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TW Column by Martha Nichols

Why the Battle Over Submission Fees Misses the Point



When you pay a submission fee to a literary magazine—say, the \$3 fee for submitting work to *Talking Writing*—where do you picture the money going? To help with administrative costs? To help pay writers or to fund contest prizes?

Or do you imagine those hard-earned dollars purchasing champagne for gleeful editorial toasts to the fools suckered into paying \$3 for a glance at their work?

Option C (for “champagne”) may seem far-fetched, but it’s pretty close to the attitude of some online commentators who are crusading against fees for literary submissions. The attitude not only depresses me; it misses the point. I’m tired of how much the work of editors is ignored or has become invisible. It’s just as bad as devaluing writers. Actually, it’s worse, because a narrow focus on the payoff for writers ducks the question of how we maintain literary quality in the new media world.

In the battle over submission fees, what troubles me most is the idea that it’s unethical for other writers to subsidize

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those who do get their work published or the editors who help develop and promote that work. This viewpoint assumes that writers do everything and editors do nothing—or that editors and other publishing professionals shouldn't care about working for free.

The latest round of submission-fee angst was sparked by the *Offing*, a new online literary “channel” of the *LA Review of Books*. It pays \$20–\$50 on publication. By mid-March of this year, before publishing anything, the *Offing* had received “almost 1000 submissions in a week,” reported one tweet from the fledgling magazine. It temporarily closed submissions, then reopened April 1, 2015, with a new \$3 fee. The same day, the Twitter flurry began, led by science-fiction author Nick Mamatas, who withdrew a submission of his own in protest. Sample tweets:

Nick Mamatas

1000 submissions=\$3000. Ten acquired pieces=\$200. \$2800 in the black without a single reader!

The Offing

Submit without a fee, any time, by mail. And during our four open submission periods in March, June, Sept, December.

Nick Mamatas

You're still monetizing your slush pile, even if you have teensy carve-outs here and there.

The Offing

Did you know all of our editors are volunteers?

Nick Mamatas

Yup. So? Volunteers, not dragged off the streets and forced to edit.

And so on. It's tempting to ignore such grandstanding, yet Mamatas's vocal opposition has been taken seriously. Lincoln Michel, online editor of *Electric Literature*, was part of that Twitter conversation, chipping in support for Mamatas and writing a more measured article a month later about the need to “rethink the slush” and the “ethical issue in charging submission fees.” The submission page for the *Offing* now includes this caveat: “If the \$3 presents [an] undue financial burden and your work is time-sensitive, just submit via email to the address below.” By mid-April, poet Timothy Green, editor of *Rattle*, had this to say in a *Best American Poetry* post:

Submission fees are anathema...they're exploitative and exclusionary and stifling. Having read submissions for a decade, I know: the majority of submissions have no chance at ever finding publication, even on a fair playing field. Editors sift for diamonds in the rough, and it's mostly rough, and we all know it. Charging money for nothing more than the 30-second skim it takes to see the obvious, when that small effort is simply the social good that you're supposed to be providing anyway, is egregious.

Anathema...exploitative...egregious. Me, I'd save that kind of rhetoric for climate-change deniers or the financial geniuses who blew up the mortgage market—not editors at small magazines who generally work long hours for little or no pay.