

by Stephanie Deming

The Subversive Copy Editor: An Interview with Carol Fisher Saller



The Subversive Copy Editor: Advice from Chicago (or, How to Negotiate Good Relationships with Your Writers, Your Colleagues, and Yourself) is a delightful book. I haven't had this much fun reading about things editorial since devouring Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* back in the middle 1990s. The author of *The Subversive Copy Editor*, Carol Fisher Saller, not only is a senior manuscript editor at the University of Chicago Press but edits *The Chicago Manual of Style Online's* Q&A, a role that has given her ample insight into the conflicts that can develop between editors and writers. Her book is filled with excellent advice and illuminating anecdotes, and Saller has an engaging writing style and a wonderful sense of humor. I burst out laughing at this passage (p 58):

You are an intelligent, sensitive, conscientious soul ready to buckle under the strain of too much work to finish perfectly in too little time. You stay up nights to meet deadlines; you work through weekends. You cry. And that is very wrong; there should be no crying in copyediting.

I won't claim that all those adjectives apply to me, but I will admit to having occasionally cried over copyediting, even while I knew that doing so was ridiculous. If you recognize even a bit of yourself in

that description, read *The Subversive Copy Editor*, and you should discover several new strategies for enjoying your job more and lightening your mental load without compromising the quality of your editing. And now, without further ado, Saller herself, in an interview conducted by e-mail in March:

SD: *The title is terrific. For readers who might be wondering what type of revolution you're trying to start, could you give a brief bio of "the subversive copy editor"?*

CFS: Just between you and me, there's nothing revolutionary about what I say in SCE—experienced editors will recognize that. But stereotypes die hard, so when I decided to write about how writers and editors needn't be adversaries and how copyeditors should break the rules more often, I imagined people gasping, and I decided it would be more fun to run with the apparent shock value than to be defensive about it. So the subversive copyeditor is armed to the teeth: she has mastered the rules, but has enough experience and flexibility to break them in the service of the text. She's sort of a double agent—in cahoots with both the writer and the reader—except that she doesn't try to hide anything.

SD: *You note that some inexperienced manuscript editors "will take a fresh and well-voiced text and edit the life out of it" because they are obsessed with rules and have only a "small bag of tricks" (p 7). Could you talk a bit about the importance of expanding one's bag of editorial tricks?*

CFS: It's important because if you have limited knowledge of various types of writing, you won't be able to think above the mechanical level: you won't understand allusions; you'll miss wordplay based on foreign phrases; you won't know names and terms that an author's readers take for granted. And if you know only one way of editing, you'll try to force every writer to write the song you want to hear, instead of the one she wants to sing. The most effective way to learn more—in addition

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continued

to reading widely and just paying attention as you move through the world—is to practice the craft. Make mistakes and learn from feedback. It's helpful to read style guides and browse Web sites for editors and take editing classes, but there's no substitute for editing experience.

SD: You write, "Knowing how to tinker with a broken piece of prose until it hums is a source of contentment known by all who have mastered a worthy craft" (p xvi). How long did it take you to master copyediting, and what kinds of training and practice were most helpful to you?

CFS: I hesitate to say I've mastered copyediting! I think it's more likely that I'm in decline without ever having mastered it. Some of the young editors I work with are unbelievably sharp-eyed; they catch things I miss. But although they do a good job with the basic stuff—the inconsistencies and typos—I often have to point out why they should have left something alone. For instance, recently one of them changed "*ur* romantic" to "unromantic" in a manuscript, even though it occurred more than once. It's understandable that she hadn't run across that term before. But her real mistake was in not looking it up, even after the second occurrence—she doesn't yet know when not to trust her judgment. For me, the most valuable training was when my supervising editors were looking at everything I worked on and pointing out the errors. Humiliating, but valuable.

SD: I loved the anecdotes you share about your own relationships with writers and colleagues. Was it hard to share this kind of personal information?

CFS: It was, but it's working out okay. People seem to find it endearing when you

admit you're an idiot—they think you're just being modest. I'm sort of hoping readers will assume I made everything up.

SD: Could you say a bit about the genesis of this book and the process of writing it?

CFS: Well, one day at work a couple of years ago I was pondering all the angst in the e-mail to the Q&A, and the phrase "The Zen of copyediting" came to mind. I felt that this phrase was larger than just a slogan—something I wanted to give thought to and maybe write about—so I typed it into a Word doc and e-mailed it to myself with the subject line "Idea." As I typed it, I expanded it a bit to "The Zen of Copyediting: Essays from Chicago" and wrote "The subversive editor: reader before writer, writer before employer." I still have the e-mail. I cooked it around a bit, started writing the book in May, and finished the first draft in August. It's pretty much a rant. Once I worked out an outline, which was the hard part, I had a ball actually writing it.

SD: How did it feel to be a writer rather than an editor?

CFS: I've always been a writer. I haven't been published much—a few children's books—but I've got manuscripts in drawers and closets. So it felt natural to me. The great difference was that this time I was writing what I really do know. Only the organization of it was difficult; the ranting was easy, and revising was the most fun of all. It often occurs to me that revising is where editing and writing are joined in the most satisfying way.

SD: How was the experience of having your own book copyedited?

CFS: I'm so lucky—I would have trusted any of my colleagues to copyedit the book, and the one who did, Erin DeWitt, was terrific. She caught some embarrassing mistakes, made good suggestions, and let me break any rule I felt strongly about. And she let me see the book-in-progress at all the stages authors don't usually get to see. In any case, I have a thick skin and have always welcomed editing. I hope my colleagues who are reading the book now will tell me what I got wrong or left out in case I get to do a second edition.

SD: Can readers expect another book from you in the future? Any hints on what it might be about?

CFS: Oh, dear—I wish! I would love to keep writing. My editor Paul Schellinger and I have kicked around a couple of ideas, but no, there's nothing in the works. In fact, I've gone back to working on a young-adult novel that I put down in order to write SCE. But Paul keeps encouraging me not to say hello and goodbye to this audience with one and the same book. Let me know if you have any ideas!

THE SUBVERSIVE COPY EDITOR: ADVICE FROM CHICAGO (OR, HOW TO NEGOTIATE GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR WRITERS, YOUR COLLEAGUES, AND YOURSELF). CAROL FISHER SALLER. CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS; 2009. 150 PAGES. PAPER \$13.00. ISBN-10: 0-226-73425-0. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-73425-5. CLOTH \$30.00. ISBN-10: 0-226-73424-2. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-73424-8.