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# The Considerations of Editing Previously Published Works

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Research question: “How, if at all, do editors adjust their methods when they are editing something that has been previously published (e.g. a short story that previously appeared in a literary journal and will now be published as part of a collection of short stories)? What is their justification for these adjustments (or lack thereof)? How does their understanding of these adjustments (or lack thereof) compare to the products of their efforts?”

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Many readers don't realize the extent to which two versions of the same work—earlier and later editions of a book, an essay that appears in two different collections, a mass market edition versus a critical edition for scholars—can differ from one another. Literary works do not become static as soon as they have been published; on the contrary, authors can and often do continue to make alterations to their work long after it has been introduced to the public. Editorial theorists have dealt in great depth with the problems caused by authors making changes to their works, and how to decide which among the different extant versions is the best or most authoritative one. Editors play an important role in these analyses, as they are often the ones tasked with either reconciling or choosing between different versions of the same work—all created by the author and hence, technically, authorized. Much thought has been given to the responsibility of the editor of the critical edition to maintain or restore the author's true final intention—a concept so fraught with problems I can't even begin to touch it here—even, if necessary, by reversing the work of a previous editor. However, most editorial theorists are not working editors, but pure theorists, and these two disciplines have long been at odds with each other. Working editors often find editorial theory to be of little use to them in their day-to-day operations; theorists, meanwhile, can appear dismissive of editorial work. The two are irrevocably connected, though, and I was interested to see how a

question of possible interest to editorial theorists might be dealt with by working editors in the field. It is an established factor in editorial theory that authors make changes to their own work after it's been published, creating multiple authorized versions, but do editors encourage or discourage this kind of reworking, and why? Are editors less likely to suggest or introduce a change to something that has been published before elsewhere? And if so, does their hesitation to make changes stem from deference to the choices of the previous editor of the piece, desire to keep things consistent for readers, or some other reason?

One of the most clear-cut examples of an editor having to re-edit a previously published piece is the instance of a short story or essay that is reprinted as part of a larger book. I approached several experienced professional editors who have dealt with this situation, and asked them about the different considerations they felt they had to take into account when working on a project of this nature. As it turned out, their thought processes were much more practical than they were theoretical—abstract concerns about readers, authorship, and other editors were overshadowed by the concrete logistics of publishing.

According to my sources, the first consideration with previously released short works is not whether to edit them, but whether to publish them at all. The process of creating a collection or anthology is less about polishing and more about curation. Meg Storey, an editor at Tin House Books, explained that whereas a full-length novel may have a spark of brilliance that is worth reworking and rewriting to uncover, mediocre short stories are often “competent but not mindblowing,” and it's a better use of the editor's time to pass over the story and keep looking for a better

one than it is to tinker with one that just isn't up to quality. "The choice will be whether to publish or not, rather than how to change a story to make it publishable," Storey said. Adam O'Connor Rodriguez, editor at Hawthorne Books, shared a similar sentiment. "The special consideration with previously published work," he said, "is whether to include it at all." The editor has to consider whether the level of quality necessary for a piece to be published in a given magazine matches the level necessary for including it in a book that bears his or her publisher's name—sometimes, the standards are just different. The editor also has to consider whether the needs and expectations of the magazine's readers are the same as or different from the needs and expectations of the book's intended audience. The important question to ask, O'Connor Rodriguez said, is "Is this piece exactly right to achieve the publication's objective? Because if it isn't, why are you republishing it?" It is far more important for an editor to spend time choosing the right pieces for a collection and arranging them in the best possible order than it is to try to make soup from a stone with a mediocre piece, or try to force in a piece that just doesn't fit with the overall project.

Although an editor will likely choose to focus on what to publish rather than how to change it, the editor still can opt to make changes—except in certain circumstances. When the author the editor is working with doesn't have legal ownership of a work, the editor's hands will be tied with regards to making alterations. For example, O'Connor Rodriguez was the primary editor of *Life Is Short—Art Is Shorter* by David Shields and Elizabeth Cooperman. The book consists of a mixture of original essays by Shields, and collected short stories by other

