Editors often receive little credit and even less respect for the work they do. If the author is deemed the primary creator of a text, the editor is considered the midwife — a key player during the work’s production who is forced to slip into the shadows after its realization, unable to fully reap the fruits of her labour. Helen Tartar, in her introduction to Darcy Cullen’s Editors, Scholars and the Social Text, writes that the editor’s role is “to give voice to others, keeping none for herself” (xvii). Thankfully, it is in Cullen’s collection, which is written by and about these elusive figures, that one can finally hear the editor’s voice. Featuring essays from practising editors, scholars, and designers, Cullen uses her text to shine a light on editors — whether they like it or not — and reveal the necessarily hidden mechanisms they use to make the author shine brightest.

Cullen uses both the form and content of her text to reveal the underlying structure implicit in the editorial process. Mixing perspectives as varied as Joycean scholar Peter Mahon’s impression of author-editor relations in Finnegans Wake and Toronto-based editor-designer Camilla Blakeley’s experience navigating the complex relationship between illustration and text in native culture, Cullen’s collection truly exemplifies the “social text” of her title. Additionally, she gives her own contribution as editor a prominent place in the collection as a whole, treating her introduction and conclusion as chapters integral to the work, instead of merely afterthoughts.

The essays are highly readable and at times perhaps too simplistic for readers of this journal; however, for editors new to the field, Cullen has provided a thorough and detailed introduction. She divides the work to highlight the primary factors competing for an editor’s attention: the people, the text, the page, and, a new addition to the editor’s slate, the electronic edition. Each of these factors comes with
its own set of demands and priorities, and the editor must balance all of them accordingly to ensure an edition meets everyone’s satisfaction.

The concept of the editor’s balancing act is most clearly delineated by Amy Einsohn in “Juggling Responsibilities,” one of the essays in the section entitled, “The People.” Einsohn focuses on the importance of the editor’s mediation between the author and publisher. In dealing with these two often opposed parties, Einsohn recommends a certain amount of editorial flexibility. She suggests that the editor’s role often will be forced to shift to the expectations of a particular project, and she comments, “[editors] are continuously discovering that they must unlearn information that they thought was true or useful but that is not” (76). It is because of the editor’s requisite adaptability that his role is often so difficult to pin down. She advises, however, that publishers take some stab at defining an editor’s responsibilities by forming a checklist of duties and expectations for each manuscript, and possibly allowing the editor to provide a sample edit for the author. While these exercises appear simple, they will allow the editor a reprieve from juggling so she can get down to the dirty business of correcting.

The other two essays in “The People” are written in a similar vein as Einsohn’s piece: Peter Shillingsburg’s “A Slight Conflict of Aims” addresses the editor’s varying roles in the commercial and academic spheres, and Rosemary Shipton’s “The Mysterious Relationship” offers strategies an editor can use when attempting to form a successful partnership with his or her author.

The book’s third section, “The Page,” similarly addresses the practical aspects of editing, focusing on the editor’s relationship with form. Blakeley’s contribution, “Merely Conventional Signs,” addresses the additional considerations an editor must account for when editing an illustrated book. Using samples and charts, Blakeley takes her reader step by step through the process of managing a book’s illustrations, from creating a caption file, to carefully integrating illustrations and text to form a unified whole. Richard Hendel, in “On Book Design,” further emphasizes the necessity of marrying form and content, highlighting the importance of a book’s design in showcasing its text and contributing to an understanding of its meaning.

Sigrid Albert, in “Changing Technology and the Editor-Designer Collaboration,” offers a counterpoint to Hendel’s call for the editor to take advantage of the dimensions of the page. Instead of designers and editors collaborating to create a unified work, their contributions are becoming increasingly separate. To speed up the process of
publication and reduce costs, publishing houses may keep a store of ready-made design templates that then can be easily slapped onto many different manuscripts. Additionally, through the use of open-source platforms for publication, and the customizable design options on e-readers, users are able to sidestep the designer’s expertise to create a truly user-driven design experience. To remain relevant, both editors and designers must accept the increasing malleability of a book’s form and content and develop new skills for crafting a cohesive design experience, as a means of reasserting the value of a custom-designed formal page.

The collection’s final section, featuring essays by Yuri Cowan and Cullen, expands upon the benefits and pitfalls associated with the user-driven edition. Both authors discuss the increasingly blurry nature of editorial work, as digital tools enable scholars to bypass traditional publishers and edit their own pet projects, making obscure works available to a whole new generation of scholars, and expanding the possibilities for literary scholarship.

This blurriness is often evident in Cullen’s collection itself, particularly in the book’s middle section, “The Text.” The heavily theoretical essays by Alexander Pettit and Peter Mahon illuminate the editorial care that must be taken when treating unconventional texts. However, the chapters seem out of place in a collection that otherwise reads more like a helpful guidebook than a dense work of literary criticism. While I cannot imagine that Cullen intended the shift between the sections of her collection to be so jarring (the book could certainly benefit from some substantive editing, a term I learned, in fact, from the book itself), perhaps the disjointed nature of Editors, Scholars, and the Social Text further helps to illustrate Cullen’s point. The voices of authors, designers, illustrators, publishers, scholars, and editors are always jostling for attention when a reader opens a book. While Cullen did not quite succeed in merging these voices, her collection has helped this reader realize that it is only by a miraculous feat of editorial strength that they ever sing in perfect harmony.

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