

EDITOR'S NOTE

HOW TO BE AN EDITOR

It's winter here in Michigan as I write this, but contrary to what friends in other parts of the country think, there's no snow, it's above freezing—and it's been that way for days and weeks now. Still, the light appears later and later, and wanes earlier each day as we head for the solstice.

We're in that last rush putting this issue of *Fourth Genre* together, and I've procrastinated writing this part longer than I've ever done in the past. Much of the production work of this journal happens over the holiday breaks in the university schedule, which means that the journal's interns aren't here. One of them left me a note before break. Actually, she's graduated and (as with all the interns who've worked on this journal) I've been loath to see her go. One of Caitlin Vander Meulen's jobs has been to keep nudging me to write the editor's essay. At times, she's turned to me in a staff meeting and said, "You could write about that in the editor's piece!" Sometimes she says it as a joke, but there are times the joke starts to take hold for me and to make a kind of sense.

This is the note from her that I found last week:

Write editor's piece. Possible ideas: the time you introduced Alison Bechdel to a huge audience and she was more nervous than you; why you hate olives so much; why Michigan winters are so effing long; why you like that British television show [it's *Broadchurch* season 1, by the way]; your AWP panel on research and the essay; a list essay on How to Be an Editor or How to Hire an Intern; why we don't like Trump essays; how to read an essay without being fatigued by the 80 more you have to read that week . . .

Just typing this out here makes me laugh again, because it suggests so much about the week-to-week life of a literary journal housed at a university. About the same time as I read this note, I received an email from a nonfiction writer who's considering editing a literary journal, asking me about *Fourth Genre*—how it's run, how it's supported, what's involved, what's hard, what I'd do differently. And since it's that time of year when every online site is overrun with lists, it seemed I might as well add mine:

HOW TO BE THE EDITOR OF A LITERARY JOURNAL

Plan to ask and negotiate for everything you possibly can before you sign the contract or accept the appointment. This is your only chance, the only moment you'll have time and leverage. Plan to get nowhere with the negotiation. You might get a couple of computers, a couple hundred dollars for doughnuts, maybe some basement storage for back issues. Deal with it.

Find an office. Having a comfortable space, with room for jackets and backpacks and pizza boxes, is important. Essential is room for a large table around which everyone can sit. Ideal is having room, too, for a couch or futon sofa. Before administrative mismanagement squeezed us into smaller and smaller space, we had such an office. The interns have gotten to the point of first laughing, then rolling their eyes and changing the subject whenever I mention, always with longing, the large corner room where *Fourth Genre* first lived. There were four windows lined with plants that the interns took home when they outgrew their pots (the plants, not the interns). Each year a new Squishable appeared (a type of stuffed animal; Google it). Staff held office hours and took naps, hung out between classes, and could comfortably gather to read submissions aloud to one another. Colleagues walking into the building commented what a happy place it was.

Find interns. Ask for a cover letter and resumé. Just as in every applicant pool, in every field, at every age, there are people who write well but bomb face to face, and vice versa. When you have face-to-face interviews, invite current interns to be part of the conversation. I have yet to meet a person who doesn't gain valuable insight for their own careers by being on the interviewer

side of this process. Ask everyone the same questions. Here are the ones I've used: Where do you see yourself in five or ten years? What have you recently read? What nonfiction work or author do you read and like? Tell us about your experience in a workshop discussion. Tell us how you have handled a serious difference of opinion. What do you like on your pizza, knowing olives are not an option?

Share with your staff why you ask the questions you do and what you think of the answers, but only after you've listened to what they have to say. Did any of them notice that the applicant didn't say one thing that indicated they'd looked at *Fourth Genre's* website or flipped through an issue?

Schedule weekly meetings. I know some journals have staff read at their own pace and weigh in on large batches of submissions by a deadline, usually end of term. I also know, however, that it's impossible to give an essay an open mind and fresh read when you have 50 or 100 more left to plow through—and that's how the reading goes, like plowing, a tedious push to the end of the row. Even 20 or 25 a week is a lot. More importantly, I've found, a weekly conversation among the staff builds a community wherein each staffer gets to know all sorts of subtle differences in how we each read—what strikes a sour note for one ear but not another, what hits a raw nerve that's never been talked about—and in the back-and-forth of conversation, readers learn to read better, more attuned to subtleties that make the difference between an enjoyable essay and a superb and truly fresh one. The moments I love most that emerge over weeks of this conversation are when one or another of the staff refers back to a piece we'd discussed before without consensus, a piece that maybe one person really liked but others dismissed, but it keeps coming up and takes on a life of its own. Often we'll come back to it weeks later, and that reader will walk us through it again, essentially giving an annotated reading of it, finally freed to find a passion for it that we all then recognize.

