

On letting your perspective change



Writer and editor Heidi Pitlor discusses stepping down from a long-standing role, exploring holistic editing and working on her own writing.

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As told to Scarlett Harris, 2163 words.

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So, the million dollar question: why are you stepping down from Best American Short Stories now, after 18 years?

Well, 18 years is one of the reasons. I've been doing it a long time. I felt myself just itching to work with authors again. This job was 95 percent reading, and there's so much I love about it, but I really miss the one-on-one of the editorial relationship, working with someone more long-term on bigger projects and just felt myself starting to get a little bit burnt out.

I started my own editorial firm a couple of years ago and it's done really well. It's scary to leave [*Best American Short Stories*], but it's been 18 years. You know, I started it right when my kids were born, and now they're applying to college. It felt like it was time.

It's kind of like a nice life cycle there, isn't it?

It was. I remember my first year, my first guest editor was Stephen King. I remember I had my twins a week after sending him his first stories, and it's really wild to think of how long I've been doing this.

No pressure as a first guest editor, huh?

None at all, let me tell you. None at all. Not at all intimidating [*laughs*].

What has the role entailed? These stories have been published and edited elsewhere, so how do you see your role shepherding them into this collection?

It's a really amazing job because you get to go out into this really crowded field and just pull stuff, and then you work with one person, a different person every year, and you decide what you want to be in this book. So it's a really great launching pad for new writers quite often.

I'm always someone interested in trends and kind of what are people talking about. The short story universe ends up being a lot about, what are people interested in now? How are they seeing the world? So you get to help shape the people who read this book, what they're reading, and it's really exciting. I think that was a big part of it.

In terms of my role, it's the guest editor who has the final say. But those conversations [are] completely different every year with people. It's amazing how much I learned and they learned. It's like being in a little book club each year with a different person. So hopefully, I helped a lot of young writers.

And what about working with the guest editors? Can you talk about what that relationship is like?

It's really interesting. You don't know who's going to pick what and so I think one of my rookie mistakes was assuming Stephen King would only like horror and Geraldine Brooks would want only historical fiction. Even about my own taste, assuming I wouldn't like something and then saying, "You know what? I kind of loved that fantasy story," a genre I wouldn't think I'd like. So it's figuring out their taste and then negotiating who gets the final say.

I came up with the system [which], honestly, it took about five years to figure out. I'd grade every story that I finished reading. I never showed [the guest editor] my grades, but if they came to me with their list and most of their stories were at my bottom, I would say, "Okay, let's make sure they see the ones at my top." [They have the final say, but] oftentimes, things shifted a little bit.

But every guest editor is different. Some people come to me with their list and that's done. Some people came to me with no list and we hashed it out together. Their name is on the front of the book. Mine is not, so, although my role is important, I want them to really take ownership. Once I was clear on that, these couple of things, it became easy.

You write in the intro that you didn't take short stories seriously when you first began editing the series, which I think is a common perception—they're not as much work as full-length books, or they're a stepping stone on the way to writing novels and you don't go back, which is obviously not true as plenty of great writers flit between the two or only write short stories. So could you talk a little bit about that?

Yeah, absolutely. You know, it is funny when people would say to me, "Oh, you must love short stories," and I always said, "I love good writing. And you can find good writing in short stories or novels or anywhere."

My kids would go through this phase where they'd say, "I don't like reading," or "I don't like books," and I'd say, "Well, you just haven't found your book for this age." And that's how I feel about stories. For people who don't like [short] stories, I always think, "You haven't found your story writer."

So yes, the publishing business is not a big fan of stories because they don't fit in a book and collections, there's this perception that nobody wants to read them. People love stories because they're really perfectly shaped for our moment. You read 40 minutes, 45 minutes, however long it takes. It's kind of a good bite-sized piece.

I do some commissioning and editing of short stories for Amazon and for different audio or tech platforms, and it's always interesting to me that they're received much more warmly. But in book publishing, they're harder for publishers to publish. But again, I'm this weirdo, where I don't always see boundaries where other people do. And even though, if I said I started out not loving stories, I think I just started out not loving reading eight bajillion things all year long. Then I realized like anything, you're going to like some of it, and some of it you're not, but you learn a lot.

Well, that leads perfectly into my next question, which was about something else you wrote in the intro, which was that focus has become harder over time. So do you think there's anything about the short story format that encourages or feeds that? And you alluded to short stories being perfect for the current moment with social media and bite-sized posts and stuff like that, and there's a lot of conversation around those things like lessening our attention spans. So do you think that there's a relationship there?

