

Edition

The newsletter for members of the
Editors' Association of Canada, Toronto branch

April 2006

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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EAC TORONTO EXECUTIVE

Branch Chair
Jennie Worden
416 465-3547
syntactician@uniserve.com

Vice-Chair
Gillian Faulkner
416 489-2677
dh939@torfree.net

Secretary
Janice Dyer
905 823-3724
janicedyer@editors.ca

Treasurer
Mary Anne Carswell
416 469-6784
mcarswell@sympatico.ca

Membership Chair
Karen E. Black
416 686-8126
karenblack@sprint.ca

Program Chair
Craig Saunders
416 699-4874
opeditor@sympatico.ca

Professional Development Co-Chairs
Martin Townsend
416 967-5994
makingwordswork@rogers.com

Alan Yoshioka
416 531-1857
ay1@aysedit.com

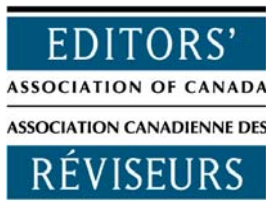
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416 533-4879
plant@tcn.net

Newsletter Chair
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edition@rogers.com

Past Co-Chairs
Elizabeth d'Anjou
416 465-8455
elizabeth@danjou.ca

Andy Carroll
416 929-4402
andy.carroll@sympatico.ca

Greg Ioannou
416 783-0469
greg@colcomm.ca



27 Carlton Street, Suite 507
Toronto ON M5B 1L2

Branch Administrator: Brian Cardie
Tel. 416 975-5528 Fax 416 975-5596
E-mail toronto@editors.ca
Web site <http://www.editors.ca>

Hours: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday to Thursday

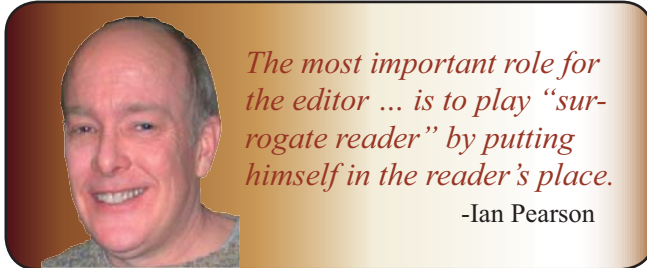
Call for Nominations

TAKE CHARGE!

Like being in charge? Have great ideas for the association you'd like to see put into action? Consider running for the EAC Toronto executive! As an executive member, you can:

- give something back to EAC
- meet a great group of colleagues
- encounter terrific networking opportunities
- keep the branch running smoothly
- and have a lot of fun!

For more information, see the Toronto branch page of the EAC Web site, or contact Andy Carroll, chair of the nominating committee (andy.carroll@sympatico.ca).



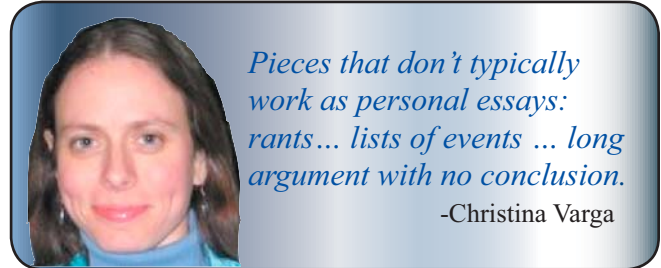
Pearson started by giving his definition of personal journalism. Authors of well-written personal essays put themselves in the story to provide some emotional commitment, he said, but they avoid becoming the stars of the piece. A good essay should have a conversational tone and provide insight into a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



Some of us think of ourselves as copy editors and some don't, but like it or not, almost all of us have a copyediting hat that we don from time to time. If your hat has a few holes in it, then we may have just the seminar for you. In **Copy Editing II** on Saturday, April 29, popular seminar leader **Elizabeth d'Anjou** discusses some of the thornier aspects of real-life copyediting beyond the basics.

Have you ever stared at a complex quotation and wondered, "Can that comma really go there?" Do you wonder if readers will deem the term "manhole cover" sexist, but find yourself at a loss as to how to replace it? Do you reach the end of a manuscript only to quail at the sight of the bibliography? If you've been copyediting for a while now but you still have unnerving, embarrassing knowledge gaps like these, you'll find that Elizabeth can stitch them up in practically no time.

A detailed list of this seminar's appointed topics is available on EAC's lovely new green-and-blue Web site (see URL below). For a tailor-made experience, bring along the copyediting questions that bug you the most.

April seminars and their URLs:

* Copy Editing I:

www.editors.ca/branches/toronto/seminars/copy.html

* Writing and Editing Marketing Materials:

www.editors.ca/branches/toronto/seminars/marketing.html

* Three Steps to Effective Business Writing:

www.editors.ca/branches/toronto/seminars/business.html

* Copyright: What an Editor Really Needs

to Know: www.editors.ca/branches/toronto/seminars/copyright.html

* Eight-Step Editing:

www.editors.ca/branches/toronto/seminars/eight.html

* Copy Editing II:

www.editors.ca/branches/toronto/seminars/copy2.html

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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



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