The Haunted Room
By Carole DeSanti

Despite bestseller rankings and lifestyle features, big advances, and superstardom, many women writers seem to be living hardscrabble creative lives. Even those whose “rooms” are more like palaces are nailing down the floorboards, putting buckets under leaky roofs, and wondering how to keep the lights on, particularly those of the “incandescent mind.”

When I was a young editor just starting out in the publishing industry twenty-some years ago, I learned that publishers thought about books this way: on the one hand, there was critically acclaimed, prize-winning, “beautiful writing that doesn’t sell.” On the other, audience-oriented popular work, often written to formula, published to meet a well-understood demand. This opposition was called “the literary vs. the commercial,” and the careers of both authors and editors had generally been directed along these separate and unequal tracks. The literary set donned tuxes for awards dinners while the commercial gang paid the bills that kept the lights on and the copiers running—and each side wanted what the other seemed to have. By the early 1990s, though, a sea change was occurring. In the new era, every book was to pay its own way. “You can’t eat literary awards,” one publisher complained a group of us editors, after yet another round of congranatization and downsizing. The numbers, and the numbers alone, were to be our measuring sticks.

The writing I wanted to publish didn’t fall neatly onto one side or the other of the literary-commercial divide, anyway. I believed, as did some others in the industry, that diverse, content-responsive audiences could be found. More importantly, as a feminist who admired the work of Carolyn Heilbrun, Carol Gilligan, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, and others, I wanted to direct publishing’s resources to a diverse field of women, across the lines of race, class, experience, and sexuality—to those who wanted to breathe new life into the stale old categories. The writers I most admired had not made their careers by way of awards or privilege—nor by abandoning their literary values. So I put “the literary vs. the commercial” to one side and got to work.

Twenty years later, I’m battling mightily, as editors always have, to mediate between competing needs—author and publisher, art and commerce, time and money—and get the work, mostly fiction, mostly by women, delivered, edited, scheduled, and out into the world. But despite huge changes in the industry—distribution over the Internet, the rise of book groups and websites, and an enormous emphasis on that new juggernaut, the “women’s audience”—my job seems harder than ever. As usual, some authors don’t meet their deadlines, but where I was once able to give six-month extensions, now I can offer only two weeks. Others deliver final manuscripts that read more like drafts. Troublingly, some of the most promising authors with whom I work have become “stuck” or “blocked,” and are unable to write for long periods. Meanwhile, the industry demands frequent publication, on-time delivery, and an end to “monkey business”—a professional approach with little latitude for the mysteries, serendipities, and chaos of the creative process. With stacks of manuscripts that should be better than they are, authors frozen “between books,” and agents on the phone pleading that their brand-new clients “just need an editor,” I find myself with many headaches, and even more questions. The discipline of the market, while tonic in many ways, does not cure every ill.

What do women writers need to build successful careers these days? Why do their needs seem greater than ever? Has some formerly available resource run dry? It’s not talent, or determination, or opportunity—or audiences, or even money—that is lacking, but something else. Despite bestseller rankings and lifestyle features, big advances and superstardom, many women writers seem to be living hardscrabble creative lives. Even those whose “rooms” are more like palaces are nailing down the floorboards, putting buckets under leaky roofs, and wondering how to keep the lights on, particularly those of the “incandescent mind.” And then there is the nagging question of “what will sell,” and how to reconcile that with what one genuinely wants to write. Pragmatically speaking, there are gaps in the infrastructure. First of all, where are the early readers, amanuenses, advisors, and general factotums who have always guarded the literati—today’s equivalents of Dorothy Wordsworth,
Sophia Hawthorne, Sofia Tolstaya, and Cynthia Thoreau; Leonard Woolf, Alice Toklas, Elizabeth Fowles, and Gabrielle Kerouac? Where are those who used to read drafts, shore up doubts, shush children, cook meals, endure writerly tantrums, encourage the wild experiment, agree to move abroad, hold salons, point out plot glitches, and bring the writer back to her heart’s desire? What about those editors who (even in my own day) would drop everything to get on a plane, and then sleep on their authors’ couches until the book was done, the hangover wore off, or the divorce proceedings were finished?

As far as I can see, women writers need, want, and desire everything that writers have ever had, but those who can provide it are in short supply. All the gift-labor and the literary ghost-work has dried up or gone elsewhere. Perhaps this accounts for the silence from which some authors suffer, the sense of being haunted by a sort of negative presence—the lurking, terrible knowledge that the work to which both they and I are devoting our lives is lacking some unattainable, yet necessary ingredient.

A few years ago one of my authors, exhausted after the publication of her second novel, commented,

I provide everything for myself. The income that purchased my home and my studio was generated from my work. When I needed a writing space, I designed it, paid for it to be built, painted and outfitted [it]. I have it heated, cleaned and repaired.

