

Edition

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Program Report

Let's Get Personal: Editing the Personal Essay

by Trudi Down

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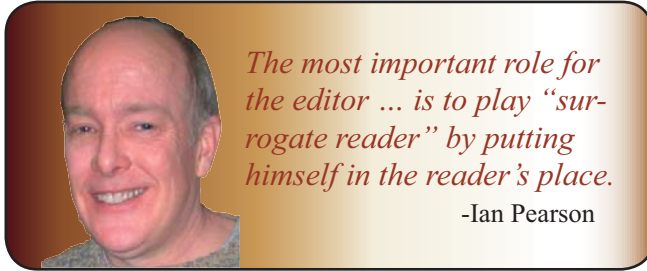
Two very experienced editors from different backgrounds provided insight into the challenges and joys of editing personal journalism at the February meeting of the Toronto branch of EAC.

Toronto writer, editor, and radio producer Ian Pearson typically writes long-form personal essays (~10,000 words), and his articles have appeared in most major Canadian magazines. A former editor at *Maclean's*, *Toronto Life* magazine, and *Saturday Night*, Pearson is currently an editor for the Banff Centre's Literary Journalism program.

Christina Varga is an editor with *The Globe and Mail*, where she has done everything from layout and copyediting to assigning stories. She currently works in the Report on Business section and has just finished a temporary assignment for the Facts & Arguments (F&A) page.

Pearson and Varga divided their comments into two parts: how to pick a topic for a suitable personal essay piece, and how to edit such a document.

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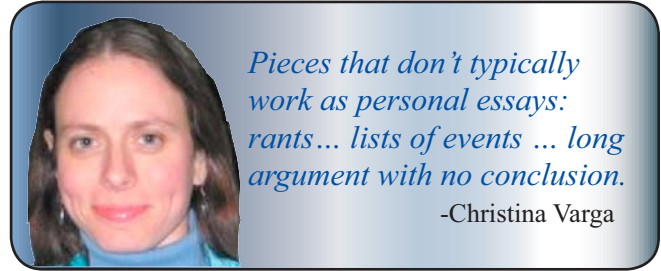
Pearson started by giving his definition of personal journalism. Authors of well-written personal essays put themselves in the story to provide some emotional commitment, he said, but they avoid becoming the stars of the piece. A good essay should have a conversational tone and provide insight into a universal experience.

Both speakers seemed to feel that selecting an appropriate topic for a personal piece could be difficult, so each spent considerable time addressing this issue. An editor needs to ask two key questions when considering the merits of a personal piece: “Why are you telling me this?” and “Do I, the reader, need to know this?”

“It is the editor’s role to make sure frank disclosure doesn’t become pure indulgence,” Pearson noted. Varga agreed, adding that an editor has to be alert for the good, strong story that doesn’t sensationalize the person or the issue.

To be successful, the piece needs to be based on a topic or issue that is worth writing about, or a story that reveals personal interaction between the writer and the subject. Travel pieces, for example, are excellent vehicles for personal essays—as long as the author’s voice doesn’t overpower the story. The ultimate success of personal journalism, however, lies in the literary ability of the writer, Pearson said. With intelligence, humour, confidence, candor, and great powers of observation, an author “could probably write about fridge magnets and get away with it.”

According to Varga, an editor needs to ask what is beyond the anecdote and the experience that makes the piece good personal journalism. “The piece must include some issue that is of universal experience.” She noted that when selecting pieces for publication,



the editor also has to be alert for those pieces that are appropriate but may not be ones that appeal personally. She acknowledged that it can be challenging to be open to pieces that speak to a wide audience but are about topics you are not the least interested in yourself.

Pearson summed up his comments by saying that the most important role for the editor in personal journalism is to play “surrogate reader” by putting himself in the reader’s place and trying to determine how he or she will see the piece.

Varga then provided some excellent hands-on tips for editing personal essays, based on her experience with the widely read F&A page at *The Globe and Mail*. She began by reminding the audience that most of the pieces she received were written by amateurs. “It’s very much like copyediting,” she said. Check for consistency, make sure the lead is strong and up-front, ensure there is more observation than the use of “I”, stress the point and ensure that it doesn’t peter out. Watch out for errors in grammar and ensure that varied sentence length is used. It was also her experience that a lot of fact-checking had to be done. In addition, these inexperienced writers often have difficulty with dialogue, and they need help to make their pieces flow naturally. The challenge for the personal essay editor is to fix these types of problems while retaining the individual voice of the writer.

Using examples provided on a handout, Varga also noted the kinds of pieces that typically don’t work as personal essays, and the classic pitfalls aspiring essayists fall into: rants about some perceived injustice, lists of events or experiences, and pieces that degenerate into a long argument with no conclusion.

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Personal Essay *from page 3*

During the Q&A, Varga admitted that, contrary to most of the audience's expectations, she actually enjoyed working with amateur writers and found that they did not mind her rewrites. Pieces are usually turned around within 24 hours, about two weeks ahead of publication. Rejections are done by standard form letter, and no critique is offered.

Earlier in the evening during his talk, Pearson digressed to comment on his experiences at Banff. A member of the audience asked him about the skills and knowledge of students selected for the Banff program. It is his experience, he replied, that today's writers in the Banff program do have an appreciation for the great personal essayists of the past, and for good writers in general.

An outstanding personal essay is difficult to find and requires careful and attentive editing. However, according to the evening's speakers, the rewards are well worth the effort. Varga admitted that she was often very affected by the experiences that F&A writers shared. The personal essay is one of the easiest kinds of writing to write, and the hardest to succeed at, Pearson said. "But when it works, it works gloriously." **E**

Trudi Down has a background in education and library research, as well as newspaper and magazine writing. She's an EAC and Professional Writers' Association of Canada member, and is General Manager of The Corporate Word (www.thecorporateword.com).

Discuss on-line

