

Literary agent, editor, and much more, Jill Kneerim dies at 83

She believed in the power of stories ‘to change the world’

By **Bryan Marquard** Globe Staff, Updated April 30, 2022, 5:38 p.m.



Those who worked with Jill Kneerim would say, “This is the best editor I’ve ever worked with, the best friend I’ve ever had,” said literary agent Ike Williams, cofounder with Ms. Kneerim of the Kneerim & Williams Agency. RICHARD HOWARD

To her writers who hoped to reach an expansive audience, literary agent Jill Kneerim offered advice that was simple to grasp and difficult to achieve.

“When you write for a general reader, the general reader is there for only one reason,” she said during a 2019 [panel discussion](#). “That is because you are fascinating and irresistible, and the minute you are not fascinating and irresistible to your Great-Aunt Gertrude and your great-nephew Tom, they’ll leave. End of your book.”

Under Ms. Kneerim’s guidance, writers held the attention of Gertrude, Tom, and thousands of other readers around the world. Books she edited and sold for publication were awarded Pulitzer Prizes, became best-sellers, or brought recognition to authors whose work had been unjustly unnoticed.

[A cofounder](#) of the Kneerim & Williams agency in Boston, she brought brilliance and enthusiasm to writing, editing, and publishing for more than six decades before dying of bladder cancer [April 22](#) while in hospice care in Lincoln. She was 83 and had lived in Brookline for many years.

“She was such an intellectual powerhouse,” said [Matthew Desmond](#), whose book “Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City” was awarded the Pulitzer for general nonfiction [in 2017](#).

He credited Ms. Kneerim’s strong editing and encouragement with helping him turn an academic dissertation into an award-winning book. She filled a similar role and more in the lives of other authors.

“She shaped and defined our literary world, broadly speaking,” said [Caroline Elkins](#), whose “Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya” was awarded the general nonfiction Pulitzer [in 2006](#).

“She brought many of us to heights that we never imagined on the national and international stage,” said Elkins, a Harvard professor who said Ms. Kneerim was more than just a superb editor and agent on “Imperial Reckoning” and her book “Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire,” which was published in March.

Ms. Kneerim “was my confidante for everything,” Elkins said. “She made me see things in myself that I never thought possible. She was brilliant, steely — gave me a kick in the pants when I needed it and a hug when I needed it. Her loss is extraordinary.”

For some writers, working with Ms. Kneerim to get their books ready to pitch to publishers was a years-long process, efforts she welcomed.

Writers “have been my heroes all my life,” she said in an interview about a dozen years ago. “There is no one more exciting or important than a writer. I love being mixed up with writers and making a difference.”

“She believed in ideas and the power of stories in particular to change the world,” said Desmond, a Princeton University professor.

Ms. Kneerim shepherded Stephen Greenblatt’s “The Swerve: How the World Became Modern,” which was awarded general nonfiction Pulitzer [in 2012](#).

Other books she guided include “How Democracies Die” (2018), by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, which The New York Times hailed as “a lucid and essential guide” to what could happen to this country in the era of former president Donald Trump.

Ms. Kneerim also represented writers such as former US poet laureate Robert Pinsky and the best-selling authors Brad Meltzer and [Sue Miller](#).

“She was kind of a wonder,” said Miller. “She was a very thoughtful person, but also was very joyous — she welcomed you with laughter and open arms. She was an incredible enthusiast for the work of the people she represented and cared about.”

Born in New York City on Feb. 1, 1939, Jill Kneerim was 8 when her mother, Margaret Whittlesey Kneerim, died of cancer.

For a Brooklyn Friends School [alumni profile](#), Ms. Kneerim said her mother had started and run a film library at New York University.

Her father, [Arthur Kneerim](#), worked in advertising for Metropolitan Life, and her early life included several moves before they returned to New York City and Brooklyn Heights.

“I lived an oddball bachelor life with my marvelous, funny, sophisticated father,” she said for the alumni interview. “At age 12 I could mix a perfect martini. Not for myself!”

When she was 13, her father placed her on a passenger ship (wearing “patent-leather shoes and white pique hat,” she later recalled) to voyage by herself to Europe, where she spent a year studying at a Swiss school.

Attending Radcliffe College was like “entering a vast city of sophisticated women,” she told the Harvard Crimson newspaper [in 1985](#).

Graduating in 1960 with a bachelor’s degree in Middle Eastern history, she returned to New York and soon was hired by the Simon & Schuster publishing house.

Her boss, Richard Grossman, became her first husband. After two years they left “to found our own publishing house — Grossman Publishers, named for him,” she wrote

for the 25th anniversary report of her Harvard and Radcliffe class.

Among their early publishing successes was “Unsafe at Any Speed,” Ralph Nader’s groundbreaking work of consumer protection writing.

Her marriage to Grossman ended in divorce, but they remained friends and she eventually became his literary agent.

Shaken by the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., she left publishing to work as a writer and editor for nonprofit agencies and prepare reports for the United Nations.

One evening in the late 1970s, she and inventor Bill Bell exited taxis at the same time in front of the Russian Tea Room in Manhattan.

“I fell in love with a vagabond inventor,” she later wrote.

“I represented something out of the ordinary to her,” he recalled in an interview.

They married in 1982 and eventually settled in Brookline.

At a dinner party, she reconnected with Ike Williams, a lawyer and literary agent she had known since college days — she at Radcliffe, he at Harvard. In 1990, they founded Kneerim & Williams.

“It had never occurred to her that she would be a literary agent, and it turned out to be a perfect thing for her,” Williams said. “She was an unbelievable editor, and then she had this incredible energy in selling the books.”

Those who worked with her invariably ended up saying “this is the best editor I’ve ever

worked with, the best friend I've ever had," Williams said.

"She was practically a magician — an unbelievable touch with clients and a super, almost frighteningly clear editorial mind. She really, really prized clarity and compassion," said Lucy Cleland, an agent at the firm whom Ms. Kneerim hired as an assistant and mentored into larger roles.

Ms. Kneerim, whose own literary efforts included writing the book "Revelations of New England Architecture" (1974), was as enthusiastic about her own life as she was about her writers and book projects.

Seven years ago, she began a class report entry: "What a life so far!"

A memorial gathering will be announced for Ms. Kneerim, who in addition to her husband leaves her half-brother, Will of Amsterdam; a stepson, David Bell of Harwich; and two stepdaughters, Wendy Guerrera of Sharon, Conn., and Darcy Symes of Bluffton, S.C.

Will, who is 26 years younger, said his sister "was always connecting people out of joy, helping them learn from each other and feel part of one big family."

"I'm addicted to occasions where intense feelings take you into the great beyond," she told Will about six weeks ago for a book they were preparing about her life. "What an utter privilege it is to play this part. That's why I love my profession too; I work for people when they're at their most invested emotional moment. They love their work, and I'm right there with them."

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