

## HOW TO BECOME A PUBLICIST/ *Jessica Francis Kane*

**I**N THE MIDWESTERN TOWN where I grew up, my father is repainting my room blue and white, my favorite colors, just in case I come home. I try not to think about this. Instead I concentrate on getting a job as an editorial assistant, not knowing of any other work for a young graduate to do in publishing in New York.

In my first interview, I'm asked to name a few of my favorite authors. This is difficult, I say, blushing—like naming my favorite book. The editor, a woman in her forties with a bob that comes to two perfect blond points in the hollows of her cheeks, does not smile. When she started in publishing, editorial assistants were essentially secretaries, and she has no sympathy for me, it is obvious. I concentrate, look at the floor and frown gently, trying hard to appear intelligent and serious. Then I name Austen, Dickens, George Eliot and Hardy, in that order. My concentration was Victorian literature. I haven't read a book shorter than 400 pages in four years. The editor raises her eyebrows, two perfect arches a shade darker than her hair. I add that I love to read.

My father phones to tell me the room is coming along. He's decided to put up molding and replace the windows. He's doing it himself at night, after work. I tell him the interviews are going well; it shouldn't be much longer now before I'm offered a job. He says he'll find Mom. I can hear him walking away from the phone, then the faint chimes of their living room clock. When he comes back, he says that Mom is sleeping. She sleeps a lot these days, he says.

In the next interview, I try different authors. Woolf, Stegner, Hemingway, Joyce Carol Oates? Steinbeck, Faulkner, DeLillo, Alice Munro? I consider adding poets. I'm beginning to wonder if getting a job as an editorial assistant is a matter of matching the right list with the right editor, like a key to a lock. I'm worried that my lists lack artistic integrity, but I've read and enjoyed at least one book by each of these writers. This is the best I can do.

After some of the interviews I'm asked to write a reader's report. The manuscript on which I'm reporting has already been judged by the editor, which gives the exercise the feel of a test and makes me nervous.

I'm running out of time and money. My roommates-to-be are on an extended postgraduation European tour; I'm living with an aunt and uncle in New Jersey. I'm supposed to have a job by the time they get

back. The summer is hot; the city smells of urine. To lift my spirits, my aunt and uncle take me out for Brazilian food. I enjoy the fried bananas, but when the waiter appears with a sword piercing twelve roasted chicken livers, I lose my appetite completely.

Eventually I have an interview in my needing-to-be-dry-cleaned interview suit in which I explain that I read a lot of books by a lot of authors. That, strangely, I don't always know who my favorite ones are at any given time. That, instead (and here my voice catches), I feel compelled to read anything anyone recommends. In short, I'm a voracious reader rather than a picky one. I smile desperately. The editor asks if I've considered publicity. I haven't, but her tone is encouraging, so I smile again and say I certainly would. She bows her head and scoots back her chair. She walks me down a long hallway. I can hear energetic, happy voices even before we turn the corner into the publicity department. The exuberance of the place is overwhelming, so different from the quiet editorial offices I've been visiting. In fact, the place is a carnival compared to those morose libraries. I've just spent four years reading, I think. I should do something different. Then it hits me: this is where I belong!

The editor leaves, and I have an interview with the head of the department, the director of publicity, a woman in her thirties. She is dressed impeccably but has hair that looks real. This seems encouraging. She tells me that publicity is the last stage of bringing a book into the world. It involves care, attention to detail and, above all, enthusiasm. Enthusiasm!

"Enthusiasm is contagious," she beams.

Then, seriously, a whisper creeping into her voice, "It's a bit like being a midwife." (Much later I will understand that these are pitches. If one angle doesn't work, quickly try another. Adjust tone and volume.)

Publicity reaches out to readers through the medium of the media, she explains.

"Medium of the media," I repeat.

Marketing, she continues, cares more about sales. Publicity worries about the bigger picture, a book's place in the world. But if a publicist does her job well, the result is increased sales. Everything's interrelated!

I smile with . . . enthusiasm.

