

Robert Epstein interview with Carolyn Hall

You are a highly accomplished haiku poet and artist. In addition to the five award-winning books that you have published, including: *Water Lines* (2006); *How to Paint the Finch's Song* (2010); *the doors all unlocked* (2012); *Calculus of Daylilies* (2017); and *Cricket Dusk* (2020), you have also, several times, taken on the role of editor. You served on the editorial staff of the Red Moon Anthology from 2004 to 2006. Founding editor, A. C. Missias, passed on the mantle of editing *Acorn*, a journal of contemporary haiku, to you from 2008 to 2012; and you have twice taken turns at editing the Haiku Poets of Northern California's Two Autumns anthology. You have also edited the HPNC journal, *Mariposa*, from 2001-2004; and again from 2018 to the present. I am delighted that you are willing to discuss your unique experience editing two contemporary haiku journals.

To edit a haiku journal, it naturally helps to be a published haiku poet. That said, not every haiku poet knows intuitively how to edit a haiku journal. I am wondering if you might share how you prepared yourself for undertaking the role of haiku editing way back when. If I recall correctly, you worked with Claire Gallagher as associate editor of Mariposa, which succeeded HPNC's Woodnotes.

The very first issue of Mariposa, the journal of the Haiku Poets of Northern California, was published in 1999—the year in which I wrote my first haiku, saw my first haiku published (in Frogpond), and joined HPNC. So though I would like to say that I was well prepared to be a journal editor, such was not the case. The first issue of Mariposa was a joint project edited by Claire Gallagher, Rich Krivcher, and Paul O. Williams. The following two issues were edited by Claire and Ebba Story. Then, to my surprise and delight, Claire asked if I would agree to try my hand as Associate Editor of the journal. I continued as Claire's Assistant Editor for two issues, and then was promoted to Co-Editor, a post I held for three years from 2002 through 2004.

To be clear, I was not new to editing. I had edited my own fiction and creative nonfiction for many years. And my most recent job, as a copy editor (and graphic designer) at a graduate school, often involved rewriting entire articles when the content was interesting but was presented poorly. I loved restructuring syntax and reordering content to make for a coherent whole. It turns out the same is true with haiku. There are so many fine poems out there

that I could never have written on my own, but which, with a small tweak, can be made into outstanding poems. I love the opportunity to suggest that tweaking.

Based on your experience, what qualities/skills have you found vital for effective editing of a haiku journal?

Based on the quality of haiku in various journals, and within the same journal but under different editors, it is clear that editors have wide-ranging skills. Readers will be drawn to (or not drawn to) the choices made by different editors. So perhaps what is most important is that an editor have a well thought out point of view and a consistent application of that point of view.

How has your own haiku writing helped to inform your editing of Acorn as well as Mariposa?

I have been writing and submitting haiku for more than 20 years. During that time, I have had my share of rejections. I have also had a considerable amount of success (if success is measured in poems published). It is trial and error that has been my best teacher. It also allows me to be empathic toward poets who submit to the journals I have edited. It allows me to approach a submitted poem not only on its extrinsic merits, but also on the basis of how much a poet has "improved" over time. It is very rewarding to publish a "pretty good" haiku from a poet who, until now, has been struggling to get the hang of the craft.

I am different from many haiku editors in that I construe my role not only as a selector of poems to publish but as an "editor," i.e., one who edits. So many poems come across my desk that are very close to making the mark, but (in my opinion) miss it by a hair. Perhaps it is simply the substitution of "a" for "the" that improves the poem. Sometimes it is an interesting juxtaposition that is awkwardly expressed. I occasionally say, "I will take this poem as you have written it, but I wonder if you would consider . . ." Other times I might say, "I am very attracted to this poem, but think it could be improved by doing x, y, or z. What do you think?" (with no promise to publish it as it is). I am as likely to do this with very seasoned poets as with newcomers. On very rare occasions, I have received a hostile response. Most often, however, the poet appreciates the suggestion and is willing to make a change. What is most thrilling to me is

when a poet comes back with an elegant solution that I would never have imagined on my own. That, of course, is a win-win situation.

Not every haiku poet who submits to the journals that you edit writes haiku like you do. How do you control for bias in terms of your own personal haiku writing predilections?

One can't completely control such bias. But the haiku I am most likely to select for publication are those to which my first response is, "I wish I had written that!" In other words, a poem that is written not as I would have done. There are an infinite number of topics on which haiku can be written. However, if one follows some or most of the guidelines that make a poem a haiku, there are a finite number of ways in which to write it. When a poet manages to create something new under the sun (i.e., finds a new way to express a feeling or to describe a moment or a scene), that is terribly exciting. In such cases I feel privileged to have the opportunity to put it out into the world for others to admire.