Recognize that reading as an editor is not like reading for a writing workshop. In a workshop, I'm looking at the piece that's emerging. Looking to make it better, to find where the writer has avoided going, what's underdeveloped or overdone. There are plenty of times I read a submission to *Fourth Genre* and like enough of it that we discuss it in one or more rounds of editorial staff review.

And as a result of that review, I might initiate a conversation with the author about revision. I'm very careful, however, whenever I do this. For one thing, I've learned that not all writers can revise well, and not all writers want to revise a piece or share my vision for it. Going down that path has sometimes resulted in decisions I regret.

Because the other part of reading as an editor is keeping in mind each issue as a whole. As I remind the interns repeatedly, we have a very limited number of pages, and there are hundreds and hundreds of good (or potentially good) essays out there. We are about the business of choosing which essays and which voices get some of that space. It's a process that's perhaps closer to accepting panel proposals for a conference, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Protect your heart. So many people talk these days about feeling overwhelmed by the glut of upsetting or disheartening or negative news bombarding them. Reading submissions to a nonfiction literary journal is like that, or worse. Because you have to get through those 500 or 700 or 1,000 submissions before the next reading period. And there are so many heartbreaking stories. It's easy to get cynical about them: another cancer story, another abandonment story, another story of abuse or rape or loss or neglect.

Guard against guarding your heart too quickly or too thoroughly. It is possible to fall into a black hole of cynicism. Or to adopt some other strategy to protect yourself that causes you not to listen well or carefully. We've received submissions that are not well written, or written before they're ready to be committed to the page, submissions about things that should not receive a crisp "no thanks" form rejection. With Submittable, it's easy to do that. It can get too easy. Try not to get to that place. Let your interns' sadness remind you what it's like to read these pieces for the first time. Be kind when you say no.

Be kind to your production editor. Don't push up against her deadlines too blithely or too often or too tightly. She has nine other journals to manage, and two of them are also late, maybe later than yours. She's put off leaving on vacation in order to get your late and misplaced page proofs to the typesetter as quickly as possible. At any rate, she is overworked and has a life.

It's important to be kind to authors. Did I already say that? Writers are worried about any number of things. In their cover letters, writers have told me they need their submission accepted in order to get into graduate school. They've told me they've been working on a piece for years. That the submission I'm about to read is preserving the life of someone who cannot speak for himself. Preserving a story that is being forgotten. Is telling a story that they've never told anyone else or even said out loud before. But above all, most writers are sitting alone with their work—even if it's been workshopped, even if a professor or niece told them to submit it—and like everyone else in the world, want their stories to be treated with kindness.

It might be useful to think first about whether you see the editor of a literary journal as primarily gatekeeper or curator. You are both, of course. But the experience of continually facing so many manuscripts, so little financial support, deadlines from production, and pressure from authors to make a decision can overwhelm, and it's too easy to fall into the habit of slamming those gates in frustration when communicating with authors.

And it's important also to think about the people writers are writing about. This is not easy. Nor is having a conversation with a writer about whose story it is that's being written. There will be more about this difficult question in *Fourth Genre's* next issue.

Assemble a group of consulting editors or readers or whatever you call them. Find the best readers you can, people who don't disappear from email when you nudge them for responses to the manuscripts you've sent them for review. People who've read widely and are writers themselves. People who make you laugh. And then trust them. They have the benefit of distance and of not having to read many hundreds of submissions in just a few months. Cherish them, and thank them often. It won't be enough.

Take time occasionally to put your feet up and read an issue from the beginning, as if you have never seen it before. It'll feel as if you haven't, at first, because even if it's the latest issue, it was a year ago that you first read the submissions, months since you saw it in layout, and your mind is already filled with the

pieces of the next issue. Take time to enjoy it. It won't last long. You'll find a typo or two or something you wish you'd done differently. But you'll also be impressed sometimes by how good the writing is, in ways you didn't fully appreciate when you were hurrying to proof the pages. Remind yourself that this is why you do it. This, and the occasional emails thanking you for taking a risk on a piece or for the edits you made. Remind yourself that it might feel like isolated work, but it's a community that emerges, that an issue weaves together, and that too is why you do it.

—*Laura Julier*