

Steve Glines

A Literary Editor's Complaint

Poets and writers hate us. We reject with careless abandon works that an author has struggled with for years, perhaps decades, yet never measure up to our standards. Yes, perhaps it's just a matter of taste, but that's what we do. If we accept a work but find an obvious misspelling, grammatical, thematic error or missed stanza break, we will fix it regardless of the author's feelings. Accept the change, explain why it should not be changed or have the piece rejected. We are a cruel lot. Publishing misspellings or other obvious flaws reflects on us far more than the author whose feelings and sensibilities have been injured. An author's name in a journal is a fleeting thing at best, but the editor's name is on the masthead for all time. An error in Joe Writer's article won't be remembered, but the journal and the editor will. Think of the errors you've seen in, say, the New York Times. It's the New York Times you remember not the journalist whose error was not corrected by the editors. We guard our reputations jealously.

The truth is that most people who submit works to literary journals can't write a passable story or poem. Inexperienced writers (and most of the rest of us too) see what they think they wrote not what they actually wrote. Fixing broken word-streams is the job of an editor. I've read stories that, with more than a little effort, could be masterpieces, but I don't have the time and many authors are immune from advice. As far as my own writing is concerned, I've never met an editor I didn't like. Every editor I've worked with has improved my writing.

The better the literary journal, the more junk they get. One literary editor I know received over 18,000 fiction submissions for just 16 slots a year, and that's not *the Paris Review* which became so overwhelmed that they threw away a multi-year backlog of hundreds of thousands of unsolicited manuscripts. There is only so much unpaid interns can do.

Finally, we've read your story/poem/manifesto and like it, and, in spite of its flaws, we've accepted it. We've sent you an acceptance letter, and your manuscript moves on to the Managing Editor whose job is to put the publication together. One problem: you didn't put your name on the manuscript so the production people don't have a clue who wrote this now anonymous masterpiece. At this point your work becomes a piece of trash to be thrown in the dumpster or, if you are lucky because the Managing Editor really likes your work too, it gets sent back to the Editor who now must dig through hundreds or thousands of submissions to discover who the secret author is. Needless to say this does not ingratiate the no longer anonymous author with the Editor.

At last the manuscript reaches the Art Director whose job, together with the Managing Editor, is to get the book out the door on a very rigid schedule. Your manuscript has another problem that may get it tossed into the trash ... again. You, the unprofessional author, couldn't decide what constitutes a new paragraph (multiple carriage returns, tabs, spaces and or all of the above) so your masterpiece is now subject to loud cursing and

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ranting from the art department and gets pushed to the back of the production line and, heaven forbid, back to the Editor. We hate that. Primary rule of thumb, don't make extra work for us. If we reject you, be gracious and move on. It's not personal ... unless you've ... well, see above.

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