

Marc Jaffe

The veteran of 40-odd years in publishing, now serving as editor-at-large for Houghton Mifflin, concedes that he “can’t escape his own eclecticism.”

BY ROBERT A. CARTER

One of the newest entrants in the field of personal imprints is also one of the savviest and most experienced editors in the business, a man long known for his civility, charm and determination. When *PW* interviewed Marc Jaffe recently in the conference room of Houghton Mifflin’s new offices at 215 Park Ave. South, the topic being his early years in publishing, he asked, “How far back do you want to go? I’ve been around a long time.” To the beginning, he was told.

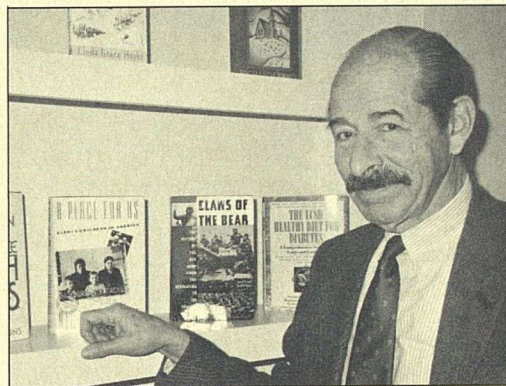
The beginning for Jaffe was a job as an editorial clerk at *Argosy* magazine. “After about a year there, working on nonfiction pieces, I decided I wanted to get into the fiction department, but there was just no opening.” A friend called Victor Weybright at New American Library, Jaffe recalls, and said: “Vic, how would you like to hire a Harvard graduate and Marine Corps veteran for your editorial staff?” Jaffe then spoke with Weybright and was hired. That was in 1948, barely a year after the formation of NAL.

Jaffe stayed with NAL 11 years, and then went to Western Printing and Lithography, where he edited Dell First Editions. “Frank Taylor hired me because he was off to Hollywood to produce movies,” said Jaffe. “One of them was *The Misfits*. Knox Burger had also left by then, but Don Fine was still there. We were all sent to Racine, Wisconsin, for a two-week course in production. It was all very valuable training. At that time, Dell was distributed by Pocket Books. Then, when Dell broke off from Western in 1960, we were all invited to stay.”

Among the titles Jaffe acquired for Dell of which he was especially

proud are *The Yachting Encyclopedia* and *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankel, which was originally published by Beacon Press.

In 1961, Jaffe moved to Bantam as editorial director. At that time, Oscar Dystel had assembled a team which probably constituted the strongest staff of any paperback house of the period. Working with Jaffe under Dystel were Esther Margolis in promotion and publicity; Lou Satz in sales; Fred Klein, Allan Barnard and Grace Bechtold in editorial; and Leonard Leone as art director. “Oscar had great edito-



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rial acumen,” recalled Jaffe, “but he gave the editorial department a large degree of independence. I consider him ‘the compleat publisher.’”

Bantam back in the ‘60s was preeminent in licensing hardcover rights of paperback originals to hardcover houses, and Jaffe was instrumental in acquiring books for sell-back. “We must have sold well over 200 titles in that way,” he told *PW*. “Mildred Hird, who ran the sub rights department at Bantam, had developed a wide network of hardcover houses.”

One of the books Jaffe brought

into Bantam as a sell-back was *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty. In his book *The Bantam Story: Thirty Years of Paperback Publishing*, Clarence Petersen tells how *The Exorcist* came to be published. “Blatty had written several comic novels but was working as a screenwriter when he and Jaffe happened to meet at a Hollywood party in December, 1967. Jaffe asked Blatty what he was working on, and Blatty said he had an idea for a novel about demonic possession but hadn’t succeeded in interesting his own agent, let alone a publisher. ‘It sounds pretty good to me,’ said Jaffe, and they agreed to discuss it further.” Not long afterward, Blatty did get in touch with Jaffe, and there followed eight pages of background and an outline, which turned out to be irresistible. The book had not been written because Blatty needed an advance for research, determined as he was to make the book thoroughly authentic. Thus Bantam secured all the rights to *The Exorcist* for \$26,000. The book was further

delayed when Blatty took time out to write a screenplay, but it was finally finished in 1970 and became, as the world well knows, a huge best-seller for Harper & Row (where Jaffe backsold it to Jim Silberman), and for Bantam in 1973.

When Bertelsmann bought Bantam in the late ‘70s, both Dystel and Jaffe left the company, Dystel first and Jaffe in 1980, to join Ballantine. He was there for three years, responsible for the editorial program of both Ballantine and Fawcett when the latter was acquired from CBS. Jaffe was then given the chance by

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parent company Random House to start a new imprint, his first. "Bob Bernstein felt there was a wide range of books they weren't publishing," said Jaffe, "titles that were being brought out by companies like Crown, Morrow and S & S." More commercial books? "Yes," said Jaffe, smiling, "but you must remember that I started editing Plato and Dante as well as Mickey Spillane."

