EDITING LITTLE MAGAZINES: A HOW-NOT-TO VIEW

Let me say for the sake of clarification that most editors do *not* found a little magazine hoping that it will *remain* little. But from the past ten years of my writing for, editing, and reviewing little magazines, I can say that it seems apparent that some editors *cause* their magazines to remain little. I have garnered the majority of my tips in this article from observing these editors of *littledom.* The piece should be equally informative for the curious little-magazine reader and writer, as well as for those editors who would like their magazines to eventually break out of the realm of littleness into the realm of the full-blown Journal. These latter editors, however, will have to read the article in the negative.

The first way to stunt the growth of a litmag is not to have a handle on the English language. I almost feel ashamed having to say this, having been an "editor" in a field where people appoint themselves editors before learning to write. To me it's as absurd as someone wishing to be a conductor before learning how to read music. And no doubt to some who read this, making the point at all will come as a shock: must one really give such elementary advice?

The unfortunate reply will soon be understood by anyone who takes a bit of time to flip through any edition of *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses* or the *Directory of Poetry Publishers,* both published by Dustbooks. Together, perhaps singly, these books contain the largest listing of little magazines, those here to stay and those gone tomorrow, to be found anywhere. The editors have made the wise if Darwinistic decision to give the magazines listed the opportunity to communicate their needs or editorial proclivities in a few sentences. Editors' comments, copied verbatim by the typists at Dustbooks, are put in quotation marks, so there is no mistaking the concrete informational part of each listing with each editor's opportunity to expatiate. All too often, the opportunities turn into exercises of grammatical foot-in-mouth. The truly amazing part is the quickness with which some of these editors are able to get the foot up and in.

One editor, for example, writes "We have occasionally run contests, and will if requested, put inquiries on our mailing list so that they will be notified if we run another contest" (*Poetry Publishers* 84).

Since the closest antecedent here to the pronoun "they" is "inquiries," one can at least assume that those inquiries will appreciate being notified, although the authors of those inquiries may very well be left in ignorance.

I once read a grammar book that explained punctuation in terms of "breathing": a comma was a halfbreath, a semi-colon three-quarters of a breath, a period a whole breath, and so on. I somehow feel a "hiccup" method would be appropriate to describe the punctuation in the sentence above. But either method is finally hit-or-miss at best: breathing and hiccupping, like so many bodily functions, are inexorably idiosyncratic. We may all breath or hiccup at different places in a sentence. Perhaps if someone invents breath or hiccup regulators it may work. But until then, it's back to learning about dependent and independent clauses, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. *They* stay put.

Another editor writes, "[This] *is the magazine That Makes Trendy People Grit Their Teeth,* each issue is filled to the brim with *raspy ruckus from the very bottom backsides of our minds*" (*International Directory* 49). And yet another writes, "Satire is terrific, everything will work as long as the author speaks from within" (*Poetry Publishers* 78). Now I wouldn't pick on the energy or flamboyance of the first quotation, or the phrasing of the second. But anyone who has taught writing knows that commas are the unsure writer's panacea. If unsure, use a comma. Like any panacea, it works sometimes, and sometimes it doesn't. In writing, the problem is that when it doesn't work, the game is over: everyone else learns that the unsure writer doesn't really know the rules and that the previous good guesses were *just* guesses. Unsure writers are often revealed, as in the examples above, when they perpetrate that common freshman error known as the "comma splice."

I admit, when it comes to grammar and punctuation, there are lots of unsure writers, maybe even a few very good unsure writers (although at the moment I can't think of any). But generally when a good writer breaks grammatical rules, she does so to create an effort or to make a statement - a desired, intended effect or statement. Part of an editor's responsibility is to know when a rule is being broken and whether it's achieving its intended effect. Of course, editors who don't know the rules to begin with are doubly disadvantaged: they will miss both the fact of rules having been broken and, perhaps, the intended effect. They will most likely end up printing works that for no good reason, break rules of which they themselves are ignorant. Such journals will be read by knowledgeable potential buyers (librarians, collectors, general readers) and deemed to be poorly edited; the journal will remain "little" and eventually fizzle out altogether. So if be*littling* a little magazine is the desired effect, do not study grammar. Or, if you already know it, pretend you don't.

Another way to keep down circulation is to publish yourself - or to publish friends, merely because they are friends, or other editors because they have published your work, or because you wish them to. You may also publish contributing editors, patrons, or anyone associated with the production or decision-making of the magazine. Such practices are almost always seen by potential contributors and subscribers as indication of lack of objectivity in selecting materials or a proclivity to publish material only after other, non-literary, criteria have been met. The perception of the magazine's quality will immediately be called into question, and possible contributors will assume that, if editors or editor's friends appear, there is that much less room for legitimate work of "outsiders."

And, if an objective reviewer gets hold of such a magazine, you can be sure the practice will be brought to light. One recent reviewer, after noting that the editor himself, as well as some members of the editorial advisory board had appeared in the magazine under consideration, noted astutely that "The editorial hand here is a) lacking, b) hidden, or c) intentionally hidden. One tries not to be suspicious, but some names on the masthead do appear in the table of contents, and one of the masthead personages does author the 'Comment' essay touting another of those masthead names" (Lee Schultz, *Literary Magazine Review* 6.1. [1987]: 33). Who, after such a disclosure, would want to submit to such a magazine, much less subscribe to it? The only exception to this rule could arise when the editor, before undertaking the editing of the magazine, is herself well-known.