I tell my dad I have news and ask if Mom is home. He says she is always home. In fact, she rarely leaves the house.

"Great!" I say. "Could you both get on the phone?"

With both of them on the line—my dad in the kitchen, my mom in the family room—I announce that I have a job. My mom is thrilled. She hollers and whoops and says that she knew I could do it, that it's in my blood. All the women on her side of the family have felt this draw to New York. They've gone, worked, burned out and eventually left. I hear the television on in the background.

"Mom," I say, "Grandma was an alcoholic and Aunt Susan was a dancer. That's a little different."

"Oh, of course it is," she says. "I'm so proud of you."

My father is, too. He's going to keep working on that room, though, because it's far enough along that it should be finished.

My friends return. They have been traveling for two months and still have two weeks before their jobs start. With their mothers, they delve into apartment-hunting full time. I race to meet them during lunch and after work, arriving damp and rumpled, exactly like a piece of wilted lettuce. I discreetly dab at the sweat beading on my upper lip. They smile sadly at me. "You're working so hard," they say.

They want to live on the Upper East Side and have found an apartment building that has everything anyone could want. On the first floor there is a bank, a dry cleaner and a convenience store. "It's like a little village," one of the mothers says.

"But we're in the middle of New York," I point out.

"Exactly," she says. "This is safer."

In the apartment in the little village, there are two bedrooms. A third, mine, will be created by building a wall in the living room. It will be exactly like living in a closet, only more expensive.

That night, we go out to dinner to celebrate the new apartment. I drink too much wine, eat too little food. When they start telling me how much they admire me for moving to New York all alone, I tell them it's just part of my family history, actually. All of the women on my mother's side have come to New York, lived, burned out and eventually left. They stare at me while I laugh. Sinatra sings "New York, New York" over the restaurant speakers, and I excuse myself from the table. I cry in the bathroom. Unfortunately, the music is piped in there as well.

At work, I'm learning to write press releases. At first these seem like short essays about a book in which only positive things are said. My

first attempt is for a biography of Shakespeare by an eminent scholar. I begin: *William Shakespeare's contemporary Ben Jonson wrote, "He was not of an age but for all time."* These words were written soon after Shakespeare's death, when it had yet to be proven whether his plays would indeed last for all time. I work on the press release at home, at night.

The release is rejected. The publicity director tells me, in between phone calls, that it sounds too much like an essay. "You're writing for book reviewers," she says, covering the mouthpiece with her palm. "And radio and television producers. These people don't have a lot of time. They want to read the release, get a sense of the book, make a quick decision and go on."

This reminds me, I say, of Raymond Carver's advice about writing short stories: "Get in, get out, go on."

"Exactly," she says, to me or the phone, I'm not sure which.

I try again. In *SHAKESPEARE: A LIFE, the author studies the playwright's triumph over the vicissitudes of time.*

"Forget you were an English major," she says.

*Who was Shakespeare? In this breakthrough study, the mystery is revealed.*

"Good," she says. Five hundred copies are printed and distributed to editors and producers around the country with a copy of the book. It's thrilling, almost like being published.

I cannot live with the two friends on the Upper East Side. They have Laura Ashley quilts and intend to buy Laura Ashley curtains. They tell me the beat-up dresser I got for fifty dollars at a church sale in Chelsea is quaint. I tell them it's solid maple, and I love it. When I pull out, they are frustrated; they will have to get a smaller apartment. I promise to keep in touch, kiss them on the cheeks. In a year, I suspect, I will not remember their last names.

I find a barely affordable studio at 99th and Broadway. The kitchen sink is five steps from my bed, and feathers float around the bathroom from the pigeons roosting on the windowsill. There is a brick wall not three feet from both of the windows. The dresser, however, looks great, and my mother tells me to be happy that I have a window in the bathroom at all. They're rare, she says, starting to cry.

"Mom!" I say. "Both of our bathrooms have windows!"

She says, "In New York, I mean. In New York."

I say, "Mom, do you need me to come home? I can come home, Mom."

