Mukul Kesavan was by common consent the best writer of English prose in India.”

This balance between scholarship and readability is really hard to achieve, which is why so many non-fiction Indian books which are easy to read are basically fluff, and what is not fluff is difficult to read. Also, the moment an academically minded person tries to write in simple language, which everyone with the ability to read can understand, he or she is not taken seriously by the so-called intelligentsia.

As Advani wrote to Guha, “The trouble with the narrow-minded, blinkered, bureaucratised, malicious and petty semi-intelligentsia of this fucked up country is that the moment someone writes well in an informal, freewheeling manner on unacademic subjects, as you do, his virtuoso writerly virtues are used to cast doubt on his equal and separable credibility as a first-class academic.” Given this, Elwin’s biography took time, and was published in early 1999. Advani wrote to Guha saying, “Never enjoyed working on a book as much as this.”

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After this, Advani quit Oxford University Press and started his own publishing house, Permanent Black. He also became a recluse and moved to Ranikhet in Uttarakhand. Guha, as a writer, became more of a historian than the sociologist that he had trained to be, and in the process published with more popular trade publishers such as Picador and Penguin. But in all this Advani continued to read and offer feedback on everything that Guha wrote, including his speeches.

Also, their communication now continued through email. It is these letters and emails that are the heart and soul of the book and, among other things, bring out the talent and wit of Advani. Here is how Advani recalled his very close friend Vipin Handa, “He taught English for some years, edited an arts journal, and resisted for long the disease to which Indians generally succumb early and which is known as SIMPLEA (Standard Indian Middle-class Parental Pleading: All Good Boys must become *Babus*. All Good Girls must become *Bahus*. Both must conjoin and produce *Babas*.)”

Indeed, it is a pity that he has chosen to write as little as he has in the public domain. Further, it is this communication between the two that clearly brings out that they did not always agree on everything. Of course, both of them being born in the Nehruvian era, they do talk about the transformation that India is currently going through.

To conclude, Guha has written an excellent memoir on his relationship with Advani, telling us that working relationships can turn into friendships. He shows such friendships can adhere even without regular meetings and incessant talking in an era of free calling, and that one can continue to maintain such a friendship, through writing, writing and more writing, which is essentially “a self-indulgent celebration of elite male privilege”.