Her husband didn’t read her work, do research, handle correspondence, hide negative reviews, manage her website, or accompany her at appearances: he was busy with his own work, which she deeply supported. And while she had experimented with hiring people to provide necessary services, for her, a sense of personal connection was lacking in these arrangements. Tasks might get done, but she still felt essentially alone in her effort. Describing her creative life rather ruefully, she said, “I am the vessel and its passenger, and I am the one keeping it afloat.”

“When is her next novel coming?” one of our marketing directors recently asked, with a wistfulness not uncommon at publishing conference tables these days. It had, we all knew, been far too long since her craft sent a signal.

Those of us who work with writers have accepted that in corporate publishing, relationships are not as personal as they once were. The business is less intimate and dramatic; less “fun” than in the good old days, but more democratic. It’s healthier— isn’t it?—for a spouse not to sacrifice his or her own creative life to that of a partner, and for an editor not to eat, sleep, breathe, and vacation in the shadow of her writers. And counting things—copies sold, dollars earned, time spent, books returned— can be a path not only to profitability but also to fairness.

Still, some form of essential nourishment that once came from the publishing life, which editors poured into books and the lives of their authors, is missing, and its replacement has not yet been found. Some try to make the case that books can be produced, and certainly consumed, without such nourishment, but for women writers and readers, this kind of literary monocropping has led to pretty thin gruel. In terms of content, it’s resulted in a succession of novels and memoirs appealing to a generic feminine audience, a dull march through the supposed life-stages of chick-lit, mommy-lit, divorce-lit, and their permutations (breast-cancer lit, looking-for-love-at-the-assisted-living-facility lit…). Women writers have been all too ready to meet the demand, mining the intimate material of their lives for commercial fodder. The internalized voices of “write this, think that” are now based on assumptions about the marketplace. But the fast-paced commerce in tales of love, sex, relationships, and women’s private lives obscures a real issue: the building of the kinds of work, relationships, and organizational structures that will provide foundations, windows, doors, and walls for women’s creative “rooms.”

Audiences are onto it, too. Inevitably, at the end of a reading by a woman author, a hand shoots up—and the question is not about the content of the presentation. It’s “How do you write; when do you write; what allows you to write?”

One successful novelist (who had managed the uncommon, enviable feat of both pleasing influential critics and rising on the bestseller list) answered the question frankly. She reported that she worked, at first, at coffee shops and cafes. Then, “manna fell from heaven,” she said. She received a fellowship from a major university. “There,” she explained,

I had an office, air conditioning, interesting companions for lunch, a computer. I dropped off the kids at school, went to the office, picked them...
An Unbalanced and Impossible Relationship

White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson

By Brenda Wineapple

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, 388 pp., hardcover, $27.95

Reviewed by Mary Loeffelholz

A s perhaps the most famous recluse in American literary history, Emily Dickinson might seem an unlikely candidate for the currently voguish genre of collective biography. “On a Columnar Self— / How ample to rely...” she wrote around 1863, at the height of her productivity, when she was composing and copying out, on average, very nearly a poem a day. “Suffice Us—for a Crowd— / Ourselves—and Rectitude...” she concluded.

Surprisingly, though, some of the best work done on Dickinson in the last half-century has been in the vein of collective biography. Richard Sewall’s magnificent Life of Emily Dickinson (1974) approached its subject through separate chapters on the major figures populating Dickinson’s life: her family, her possible beloveds, and her friends in the literary world. Sewall surrounded Dickinson’s columnar self with so many adjuncts because he resisted ascribing a singular narrative to Dickinson’s mysterious, outwardly uneventful life. The group portrait seemed to him “the truest way of presenting a figure upon whose biography no narrative structure can be imposed that is not to a degree arbitrary or fictitious.” At the other extreme of confidence in finding a mastering pattern in Dickinson’s literary remains, Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart’s influential 1998 Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson looked at Dickinson through the lens of her intense, long-lived, mutual bond with her sister-in-law.

Like Smith and Hart, Brenda Wineapple, in White Heat, pairs the poet with a single adjunct figure from the crowded Dickinson mausoleum: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Atlantic Monthly essayist to whom she wrote in April 1862 to ask whether her verse was “alive.” Higginson would become a lifeline to Dickinson, first as a genial correspondent and ultimately as one of the most influential of her posthumous champions. He saw the first volumes of her poetry into print, assisted her in choosing which poems to publish, and defended the formal unorthodoxy of her writing in a bold essay for the middlebrow Christian Union: “When a thought takes one’s breath away,” he asked, “who cares to count the syllables?”

As Wineapple observes, Dickinson often credited Higginson with saving her life: “To
Free. Android. Category: Adventure. Escape the rooms comes to Virtual Reality (VR). Game is playable in VR (cardboard) and normal touch (no headset required). The game is played in a scary theme and you need to solve puzzles to escape from each room. As you escape a thrilling story unfolds. Join the experience and download this free game.