

Food and nutrition, health and well-being
What they believe: 12 . Karl Miller
The editor as alchemist



Karl Miller (above, left and right), who died in September, is the impresario of much of the most accomplished English writing in the last half century. He nourished generations of readers of the weekly journals the Spectator, then the New Statesman, and (below) then The Listener and founder-editor of the London Review of Books. He promoted poets who remained close to nature such as Seamus Heaney (above) and James Hogg (below) and his own books include two memoirs (below).

This story apparently celebrates literary editing in the UK, and a unique editor, but it is about the whole craft and art of editing, any time, anywhere. Everybody whose writing is published is edited, in some sense. So I suggest that we need to see the significance of editing. What prompts me is the recent death of Karl Miller, one of my mentors. He learned his profession as an editor at the UK weekly journals the *Spectator*, the *New Statesman*, then *The Listener* (lower row, left) which is where I worked with him. He nurtured very many writers including Nobel prizewinning poet Seamus Heaney. He also became professor of English literature at University College, London, combining this with co-founding and editing the *London Review of Books*.

Karl had a hard-learned and -earned luminous quality. He was a literary editor in a grand sense. This included gastronomy – a cover of his *London Review of Books* above features Emma Rothschild on the food culture of Hangzhou and its place in ancient imperial China. But that is by the way. Karl understood editing. He practiced it every day, becoming a maestro. Romantics like me claim that political, social, cultural and other movements are identified, catalysed and amplified by the editors of periodicals. Created, even! Great editors discover and transmute the spirit of their age. They are alchemists. This is how so many people see Karl.

Box 1

Karl appreciated

Extracted and adapted from the obituary in the New Statesman, 26 September 2014.

Karl Miller's first proper job began in 1958 as literary editor of the right-wing weekly political journal, the *Spectator*. He remembered it as 'a jolly sort of paper' whose 'displays of brilliance and impudence looked forward to the satirical sixties' in the UK. He moved to the left-wing weekly *New Statesman* in 1961. This required 'no gymnastic leap'. He found the best writers from the universities, as well as expert jobbing writers. His favoured contributors included the distinguished historian Eric Hobsbawm, who wrote about jazz under the name Francis Newton. The *NS* was in a great period – weekly circulation around 100,000 – and Miller's pages were admired. He had no fixed agenda, though his commissioning showed a strong egalitarian streak. He nurtured writers from the Commonwealth such as the South African novelist Dan Jacobson and the Trinidad-born Indian VS Naipaul.

In 1967 he was appointed editor of *The Listener*, a BBC weekly originally meant to reprint radio talks, but which long before had flourished as independent and unaligned. It had a smaller circulation but plenty of influence. It had become tired. Karl breathed it into new vigour. One of his first moves was to ask fellow editor and wit Mark Boxer to contribute a regular cartoon. He continued to commission academics with a light touch, and journalists with scholarly authority. The poet and critic William Empson, after seeing a copy of the magazine, said that Miller seemed to be doing 'all right.' while the eminent poet WH Auden on meeting Miller, said: 'You are the man who ruined *The Listener*'. While there he continued to publish the poets he loved, such as Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney, and also became part of a new move, an extension of sixties counterculture, to destroy hierarchies. His colleague Blake Morrison told me that Miller showed him how editing worked – 'how when you pause over a choice of word, you can also open up a discussion about ideas, history, etc, as well as language.'

In 1973 Miller left *The Listener*, after a dispute with the BBC about the direction of the journal. He landed on his feet again when Frank Kermode vacated the position of Northcliffe professor of English literature at University College, London. With him there the job united journalism and academia. Bestsellers were added to the syllabus, and even movies.

Kind of hip

In 1979 Miller co-founded the *London Review of Books*. His time on the *LRB* coincided with the regime of Margaret Thatcher, just as his time at *The Listener* had coincided with the Vietnam war and the student protest movement. He brought light into these obscurities. As well as bridging scholarship and journalism, high culture and low culture, he included political commentary. Many of the *LRB*'s controversies, in those years as today, related to challenging ideas and ideologies expressed in its pages.

At the *LRB*, Miller published a new generation of essayists and reviewers. One remembered Miller as 'the only editor I've known who edited poems as if they were prose. It wasn't beyond him to suggest the removal of lines or the scrapping of stanzas – even, on a good day, of an entire poem.' After identifying a word in a hand-scrawled Allen Ginsberg poem as 'illuminating' rather than 'illustrating', Miller took his small cigar out of his mouth and said 'I've never edited a poem before. But, in this case, it feels kind of hip'.

Working with Karl

My own experience with Karl in the late 1960s was a shaping force. In those days I knocked around with young media moguls like David Frost. In London the middle-aged men who had controlled the media including the BBC, were desperate to be told what to do, and even to be taken over, by cocky hipsters. Dear long gone days!

Having agreed to revive *The Listener* as part of the BBC's panicky shake-up that included the creation of the Radio 1 pop music channel, Karl worked in the Langham, once (and again now) one of the fanciest hotels in London, which had been turned into BBC offices for staff overflow from Broadcasting House opposite. *The Listener* was on the third floor of palatial chambers with high ceilings and big windows. The building, designed to be serviced by hot and cold running servants, had become a bit grubby, but even so, it gave a sense of wonder to visitors in those days when anybody could wander in. To go up you chose between creaky Edwardian lift with brass buttons or the grand staircase that wound round the elevator. Karl's big office was stylish and austere, like him. It had a great iron rattling radiator behind which, so it was later said, he stuffed furious memoranda from BBC bigwigs.

In a tight-lipped way, Karl was glamorous. He had a fine line in dry irony. Celebrated writers would stand and shake and sweat beside him as he sat silently examining their copy. It is said that some begged to take their wretched drafts away for a radical rewrite even before he spoke. But if you seemed to please him, such bliss!

