

The X Files

CONFESSIONS OF A CRANKY LIT-MAG EDITOR

Disclaimer: What follows is not offered as prescription; it is not meant to be objective, or reliable; it may not even be entirely sane. It claims only the authority of its prejudices. In other words, the author is a crank.

BUT I am a crank of a special order. I am the cranky coeditor of a literary journal, and my cranky judgments may determine whether something you write gets published. Or not.

I write this on the 3:20 P.M. local as it rolls out of Grand Central Terminal, bound for Harlem, the Bronx, and various other points north along the Hudson River—which, when they lived in the area, the Mahican Indians called The Muhheakunnuk, or “The River That Cannot Make Up Its Mind,” because its conflicting tides make it flow both ways.

On the baize seat beside me sits a pile of submissions for *Alimentum* freshly yanked from P.O. Box 776, New York, New York: twenty-eight poems, stories, and essays in white and golden envelopes—and that’s less than a week’s worth. By the time the train arrives at my stop (Spuyten Duyvil, which, depending on who you ask, is Dutch for “Spouting Devil,” “Spitting Devil,” or “Spite the Devil”), I’ll have rejected all but three or four.

For, unlike the Muhheakunnuk, when it comes to rendering verdicts on submissions, I have no trouble making up *my* mind. No competing tides conflict this cranky editor’s soul. On the contrary, I am gratefully swept forward by the gravitational broom of an impeccable style, perfectly willing to be sucked into a poet’s imagery by the undertow of her perfectly pitched voice, ready and willing to be bowled over by the breaking wave of a sublime sentence.

Then again, the same words that sweep me forward, and into and under, may also set me drifting off into a bay of boredom. A droopy sentence, a shaky simile, an artificial sentiment, or, worse, a flaming cliché—any one of these is enough to set my concentration adrift, until I find myself no longer immersed in the story, essay, or poem, but skimming its brackish, scummy surface.

What’s gone wrong? In a word: style. The writer may or may not have something worth saying. I don’t know; I can’t tell: I can’t read the thing. Which brings me to my first

Murray to place

PETER SELGIN has published dozens of stories and essays in literary magazines. His short fiction manuscript, “nothing but water,” was short-listed for the Iowa Fiction Award, and “Life Goes to the Movies” was a finalist for this year’s James Jones First Novel Fellowship. He reads for several literary journals and is coeditor of the magazine *Alimentum: The Literature of Food* (www.alimentumjournal.com). He teaches fiction writing at Gotham Writers Workshop.

confession: *I am a style snob*. If a submission isn't well written—if the language isn't such that I might conceivably want to read it through a second time for the sheer pleasure of reencountering the same words in the same order, then, as far as I'm concerned, it isn't worth reading *once*.

Let me give you an example. It happens that in the first (golden) envelope, which I have just opened, there is a story, and that story begins (more or less, since, however cranky, I am neither mean nor unscrupulous enough to quote the author's exact words) with: "He stood at the open doorway wearing his pajamas, frosty air nipping at his toes." As I read the opening, a similar chill passes through me, and I brace myself for the next frigid gust. Why? Notwithstanding that "open doorway," the sentence is more or less grammatical; its meaning is clear. An innocent sentence. Which may be why it leaves me cold: It's *too* innocent; it draws no blood or heat and has no weight or thrust. Unlike "They threw me off the hay truck about noon" or "None of them knew the color of the sky," it augurs nothing: a tip with no iceberg. Furthermore, thanks to its rudimentary positioning in the sentence (buried in its soft center), that "wearing his pajamas," which might have carried some weight, feels inconsequential, while the frost "nipping at his toes" downloads into my brain an unintended sound file of Nat King Cole's warbled vibrato.

Were this not the author's first sentence, and hence presumably his best foot forward, I wouldn't be so hard on it. But it is, and with my expectations for his second-best foot reduced accordingly, I read on with a frosty heart. When, less than three pages later, that organ has iced over completely, I tuck the story, along with its cover letter and SASE, back whence it came, get out my calligraphic Shaeffer fountain pen, and carve a large, unambiguous X onto the envelope.

Sounds cruel, you say. Sadistic, even. Try to understand. Despite being a brand-new journal, already *Alimentum* is averaging over three hundred submis-

sions a month. That's seventy-five a week, or roughly ten a day: two hours' work, potentially. That's on top of all the other unpaid responsibilities that come with running a literary magazine—filling out orders, doing mailings, planning events and promotions—not to mention the thousand-and-one other details that rear their prickly heads in the midst of our (sleeplessly) designing, assembling, and proofreading an issue. And that's on top of whatever else we do to *make a living*. All of which is to say that, like our brethren at the big publishing houses, we editors at little magazines are a harried lot. We can't afford to read every syllable of the submissions we get. Or else we do so to the detriment of some other part of the process—like fine-tuning those stories that we *do* accept.

So, I've confessed: I don't read every word of every submission. Confession Number Two: *Sometimes I don't even make it past the first page*. Why should I, if that first page isn't any good? Even if the work does redeem itself three pages later, why accept a broken-winged bird when, heaven knows, there are plenty of soaring masterpieces out there?

