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As told to Denise S. Robbins, 3196 words.

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On getting the details right

Author and editor Aram Mrjoian discusses the process of selecting submitted work and developing an editor's eye.

Do you consider yourself a writer first or an editor first?

I found editing through writing. When I was an undergrad in college, I started writing fiction and some creative nonfiction. I was really bad, but continued after I graduated and then eventually got into an MFA program at Northwestern in my mid-twenties, where I started taking my writing more seriously. That's when I thought maybe I had a shot at this.

In that program, I found editing the way a lot of graduate students do, which is through the university's literary journal, _TriQuarterly_. That was my first gig in editing literary work. As a writer, I was a slow study. For years, I didn't know how to improve my work. But when I went back to grad school, a lot of things clicked very quickly. All of a sudden I wanted to consume as much knowledge as I could to become a better writer. Editing allowed me to do that. When I started reading work that was being considered for publication, it dramatically influenced my own process and my own craft. From there, I fell in love with it. So I've been an editor at different literary magazines for the last seven or eight years, and have really enjoyed the community it brings about and what I've learned as part of that process.

How do you approach writing a story for the first time versus revising it or reworking it?

In my first MFA workshop, I learned radical revision techniques. What happens when you chop something up and move it around? Change the point of view? Add or subtract characters, change the setting, cut it in half or double it? I realized that a piece of writing is not going to be that good until its fourth or fifth draft. Once I started thinking like that, it became way easier. I started thinking about the first draft as a practice step, figuring out what I want to say. Once I have the material, then I'm going to go about fixing or changing it or just trying to make it better.

And how do you know when you're done?

I don't think you do necessarily, but for me, I go through all these different drills and practice steps to figure things out. Once I have something in okay shape, I tend to read it aloud, start to finish, at least half a dozen times. And when I go through that process and polish it, that's when it starts to feel not necessarily done, but like it's the best it's going to get for a while. That might be when I send it out. I don't necessarily think anything is ever done. It's just the best version of what it can be at the time.

How do you differentiate how you approach editing your own work versus something you're editing for a journal?

When I say that I've learned from working at literary magazines, I know how much great writing is out there and how much writing that is so close to being great is out there. That might sound like a minor distinction, but the difference in time and effort it takes to get from one to the other is pretty astronomical. I think there are a lot of people who get tired of what they're working on and think, "This is good enough." And the reality is, usually when I'm tired of what I'm working on, if I'm super annoyed by it and think it's good enough, then it's probably not.

Being an editor has taught me to think like that as a writer. But on the other side of things, when I'm editing something, I like thinking about its opportunities. I know that the writing has to be good, but

I'm not worried about it being perfect. I'm worried about, is this something that I can collaborate on with the author to make it the best it can be? When editors first reach out to writers, we ask, are you willing to go through that revision? Are you willing to go through a long and tiring process? Most writers say yes because they're hungry for publication, and mostly people are open to it, but the process can be really long.

I've published stories at *Guernica* that I worked on with the writer for over a year, with five, six, or seven drafts back and forth over the course of fifteen months to get it where it needed to be for publication. And at *The Rumpus*, I've published as a writer before I got into the editor position. Working with *The Rumpus*'s editors is one of the reasons I was excited to take this job. I remember working with them on four, five, six drafts over the course of a few months where they were really digging into what I was trying to do and paying attention to detail.

As a writer, I know something's done when I can explain every decision and when I have reasoning and excitement for any edits that might be made. If an editor comes back to me and says, "Hey, we want to change this sentence," or, "Hey, how do you feel about this character being more this way or that?" I want to have strong opinions about that. And that's when I start to think I know something's done. Do I care enough about the sentence to argue over it? Do I have a sense of what this work is trying to do? And as an editor, that's what I want from writers when I work with them. I don't want them to say yes to everything that I offer. I want them to say, hey, this paragraph that you're trying to delete is important to me for these reasons. Or, I totally see your point here, that makes sense. Let's change it.

When you're reading stories for journals, how do you tell the difference between something that's almost-great and something that is great?

It's hard to answer. Part of it is a gut feeling. Sometimes we get writing that is just out of the park, something that's so good that you want to say yes to it immediately—but truthfully, that's rare. What happens most of the time is we get a lot of things that editors are divided about, or things that everybody feels really good about, but we have limited space. Writing that's great is operating on all cylinders. You can tell that the writer has cared about every detail, every aspect, that they're not just trying to put together something that looks like an exorbitantly wrapped, empty present. Whereas I think that so much of the writing I read that's almost-great is doing cool things on a sentence level, but the story isn't there. Or the arc of the essay isn't there. Or these characters aren't fully developed. Or maybe there's not enough setting here. Or it feels like a concept or a premise that hasn't been played out.

