Inside Publishing: A Conversation with Havilah Sciabbarrasi

Random House Books for Young Readers and Rodale Kids

Interview conducted by Savannah Aleksic, Content Committee, George Washington Journal of Ethics in Publishing



A graduate of the Columbia Publishing Course, Havilah Sciabbarrasi is currently working at Random House Books for Young Readers and Rodale Kids as an editorial assistant for two editors. While we spoke over Zoom, Havilah and I reminisced on our time working together at our undergraduate institution's literary magazine. During our conversation, Havilah spoke about the importance of intentional inclusion in editorial work, navigating bans on books for younger readers, and upholding authenticity across publishing mediums for various audiences. This connects the importance of inclusion and editorial responsibility in publishing, topics that resonate with the *GW Journal of Ethics in Publishing* (GWJEP) and the wider GW publishing community.

What follows is an edited excerpt from our conversation, condensed for clarity and length.

Havilah started by reflecting on the unique challenges she faced as an undergraduate student managing peers at a student-run magazine as it struggled to reach its audience.

On Joining the Industry

GWJEP: We first met when you were editor-in-chief of The Kudzu Review. What's one experience from that role that most directly shaped how you work in publishing now, and why?

Havilah: I think for me, it was retooling the magazine a bit. It's not one specific thing that I aimed to do, but Kudzu was a magazine that felt pretty secluded and not well known about on campus and it felt like we weren't taking advantage of all the ways that we could reach people.

Havilah (cont.): There were visions that I had of how I wanted us to connect within the team. I organized events that would encourage team bonding and find the areas where we weren't doing as well when it came to outreach. This included reaching people outside of the English department, spreading the word, having events that raised money and encouraging people to get to know their fellow peers.

Havilah (cont.): Not exactly the same thing, but that has become something that I've taken into my current job—finding new ways to reach people where they are when it comes to reading. One of Random House's core values is creating readers. That often means you are not necessarily curating books that you then hope people will find. It's finding out what people enjoy and then crafting books to meet them where they're at. It's a value that I think can translate across different disciplines.

Havilah (cont.): I've learned that you have to be extra thorough and examine where your sources are coming from. Don't accept things necessarily at face value. Do your due diligence and look further. It's a fast-paced industry, but one thing I have learned is the importance of slowing down and making sure that things are right the first time so that you don't have to go back and fix your own mistakes.

Our conversation shifted towards Havilah's experience at the 6-week intensive Columbia Publishing Program as a recent graduate from Florida State University.

On Early-Career Publishing Ethics

GWJEP: While you were in the Columbia Publishing Program and entering NYC publishing, was there a moment that challenged your expectations about

how the industry works ethically? What was the situation, and what did you take from it?

Havilah: The publishing course is a very intense, stressful experience especially if you know it's your dream already; you're kind of told that the Columbia course will be the ticket into the industry, but then the reality of it is that you get out what you put in. You're not guaranteed anything.

Havilah (cont.): As far as situations that challenged us ethically when it came to working together, [mainly it] was attribution. A lot of the time, you're wondering when it's right to take credit for work and to let other people take credit for work. When working together in a team, it's especially dicey because everyone's throwing ideas out there—it's hard to say who did what, and does it really matter as long as the work gets done? It's these questions that I had to navigate with other people because you're trying to put yourself into a position where you can be set up for success down the line. I know that's not a big ethics, capital "E", concern, but those interpersonal relationships are the backbone of publishing. Getting along with people and not sacrificing the work for the sake of your ego is really important.

Next, we explored preserving personal authenticity in navigating experiences across freelancing, internships, and creative passion projects.

On Staying Authentic Across Mediums

GWJEP: You've worked across small press, journalism/editing, and podcasting. What principles stay the same across all those formats, and what changes depending on the medium?

Havilah: The underlying thread through all of those things is a passion for seeing someone's vision of their work come to light while also creating an experience that I think doesn't alienate readers or listeners. There is something inclusive about everything that I believe I was trying to do. I'm thinking of, I used to work on fantasy manuscripts as an editorial assistant at a tiny indie press, and I was doing a lot of first reads and our mission was to publish stories that might have gotten marginalized. I remember working on manuscripts in our slush pile and my gut check was that it didn't feel authentic. There's little things like that that you have to be aware of because if you have a mission statement, you want to make sure that the work that you're putting out there reflects that.