She says, "Don't be silly. Your life's there now."

I begin to settle in. Someone points out that the first letters of the avenues west from Central Park West spell CAB. This is surprisingly

helpful. I learn that to get to Central Park I should walk down Broadway to at least 96th Street before turning east. This way I avoid a pocket of drug dealers and other shady characters. I can, however, walk straight over to Riverside Drive on 99th; that neighborhood is wealthy and safe. I find a good dry cleaner.

Soon, there are things I love: the lanes of unscathed sky between the skyscrapers in midtown; the Chrysler building on cloudy days; the sunset reflected in the building across the street from my office; the undulating expanse of Central Park, like actors offstage waving a giant green sheet in the middle of the city: voila! A park! I don't go below midtown much; the chaotic streets at the bottom of the island are a challenge I'm not ready to face. I love the orderliness of the blocks on the Upper West Side and hope that does not make me a certain kind of New Yorker, though it probably does. Everything in New York seems like a potential label. I bought a new pair of leather shoes, and the first time I wore them to work, someone said, "Very Upper West Side."

Occasionally I see things that upset me, such as the man who kicked out at a passing car's tire, apparently for no other reason than that the car was rushing through a yellow light. The force of the kick pulled him off the curb and tugged his extremely pregnant wife into the gutter with him. The image of this stayed with me for days.

Sometimes I look at the ground, covered as far as the eye can see in cement, and feel something akin to panic. Where does the real ground begin? What, exactly, is New York resting on? I try to look up, although I've been told only tourists do that.

The publicity director asks me to work on a few of my own books. As the newest member of the department, however, I get the books no one else wants: a dictionary of women composers, a treatise on the building and preserving of American schooners, a book of photographs of the coast of Oregon and a history of the zipper called *Zipper!* For the Oregon book, I throw a publication party at the South Street Seaport. For *Zipper!* I send out the publicity materials in little zippered pouches. These ideas are big hits, and I am promoted.

The leaves begin to change, even the fifteen or so on the maple sapling in front of my apartment building. Walking to work with a cup of hot coffee and a fresh bran muffin, I have moments of happiness. I'm having trouble making my school loan payments and have started charging my groceries, but on these cold mornings, with my steaming coffee and my muffin, everything seems possible.

The publicity director says I'm especially presentable. When she is busy, she often asks me to escort her authors to events in the city. On one such occasion, I sit in the studio audience of a popular late-night talk show. When the host comes out, he talks to the audience for a while. He makes a joke of the fact that I'm sitting in his audience with a book on my lap. He pretends to be insulted. I try to explain why I have the book, that the author is going to be one of his guests, but I'm not miked and no one can hear me. Everyone laughs. Later, when I tell the publicity director what happened, she says I should have held the book up in front of my face. "Think like a publicist," she says.

At parties, men want to give me their manuscripts. They whisper plot summaries in my ear. They'd rather be talking to an editorial assistant, but I am second best, way above the assistants in subsidiary rights. I drop the manuscripts in the slush pile first thing Monday morning. I'm starting to believe that this is thinking like a publicist.

At Christmastime, I call my mom from Rockefeller Plaza. I think it will make her happy to know I can see the tree, but she starts to cry. There's no place in the world like New York at Christmas, she says. Her voice sounds small and choked.

A fabulously beautiful woman is waiting to use the phone. Her long winter coat looks like cashmere, and her hands are cozily tucked into a white fur muff. She looks Russian, as if she just disembarked from a sleigh. I turn toward the phone box and hunch over the receiver.

"I miss New York," my mom is saying. "Why did I leave?" She seems to be asking me, but I know that she's just thinking out loud. I've heard this before.

"Oh, right. To marry your father." Her voice is small and hard.

I peek out at the waiting lady. A well-dressed man is talking to her, offering her the use of his cell phone. He saw her waiting; he gestures at me in the booth and shivers to indicate how cold it is. This is what happens, it seems, when you are beautiful. The world just provides assistance.

I ask my mom if she's ever thought about volunteering, perhaps, with children or animals? Maybe she would find this fulfilling?