authors, which Shields obtained legal permission to reprint. For the Shields essays, O'Connor Rodriguez had full editorial capabilities; for the stories by other authors, though, he said he "felt more like a proofreader." Copyright law is a serious issue, and the last thing a publisher wants is a lawsuit from an author who feels his or her work has been inappropriately fiddled with. Hence, in these cases, a conservative approach to editing is required. O'Connor Rodriguez recalled that while working on *Life Is Short—Art Is Shorter* he "wasn't hesitant to fix any typos or ensure that the manuscript conformed to [Hawthorne Books'] house style" but that he was "opposed to making any significant change" even if he felt it might improve the work. He emphasized that striving for "the most perfect manuscript" is always his goal as an editor, but in this case he was constrained by the bounds of his assignment and any changes beyond proofing were not appropriate. Since Shields had been the one to choose which stories to include in the anthology as well as the one to obtain permissions from the authors (or their estates), O'Connor Rodriguez relied on Shields to provide him with pieces in the form that they had legal permission to use. "It's generally best to trust that the person collecting the permissions for an anthology (in this case, the author) will provide the approved version," he explained. He did not compare the stories Shields provided with the original published versions because "most often, [the version the author provides] will be in exactly the same form as the published version or very nearly the same." Regardless, what the original version looked like is of little consequence to the editor in this circumstance—the important thing is that the editor have a version that is legal and approved, and refrain from making major changes to it. O'Connor

Rodriguez added that sometimes the permission holder can pass a comment back to the owner of the work and obtain permission to make a fix. Similarly, Storey said that if she were working with the permissions holder rather than the author of a work and she came across an obvious substantive error, “something the previous editor clearly missed,” she would point it out to the permissions holder but never make the change herself. Once the problem has been noted, it is out of the editor’s hands, and if the owner doesn’t respond or doesn’t agree to the change, the issue must be left as-is, no matter how easy it would be to fix it.

Even if legal permissions weren’t a factor, the non-presence of most of the authors in the project would likely cause the same outcome. *Life Is Short—Art Is Shorter* featured stories by forty different contributors—but the only one that O’Connor Rodriguez had access to was Shields. Since he was also the only one who was creating new material for the collection, it was only with him that O’Connor Rodriguez could have a collaborative author-editor relationship. Although the public perception of editors is that their work is just fixing mistakes, the editor is actually often an important collaborator in the author’s work. There is a vital aspect of back-and-forth to the process, and the author and editor need to be in some kind of conversation—whether through comments on the manuscript, a letter of suggestions, working together in person or on the phone, or some other way—to work towards a final product with which they both feel satisfied. All of the editors I talked to were very clear that they were completely comfortable making changes to a previously published work as long as they worked collaboratively with the author on the changes. The third editor I spoke to, Kevin Sampsell of Future Tense Books,

said “I wouldn't feel weird about [suggesting changes] at all. It's mainly about how the writer feels about it.” Storey said that she would have no qualms about making changes if the author were involved in the process, and pointed out that sometimes changes *need* to be made in order to allow stories to exist in a collection, as patterns and tics may emerge only when all the stories are put together. She cited an example of a collection she'd worked on in which the author, without realizing it, had given every male character green eyes. In a single story it wasn't a problem, but when all the stories were put back-to-back the repetition became noticeable and needed to be fixed. She was adamant that she would not introduce a change herself, but would notify the author of the issue and allow him or her to decide how to resolve it.

“Never make changes without asking,” Storey says “unless you've worked with an author long enough to know for sure what they would allow or want you to do.” A longstanding working relationship between an editor and an author may get to this point, but it is almost always preferable to err on the side of conservatism: the editor's responsibility is to point out problems and provide suggestions, not rewrite things in his or her own words. Still, direct access to the author allows the editor much more freedom to suggest changes deeper than line-level edits requiring no approval—and it was the opinion of O'Connor Rodriguez that editors should absolutely take advantage of that freedom. “If permissions aren't an issue, and the writer wants to work on the piece, by all means, do. If it's something like a collection of essays by one author, for example, you can edit the hell out of it,” he said. “The difference [is that] the permissions holder is the person you're working with.” Since the author will have the final say over which changes are approved and which are



rejected, the editor can and should do whatever he or she can to make the manuscript as good as possible, even if it means making it different from the original published version. As long as both the editor and the author feel that the edits are improving the work, there's no need to worry about overriding the choices of a previous editor. "Previously published work isn't gold, and the *New Yorker* might've been wrong when they edited the piece in the first place. I'm allowing the writer to do whatever they want with the thing so long as I think it's better off for the changes," O'Connor Rodriguez said. Sampsell noted that while stories that have already gone through editing tend to "feel more polished" than those that haven't, "it doesn't mean I can't edit it. I will still make changes if I feel it's needed." Storey did express that it might be a bit strange to have two drastically different versions of the same story out there, but also emphasized that pieces that have already been edited "tend to need little work anyway" and that she would most likely only choose to publish a story that didn't require much tinkering in the first place, eliminating the problem. Still, she said that she was certainly willing to make necessary changes (such as in the green eyes example cited above) as long as the author was part of the decision-making process.