Villard Books, Jaffe's Random House imprint, was named after the building that once housed Random House as well as the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, and which is now the Helmsley Palace Hotel. For staff, Jaffe brought in Peter Gethers from Random House (Gethers is now Villard's editorial director) and hired Diane Reverand (now executive editor) and Janice Donnaud (his associate publisher and marketing director). Villard was programmed to publish 19–20 titles a year when Jaffe started it, and now issues close to 40 titles a year.

In 1986 Houghton Mifflin's David Replegle and Austin Olney persuaded Marc Jaffe to join them in forming a new imprint, this one to bear his name. During his first year at Houghton, Jaffe, understandably, published no books. In 1988 he published two titles, *Walking on the Edge of the World: A Journey of Discovery Through the Sixties and Beyond* by George Leonard, and Howard Simons's *Jewish Times: Voices of the American Jewish Experience*. The next year brought three more books: *Judgment Day: My Years With Ayn Rand* by Nathaniel Brandon; *Claws of the Bear* by Brian Moynahan, a history of the Red Army; and *City Sleuths and Tough Guys*, crime stories edited by David Willis McCullough. Jaffe was a logical choice to edit the Brandon book, having met him through his association with Ayn Rand during Bantam's paperback publication of her novels. This year Jaffe has so far published three more titles: *Exes*, a novel by Dan Greenburg; *The UCSD Healthy Diet for Diabetics* from the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine; and *Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community* by Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, his first bestseller. When his eponymous imprint is going full-out, Jaffe expects to publish eight books a year.

Does he enjoy working in a somewhat less organized situation, with fewer administrative responsibilities

than he might have had in his past assignments? "Frankly," Jaffe said, "working with people is something I enjoy a great deal. So, from that point of view, I'm delighted to be in an office, communicating, trying to make some contribution to the company. Detail work doesn't fascinate me, but I've always done it. You can't be an executive in a large company for a number of years without doing some administrative work, but my keenest interest has always been editorial."

Asked what kind of books Houghton expected him to publish, and if they wished him to establish another Villard, Jaffe shook his head. "No, I don't believe they were thinking of Villard as a model at all. I believe they thought they'd be draw-

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ing on my entire background. Hal Miller's intention in setting up these separate imprints [four altogether: the three other imprints are those of Richard Todd, Peter Davison and Seymour Lawrence] was to broaden the company's editorial reach in ways they'd find it hard to do otherwise.

"Those of us who have imprints are not really formally part of the editorial board," says Jaffe. Of his business and financial arrangements with the parent company, Jaffe would say only, "I'd rather not be specific, but I gather it's one of the several familiar arrangements common to imprints. There is nothing particularly dramatic or different about it."

As to Jaffe's editorial predilections, he comments, "I can't escape my eclecticism. I've always gone from *The Five Great Dialogues of Plato* to John Ciardi. Throughout my career that's been my interest and my practice. I've never been narrowly focused."

Jaffe compared his role at Houghton Mifflin to Herman Golub's at Doubleday, that of "editor-at-large." "Though I report to Joe Kanon," he said, "I also work closely with John Sterling, Houghton adult trade editor-in-chief. When I sign an author up, it is never certain whether the book will be published with a Marc Jaffe or a Houghton Mifflin

imprint."

What books are on the drawing board now? "A book called *Read With Me* by Walter Anderson, the editor of *Parade* magazine," he said, "which I believe will be an important book in the movement to improve America's literacy level. A new book by David Larkin, a designer I signed up when I was at Villard. After I left, they decided not to go forward with Larkin's book. Larkin is an independent book designer and editor, who has been published up to now by Stewart, Tabori and Chang. His ideas are his own, but he is not a packager." (See Trade News, p. 40, for more on the Larkin projects.) Jaffe also mentioned a geography reference book which will be copublished with Marshall Editions in London. "It's called *The Real World*," Jaffe said, "and it's a new look at geography. I have long believed there would ultimately be a resurgence of interest in geography, and fortunately that has been true. This book will put the science back in its proper place as one of the principal disciplines."

Jaffe is also working with Sterling on a wilderness guide, an original paperback, and with the University of California at Berkeley on a wellness encyclopedia based on the enormously successful *Wellness Health Letter*, which now reaches a million subscribers. Also in the works are titles based on books generated by Houghton's textbook division but suitable for a trade market, "to broaden Houghton's spectrum."

Eclectic indeed—but what about fiction? "I'm still interested in it," said Jaffe, "especially historical novels. And if I could find another A. B. Guthrie, I'd be very happy. I was Louis L'Amour's editor for years, and even before that I was hired by Victor Weybright as a mystery and western editor." But at the moment there's no novel on the horizon.

Marc Jaffe summed up his feelings about his new venue this way: "They're a wonderful group to work with—all professionals, and with still enough of that family feeling. They have a strong sales force, and they do not take book design and production lightly. Every author I've worked with here, without exception, has written me or written the managing editor to say how pleased they have been with their books. A wonderful house."

About his own career, Jaffe was understandably proud, and perhaps a shade bemused. "Sometimes I look back and think—It's been a long time—but it doesn't seem that way. I look forward to a long time here." □