No, because [short stories aren't] popular enough. I think it's attributed to tech and to YouTube and to the bite-sized chunks that we now consume everything in.

Although a story is really well-suited to this moment, I think that any good writing, it takes you to a better place. If you're experiencing it and it's touching you and it's enlarging your brain, there's nothing wrong with it being a shorter work. I think people are just not used to reading short stories who don't read them, it tends

to be the form of new writers.

I teach a class on writing short stories, and I think it's really useful for novel writers, too, because it's kind of the same thing. You need a smaller aperture. There's still a rise and a fall. There's still a human emotion and trying to make the unfamiliar familiar and vice versa. The story is a small form. Every word matters. Every word matters in anything, but in a story, even more. You cannot go down rabbit holes. To my mind, I'm watching for what is happening right now as I walk forward in this time, and I think sometimes writers get stuck in that. Try a different tense. Try it for a couple sentences and see if that wakes you up a little bit.

So moving on from *Best American Short Stories*, you're now going to be focusing on your editorial consulting business because you want "the longer, deeper engagement with authors and their work." So can you talk a little bit about what you're craving through that that you haven't been able to get as editor of *Best American Short Stories*, and how those roles differ?

Before I did *Best American Short Stories*, I was an acquiring editor at Houghton Mifflin, which no longer publishes trade books, and this was now 18 years ago. So I would sign up books and then I would edit them and work pretty closely with authors. I was an old-school hands-on editor, and I loved that relationship. *Best American Short Stories* shelved that for many years because you're just reading and picking and passing along. You're not getting your hands in people's words and I really started to miss that. I want to be the editor.

I've also published three novels. I wanted to be the independent editor that I wish I'd had as a writer, which means I want to be—I call it holistic editing. I want to be that person, to be there as a coach. Writing is a really lonely, scary place to be, and the writing *business* can be also lonely and scary and really competitive, and I felt like there aren't quite enough allies sometimes.

Are you writing anything at the moment?

I took a big long break, and I've been toying with like a writing book; [a] memoir. I have a Substack. I put it on that. But I'm not writing a novel right now. I'm not writing fiction.

And how do you get motivated then to really home in on a project?

For me, it's all about going away. It's very hard for me to write at home. So I love to rent a place with some friends. We go away for a few days, a cheap Airbnb or something, and we write. Then at night, we drink wine and cook and something like that. That helps me. I need the peer pressure of other people writing around me. It's another reason I started this business is that I felt like I wanted people to have the sense of not being in a room by yourself writing. I'm much better at motivating other people than myself.

How do you keep everything straight, from reading for *Best American Short Stories* to your editorial consultancy, to your own writing?

One bit of advice I have that's worked for me is to not organize everything on apps and a phone. I need some physical stuff. So I have two massive whiteboards, one that I'm looking at here, one with my clients and another thing with jobs. Then I have this really ridiculous planner. I'm becoming an evangelist about the physical planner and some physical things in our life because I can't just look at a screen all the time for everything. I need some tactile things.

In my younger years, I was far more organized and would say this time of the day is for writing. I used to write in the morning and then I would maybe go for a walk or exercise and then read.

You get to know yourself. I know that I'm tired in the afternoon, so reading at that time is tough. There's a different energy in a line edit than a developmental edit. It's easier to line edit in some ways because you're active, so [it's beneficial] knowing your own bio rhythms and what you do well.

For most people, I think mornings are a really wonderful time for creativity because the world hasn't beaten you up yet. You can just get right to it.

You have kids and it gets really hard. It's unpredictable. So I just became really good at juggling in the most ridiculous way. I'm so, so, so lucky to always have too much work on my plate. But there are times where I'm like, "Oh my God, I'm editing too many things."

How do you ensure that other people's work that you are editing and reading doesn't seep into your own writing or creative work?

It's a question for all writers at all periods. We all steal. We all inadvertently steal. We steal not only from other writers, we steal from people in our lives. I think realizing that your first draft can be a mess and can do whatever you want it to do, and then when you go back, that's the time where you have to say, "Oh, I just inadvertently ripped off whoever," you know?

To write well is kind of how to live well; so much of it is just being forgiving and doing better next [time].

Heidi Pitlor recommends:

Lori Ostlund's book *Are You Happy?* (in galley)

Tova Mirvis's *We Would Never* (also in galley)

Big Swiss by Jen Beagin

A movie called *Ghostlight*

Baby Reindeer (on Netflix)

Name

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Vocation

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