The next three suggestions could go under the category of Technical Operations, but I am sure there will be many nodding heads among writers who have never thought of editing a magazine.

New literary journals, no matter how well-advertised before their inaugural issue (and I speak now from my own experience as well as my knowledge of other editors' experiences), do not receive nearly the number of submissions as established little magazines. A new editor *must* have some time to begin with.

Let me put it another way: one of the few advantages a new magazine that wishes to pick up circulation has over the established journal is the *opportunity* to attract submissions from authors who are pleased by a quick turn-around time. And there is *no* writer who enjoys waiting several months for word on whether a manuscript has been accepted or rejected. I am not the first to say that writers live through the mailbox: it's the mode of distribution of hard work . . . and of reward and defeat. One of the praises I have received most often as an editor (with a reporting time of two to three days, mail handled nightly) is "I appreciate your quick reporting time." With many journals taking from three to six months, it's no wonder.

Something else authors are extremely appreciative of is a *personal,* i.e., handwritten response to their submissions. New editors who would like their little magazines to live down to the epithet of "little" should by all means avoid the personal response. The personal response, no matter how brief, no matter how perfunctory (e.g., "Sorry, but can't use. Try

again"), will always be better received than the form letter rejection *or* acceptance. And authors who receive such a response will be more likely to submit again, as well as to subscribe, to such a magazine.

Also, if the desire is to smother the newborn little magazine, never solicit work from wellknown authors - or if you do, be sure that the magazine contains *only* the work of wellknown authors. Libraries generally don't consider subscribing to little magazines that have been in existence less than three years, so if your magazine contains *only* big-name writers it will die quickly enough from lack of support from small-name or no-name writers. For, in truth, the small- or no-name writer will support the magazine in the beginning, but only if she sees a realistic chance of one day becoming a contributor. Ezra Pound wrote to Robert Creeley a sly remark to this effect, saying, "let...roughly half (of the magazine)... be as various and hogwild as possible, 'so that any idiot thinks he has a chance of getting in'" (*Was That a Real Poem* 18). Ezra had a rough way of putting things - and the attitude is not commendable - but the substance of the remark is sound.

If well-known authors are included, contributors are likely to be excited with the prospect of appearing in such a journal. They may thus continue to follow the journal, and perhaps lend their financial support. And later, when libraries find reviews of the magazine (and such reviews invariably mention first the big-name writers - indeed it is often the well-known authors that get the magazine reviewed at all), they will be more likely to subscribe than if the magazine contains only unknown authors. So a beginning editor who wishes to asphyxiate a little magazine should adopt one of the extreme editorial acceptance policies: either all names or all no-names.

My final comment has to do with a little magazine's *appearance.* Ah yes, that evermonetary but most important editorial consideration - how will the magazine look? I have reviewed well over a hundred little magazines over the past four years, and I have looked through several times that number. I have seen magazines sloppily typewritten, replete with typos and spelling errors, neatly typewritten, half-typewritten and half typeset, completely typeset, trimmed and untrimmed, with two-color, three-color, four-color, no-color covers, that have been xeroxed, mimeographed, offset, letterpressed, stapled, perfectbound, thesisbound, strung. And I have always commented on the magazines' appearance in my reviews, much to the chagrin of those editors who produce sloppy-looking magazines and, I imagine, much to the delight of those editors who produce neat ones, whether typeset or typewritten.

Writers, I would venture to say, are only a little less concerned with *how* their works would appear in a journal than they are with *how many* readers the works will appear before. Some of this concern among writers has unfortunately as much to do with the establishing of a presentable portfolio as with anything else. But it is almost invariably the case that circulation is yoked to a magazine's appearance: the better the magazine's circulation, and hence the better its income, the better it generally looks.

Which brings me to my final point, one that, from this end, cannot become too specific but must remain a guiding precept of the new editor: if a little magazine *is* to remain little, no attention should be given to improving its appearance from issue to issue, as finances and contributions allow. Do not, if the magazine is to be typewritten, attempt to be as neat and diverse as the typewriter will allow; do not trim the edges of the magazine (which, if the magazine is forty pages or fewer, could be done easily enough with a standard paper cutter, often available in one's public library); do not invest in better equipment (and the choices today are many, computers are now being used with acceptable results), do not, in essence, invest all initial capital above expenses in improving the magazine's appearance. For next to names, it is appearance that will get the magazine reviewed; it is appearance that will keep the good contributors coming back; it is appearance that will be a major factor in attracting

revenue, and that would mean one would have to continue the little magazine, perhaps allowing it to get *bigger.*

So I offer these suggestions to editors who evince editorial languidity and seem thereby to suggest that they would more happily be out of the business of little magazines than in it. Ending such an enterprise once begun, though, is for unexplainable reasons not so easy. I am confident, however, that the guidelines here will hasten the extinction of a few little magazines by reducing their subscribers to an unviable number. I am likewise sure that writers reading this will applaud my suggestions. After all, it may make authors' decisions on where to send material less bewildering and time-consuming.

But as we listened to this, somewhere outside terrible things were no doubt occurring, things of which we should all be informed. Perhaps someone should now awaken that reporter from *The Post.*

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