The Subversive Copy Editor: Advice from Chicago (or, How to Negotiate Good Relationships with Your Writers, Your Colleagues, and Yourself) (review)

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Reviews

Carol Fisher Saller. *The Subversive Copy Editor: Advice from Chicago (or, How to Negotiate Good Relationships with Your Writers, Your Colleagues, and Yourself)*

Reviewed by STEPHEN K. DONOVAN

Who can resist a book with such a tempting title? I saw an advertisement for *The Subversive Copy Editor* (*SCE*) and bought a copy the next day. As managing editor of a small scientific journal, I am a jack-of-all-trades and wanted to see how a big publisher deals with a vital, although hardly glamorous side of academic publishing. Author Carol Fisher Saller runs the *Chicago Manual of Style* monthly Q&A Web site, which, I must admit, I hadn't heard of until now. Saller's subversion is perhaps not quite what I expected, seeking to overthrow 'the popular view that the writer is a natural adversary' of copy editors (xiii) and encouraging editors to recognize that a style is just that; not a law written in stone.

The author succeeds in maintaining momentum to justify these early revelations in the rest of the book. She has written a collection of simple, practical messages for copy editors and their authors, favouring a readable, chatty style that doesn't seek to overemphasize them. Saller's prose thus remains digestible, with sufficient examples to illustrate her message. Although much of the substance of this book will be common sense to an experienced, organized, thinking editor, it is nonetheless worth repeating, particularly in such a readable style.

The eleven chapters are divided into two parts, of which the first is entitled 'Working with the Writer, for the Reader.' Much of the meat of this part focuses on editor/author interactions, and so does this review. My own editorial experience is probably typical: I have rarely had a manuscript submitted to one of my books or journals that was so good

that I couldn't 'add value' as an editor. What's important is to sit in the same place as the author and look in the same direction, pointing things that he or she may have missed. It is when an editor sits in a different place, looks in a different direction, or both that harm can be done to a manuscript and, in consequence, to the editor's relationship with the author.

Carefulness, transparency, and flexibility are Saller's three virtues of the enlightened editor. These, and a mantra of 'do no harm' (24), are the underlying justification for much of *SCE*. Indeed, although this is ostensibly a book on copy editing, it also brims over with calm advice for both editors and authors. Their relationship should be professional, even friendly — never hostile. Hostility can do little to further the efficient publication of any manuscript.

One of the principal messages that Saller conveys in a number of ways is that honest and informed communication between author and copy editor is essential. For example, if a copy editor can't answer a question from an author, then the way forward is not to guess or waffle, but instead find out and pass the information on. Easy, really — and keeping everything sweet with only a little effort.

Care in editing is driven by knowledge. A copy editor will be knowledgeable about style and language, but should bow to the author's technical expertise in his or her subject area. However, authors may be knowledgeable, yet woefully inept in their writing. Saller is a paragon of care and tact in her suggestions for pursuing accuracy and transparency from recidivist authors. I particularly learned from the section 'Flexibility: A Style Is Just a Style' (27–30) in chapter 3, 'Working for the Reader, through the Writer.' I know that I am often an inflexible editor and will try to take Saller's advice to heart, even if it sticks in my throat a little.

Saller is very kind. Her assertion that 'I don't think I've encountered more than half a dozen difficult authors' (31) surprised me — only half a dozen? But this was counterbalanced by some of her tales from the trade. And she has nothing but good advice for dealing with bullying authors (35). My experience of editing suggests that backsliding authors are more likely to be nescient or guileful than bullies, but maybe commitment grows when you're defending your book rather than your research paper.

Saller sings from a good hymn book—'editing is by nature multi-tasking, reading at several levels simultaneously' (44)—even if she uses abominable words like 'multitasking.' She rightly recognizes that no two editors do their job in the same way. I would also comment that when some authors turn to editing they are, to be polite, naïve. Their research papers have been put into shape by a succession of reviewers and editors over the years, a potentially educational experience from which they've learned very little. The result is that they expect to be called editors when, in fact, they are little better than fumbling compilers, informed about their subject, but ignorant of the basic needs of style.

Chapter 5, 'Dear Writers,' is aimed at authors, not editors. I hope it will be widely read. The section 'Editing as a Gift, Not an Insult' (49–51) particularly warmed the cockles of my heart. Why do some authors assume either that their work is perfect (it never is) or that any editorial changes are part of a plot against them (they never are)? The whole tone of this book is one of reconciliation through understanding. When Saller gently rails against the dumbness of some authors, the authors in question would presumably deny it. Well, as an editor and an author, I can be dumb in both jobs, but never as consistently dumb as some unthinking authors who have inflicted their poorly written, weakly structured prose on me.

Some parts of *SCE*, such as chapters on freelancing and IT management, were of less interest to me than others. These are to be found in the second half of the book, 'Working with Your Colleagues and with Yourself.' (I admit that my review is biased toward ideas and chapters that are most relevant to my work. The text is of no lesser quality than the first half, but it is editorial methodologies and editor/author interactions that interest me.) This second part is more focused on the life of the copy editor than on the nuts and bolts of publishing. It makes good reading, particularly in chapter 6, 'When Things Get Tough (the Sequel): The Dangerous Manuscript.' Dangerous manuscripts are mindlessly tedious, repetitive, or both, or they are unusually complicated. Saller's advice for dealing with the mindless is good—automate, delegate, or re-evaluate, although the eventual solution may be to accept your fate (60–2). As for complicated manuscripts, has the author just used a different approach, or could he be incorrect? Is her approach unnecessarily confusing? Or just plain ugly? If any of these, the copy editor must

recognize what needs to be done and how to explain the necessity to the author.

A book on academic publishing that is so cheap will break no bank. *The Subversive Copy Editor* is well written, informative, and entertaining, and I enjoyed reading it. I won't make a general recommendation for it only because its general interest drops off a little toward the end. But anyone who is or wants to be a copy editor should enjoy *SCE*, as will many academic editors and authors.

Tim Albert. *Winning the Publications Game: How to Write a Scientific Paper without Neglecting Your Patients*, 3rd ed.
Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing, 2009. Pp. xiii, 114. Paper: ISBN 978-184619-247-0, UK£21.99.

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To my knowledge, Tim Albert is the first author to state the obvious truth that academic publishing is, indeed, a game. The rules are set by the mandarins, directors, HoDs, or whatever their current appellation. They set those magic targets to which we must aspire—this year, it may be a particular number of peer-reviewed papers in journals that appear in a particular citation index. The emphasis is not on pushing back the frontiers of knowledge but on publishing the right number of papers and being seen in the right journals. Is there any academic who doesn't recognize this as a recipe for festering mediocrity?

I wonder if managers ever contemplate how their pronouncements, driven by misconceptions about the value of the citation indices of journals and the like, are influencing not academia but academics' attitudes toward publishing? It is hardly unknown for a manager to demand, say, three papers per staff member per year in journals on some named citation index. So instead of writing one substantial paper that would stand as a significant contribution to knowledge or thought, the staff member instead dissects it, and three shorter papers are submitted that are much less likely to be noticed or to have a significant shelf life. Same game, but scoring a series of separate runs rather than a grand slam in order to satisfy an artificial academic goal.