The Case of the Disappearing Editor [1]

June 15, 2015 Media Debate [2]
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TW Column by Martha Nichols

Why the Battle Over Submission Fees Misses the Point



When you pay a submission fee to a literary magazine—say, the $3 fee for submitting work to *Talking Writing*—where do you picture the money going? To help with administrative costs? To help pay writers or to fund contest prizes?

Or do you imagine those hard-earned dollars purchasing champagne for gleeful editorial toasts to the fools suckered into paying $3 for a glance at their work?

Option C (for “champagne”) may seem far-fetched, but it’s pretty close to the attitude of some online commentators who are crusading against fees for literary submissions. The attitude not only depresses me; it misses the point. I’m tired of how much the work of editors is ignored or has become invisible. It’s just as bad as devaluing writers. Actually, it’s worse, because a narrow focus on the payoff for writers ducks the question of how we maintain literary quality in the new media world.

In the battle over submission fees, what troubles me most is the idea that it's unethical for other writers to subsidize

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those who do get their work published or the editors who help develop and promote that work. This viewpoint assumes that writers do everything and editors do nothing—or that editors and other publishing professionals shouldn't care about working for free.

The latest round of submission-fee angst was sparked by the *Offing*, a new online literary "channel" of the *LA Review of Books*. It pays $20–$50 on publication. By mid-March of this year, before publishing anything, the *Offing* had received "almost 1000 submissions in a week," reported one tweet from the fledgling magazine. It temporarily closed submissions, then reopened April 1, 2015, with a new $3 fee. The same day, the Twitter flurry began, led by science-fiction author Nick Mamatas, who withdrew a submission of his own in protest. Sample tweets:

Nick Mamatas
1000 submissions=$3000. Ten acquired pieces=$200. $2800 in the black without a single reader!

The Offing
Submit without a fee, any time, by mail. And during our four open submission periods in March, June, Sept, December.

Nick Mamatas
You're still monetizing your slush pile, even if you have teensy carve-outs here and there.

The Offing
Did you know all of our editors are volunteers?

Nick Mamatas
Yup. So? Volunteers, not dragged off the streets and forced to edit.

And so on. It's tempting to ignore such grandstanding, yet Mamatas's vocal opposition has been taken seriously. Lincoln Michel, online editor of *Electric Literature*, was part of that Twitter conversation, chipping in support for Mamatas and writing a more measured article a month later about the need to "rethink the slush" and the "ethical issue in charging submission fees." The submission page for the *Offing* now includes this caveat: "If the $3 presents [an] undue financial burden and your work is time-sensitive, just submit via email to the address below." By mid-April, poet Timothy Green, editor of *Rattle*, had this to say in a *Best American Poetry* post:

> Submission fees are anathema…they're exploitative and exclusionary and stifling. Having read submissions for a decade, I know: the majority of submissions have no chance at ever finding publication, even on a fair playing field. Editors sift for diamonds in the rough, and it's mostly rough, and we all know it. Charging money for nothing more than the 30-second skim it takes to see the obvious, when that small effort is simply the social good that you're supposed to be providing anyway, is egregious.

Anathema…exploitative…egregious. Me, I'd save that kind of rhetoric for climate-change deniers or the financial geniuses who blew up the mortgage market—not editors at small magazines who generally work long hours for little or no pay.

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First, let's talk turkey about that thirty-second skim of a submission (or maybe a three-minute skim, in the case of prose submissions; Green is referring to poetry). It's true that experienced editors can quickly separate the wheat from the chaff, making "blink" decisions as Malcolm Gladwell argues that any seasoned professional can. However, we pack a lot of expertise into those evaluations, starting with giving writers we don't know—or have no personal obligation to read—the benefit of paying close attention to their work.

Second, at *Talking Writing*, we accept a significantly higher percentage of unsolicited submissions than the 1 or 2 percent many commentators claim is standard. Since TW began charging submission fees (comparable to those charged by many other small literary journals) in 2012, we've accepted about 15 percent of unsolicited submissions, including contest entries. In 2014, our acceptance rate was over 17 percent, an indication that the quality of submissions is going up, not down as some commentators claim happens with fees (because, they argue, serious writers will steer clear of magazines that charge for submissions).

Talking Writing is not *Tin House*, *Rattle*, or any other high-profile journal that draws thousands of submissions a month or year. We're not even close, and our budget is miniscule in comparison. Yet, one practical reason for imposing a pay gate is to cut down the amount of low-quality chaff in a submissions queue. The more chaff, the more editorial time required just to sift it. This was one of the biggest reasons we instituted a fee. Any writer who follows our editorial calendar and theme guidelines now has a much better chance of getting work accepted than in the average open call.

And once their work is accepted, TW writers receive the type of editorial support that many don't understand before they experience it, especially if they've never been published before in a journalistic venue. All our pieces, including poetry and fiction, go through copy editing and proofreading, and the nonfiction pieces—TW's main focus—often are developed with the writers in multiple drafts.

When a submitted piece clearly needs editing, I may accept it anyway because the voice is strong despite a lot of clunky exposition and a lack of details—or because it's a wonderful story that falls apart at the end, shying away from a powerful conclusion—or because there's an original argument that still requires evidence and attribution of information. I nudge writers to take risks, to say more of what needs to be said (or to cut what doesn't), because the goal is to have an impact on readers.

Most nonfiction writers struggle with clarifying what they think, avoiding touchy material and not pushing themselves to dig deeper. And most nonfiction drafts start in the wrong place, failing to hook readers fast enough to keep them reading. These are issues a good editor can help writers fix.

