



## An Essential Guide to an Invisible Art: A Review of “The Invisible Art of Literary Editing”

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### REVIEW OF

*Bryan Furuness and Sarah Layden. The Invisible Art of Literary Editing. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 152 pages.*

The work of publishing literary magazines is central to creative writing pedagogy in the United States. In my combined years as a college faculty member, undergraduate student, and graduate student, I have worked on the staff of four literary magazines at four institutions and advised two undergraduate journals at two different universities. Yet in all that time, not once did anyone provide any formal education in the art of being a literary editor. We received handouts on copy editing and held discussions about the pieces we were interested in publishing, but any training in the art of selecting pieces, corresponding with authors, editing chosen work, or curating and organizing an issue of a magazine, was entirely through the example set by professors. I was taught as my professors were taught, and as I have taught my students about editing: through experience and knowledge passed down from one person to another—essentially, through lore. There were no real guides to literary editing that had the classroom and undergraduate students in mind. While teaching through lore *can* work, it leaves much to chance. With *The Invisible Art of Literary Editing*, Bryan Furuness and Sarah Layden have written a much-needed practical guide, one that will assist graduate students, faculty, and undergraduate students for years to come.

Furuness and Layden organize *The Invisible Art of Literary Editing* into four parts. Part One ushers the reader through the process of forming an aesthetic and mission for a journal. Part Two details the steps of the acquisition phase, including both solicitation and selection. This section also contains advice and examples of how to correspond with writers.

Corresponding with writers can be a particularly thorny problem (I know this from personal experience; I once had an author whose story I rejected offer to send me photos of himself, to see if that would make us change our mind about publishing him). The examples on how to tactfully accept, reject, and suggest edits, are clear, cogent, and useful. Part Three takes up the majority of the book. It is composed of case studies in editing. A broad assortment of editors, both professionals and undergraduates, share their editing process in full, including annotations on specific works. Each case study is also accompanied by an interview with the editor about their editing philosophy and methods. Part Four is devoted to teaching editing techniques through exercises. Real poems, stories, and creative non-fiction pieces act as what Furuness and Layden refer to as “CPR dummies.” These texts are accompanied by suggested editing techniques, such as “Editing with Lenses,” “Editing with the Body,” “Selection and Sequencing” and “Editing with a Heavy Hand,” among others. There are plentiful questions to provoke discussion, introspection, and experimentation along the way. Finally, the book ends with guidance for creating an editing philosophy.

I can attest to the book’s usefulness on a personal level, as I assigned it in Fall 2023 to my Magazine Publishing Practicum students. This is the class in which we prepare to publish *Polaris* literary magazine. In the Fall we learn about publishing and begin soliciting submissions, all to build the foundation for publishing the journal in the Spring. *Polaris* is fairly unique among undergraduate magazines in the extent to which we seek to professionalize our student editors. There are seven paid editorial positions, and we’ve won awards from the Society for Collegiate Journalism almost every year since I started seven years ago, yet it is also a student club, so we have student staff from across the university. I bring all of this up not to brag, but to point out that *The Invisible Art of Literary Editing* had a tough crowd to please with the *Polaris* group, given their vast range of experience with literary magazines and the discourse surrounding publishing. But Furuness and Layden have created a text that rose to the challenge. The entire class, from new students to experienced editors, raved about the book.

As we went through Part One and Part Two, the new students found the way it laid out the sequence of editing a journal useful and reassuring in its clarity. The experienced students were deeply engaged in the process of thinking about the mission of *Polaris*. As a journal that has been around for decades, *Polaris* wasn’t creating a mission from scratch, but it was still valuable for the students to think through our goals as a publication, and to explicitly articulate those goals. Furthermore, this discussion seemed to fill the newer students with a sense of purpose, a realization of the impact that a literary journal can have. Because of this book, the students generated strategies for refining the articulation of our submission guidelines and aligning those guidelines effectively with our mission. We also had productive discussions thinking through the implications of asking writers to make changes to their work. *The Invisible Art of Literary Editing* led my students to ask many

excellent questions. When is it not only okay but necessary to ask an author to change their work? And how does editing poetry differ from editing fiction, or non-fiction? How is editing between professional writers and professional editors different than the engagement that might occur between an undergraduate editor and an undergraduate writer?

Part Three and Part Four engaged my students in active editing practice. My genre editors coordinated discussions in their genre groups (students who would be helping to screen fiction, poetry, and non-fiction) over the case studies, and the room buzzed with excited voices. Finally, with photocopies of the “CPR dummies” students chose an editing lens and began to practice their editing skills. That class period was quiet, as the students focused on the work with intensity. One of my graduating seniors who aspires to be a professional editor immediately went out and bought her own print copy (she’d been using a digital copy from the library), saying that she hadn’t even known she needed this book until she’d read it, but now she knew she did.

As a faculty member, I shared her sentiments. While I’ve taught for many years without this book, and learned my own skills without it, I never intend to forgo assigning it again. This book has made my job as the faculty advisor for a student literary magazine infinitely easier, and it clearly made my students feel empowered. If you teach literary editing, you must go out and buy this book. You won’t regret it for an instant.