Even when the author is involved, though, things can get tricky. Editorial theorist G. Thomas Tanselle explored a concept in his essay "The Editorial Problem of Final Authorial Intention" involving what he termed "horizontal" versus "vertical" revisions to a work. This taxonomy has to do with situations in which the editor has to decide if the changes to a work are substantial enough to consider it an entirely new version. The number of changes, Tanselle argues, is less important than the

type of changes—a work can undergo dozens of small changes and be the same work, but only a few large changes (for example, eliminating an entire character, altering a major structural detail of the plot) can make the work into something completely new. The former he calls horizontal revision; the latter, vertical. I was fascinated by this concept, and I wanted to see whether it played out in any way in the work of my interviewees. I asked them if, should an author come to them wanting to make major changes to a piece, there was a level of change at which they would suggest treating the piece as an entirely new work. Their answers, once again, trended toward a practical rather than a theoretical approach. Storey said it depended on where the piece was published before. “If it was in the *New Yorker*, no, they can’t change it! Because we want to be able to say ‘Published in the *New Yorker*’ in our publicity materials. If it was in the *Portland Review*, yeah, make it entirely new,” she said. As a general rule, though, “if it did become a different story, make it a different story.” Sampsell explained that the scenario was realistic in that “writers really do make major changes sometimes,” and he expressed no hesitation about allowing authors to transform their stories into new pieces if they so desired. “I’m not against even retitling something that has been reworked a lot if that’s what the author wants,” he said. “I think it can be cool to have a couple of different versions of a story out there, especially if they are really different. It can be almost like a remix.”

So editors are willing to make changes to previously published works, as long as they have legal permission to do so and the author is involved. However, both those factors are also in place with a new piece that’s never appeared anywhere

else. Are there any circumstances that would cause an editor to be more likely to suggest changes to a previously published piece?

The answer is context. A short story has its own goals, but it also has to fit in with the overarching goal or project of the publication in which it appears. As mentioned above, this often comes down to the choice to include it or not, but even after a story is chosen for a publication, small tweaks can make it more suited for that context. All the editors I spoke to were in agreement on this matter: in order to make a previously published story fit well into a new publication, changes are absolutely advisable. “It’s very common practice to assign different editorial goals when a piece is used in different contexts,” O’Connor Rodriguez said. As an example, he explained that while literary magazines often edit pieces for length, the editor of a collection will likely not take length into consideration “unless it’s just a better piece condensed.” In a case such as that, the author could come to the editor and say “I think the original, longer version of my story was much better, can we go back to that?” and the editor would probably allow it as long as he or she thought the longer version wasn’t weaker than the shorter version. The logistical considerations of publishing in different formats—periodical versus book, online versus print, collection with many authors versus one author—can result in different approaches to editing the same piece. Sampsell mentioned that the goals of different publications can also differ: for example, magazines tend to strive to be of-the-moment, whereas books are designed to stand up to the test of time. These goals have to be manifested through their content. Sampsell explained:

Maybe an editor for a certain magazine really liked a certain line and felt like it made the piece more topical, and maybe I felt like the piece would seem more timeless if that line was taken out. Editing something for a magazine and editing something for a book can be a little different because of that need to feel timely or timeless.

Timeliness isn't the only goal that can change between publications; readers' expectations can vary widely depending on the theme, marketing, and history of a given publication. Storey insisted that meeting readers' expectations for the publication is more important than worrying about readers discovering that a story they've read before has been changed. "Many readers don't reread things that they've already read anyway," she said—and even those that do notice differences are unlikely to be bothered by them. At the end of the day, "taking the reader into consideration is not so important as taking the marketability of the book into consideration." If a change needs to be made to help a story fit into the context of its new publication, the fact that the piece was published differently elsewhere should not deter the editor from suggesting the change.

The conclusion I was able to come to, based upon my sample, was that when editors are dealing with work that has been published before, they do not feel hesitant to edit it unless logistical reasons—legal permissions, unavailability of the author—prevent it. In some cases, changes are advisable *because* of the fact that the piece has been published before, such as when changes would help the piece better fit into the context of its new publication; and often the need to make changes is circumscribed by editors having the ability to only choose pieces that are already polished and suited for the publication. However, if a previously published piece could benefit from changes, editors will suggest them, regardless of what the

previous editor of the piece had done. It seems the goal of making the work great trumps any deference to what it was in its earlier incarnation.

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