There's a long pause, during which I can hear her sniffing. Then she asks if I can see the skaters. Yes, I say. I can see the skaters.

She blows her nose. She is so proud of me.

I ask about my brother.

He leaves for college next year!

I wonder how it happened that I'm having this conversation at a pay phone in Rockefeller Plaza.

The following week, I attend the Christmas party in the lobby of my apartment building: twelve people standing around with wine in plastic cups and store-bought Christmas cookies. A tree has appeared in the corner, shackled in heavy yellow garland. Next to it a grim plastic reindeer wades through deep drifts of sticky-looking cotton. There's a bad dent above his right eye. A woman in a Christmas sweater greets me. She's responsible for the party and clearly the epicenter of cheer.

"You're in time for the carols," she says, handing me a cup of wine and a clutch of cookies on a red napkin. Just then, a woman begins to sing "O Holy Night." Her voice is beautiful; everyone is taken aback and no one wants to join in. People motion for her to continue alone, and she smiles through the words, tipping her head in a little bow of acknowledgment. Someone near me whispers that she is an opera singer; she's in the chorus at the Met. Others nod in agreement. The fluorescent lights seem to soften, the tree stands taller under its load of garland, and this, I think, is the promise of New York. Here, in this dingy lobby, in this no-man's land above the fashionable section of the Upper West Side, is an angel, a singer of true talent. Her voice, reverberating majestically in the little lobby of this warm, smelly building, reminds me why I came to New York. My eyes fill with tears. I start to snuffle, and have to dump my cookies to blow my nose.

When the song is finished, the singer bows her head and closes her eyes. All around the lobby, people clear their throats and murmur that it is a crime she is just in the chorus, she should be discovered, she should be famous. Their voices grow louder. The singer smiles and nods gracefully.

For Christmas, I give everyone in my family books from the publishing house. Technically I'm supposed to buy these at a 50 percent discount, but no one ever bothers with the paperwork for this. I've read none of them, and wrap quickly.

When I'm home, all the friends and neighbors who have heard that I work in publishing think I'm an editor. Explaining to each of them what a publicist does is tiring. After a few glasses of wine, however, it gets easier. It's a bit like being a cheerleader, I say.

In the spring, I'm promoted to full publicist. I work on a book called *Wistful Moors*, a first novel based on the life of Charlotte Brontë. It's my first big project; rather than the midlist dregs I've been working on,

this is a novel with “breakout potential,” at least, according to the publishing executives at my house. It is a novel with “legs,” they say, meaning it has already received advance praise from several famous writers and a good amount of interest from booksellers around the country.

“Oh, yeah,” says the publicity director in the weekly publicity meeting. “It’s a book that might just get up and walk itself to the best-seller list. What do they think we *do* around here?”

“Hello. You’ve reached the producers of the D— R— show. Please leave a message after the beep. If you are a *publicist* calling about an author interview, please leave a *brief* message. We receive an enormous number of calls from publicists daily, and it is simply impossible for us to respond to all of you. Howeverwedothankyouforyourideas.”  
Beep.

“I’m calling about *Wistful Moors*—”

“This mailbox is full.”

“Hi, I’m a publicist for—”

“Fax the information.”

“I’m just calling to follow up—”

“Which book?”

“*Wistful Moors*. It’s a novel about the life of Charlotte Brontë. Do you know—”

“Fax the information.”

“Can you just tell me if the book has arrived?”

“We get hundreds of books every day. Fax the information.”

On a Sunday night in May, I call home. My voice is hoarse from a week of intense phone pitching for *Wistful Moors*. My mother asks if I’m sick. I laugh wildly for a moment, then clear my throat. “No,” I say, “I’m fine. How are you?”

“Oh, fine, fine,” she says.

I ask if she liked her Mother’s Day present, a book of essays by daughters about their mothers.

“I do. I do. Is it a book you’re working on?” she asks.

It is, when I can get away from *Wistful Moors*. I realize with a start that I forgot a card and sent the book with a press release wrapped around it.



