

The Editor's Role as a Harriet Shaw Weaver

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Two weeks ago I visited Dublin, Ireland, where the summer meeting of the Anatomical Society was held. A literary walk was included in the conference program, and it began just after the poster session. About 50 participants attended in two groups. It started at a famous pub on Duke Street, and an actor guided each group. In the pub, we were guided to a small private hall where I found a picture of James Joyce and a framed letter he had written (Fig. 1).

The actor told us that the letter was written to a magazine editor, Harriet Shaw Weaver, and when Joyce could not find anyone to publish his major work, *Ulysses*, Weaver set up the Egoist Press for this purpose at her own expense. It is thought that without the editor's help, the great novel would never have been published, and thereafter Joyce would not have become a world famous writer.

On my way home, I thought about how much the reviewer's recommendations to a journal editor should be taken into account. Should the editor rely upon a reviewer's opinion or does he have the right to accept or reject the paper against the reviewer's recommendation? Should he play the role of one who 'plucks a pearl from the mud' as Weaver did?

A recent paper shows that journal editors tend to place considerable weight on reviewers' recommendations. If all reviewers recommended not rejecting an article, editors still rejected the manuscript 20% of the time. If all reviewers recommended rejection, the editors rejected the piece 88% of the time. Further, if the reviewers were divided, the editors rejected the manuscript 70% of the time (P=0.001) [1]. It is noteworthy that if all of the reviewers recommended rejection, the editors still accepted the paper 12% of the time.

The publication process involves author-editor interaction for

which both get credit once the article gets published—the author directly, the editor indirectly [2]. However, the process of peer review can be prone to biases towards ideas that affirm the prior

Fig. 1. Photograph of James Joyce and his letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver. Taken at 'The Duke' in Dublin

Weaver was the magazine editor and arranged the publication of Joyce's book.



convictions of reviewers and against innovation and radical new ideas [3].

In the reviewing process, peer reviewers should avoid intellectual suppression due to the Matthew effect and Heider's assimilation-contrast theory. The Matthew effect is the phenomenon in which "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." In the case of academic publication, it means that manuscripts of famous researchers have a greater chance of being published even if they are inadequate, while unknown authors' work may be required to meet a higher standard or even rejected simply due to lack of an established reputation [4]. Heider proposed the distinction between two types of affective reactions in relation to the emotional expressions of others. He argued that we experience concordant affective reactions to the ideas of persons who belong to our in-groups and discordant affective reactions to those with whom we do not identify [5].

The role of editors is to comprehend the degree of concordance of reviewers and determine whether to accept or reject an author's work on its own merits. Sometimes they should be a 'devil's referee' [6], and sometimes they should be a Harriet Shaw Weaver.

At the pub, two actors performed a portion of 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett. Two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, waited endlessly and in vain for the arrival of someone named Godot. Godot's absence has led to many different interpretations. For me, as an author, after submitting a manuscript to a journal, the decision letter can be a figurative 'Godot' that I feel I am waiting for endlessly. Until that letter finally arrives, I wonder whether the editor will truly be my advocate.

Editors should remain sympathetic to the fact that authors who have submitted a manuscript to a journal are waiting for a letter that begins "I am pleased to inform you that..." While enforcing strong standards of rigor and ethics, the best editors

will be on the lookout for unconventional ideas that should be published. It is such ideas that will move science and clinical practice forward the most.

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