In other words, editing has value to writers *and* to everybody who cares about quality and a wider audience for literature. I'm talking about literature in the broadest sense of that term: writing that moves people, that makes them think, that informs and illuminates. In a world where anyone can publish unfiltered text online, editing is a bulwark

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against opacity, fakery, apathy, and socially acceptable stupidity.

At this year's AWP Conference and GrubStreet's Muse and the Marketplace, I heard lots of talk about "literary philanthropy" and "community service." I appreciate all who donate their time and skills to promoting literature. I cofounded *Talking Writing*, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and run it for no pay—working thirty hours a week or more when we're publishing—because I believe writing matters in a larger sense.

However, in the age of free content, I'm also concerned that relying on the selflessness of volunteers to keep the literary world afloat reinforces the wrong message: that editing isn't worth paying for. The work of editing, designing, and publishing a good magazine piece, let alone a book, *is* work. But the media economy has changed so radically in the past fifteen years that the professionals who used to ensure quality of a final product—editors at all stages of the process, agents, artists, publicists—now seem like discretionary add-ons or have just plain vanished.

As literary agent April Eberhardt told me in a recent phone call, "The world lacks a quality-control mechanism outside of traditional publishing." Eberhardt, who was head reader at San Francisco-based *Zoetrope: All-Story* (the quarterly launched by Francis Ford Coppola) and is still a reader for the *Best American Short Stories* series, has become an advocate of partnership publishing. This new model combines editorial selection by a press like She Writes with accepted authors covering at least a portion of book production and editing costs. Authors earn a bigger share of net profits, but the fees they pay for services can add up to thousands of dollars.

Horrifying? That depends on how much you care about reaching more readers and keeping literature alive. Poor quality control "is the single biggest factor standing in the way of indie authorship being taken seriously," adds Eberhardt by email. "Many authors make cringeworthy errors that easily could have been avoided if they had hired expertise to help them." Given that mainstream book publishers almost never take a chance these days on debut literary authors, it puts the debate about magazines with submission fees in perspective.

In 2014, the revenue from TW's submission fees amounted to less than 8 percent of our program income. The majority came from charitable donations, along with modest revenue from ads and T-shirt sales. Regardless, TW's operating budget covers only the most basic administrative costs, such as pay to independent contractors for production, bookkeeping, social media, and handling author contracts. (If it weren't online-only, the magazine wouldn't exist at all.) Our top editors donate their time, and TW contributors, except for contest winners, are unpaid. For me, that's the real ethical issue here—not the fact that we're asking writers to pay $3 for our serious consideration of their submissions.

I'm convinced that plenty of readers are looking for great literary work and journalism, even if not in the numbers commanded by *Halo* or *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Yet, if we're not clear about what editors do to maintain standards—and if we don't address the question of how to pay for the necessary services editors and other publishing professionals provide—people will continue to see literature as a hobby project aimed at a tiny, insular audience.

I say we take the debate about who benefits and flip it around. Writers don't have to view themselves as competing like starving dogs over a meatless bone. And, with the exception of a few notorious gougers, magazines that charge submission fees aren't raking in champagne-level bucks for their editors.

We're all in this together. Let's recognize that literature is a public institution—one that can't just rely on market forces and sporadic charitable giving for its survival. Everyone involved, including struggling writers, must now step up and support it.

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Before You Submit: Ask Yourself Four Questions

I'm fortunate that one of TW's editors, Karen Ohlson, donated about ten hours of her time over multiple drafts to help me develop this piece. Karen changed my lead and made other suggestions for revision. But before she saw a draft, I also asked myself four key questions, the same ones I often put to the writers I'm editing. Answering them didn't guarantee that a perfect piece would tumble out of my brain with no need for help from anyone else; but the process got me closer to what I wanted to say.

All writers should ask themselves the four questions I've highlighted below before submitting work to a publication. They apply to writing of any style or genre, but with nonfiction submissions, they're crucial—and as an editor and teacher, I know how rarely literary nonfiction writers ask them before submitting their work.

Here are the questions to ask yourself, along with my own answers for this column:

1. What do I want to say in this piece?

Editing matters. Literary writers and editors who say submission fees shouldn't be charged to help fund an online journal have apparently abandoned the idea that literature has value to more than a niche audience.

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2. Why do I care about this topic or story?

Because I'm an editor of an online magazine—and I often feel like I'm spitting into the wind. I'm frustrated and worried about my profession.

3. Why will readers care?

Because many of them are also disturbed by the mediocrity of most online content and concerned about the fate of books, authors, and journalism.

4. What do I *really* want to say—and why am I having trouble saying it?

Editing matters. It's what makes a good magazine, the kind of magazine readers want to read. In other words, I'm saying the work I do matters—but saying this opens me up to public attack. It sounds self-serving. It's scary to claim my work and beliefs have value. I need to say this anyhow.

Publishing Information

- "Against Submission Fees" [5] by Nick Mamatas, *Storify*, April 1, 2015.
- "Literary Journals and Epistemic Closure," [6] Nick Mamatas's blog, April 3, 2015.
- "Is It Time for Literary Magazines to Rethink the Slush?" [7] by Lincoln Michel, *Electric Lit,* May 18, 2015.
- *The Offing* magazine submission page [8](Submittable).
- "Clowns Against Submission Fees" [9] by Timothy Green, *Best American Poetry*, April 15, 2015.
- "A Look at Partnership Publishing" by April Eberhardt, *Writer's Digest*, November/December 2014.
- "How It Works," She Writes Press. [10]

Art Information

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