The author of *Wistful Moors* goes on a short reading tour. One night she reads at one of the best independent bookstores in the Midwest, a shop that has been around for decades. That night, around the corner, the popular author of a new legal thriller reads at a brand new Barnes & Noble. There are two hundred people at Barnes & Noble, five at the *Wistful Moors* reading. The next morning, the author calls me in tears.

I take a deep breath and tell her that those five people who heard her last night will tell friends about the book, that she should never underestimate the power of word-of-mouth, that the bookstore where she read is a really good one, that they'll prominently display the book and continue to hand-sell it for weeks, that this is more significant in the long run than the 30 percent discount on the other book at Barnes & Noble, that a lot of good will come out of last night even if it doesn't feel like it.

While I'm speaking, my left eyelid begins to twitch.

Soon afterward, I start collecting essays by authors complaining about their book tours. The form has become, in fact, a new genre—the obligatory just-returned-from-book-tour essay about the trials and tribulations of traveling around the country. Partly these are boastful. After all, the publisher has deemed the author worthy of the expense of a tour. And partly they are self-important—the author prefers, *needs*, to be at home, *writing*. Completing the script are nostalgia for the historical role of the writer, anger at the stupidity of the media, frustration with the youth and inexperience of the average publicist and stories of humiliation at being made to get up at ungodly hours for interviews with hosts who haven't read their books.

At the weekly publicity meeting, I show the department my collection. I ask if they've noted this irony: at first it was only the big authors who were sent on tour, and now it is only the big authors who are allowed to refuse to go. Furthermore, all of them, big and small, like to complain about it. So why are we sending them? I ask. Around the room there are tight-lipped smiles, a few shrugs. Authors are just notoriously difficult, the publicity director says.

A few weeks later, at a major book award ceremony, the fiction winner, an esteemed novelist, uses her acceptance speech to relate stories about all the screw-ups and fiascos of her book tour. The audience, mostly editors and other writers, laughs heartily. I cut a picture of this writer out of a magazine, draw a moustache on it and tape it to my door. The next day, the director calls me into her office. She's worried about me, she says. And she wants to talk about *Wistful Moors*.

It seems the editor of the book is frustrated with the amount of publicity it has received and wants us to try the big league, the TV talk shows. Even though, the publicity director admits, our chances with a first novel of this kind are next to nothing, the effort will get the editor off her back.

I practice my pitch out loud before the first call. To my astonishment, I get through the line of assistants but am brought to a halt by the first producer.

"Why would we be interested in a book by Emily Brontë?"

"Well, she's always been such a perennial favorite, Charlotte Brontë. Emily, too, of course, but this novel is about *Charlotte* Brontë, the author of *Jane Eyre*? The author grew up in Nebraska and from a young age identified with the Brontë sisters. She was moved by the parallels between the English moors and the Great Plains. This is her first novel, and we think it has breakout potential."

"Okay, well, we'll take a look at it."

Knowing this means next to nothing, I press on. "Many women, you know, grow up loving the Brontë books, and now they can read a novel about Charlotte. It's already appealing to women's book groups around the country. Did you know her brother and two sisters died within nine months of each other?"

"The author's?"

"No, Charlotte's. She nursed them all. She withstood so much loneliness and stress—"

"The author?"

"No, Charlotte. But she still managed to be a successful writer. Many of her concerns were very modern."

"Right."

"Do you know if the book has arrived?"

"No."

"No, you don't know, or no—"

"I don't think it's here."

"I'd be happy to send another copy."

"Fine."

When I hang up, I cry, "Medic!" exactly like a wounded soldier on the battlefield, but not loudly enough for anyone to actually hear.

On a hot summer night, the city again smelling of urine, I drink too much with an Irish author in New York on book tour. All publicists, at one time or another, drink too much with an Irish author in New York on book tour. Trying to pay the bill, I'm told that the place doesn't take

credit cards. This confuses me. "But how will we pay?" I ask. Everyone at the table laughs. "Remember cash?" someone says. The Irish author says this is wonderful; he's going to use it in his next book.