He transformed *The Listener* into a whole new journal. My job was as designer. Our first issue, on the left above, was number 2001. For the cover we agreed an iconic photograph of the charismatic book publisher Tom Maschler and the 'underground' poet Allen Ginsberg reading about Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn being arrested for smoking dope in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury hippie district. Inside, Karl had commissioned the cartoonists Mark Boxer and Barry Fantoni. The cover features was the poet Thom Gunn on rock'n'roll, and the journalist John Morgan on flower power. One of the radio transcripts on which the paper was founded, was the Marxist scholar Isaac Deutscher on *Das Kapital*. The whole issue, sitting on my desk now, was – is – wonderful. It was the continuation of a new world. Or so we felt.

Karl and I gloated over the galleys and the page proofs. Then we went to the printers, Waterlow's in Park Royal, and gloated over the first copies of 2001 running off the giant presses built for the multi-million print-run of the BBC television and radio journal. In those days newspapers were printed letterpress on thin paper. Our newsprint was thicker, with no show-through. We had one extra colour, only for the cover titles. That was it. Within our resources Karl and I both knew that we had got it right, and that from then on under Karl, *The Listener* was, in print, as good as anything the BBC could do on television and radio. Or so we thought.

Box 2

Karl understood

Part of an appreciation by Karl in the London Review of Books, 23 September 2010.

A few weeks ago I visited Frank Kermode in Cambridge. I had known him for 52 years, and for much of that time I had been his editor. Originally I had been warned against him. I was told that he combined the faults of the academic and of the journalist. Frank did not agree that scholar and journalist were two different people. His writings were an undivided source of enlightenment. He did not want to be, as he put it, 'impressively arcane'.

Some weeks before then I went with friends to visit the grave of the Anglo-Welsh metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan. We read aloud a passage from Vaughan's 'great poem', as Frank rightly called it, 'The Night'. The passage was discussed by him in a sermon, by no means arcane, delivered in King's College Chapel on 11 May 1986. The passage reads:

God's silent searching flight,
When my Lord's head is fill'd with dew, and all
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night; His still, soft call;
His knocking-time; the soul's dumb watch,
When spirits their fair kindred catch.

The sermon is about the enabling errors whereby writers repeat and reverse what has been said before them, and Vaughan's passage draws on a passage from the *Song of Songs*.

I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night.

Frank loved literature. It took him into a world of light. These last words can hardly mean to us what they did to Vaughan in the 17th century. But they have yet to lose their meaning.

Reflecting on Karl

Now here comes the application of all this to the business of preparing – and editing – and publishing expert papers in scientific journals. Do you consider the process of editing, or think about editors? Perhaps not. Most contributors to journals concerned with public health or nutrition probably see most editors (and reviewers) as irritating un-named barriers between their 'papers' – as reports of original research are called – and publication. The feeling is rather like exposing your stuff for inspection to check-in and immigration and customs officers at busy airports, knowing that if what you have in your bags is too much you will have to repack them, that items seen as inappropriate will be binned, with admonitions if they are sharp or explosive, and that if your documents are not in order you will be delayed.

But such typical frustrations between submission and publication of papers on public health or nutrition in specialist journals, do not involve editing, as I understand the concept of editing and the vocation of editors. The main function of such journals is

as repositories. Preparation will involve only text- or copy- or line-editing, skilled crafts designed to ensure that papers have followed the often rigid rules for contributors, and that anything fuzzy, ambiguous, contradictory or mistaken that has been missed during review is resolved.

Such work falls short of what I mean by editing, as exemplified by the great pathologist, epidemiologist and politician Rudolf Virchow's *Archives for Pathological Physiology and Anatomy and Clinical Medicine* (or *Virchow's Archives* for short), or by *The Lancet* for much of its history, as for example edited by its founder Thomas Wakley, or its current editor Richard Horton. Here come my considerations on what editing is and should be all about. These I think apply to all published writing, including in scientific journals concerned with public health and nutrition.

Learning from Karl

What I have learned is as follows. First, everything that is worth saying can and should be said clearly. This is a version of Albert Einstein's 'everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler'. Second, the art and craft of editing is interlocutory, knowing how to engage the writer with the reader (or speaker with listener). Third, the design and sequence of words (or the rhetoric and modulation of speech) must be attractive, amplifying while staying faithful to the meaning of what is written (or spoken). Fourth, while the range of talent, energy, fortune, courage, imagination and intelligence in humans is vast, we can all basically understand one another. All forms of autocracy or priesthood are bogus. Fifth, at some times, an editor may be a statesman, even a magus, identifying, announcing and bringing a new age into being. Most and maybe even all cultural, social and political movements in modern times have been and still are sparked by regular sustained writing in the form of manifestos, tracts, pamphlets – and journals. Can you think of exceptions?

When I worked with Karl I was in my late 20s and he was in his late 30s – the first picture above shows what he looked like then. We worked together joyfully in 1967, the year of the Beatles' 'White Album', and (more to the point for me) the great year of Californian bands like The Doors, the Jefferson Airplane, Love, and the Steve Miller Band. Karl had a foot in that door. He paced around his big office, complaining about getting old. Meeting him 40 years later, at a book launch party in 2007, I reminded him of this. 'It's true now' he said. And so it was.

Box 3

Editing by Karl Miller

The Spectator (literary editor, 1958-1961). *The New Statesman* (literary editor, 1961-1967). *The Listener* (editor, 1967-1973). *London Review of Books* (co-founder, editor, 1979-1992). His books relevant to his editing are *Rebecca's Vest* (1993) and *Dark Horses* (1998).