Havilah (cont.): Podcasting started off as a school project at Florida State University, but it became so much more. It was this really fun space to talk about how pop culture and intersectionality cross over and often can start conversations. Sometimes it's a bit of a Trojan horse situation such as shows that reach a lot of people like Heated Rivalry. It can do so much work for

normalizing same-sex relationships. It's not trying to do that with a capital PSA but by being a well-written piece of work that people just genuinely enjoy; you are getting those conversations started in the ways that grassroots campaigning or social media posts can't.

Passion for reaching audiences across mediums created a natural transition to Havilah's current work at Random House Books for Young Readers and Rodale Kids, where she assists in promoting inclusivity efforts in uplifting diverse communities.

On Adjusting to Ethics in New Environments

GWJEP: Working as an editorial assistant on a children's imprint, what's been the biggest adjustment in how you think about audience, responsibility, and impact compared to your earlier work?

Havilah: I am now working on things that are going to children and teens, so there's a lot of scrutiny on the media that is being given to children now. My biggest responsibility is thinking about the stories that kids need to hear most. Right now, I'm working on a project that's addressing ongoing questions our society has about AI and agency and how it can be used and whether it even should be, but it's also talking about the process of coming out for children to their parents, especially parents who might not necessarily be warm and welcoming. It had a great underlying message of learning to be true to yourself in adversity. These are the things that are on my mind right now due to books being so easily banned.

Havilah (cont.): I also recently read a review of a book that I worked on last year called *When Tomorrow Burns* by Tae Keller. She won the Newbery Honor for *When You Trap a Tiger*. In this book, she has a character who has two dads and it's not even a huge part of the book, but there was a one star review written by someone who did not finish it because of that. It's frustrating because it's an example of casual representation, but it can lead to a loss of readership. I'm lucky PRH is very focused on keeping that a part of the experience for kids because all kids deserve to feel seen and heard. If they can't find that in their communities they should be able to find that in the books they read.

Our conversation drew to a close as we discussed the pressures of balancing market expectations with author visions, as well as strategies to uphold inclusive editorial practices across a large organization.

On Ethics in Children's Publishing

GWJEP: In children's publishing, how do sensitivity reads and inclusive

editorial practices show up in the workflow, and what do you think your ethical responsibility is as an editor when values, market pressures, and creative intent don't perfectly align?

Havilah: Sensitivity reads aren't always necessary, but they are a lot of the time for the projects that I work on. For one of our current projects, the author is prioritizing a story about a kid who's been in the foster care system and they want to see if this is reading as authentic. I'm in the process of looking for a sensitivity reader for someone who's been in the foster system to provide a thumbs up or thumbs down. There are examples where sensitivity readers aren't necessarily required because the author is speaking from their own experience, as a lot of stories we publish are quite personal and they're often writing the stories they wish they had when they were young.

Havilah (cont.): We had a meeting as a team a while ago where we were reading the book Erasure by Percival Everett and compared it to the movie American Fiction because both discuss the ways in which racial identity can show up in publishing and how it needs to be accurately represented. This goes back to not being the loudest voice in the room and deferring to people who would know better than you.

Havilah (cont.): I don't think there's a simple solution but you want the book to sell and reach people, which is what the author wants too, so in situations like that you're trying to stress the importance of having this book be in people's hands. Sometimes it doesn't always go the way you want, but you try to stress to the author the importance of getting this book in the hands of kids, which is why they wrote it in the first place, and book covers are an area where we might not be as married to a certain direction.

Havilah's reflections remind us that ethical practices in publishing can't be simplified, as empathy and authenticity can be the most important action when it comes to approaching life-long readers at a young age and lifting up voices historically underrepresented in children's and young adult literature.

Authoir Bio

Havilah Sciabbarrasi (she/her) is an editorial assistant at Random House Books for Young Readers and Rodale Kids. She supports two editors on picture books, middle grade, and young adult titles. She is also a bookseller at her local bookstore, Book Culture, and works as a freelance editor on World War II manuscripts. Based in NYC, she loves a good thrifting haul, bookstore crawl, or cold drink of Mountain Dew.