



Portrait of an Editor as a Sceptic

by Jean G-Owen © 2026

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We Give A Fig

At [Figarama: The Write Fair](#) last Saturday (28 March), I was asked about editing—what it involves and what, exactly, qualifies someone to call themselves an editor. The person picked up my book on self-editing, [Killing Your Darlings: Editing as an Act of Murder](#), and thumbed through the pages, clearly entertained by the conceit. Cosy crime as a metaphor for editing tends to do that. They grinned at the title, at the suggestion that editing might involve a certain necessary ruthlessness (which, of course, it does).

The question wasn't hostile. Curious, if anything—the kind of question that's given with a tilt of the head and a half-smile, as if the answer might be simpler than expected.

'I can only tell you what qualifies me,' I said.

But since the session was about their writing and not my profession, I promised to put my thoughts on editing in writing.

Many years ago, at a busy time, while juggling postgraduate study and two jobs, I was encouraged to consider editing as a portable career. The idea intrigued me.

'You don't need formal qualifications,' the friend said. 'Just a good command of English.'

'Really?' I replied. 'So anyone can set themselves up then.'

'Pretty much—I did.'

I found this attitude odd and a bit suspicious, since few professions allow such a casual approach. Surely being "good" at English wasn't enough. My Bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature and Language, and TEFL training proved my credentials in my native tongue, though that wasn't always the case.

I wasn't born with a plum in my mouth. My only access to the Queen's (now the King's) English was the BBC. My father's Herefordshire dialect and my mother's verbal idiosyncrasies (she hailed from the Potteries) shaped my early language. Neither paid much heed to *book-learning* or good grammar; the idea of attending university was as far from our table talk as caviar.

After school, I took an intensive two-year Private Secretarial Diploma course, which included Business English, Communication Studies and Commerce, as well as the usual shorthand and typing (at one stage, I attained 100 wpm!). The skills I acquired have proved invaluable, often providing the foundation for my various career paths, including editing.

I began my academic quest at the age of 26—after a ridiculously brief marriage and a traumatic crisis that almost ended everything—securing a place at the University of Essex. In my second term, a snobby peer mocked me for my

“elongated vowels”. I worked hard to master the language and literature I loved. Later, I trained as a creative therapist. Now, four degrees later, I’m proud of my self-funded journey from poacher’s daughter to PhD graduate. Still, I hesitated to call myself an *Editor*; the role seems to require more than language mastery (and yes, my lilting regional accent remains). Undeterred, I invested time and money in Chapterhouse editing, copywriting and proofreading courses. What an eye-opener!

Several (long) decades have passed since those heady days of *how-to-edit*. In the main, I’ve edited freelance alongside my other professions. I’ve worked across a range of forms, shaping numerous Master’s dissertations and PhD theses on topics from Volkswagen and the influence of D. H. Lawrence’s bowties on his writing to domestic violence in Turkey and BlueSky thinking. I’ve edited academic collections (see [On Replacement](#)), books on dance (which came about because I’d been private secretary to Ann Hutchinson Guest, great-granddaughter of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow), poetry, novels, short story collections, business manuals, promotional material, charity campaigns and website content. And now, through my own small press, I continue to edit every piece that passes into print.

Early on, I understood how much every editor needs an editor if they wish to be a writer. It is perhaps the most humbling truth of the profession. I introduced my first *real* editor in my book *Killing Your Darlings*. With her red pen and unflinching eye, Naomi slashed through my draft PhD chapters until they resembled a bloodbath. While back then, I cried in the toilets after each meeting, I now appreciate how her supervision nurtured in me both competence and backbone, gifts for which I remain profoundly grateful.

For many years now, I’ve worked with a trusted editor—someone who reads my work with the same rigour I offer to others. We work well together because we both understand that the resilience required of a writer in the face of feedback (in my practice, all feedback is positive) is equally necessary in an editor.

To be edited is to be reminded—repeatedly—that writing isn’t a solitary act, however much we might wish it to be. It is collaborative at its core. It requires another mind, another sensibility, another pair of eyes capable of seeing what the writer can’t always see.

No one is exempt from this. Not even those of us who have spent decades doing the work. Especially not us.

Being an established editor and writer doesn’t make me infallible. But it does make me wary of those who assume that being a writer entitles them to edit professionally. Experience has taught me that the difference between confidence and competence is always visible on the page.