I think that sense of almost-greatness comes from when the writer has a good idea and they executed it well, but they didn't have the patience to see it to where it was the best it could be. Great writing doesn't have to be perfect, and can do things I don't like or disagree with. But I can at least tell that the writer has fully built in every failsafe and considered every different part of the equation. You see it in the small details. This writer put something in the first paragraph that pays off on page six, or this writer had this minor character that I didn't think was necessarily going to play a big role but then comes back and does something cool. A ton of stories and essays are really good for the first two thirds, then totally fizzle out in the last few pages because the writer got bored.

When you're reading a draft over and over again, it's easy to polish your first paragraph and make it look great. And that part is important. It draws in an editor's attention. But if the end feels unrewarding or unsatisfying, then it's harder to say yes. That's a common problem I see. People are invested in getting their work in the best shape possible, but they can't figure out how to end it or what they want to do with the ending, and they give up on it and say, again, "This is good enough."

Do you feel there are limitations in flash fiction? Are flash stories able to cover all those bases and take on all that you are looking for?

I don't think there are limitations to flash fiction, but I do think there is a lot of so-so flash fiction. I love good flash fiction. When you read good flash fiction, it's like the best magic trick, right? Like, how has someone pulled off something so cool in such a small amount of space? I love teaching flash fiction for that reason. I love editing flash fiction for that reason. But it's also a place where people can get away with a lot of sloppy habits, frankly. Thinking that, oh, I can create the concept for a story, but I don't have to see it out because I'm limited by space. Or oh, I can just write this lyrical prose for several hundred words. And because the prose is so flashy, people overlook the fact that it's not really saying anything.

That's not to say that all flash is like that, but I think there is a hunger to publish frequently. And flash fiction creates an avenue for frequent publication. Sometimes that desire to have your name out there, to be publishing regularly, to be accumulating these CV lines, encourages a flash that maybe is not that great. But great flash certainly exists too. And I want to be very clear about that. I'm not coming after flash fiction or flash nonfiction because both those genres have masters of the form. Both those genres have examples of work that is some of the most memorable work we read today.

When you're editing for *The Rumpus*, is there a certain tone or style that you are working within, or do you have an individual editorial style that you're bringing to *The Rumpus*, or is there some combination?

Probably a combination. I've defined my editorial taste enough that I can't completely ignore it, even if I'm moving from one place to the other. But I'm still relatively new to *The Rumpus*, too, so I'm still learning what their voice is, what their tone is. *The Rumpus* publishes a lot of things that don't easily

fit in other literary magazines. They publish interesting, challenging, complex work that engages with the world in cool ways. And also stuff that's quietly literary, and not the same way that *The Paris Review* would be. So I'm both bringing my aesthetic and trying to take on the aesthetic of a well-established magazine. *The Rumpus* has been around for a long time and is a venerated literary journal. It's important for me to be thinking about continuity, making sure that I'm not changing the established aesthetic too much. One way I do that is by relying on my masthead a lot. I'm fortunate to be surrounded by editors who have been at *The Rumpus* for a long time. Having that knowledge within the masthead itself has been useful, and I trust the editors that I work with to know what they want to publish and give them autonomy.

So *The Rumpus* has a style you're working with. And you have a style. How often do you feel like you intentionally try to subvert that style to mix things up?

Over and over. Sometimes you have to. There's something nice about finding writing that defies your expectations. I think that naturally awakens something in editors. It happens organically. There's not a formula where it's like, for every ten things we publish that feel this way, we need to publish something that feels that way. Certainly you want to have a well-balanced and well curated editorial calendar, and it's important to be thoughtful about the genres you're representing, the authors you're representing, the demographics you're representing, but also not necessarily letting that formula dictate the entirety of what you publish.

Do you ever think of it as something like dating chemistry? All these people with different styles or tastes, and sometimes they coalesce, and sometimes opposites attract?

