



Who are the great editors? Who decided they were great and why? Are they born to the job, or did they have key experiences that developed their knowledge and skills? Are they always substantive editors? Do they always work with individual authors? These questions and more were the focus of this year's senior editors' roundtable at the EAC conference, *Reflections: Editing Content and Culture*.

The roundtable's 11 participants had done their homework: preregistering for the session and completing an online questionnaire that helped start the conversation in Montreal. Easy questions? We thought not. For some of us, there was an aversion to framing the discussion in terms of greatness. Aren't editors supposed to be invisible? To use skill, possess knowledge, and exercise savvy, of course, but to do so with humility, always putting the author or the project in the spotlight. But some editors do become prominent. What's that all about? And is it a good thing?

Here are just a few comments and stories from the wide-ranging discussion. Check the sidebar for additional online readings.

On skills

"A great editor brings an awareness of how people operate. One of the things I can do as an editor is come alongside someone and say, "That must be really difficult to write about." I lend them my heart to bring out something that is there.

When I think of great editors, I think of people who demonstrate enormous skill; people who share it; people who mentor; people who accept that their reputation is largely invisible. Those people will never have the kind of recognition a Douglas Gibson or an Ellen Seligman gets. If you're going to include that larger group in the definition of great, you have to talk about categories and types of editorial work. And you're doing a disservice to stu-

dents and practising editors if you don't talk about those other editors, because so few people will turn out to have the opportunities and the kind of talent the very prominent editors have enjoyed. There are many editors in the trenches. Those are the people who can take ownership of a huge editorial project, who can communicate well, who can set sensible policy, and who can help prevent a posse of editors from getting suicidal.

Can someone be great at every level? Can there be great proofreaders? Great copy editors? They may not be involved in the project in the global, visioning way, but is it fair to say that only those involved in the creative side are the great ones, and those involved in the finalizing, the correcting, side are not?"

On knowledge

"For me, the common element great editors share is the ability to understand the bigger picture and to help bring a project to fruition, no matter what their specific role may be in a project.

He said editors in Toronto should know whether streets in Montreal formed a cross. Several editors complained about this. He asked, "Do you have a map?"

Where do you find the conversations about editorial vision? For the most part, they're not there. I can't find anything that talks and teaches convincingly about visioning, creative thinking, synthesizing diverse information, and drawing key information out of an author.

I heave a little internal sigh whenever I hear the word *vision*."

On identity

"That word great seems to stand for the public face of editing. In other words, it's the non-editor's notion of an editor: "My dear, you must rewrite Chapter 3." There are perhaps only 10 or 15 people in Canada like that. And it's a perfectly legitimate

enterprise to investigate great editors in the sense of public, substantive editors of literature. But some of us have heroes—mainly heroines—who have never done a substantive edit in their lives.

There are some editors who are great because they're not there. They may be the ones who primarily service the text. They bring out the energy of what's already present. And then there are some editors who are great because they have created something more: a magazine, a newspaper, a publishing imprint. They're building something beyond a text. Many great editors are not public figures. But those public figures help provide a profile for our profession that gets people thinking. Everyone thinks they can write. Perhaps worse, everyone thinks they can edit. These public figures can help get our profession noticed in a positive way."

More to come

Thanks to the roundtable participants for their gift of time and thoughts to get the research ball rolling. Watch for more reports on this new research project into the skills, knowledge, and professional identity of editors. [↗](#)

Online Reads

Six Measures of a Good (Great) Editor

EAC past president Anita Jenkins reflects on five key measures. Lenore d'Anjou adds a sixth. www.sources.com/ssr/docs/SSR41-2-Editors.htm

The Great Editors Project

Sixteen editing students from Douglas College go in search of their great editing hero or heroine. www.douglas.bc.ca/programs/print-futures/good-reads/linked/The_Great_Editors_Project.html