

OUT TO LUNCH | NOVEMBER 2011

AN EDITOR AND A GENTLEMAN

Bob Loomis spent 55 years making great authors greater. Just don't tell them he's retired.

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Robert Loomis—not quite the last of a breed, but *close*—met me for lunch at the fabled American Hotel in Sag Harbor, Long Island, where he keeps a house. This gentlemanly book editor of the old school had just retired after an astonishing 55 years at Random House, where his award-winning authors are so loyal to him that Maya Angelou—for one—refuses to accept that he’s done the dirty deed.

Mr. Loomis is 85. Only a couple of years ago he was still piloting his own Cessna.

“A Jack Daniel’s on the rocks, please,” he asked the waiter when we were seated.

“Now we’re talkin’!” said the delighted waiter.

“This is a first,” I said, for no subject of an Out to Lunch had ordered a real drink until now.

“I was brought up in the publishing business when the drinking lunch was every day,” Mr. Loomis explained, in his wry way. “You were none the worse for wear, or maybe a little fuzzy.”

“How’s retirement treating you?”

“It’s kind of like you died and you can hear the funeral orations. I’ve never received such accolades in my life! It’s quite remarkable.”

“Why did you choose to become an editor?”

“Because I couldn’t write well enough! I wrote a lot of fiction, but it was just college stuff. It seems to me you have to be so confident in yourself to become a writer.”

At which he told an amusing tale he’d heard about the indomitable romance novelist Jackie Collins, who said she became a writer because her husband gave her a typewriter. And then she added, “If he’d given me a violin, I’d be performing in Carnegie Hall!”

Mr. Loomis first practiced his editing skills for a magazine at Duke University, where he edited his fellow student William Styron. They remained friends for 60 years. (Styron was best man at both his weddings.) He edited all of Styron's books at Random House, except for the first novel. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* used to read aloud to him chunks from his works in progress, as if auditioning the books.

I reminded him that Styron (who died in 2006) said of Loomis's editing that "he pounces like a cobra, shakes the wretched phrase or sentence into sensibility, and soon all is well."

"He's a good writer, isn't he?" he responded.

Bob Loomis, the son of two schoolteachers, was born in the town of Conneaut, Ohio. "Books guided my life from high school," he recalled, "and the greatest, most interesting, most provocative, funniest, smartest people who ever lived in the last 200 or 300 years wrote those books. I would fall in love with Victor Hugo and read not just *Les Misérables*, but *Bug-Jargal* and *The Toilers of the Sea* and so forth. I was able to associate with great minds through their books. That's the way I look at it."

His love of books led him inevitably into publishing, where he got to share his life with writers. Among them: Shelby Foote, whose three-volume Civil War masterpiece took some 20 years to complete; Maya Angelou, whose 26 books he edited over a span of 42 years; as well as his longtime authors Calvin Trillin, Neil Sheehan, Edmund Morris, and more.

He describes his editing process as a personal relationship based on trust. "I wanted to publish writers for life, the way it used to be. It turned out to be possible. But losing a writer is like losing a close relative. It's very hard."

"Don't all writers at heart want to be loved and cared for and given lots and lots of dough?" I asked.

“Right, but they want to be understood and they want to be heard. Good writers know that you’re just trying to help them do what they want to do.”

“How do you tell an author he’s given birth to a mess?”

He seemed to pale at the thought. “You have to turn your collar around like a priest. You offer a lot of praise, you have confession and you have faith, and pretty soon they might trust you enough to know that you’re not trying to make the book in your own image. It’s their book. But sometimes it doesn’t work.”

“You guys doing all right?” our waiter asked.

“Excellent!” said Mr. Loomis. He had a simple lunch of potato-leek soup followed by grilled cod, all the while nursing his Jack Daniel’s. Though not wishing to sound decrepit, he happily reminisced that he knew the two founders of Random House, Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer—“an unbeatable publishing team” he still reveres for their sense of decency, appetite for fun, and intuitive magic with writers.

Since those more carefree days, the publishing game has undergone seismic changes. They haven’t passed Mr. Loomis by, but he has managed to remain utterly himself. He was the last person at Random House to switch to a computer. It made little difference to him. He told me he could type with only one finger anyway. He has always edited manuscripts with a trusty pencil (medium soft).

Then he said, surprisingly, “My mother once told me that when I was a child I didn’t like my crib moved.”

“And what are we to make of this confessional revelation?”

“That I wanted things to be the same.”

I mentioned later that Ernest Hemingway, beat up by the ravages of depression and his waning creative power toward the end of his life, still scoffed bitterly at the notion of writers’ ever retiring.

“No, they cannot,” he responded. “A writer has no way of saying, ‘O.K., I’ve done it.’”

It isn't a profession that writers feel they can withdraw from honorably. They just can't."

Nor, it turns out, is Robert Loomis quite retiring, either—despite what he calls the funeral orations that have come his way of late. He is still editing a book on the F.B.I. by another of his Pulitzer and National Book Award winners, Tim Weiner. There are the collected letters of his old pal Bill Styron to come. Doubtless, one or two of his other writers will be welcome to disturb the distracting peace.

So, as we parted company, I wished this admirable man the happiest of semi-retirements.

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