Although both are respected haiku journals, *Acorn* and *Mariposa* are not identical publications: *Acorn* contains only haiku while *Mariposa* includes senryu, tanka, linked verse, and haibun. I am wondering if the experience of editing these two publications has been notably different for you.

From an editorial standpoint, Acorn and Mariposa were not so different from one another. When AC Missias invited me to take over Acorn in 2008, I was thrilled because I considered it to be a journal of the highest quality. But our editorial outlook was quite different. I accepted the job on the condition that I would have complete editorial autonomy—and AC readily agreed to that. The book was different, but not worse. And under the auspices of Susan Antolin (who has edited Acorn since 2008), it is again "different" but in no way worse. Sue makes different editorial choices than I may have made, but it is considered an outstanding journal.

Acorn and Mariposa differ in two significant ways. The first is that HPNC is a members-only journal, so I receive submissions from fewer than 100 poets per issue. That gives me the luxury of accepting more than one poem per poet. The other difference is that Mariposa includes tanka, renga and, haibun and other linked verse. The number of such haiku-related forms is constrained by

printing and mailing costs, so I am forced to reject a larger percentage of such submissions than I would like to do.

What do you regard as the most gratifying parts of editing a haiku journal?
What's challenging and/or stressful?

What is most gratifying is the opportunity to showcase a poet's best work. Equally gratifying is the opportunity to develop relationships with members of the haiku community. That has been a source of great joy to me.

What is challenging is to try to stay out of the poet's way. As I said, I don't hesitate to make suggestions when I think that might be helpful. But I have to rein myself in from my impulse to rewrite the poem the way I might have written it.

What is most stressful is the necessity to reject some submissions based simply on space limitation; and, of course, the need to reject some submissions based on the quality of the haiku. All rejections are hard.

As an editor of two well-respected haiku journals, what off-the-record advice or reminders would you recommend to new and experienced poets in submitting their work for consideration?

One thing I have learned only recently (after writing and submitting haiku for more than 20 years) is to look at my poems from the perspective of an editor. "Would I," I ask myself, "accept this poem for publication?" Or an even more stringent criterion: "Would I give this poem an award if I were judging a contest?" It is surprising how often a poem of my own—to which I have become particularly fond—fails both of those tests.

If you are asking what do I admire in haiku, the answer is haiku that have a fresh take on a familiar subject. And/or that effectively use ordinary language to celebrate the everyday. And/or that present vivid imagery. And/or that speak to more than simply what is seen. And/or that employ meter and musicality and exquisite language. And/or that have surprising, impactful, and creative juxtapositions. And/or that make effective use of kigo. And/or that make me smile, or even laugh out loud. And (most important in haiku, though not so much in senryu) that reward me with deeper insight on repeated readings.

Charlie Trumbull, in a blurb on the back of my first book, wrote of my haiku, "Here is a writer who knows that the best haiku illuminate the human condition." I was thrilled with his characterization of my haiku. It is what I look for in the haiku of others.

I try very hard to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Still, with each issue there are submissions which are just not ready for prime time. Haiku that try too hard to be engaging or funny or clever. Haiku that spell out an emotion. Haiku that direct the reader how to feel. Haiku that are just a sentence or clause broken into three lines – or a sentence turned inside out to create an artificial break. Meaningless words in a 5-7-5 format. And "haiku" that bear little resemblance to what we have come to recognize as exemplars of the form.

Everyone who submits poetry to journals rides the seesaw of acceptance and rejection. Acceptances are easy, but I wonder what encouragement or advice you might have for those—which may be most—poets who find themselves disappointed or disheartened when their poem(s) are not chosen. As an editor, what is it like for you to decline a poet's work?

*It is always very difficult to reject a submission. I've been there. I know how it feels to receive one of Bob Spiess's "not quite"s. I try to be as gentle as possible. If it is a poet who is relatively new to the form, I will most likely suggest that they read everything they can get their hands on – and am likely to suggest sources of what I consider to be high quality haiku, or refer them to Lee Gurga's *Haiku: A Poet's Guide* (which I consider to be an outstanding resource for all things haiku). I will almost always invite the poet to submit again for the next issue. I am genuinely eager to see what progress they have made in the six months between issues.*

Roberta Beary and J. Zimmerman have been outspoken about what they consider gender bias in the haiku community. As a woman journal editor, I wonder if you have any thoughts or reflections on this charged topic that you might like to share.

*I must admit to never having given it a thought. Poems are accepted for *Mariposa* based on merit, not at all on gender. I've looked at a couple of past issues (in response to you posing this question). In each case, the percentage of male and female poets is virtually equal.*

I am very curious to know what counsel you might give to your successors whenever that day comes to enrich their experience of editing a haiku journal.

Come to this job with an open mind and an open heart. No matter which journal I have edited, I have loved having this responsibility. Not only do I get to read a lot of fine haiku, but I have developed intimate relationships with many of the poets. And that is truly the icing on the cake.