



ON THE JOYS OF EDITING

BY GERRY CANAVAN

Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in.

After four laborious years on the Randolph High School student newspaper, slaving away as news editor under the cruel tutelage of legendary advisor/dictator Mr. Haas—raging against PageMaker’s limitations, ducking administrative interference, and steeling ourselves against the inevitable crashes of our ancient computers—I’d resolved to stay away from editing. Reading, sure. Writing, if they’ll have me. But editing? No thanks. You can keep it.

I stuck pretty closely by this decision while attending Case. I joined *The Observer* as an opinion columnist after my freshman year, which allowed me the luxury of seeing my work in print without the hassle of having to do anything else. After a single click of the send button on my email program, my work was done. This nice lack of responsibility left me free to focus on amusing internecine feuds with the other columnists and my quixotic (but ultimately vindicated) struggle to drop “Western Reserve University” from the school’s name.

It was only after leaving Cleveland, while in graduate school, that things went wrong. Like any addict, I backslid. I volunteered as a reader on *The Greensboro Review* to help them navigate their endless slush pile, and in short order I was back to proofreading, reading and rereading and re-rereading their stories in search of the slightest typographical errors. The next summer, I made ends meet by copyediting for a local alternative newspaper.

Then I hit rock bottom. I started my own literary journal.

As a magazine editor, I feel fully qualified to remark that magazine editors are the most overworked and least appreciated workers in the world. (You don’t have to take my word for it. Just ask the editors of *Case Magazine*.) A good editor—even in the largest organizations, but particularly in a small-staff endeavor—is equal parts contracts lawyer, accountant, computer technician, Web designer, libel expert, fundraiser, distributor, promoter, archivist, reader, writer, and dictionary. If all goes smoothly, expect no credit. If anything goes wrong,

expect full blame. Behind every great publication, there’s an editor who just dodged a bullet.

So why do we do it? I suppose it’s as simple as this: we love words. We want to midwife language on its way into the world. If you’ve ever discovered a half-invisible homophone error on your fifth squint-eyed read-through of a manuscript, or fixed the spacing on an ever-so-slightly misaligned page, you know exactly what I’m talking about—and if you’ve never known these peculiar joys, there’s absolutely nothing I can do to explain it to you.

We definitely aren’t in it for the money, I can tell you that much.

In the year since *Backwards City Review* began, the five founding editors have felt both exhilarating editing highs and excruciating editing lows. We’ve put together two well-received issues with fantastic prose, poetry, and comics from very talented and incredibly generous writers who let us have their work for free (multiple highs). On the other hand, we let an errant forward-slash slip past the goalie and into the contributors’ notes of the second issue (low). Despite a subscriber base that’s grown faster than our wildest imaginings and a few very generous patrons, we’re still shelling out quite a bit of our own money for this cockamamie idea (low). Then again, we received a letter from my literary hero, Kurt Vonnegut, and published one of his pieces in our first issue (huge high). We were even named one of *Library Journal*’s top-ten new magazines of 2004 (high).

But some of the most satisfying moments have been the little things: simply being back in the PageMaker saddle, devoting late nights to proofreading, helping to build something fresh and exciting, and being proud when it finds readers. It’s been great fun. Just don’t tell that to Mr. Haas. ☒

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ILLUSTRATION BY CATHIE BLECK