

Richard Marek, Editor of Hemingway, Baldwin and Ludlum, Dies at 86

He shepherded more than 300 books into print, including James Baldwin's "If Beale Street Could Talk" and Robert Ludlum's "The Bourne Identity."



By Katharine Q. Seelye

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When Richard Marek was a young editor at Scribner's in Manhattan in the early 1960s, he was entrusted with one of the literary world's most important manuscripts, "A Moveable Feast," Ernest Hemingway's intimate portrait of his life as an unknown writer in Paris in the 1920s.

Hemingway had scrawled his edits in the margins of the manuscript. Mr. Marek planned to go over it at home, and carefully slipped the pages into an envelope before getting on the subway near his Midtown office.

But once he arrived home, on the Upper West Side, he didn't have the envelope. He realized he had left it on the subway.

Panic ensued. He sobbed all night and told himself, "My career is over."

The next morning, he went to the subway's lost and found and saw to his astonishment that someone had turned in the envelope.

And his career was far from over.

Mr. Marek, who died on Sunday at 86 at his home in Westport, Conn. — the cause was esophageal cancer, his wife, Dalma Heyn, said — was one of New York's most prominent editors and publishers.

Over the course of his career he worked at a half-dozen publishing houses and was responsible for shepherding more than 300 books into print.

They included several by James Baldwin, including "If Beale Street Could Talk" (1974), the first nine by Robert Ludlum, including "The Scarlatti Inheritance" (1971) and "The Bourne Identity" (1980), and Thomas Harris's "The Silence of the Lambs" (1988). He also wrote novels of his own.

As an editor, Mr. Marek took risks that were surprising in the conservative world of book publishing. In the late 1970s, when he worked at Dial Press, he was trying to figure out how to market a satirical novel called "The House of God," by Samuel Shem (the pseudonym of Stephen Bergman), with an introduction by John Updike.

The story concerned a group of young doctors battling their way through their residencies, which they found dehumanizing, psychologically damaging and absurdly funny. Mr. Marek thought the story was hilarious, but it had no real plot, and he couldn't come up with a compelling pitch.

Without a good pitch, his sales manager told him, he might as well just give the book away.

That, Mr. Marek thought, was a brilliant idea.

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He soon ordered 10,000 copies printed and had the book jackets marked so that the books couldn't be returned to the publisher. Then he gave them away to booksellers. In exchange, the booksellers agreed to display the book prominently, often in their front windows.

The publishing industry was aghast, but the book was a hit, selling millions of copies and becoming an instant classic for generations of medical students.

One of Mr. Marek's former editorial assistants, Erika Goldman, wrote in a 2017 essay that she had learned about editing in part from reading manuscripts that he had edited while she was making Xerox copies of them.

"This was how I learned what line editing was — and where, why and how much a good editor should intervene in an author's text," wrote Ms. Goldman, who is now publisher and editorial director of Bellevue Literary Press.

“Dick Marek may have had a paperback of a Henry James novel in his raincoat pocket for subway reading,” she said, “but he knew how to edit for plot.”

Mr. Marek in an undated photo. “I loved books and wanted my whole life to be around books,” he said. He also wrote novels.
Pamela Barkentin

Richard William Marek was born on June 14, 1933, in Manhattan and grew up there. His father, George R. Marek, was vice president and general manager of RCA Victor Record Division and a biographer of classical composers. His mother, Muriel (Heppner) Marek, was a homemaker.

He graduated from the private Fieldston school in the Bronx, then attended Haverford College, outside Philadelphia, where he majored in English and once pitched a no-hitter for the Haverford Black Squirrels. He graduated in 1955, and the next year earned his master’s degree in English from Columbia. He married Margot Lynn Ravage in 1954.

He later served in the Army in Japan, where he wrote radio scripts and traveled with his wife around the country. They had two children, Alexander Marek and Elizabeth Marek Litt. His first wife died in 1987. He married Ms. Heyn, an author and psychotherapist, in 1991.

In addition to Ms. Heyn, he is survived by his children and four grandchildren.

Mr. Marek began his publishing career as a junior acquisitions editor at Macmillan and rose to become president and publisher of E.P. Dutton. “I loved books and wanted my whole life to be around books,” he said in a radio interview in 2015 with WritersCast, a podcast on writing.

He also worked at World Publishing, the Putnam Publishing Group and St. Martin’s Press. At Putnam he had his own imprint, Richard Marek Publishers.

After E.P. Dutton became a subsidiary of Viking/Penguin, he moved to Crown as editor-at-large and then became an independent editor. He took up ghostwriting, helping with Trisha Meili’s “I Am the Central Park Jogger” (2003), James Patterson’s “Hide and Seek” (first published in 1986) and Brian Weiss’s “Same Soul, Many Bodies” (2004). He would write in the mornings and edit in the afternoons.

He wrote his own fiction as well. His first novel was “Works of Genius” (1987), the story of a brilliant but egomaniacal novelist, told from the perspective of his mild-mannered literary agent. Mr. Marek was the president of E.P. Dutton at the time, and the novel provided insights into the world of publishing.

Howard Frank Mosher, reviewing the book in The New York Times, said it “exploded many of the silliest clichés about the fascinating process of getting books into print.”

With Ms. Heyn, Mr. Marek wrote “How to Fall in Love” (2019), a novel that explores the question of whether great, transcendent love affairs can still occur in the age of online dating. They concluded that they can.