

# Robert Gottlieb: the editor who changed American literature

[Michelle Dean](#)

[Joseph Heller](#), the author of [Catch-22](#), once gave an interview where he credited his editor with kicking his work into shape. After the interview ran, Heller got an irritated phone call. The caller was his editor, [Robert Gottlieb](#). Gottlieb told Heller to knock it off. "I felt then, and still do, that readers shouldn't be made aware of editorial interventions," Gottlieb writes in his new memoir, [Avid Reader: A Life](#). "They have a right to feel that what they're reading comes direct from the author to them."

Gottlieb's book is full of stories like that one. He is a very unassuming person, for an alleged legend – a characterization he laughs at to me, saying his daughter pokes fun at him for so often being called it. Yet beginning at Simon & Schuster in the 1950s and 1960s, flourishing at Knopf in the 1970s and 1980s, and with a brief but memorable detour to the [New Yorker](#) (as an editor), Gottlieb's editing pen has touched the manuscripts of most of the important American writers of the 20th century – and several of the British ones, too. He did it, though, as much from behind the scenes as he possibly could. "I've given very few interviews," he told me when I met him at his book-lined townhouse on New York's East Side. He is only giving this one now, he says, because he needs to help the publisher sell his book.

*Avid Reader* is, in some way, a book for book nerds. To the average book reader, after all, the world in which Gottlieb has made his career is mostly invisible. Most people do not pay attention to the publisher's imprint on a given book. Most writers are more egotistical than Heller and do not talk about their editor's contributions to the finished product in interviews. And most editors share Gottlieb's view that what's done in publishing is best kept in publishing. "This is a boring point, but it's a service job," Gottlieb told me.

"You're there to serve."

I point out that one of the purposes Gottlieb has clearly served is the world of letters. Besides Heller, even a short list of people he edited reads like a celebrity roster, if such a thing can be said to exist for the relative unremunerative world of books: Toni Morrison, Mordecai Richler, Edna O'Brien, Ray Bradbury, Cynthia Ozick, Doris Lessing, John Le Carré, Michael Crichton, Robert Caro, Katharine Hepburn and Bill Clinton. [The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich](#), [True Grit](#) and of course Catch-22: all of these are classic books that might never have existed in their present form without his work. Over the years that got his name in the papers quite a bit; it's certainly true that you can't get very far, looking at 20th-century American writing, without coming across his name.

Gottlieb sort of nods at this observation, but continues to insist that for him, celebrating his own achievements was never the point. "For whatever reason, I became a name for a long period of time," he said, waving his hand. "I could have been all over the place, I guess, but what a waste of time."

In person, it's easy to see why Gottlieb is an object of devotion for so many of his writers. He is very soft-spoken, but not shy. When he has an opinion, he is clear about it. Talking, for example, about the slow pace of book editing, a process which sometimes takes months, he calls it a "true crime" that editors often keep writers waiting. "I just find it vile," he said, with real feeling.

The essential quality of an editor, he told me, is sympathy. "You don't take on books with which you do not have a sympathy," he says early in our conversation. "Only trouble can arise if instead of wanting to make a book that you like even better than it is, you want to change it into something that it isn't." The most disastrous thing that can happen in an editing process is for an editor to insist on making the book their own. "For writers, everything is at stake in this relationship," Gottlieb said. "And they've very sensitive to what's going on even if they're not conscious of it."

He tells me he knows one of the great gifts of his life was knowing so many interesting people, and is full of gossipy anecdotes about them, the best of which stud this slim book. He writes about meeting [Nora Ephron](#) over a silly assignment about publishing lunches that she was given as a small freelance journalist. "She came to the office (for the obligatory sandwich), and within minutes I could tell that she was as embarrassed as I was to be having a discussion about this dopey non-subject," he writes. "Within an hour we both knew that we were going to be friends."

Other more formidable acquaintances get no less affectionate treatment. Of his first meeting with [Doris Lessing](#), he writes: "She made no attempt to be charming, and I wouldn't have been foolish enough to try to charm her," he writes. But the two became fast friends. The big hearts and strong work ethics at the hearts of alleged "divas" is a theme of his, one he returns to again in our interview. "As a worker, she is in no way a diva," he insists of [Toni Morrison](#). "I work with many people who are considered extremely difficult and complicated." But he has never had a real problem.

That isn't to say he hasn't had disagreements. As a young editor, he took on [Robert Caro's The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York](#). Caro's storied thoroughness meant that the original manuscript arrived at a length of a million words. (The average non-fiction book is somewhere in the range of 100,000 words.) Gottlieb says it took him a year to cut it down. The long process still resulted in an enormous doorstopper.

Another sort of editor might feel entitled to brag about this achievement. Not Gottlieb. "He feels I am much more important to his work than I feel I am," Gottlieb said of Caro, who he admits he often fights with as they work on a book together.

"He doesn't really need an editor, as much as he likes to think he does, as much as I like to think he does. Because at this point he really knows what he's doing," he added.