Hence, weak work gets read very quickly. Someone I know once described an editor's job in two words: rejecting things. Any writer who's been out there and has a filing cabinet stuffed with rejection slips to prove it can vouch

for the accuracy of that description. The reason is simple enough. There are a lot of good writers out there, and many more not-so-good ones. And too little space even for the best of the best.

Still, I'm continually amazed by how many superb stories, essays, and poems—works by unknown writers, but also by established ones—somehow manage to evade publication until, by dumb luck or God's good grace, they end up in our submission pile. To most of us writers, getting published feels like a little miracle. To the editor of a small literary journal, the miracle consists of being the one among hundreds who gets to say "yes" to something good.

BUT to get to that "yes," we first have to tunnel our way through a mountain of "no's." And so I make an end-run through the pile on the seat, branding envelopes with my swift executioner's X. And here's my third confession: *It doesn't break my heart. In fact, rejecting things is sort of fun.* Don't get me wrong. I don't wring my hands and snicker like a Grand Guignol villain at the prospect of sending fellow scribblers' efforts to their self-addressed-stamped doom; I'm not that heartless. Every so often I even feel a dint of pity for the ink-stained wretches who've wasted their time (and mine) with work that is by no means

ready for publication—work that is amateurish, or pretentious, or (often the case) both. Why, I ask myself, shaking my head, restuffing the envelope, slashing another X—why do they *bother*?

And yet...though I admit to being a sucker for style, this hasn't stopped me from spotting a diamond or two in the rough. However old they may be biologically, professionally, some authors are very young, and they're entitled to some callowness. We've published stories by people who had never before seen their words in print (at least one of whom turned out to be sixteen). We've signed on works that arrived single-spaced, with typos scratched out and handwritten cover letters on flowery stationery (and with no SASE).

But these authors had something to say, and their writing was, if not polished or even all that competent, fearlessly sincere. Yet, professional callowness is hardly an excuse for the writer in the next envelope, who, after letting it be known in her cover letter that she's had three stories published in the *New Yorker*, blunders into her essay with "Growing up, there were two types of food in my family." That may be so—that is, the two types of food may indeed have been growing up. But to me it reads like either very sloppy editing or the syntactical equivalent of tone deafness. In any case, I'm deeply discour-

aged, and find my eyes already starting to bump and skim over the next sentence like the wheels of a 747 during takeoff. Several clunkers later, I am no longer reading for story so much as for the next glaring error. If nothing bad happens for a whole page or two, this writer may yet win me back to her good graces. But no: I stumble upon more blunders and, my concentration having lifted up, up, and away into the dreamy atmosphere of the 3:20 Hudson Line local, I bail.

Back into the envelope goes the work of Madame X, and I pick up the next contender. It may be an essay, a poem, a story—it makes no difference. Language is language, and it never ceases to impress me how very often poets are as guilty of using it as sloppily as their humble prose-writing cousins. When I read a poem and find myself mentally cutting every other word, vacuuming rhetorical sawdust, pulling out cotton batting, putty, steel wool, and other types of filler, that's it for the poem. In a work of prose I can live with some flab, that extra word or phrase meant to lend conversational flow to a narrative. And even with poetry, sometimes the voice has to loosen its belt. But, while a story or essay can survive a less-than-unimpeachable style, a poem made of flabby language doesn't live up to its name, not for me. And so X marks the spot.

Next: a forty-five-page story, with prologue. At that length, the prose had better be as good as Proust's. It's not. *X*.

Next: a third-person account of a gourmet bike trip in France that turns into a love story. All is well until I read, "Everything was magic: their touch, their kisses, their words. His green eyes shined twin beams of light and there was magic in the air between them." Clichés are like those little crosses you see at the side of highways: They mark a place where a genuine feeling or insight has met its end. Martin Amis calls all good writing a war against cliché. You could say the same for good editing. *X*.

Yes, it's a war, all right, with twenty-thousand paper Napoleons going mano a mano for the same few hallowed inches of paper, and for every Austerlitz a hundred Waterloos.

Having left 125th Street behind, the train galumphs its way over the lentil-brown waters of the Harlem River, into the warehouse and truck-lot district of the Bronx. While the Bronx is beautiful where I live, this is more like the part that inspired Ogden Nash to write, "The Bronx? No Thonx!" I can see Yankee Stadium in the distance. Next stop: Morris Heights. So far I have read (scanned? perused? gathered in the essence of?) twelve submissions and slashed as many *Xs*. Sixteen more to go.

Although it may seem so, I'm not the enemy in this war; I'm just a medic at one of countless MASH units sprinkled along the front, exercising triage, putting what seems to me hopeless cases out of their misery, while saving bandages, blankets, and beds for those in good enough shape to benefit from them.