That idea of dating chemistry makes sense to me. I don't want to say I've had a lot of bad first dates, but as a writer, I think I've been that bad first date a lot. I've sent work to journals that I had no business sending work to because my stuff didn't align. Sometimes writers almost intentionally have to be bad first dates because the odds are so stacked against them. There's only so many venues, and the statistics can look bleak. So it does feel like you have to be out there on, I don't know, literary-magazine-Hinge, swiping. On the other side of things, every editor has their own vibe, and mastheads get in a rhythm. At *Guernica*, we have a group of four fiction editors that are really tight knit, but we all have very different styles of stories that we like. We know, going into meetings, if this is going to be an Aram story, or this is going to be an Adam story, or a Miriam story, or an Autumn story.

Did you really just say that your fiction team has an Aram, Adam, and Autumn?

And Miriam.

Very serendipitous! So how do you think people can try to find their own writing style?

I'm a huge advocate of artistic agency. Finding my own writing style took a lot of effort. It took a lot of editing, being in workshops, and hearing good and bad feedback, and learning what feedback I liked and what feedback I didn't like. I wrote a lot of reviews. I've interviewed a lot of authors because that's a great way to learn about someone's process and about the way they approach things. After that, working with editors on the other side of things has taught me to learn when to advocate for myself. I think this is important for writers to learn because publishing can be tricky. People get excited. An editor will send notes back and they'll be like, great, whatever you want, I'll take the edits because I want this story to look the way you want it to. But it should be much more of a conversation. Writers should learn to talk about the things in their work that are important to them and know when someone's idea might not fit what they're trying to do.

The anthology of essays you edited, *We Are All Armenian*, was not working with a particular style or tone, but a particular subject matter. How did you tackle that? Did you want there to be a cohesive tone or vision, or did you prefer tonal diversity?

I tried to get as much diversity as possible into that anthology. Looking back now, a few months after publication, there are things I would do differently to make that diversity even more expansive. But what was important to me was giving the writers the agency to write about what they wanted to. When I started talking to different writers and contributors about the project, I didn't want them to feel like they had to write about the Armenian Genocide or that they had to write about Armenian identity and that they could touch on whatever subject matter they wanted. It felt very wide ranging, but also like there was a cohesiveness to it that happened organically. That, for me, was really exciting. But it was a challenging project. It took three years. The first peer review I got back was just brutal. It basically called me an incompetent editor. I found two good gems of recommendations between all of this bullying. So I talked to my editor at the press about it and was able to move forward.

I read that you wished you'd had co-editors on that anthology.

I do.

So how would you go about that? How do you collaboratively select art?

It makes things much easier when you have a conversation. It's very rare that anything is accepted by one person. Now, even in an editor-in-chief position, I keep telling all my different section editors at *The Rumpus*, you're the ones with the authority to publish what you want to. We'll have a conversation about it. I'd rather hear what you're excited about and give you my opinion on it, and make a decision collectively, than me just saying yes or no.

At *Guernica*, one of my favorite things is our monthly meeting where we bring these stories together and have our readers plus the four editors talk about them. It's amazing how much you can be on the fence about something. Someone who's enthusiastic about a story can sway you into it. Or someone can give you a reason not to publish that you haven't even thought of. Most literary magazines are working with volunteers and people who are spending time outside of their normal day jobs talking about art, and collaborating on art, and trying to collectively find things that they want to publish.

For me, it's never been an isolated effort. Every organization I've been a part of has been a collaboration. That's probably why I was craving a co-editor on the anthology, because it was a project that I took on by myself. But I'd never had to deal with an academic peer review before. I'd never had to proofread an entire book length project. I wished I had someone to talk about it with.

What's your favorite bad story that's ever fallen into your queue?

I firmly believe that anyone who is sending in work is coming from a good place. They want to see their writing engaged with. The frustrating thing is when we get something that is not our submission guidelines at all. Someone will send us a novel. We're an online magazine. But I don't know. Without knowing the writer, I'm assuming that they wrote something and didn't know what to do with it, and they're trying to figure it out. That's a tough journey.

Aram Mrjoian recommends:

Coast of Chicago by Stuart Dybek: A superb collection that intersperses memorable flash fiction (from a master of the form) with some of my favorite short stories.

Farmers Markets: Where else to get local oyster mushrooms, microgreens, and seasonal veggies?

Untitled Art NA Italian Pilsner: For after long runs, long weekday commutes, and unexpected moments of disappointment.

Bike lanes: They should really be everywhere.

Lake Superior: Just wow.

<u>Name</u>
Aram Mrjoian

<u>Vocation</u>
author and editor

<u>Fact</u>

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