I start to see the word "publicity" associated with very negative things. The N.R.A., for example. I read somewhere that publicity has been called "the black art." It is always vaguely responsible for the deaths of movie stars.

The thought that I promote books is some consolation. Books are good. But deep down I'm beginning to feel like a salesman. I rent *Death of a Salesman*, with Dustin Hoffman, and watch it alone over my eighth consecutive dinner of ramen noodles. After the movie, staring at the moonlight on the bricks outside my window, I try to think of all the words that can be spelled with the letters of publicity. I get stuck on *pubic* and fall asleep on the sofa.

Promotional words begin to annoy me, especially: *luminous, stunning, mesmerizing. Colossal, odyssey, tour de force. Ambitious, exhilarating, heartbreaking, breathtaking* (in fact, all words with *heart* or *breath* in them). The worst is when they appear together in press releases and jacket copy. *Luminously mesmerizing*, for example.

I reconsider graduate school, buy study books for the GRE and spend one whole Saturday in the Barnes & Noble at 82nd Street writing away for application materials.

In the meantime, I have to do something besides publicity, so I sign up for a creative writing workshop. Taking the 1/9 to Astor Street after work on Tuesday nights makes me feel edgy, sensitive, hyperaware. A woman sitting across from me on the subway begins to yawn, her fat chin breaking into a constellation of dimples. "Constellation of dimples": I write this down in the notebook I've started keeping in my purse. I'm drinking a lot of coffee. My hands tremble sometimes, but I feel good, strong. I write a story about a mother and a daughter in which the daughter feels enormous guilt and pressure because she is the focus of the mother's life. The class is not enthusiastic. One woman, who has said previously that her mother died when she was ten and who writes stories about young girls enjoying scrumptious food-filled summers in the German Alps, glares fiercely at me across the table. She thinks my story is unrealistic.

I write another about a publicist who one day, after her millionth phone call to a curt producer, decides to become the Unabomber of the media world. Radio and television producers all over the country die, and a great reformation begins in which publicists are the supreme

arbiters of literary taste and style. The class doesn't like this one either. Someone says I use too many adjectives.

The motherless woman continues to scowl at me, even when it isn't my story being read.

At this point, one of three things could happen. Waiting for the graduate school materials to arrive, my irony will slowly fade and I'll start to say things like, "Her style is sort of Willa Cather meets Cormac McCarthy" without cringing. If this happens, I'll go on to be a great publicist, maybe a publicity director someday, or the head of my own agency. I'll meet my two friends running in Central Park one weekend and I'll greet them with *enthusiasm*, suggest coffee, and over steaming cappuccinos use my best conspiratorial whisper to tell them stories about all the famous writers I've worked with. They will ask about my mother, and although she has suffered what the doctors are calling a "nervous breakdown," I'll describe her as a victim of the "empty-nest syndrome." A pitch. Easier to explain.

Alternatively, my eye twitch will worsen, and I'll start to gesture wildly during phone pitches, like a drowning woman clutching at air. At publication parties, I'll forget to talk about the book being feted and the grand media plans I have for it. Instead, I'll share my theories. I'll ask people, for example, if they've noticed that often a writer's entire career can be traced in his or her flap copy. They will shake their heads almost imperceptibly and stare blankly. Do they remember, I'll try again, books from the library when they were little? Books without jackets, without flap copy, just the naked book with its library binding? Silence. I'll grow breathless, overheated. We live in an age of author molds, I'll press on. Don't you see? We force authors through right-shaped holes, just like a child's shape-sorter! People will move slowly away from me.

But it is the third possibility that frightens me the most. I've started dreaming about returning to the blue-and-white room. My parents know nothing about this. When they call, I tell them that I love New York and am doing just fine.



Jessica Francis Kane is from Ann Arbor, Michigan. She worked in publishing in New York and Washington, D.C. for five years. Her work has appeared in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and is forthcoming in *Michigan Quarterly Review*.