ALL editors have their pet peeves. I know one editor who won't publish coming-of-age tales no matter how well written, and another who publishes only first-person stories, and a third who thinks that poems should never rhyme. I don't happen to share any of these particular views, but I'm not exactly peeve-free. For the record (and since this *is* a

confession), here are some of mine:

Let's talk about envelopes. Holiday and pastel colors may cheer certain souls, but in me they tend to call forth the sober puritan. I don't want to be charmed by your envelope, only by what's inside. And although it's said that good things come in small packages, a twenty-six-page story stuffed to bursting into a No. 10 business envelope doesn't (for me) promise anything good, while it does give new meaning to the word *tightwad*.

Presentation matters. I know we editors should be above such material, superficial concerns. We're not. At least, I'm not. I prefer a neat, businesslike approach, something to assure me that, though the heart of a savage beats swiftly on the poetic page, the person who slid said page into its envelope is orderly, hygienic, and deeply concerned with my comfort and well-being. Thus, she will not blind me with a story printed in ten- or eleven-point type. Another confession: *I hate ugly fonts.* What do I mean by *ugly*? I mean a font that's hard to read, meaning any sans-serif font or fonts designed by ex-art room Goths while dosed up on their favorite recreational drug. Want to play it safe? Times Roman is your pal. Otherwise, choose Garamond, Baskerville, Janson, Caslon—any of the classic text fonts or their derivatives, as glorified on the pages of your favorite Knopf novel.

Another tip for getting your work read *really quickly*: Print on both sides of the pages. I just love how, as I read, a palimpsest of the page before or after asserts itself through the thin scrim of the present narrative, imbuing it with a perpetual, subliminal flashback or flash-forward—lending fresh meaning to the word "backstory."

UNIVERSITY Heights. So far, I've rejected nineteen stories; of the twenty-one I've opened, only two have escaped the double slash of my Shaeffer. I tear open the next envelope.

You'll notice I've hardly said a word about cover letters. That's because I don't read them, or I try not to read them until

after the fact (though, sometimes—as with the *New Yorker* author mentioned above—a publishing credit will leap out, to be caught by my fleeting eye). As a matter of courtesy, I think a cover letter should always accompany a submission; yet, for me, they are simply a means of verifying certain suspicions. It's no surprise to learn that someone whose submission is strong has racked up a dozen credits with good publications. Nor am I shocked (shocked!) to discover that someone whose work is green has yet to be published.

On the other hand, there are occasional upsets, as when the same person who pens sentences like, "Never in a long time have I been so moved," tells me in her letter that she has had three novels published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (rest assured, I'll Google this). Oh, I still reject her submission, only I do so with...well, with less sorrow.

Then there are those exquisitely turned products by people who have never published a word, like the aforementioned sixteen-year-old who sent us a story about cooking pancakes for her little brother. Of course, we had no idea she was sixteen when we accepted her piece, but when her biographical note arrived bearing the news, we were delighted.

Advice on writing cover letters? Don't include a lengthy list of your most recent self-published books. Unless you're a war veteran, don't call yourself a "veteran" author. And don't spoil a perfectly good bio by telling me that you "reside" in such-and-such a place. What's this *reside* business? Since when do people *reside* anywhere? Isn't *living* good enough for them?

I said I was cranky, didn't I?

Speaking of words I can't stand, whenever I read the word "purchase" my eyes tear and I sneeze. Ditto the verb "to place," as in "He placed his arm around my shoulder." No, he didn't: He *put* it there. *Place* is what you do with a jewel on a velvet pillow, or what a horse does in a race. And, except in the mouth of an insipid character, the word "incredible" is incredibly useless (I can do without

"amazing" as well). I also wish that fewer objects were "tiny" and "dainty," that all authors everywhere would forever forget the phrase "in the process of," that I could live my remaining years without ever having to hear anything "chuckled" by anyone, and that the word "literally" could be struck from the dictionary (or at least from the vocabulary of writers who consider it a synonym for "figuratively"). Other than that, I have only a few thousand more opinions.

But I'm just one cranky editor. There are countless others like me, each with his pile of manuscripts and his 3:20 train to Spuyten Duyvil, or wherever, each mixing pleasure with pity, excitement with boredom, disappointment with impatience, envy with pride. And that's leaving out a dozen other emotions that pass through us as quickly as we pass through submissions, digging for gold, and finding mostly rocks and dirt.

The train pulls out of Marble Hill. Next stop: Spuyten Duyvil. I get up, put on my coat, grab the shopping bag of submissions.

Three acceptances, twenty-five rejections.

And this is only Round One. Even a small publication like ours puts every piece under at least two sets of eyes before accepting it for print. And sometimes we read things two or three times before making a final decision. Given the effort involved, and the amount of very good stuff out there, it's no wonder that, to be published, the work has to be better than good. It has to have whatever it takes to win over even a cranky guy like me, and make me fall in love.

And love, as we all know, is a subjective business. Yet, I'm sure that every editor feels as I do, that, while other opinions may be subjective, there is nothing subjective about *mine*. Which is why every magazine should have at least two editors: a ruthless bastard like me, and another who is kind, considerate, and relatively spleen-free. That would be my wife and coeditor, who also happens to be the publisher.

She reads the ones without the X. ∞