

Book Review: *Scholarship, Money, and Prose: Behind the Scenes at an Academic Journal*

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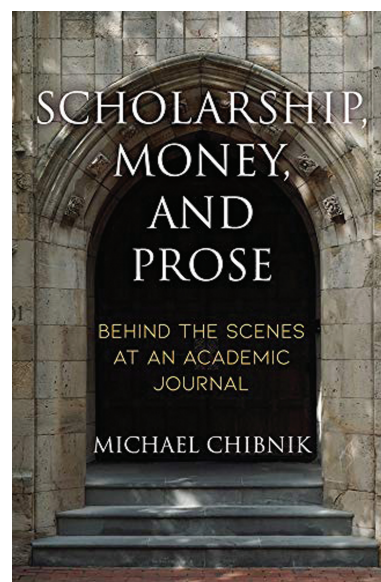
Scholarship, Money, and Prose: Behind the Scenes at an Academic Journal. Michael Chibnik. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; 2020. 207 pages. ISBN 9780812252170.

Many of us in science editing and related realms enjoy and benefit from seeing what others in our profession do. We can gain glimpses in this regard through periodicals such as *Science Editor*, events such as CSE annual meetings, and interactions such as CSE mentorships. Yet rarely do we have the luxury of a detailed look.

Scholarship, Money, and Prose: Behind the Scenes at an Academic Journal, by Michael Chibnik—now professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Iowa—provides such a look. In this book, Chibnik contextualizes, recounts, and reflects on his experience as editor-in-chief of *American Anthropologist* (the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association) from 2012 to 2016. The resulting mix of memoir and ethnography can appeal to and inform science editors, those they interact with professionally, and educated general readers.

The book consists mainly of a long introduction and a largely chronological set of 8 chapters. Derived in part from articles in *American Anthropologist* and *Anthropology News*, the chapters draw on Chibnik's perspective as a scholar whose specialties include the anthropology of work. Different chapters may especially interest different readers, and although the book is most meaningfully read as a whole, much can be gained from reading individual chapters.

Providing a foundation for the chapters that follow, the introduction includes basic information on academic journals and issues they face. It also describes the range of content in *American Anthropologist*. And, it notes that anthropology's diversity of subfields (sociocultural anthropology, archaeology, biological anthropology, and linguistic anthropology) complicates editing a journal in this field. The introduction also presents wise editor-selection advice from the previous editor



of the journal: Rather than concentrating on innovations that candidates propose bringing to the journal, seek “evidence of timeliness, strong organizational skills, and an ability to manage a heavy workflow without resorting to complaints and excuses.” How true, how true.

Chapter 1 regards the history of *American Anthropologist*. Although this chapter provides useful context for what follows, it may interest journal historians and American Anthropological Association devotees more than it interests science editors. The chapter can, however, be easily skimmed.

In contrast, Chapter 2, on Chibnik's seeking and embarking on the editorship, may appeal more directly to prospective and current science editors. His accounts of his application and interview processes may aid candidates and search committee members. Also helpful are Chibnik's descriptions of how he enlisted a managing editor and editorial assistant, assembled an editorial board, appointed associate editors, and worked with the previous editor-in-chief to ensure a smooth transition. In keeping with the chapter's title, “A Lot to Learn,” Chibnik also notes some surprises:

[During an initial meeting,] I did not pay all that much attention to the talk about metrics. This was a mistake. Both Wiley-Blackwell and the AAA were greatly concerned about these measures during my tenure as editor.

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When I had thought about the AA editorship prior to my interview for the position, my main concern had been the journal's intellectual content. During the editorial transition, I learned that the administrative complexities and headaches associated with editing a major journal are comparable to those I had experienced when chairing a medium-sized anthropology department.

Again, observations well worth remembering.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus, respectively, on the peer review process and Chibnik's decision-making about manuscript acceptance. Chibnik says that he generally had little difficulty obtaining peer reviewers and that most reviews were "constructive and helpful." Usefully, he includes the letter he sent to reviewers to guide them. He says he kept it largely the same as his predecessor's, but added a paragraph asking reviewers to comment on the clarity of the writing. He notes disappointedly that few reviewers did so and that, more generally, reviewers seemed to neglect the letter.

Chibnik characterizes decision-making about manuscript acceptance as "the most interesting and time-consuming of [his] many journal-related tasks." Helpfully, he includes anonymized excerpts from manuscript decision letters suggesting improvements. Also, he notes that nearly all articles published in the journal received revise-and-resubmit decisions initially, and that rejections usually resulted from multiple problems, few of which alone would cause rejection. These points, applicable to many journals, may benefit authors to know.

Chapter 5 regards attempts by Chibnik—who terms himself "psychologically incapable of ignoring horrendous prose"—to make *American Anthropologist* more readable. This chapter, too, includes helpful excerpts from decision letters. Chibnik mentions that when manuscripts had promising content but poor writing, he recommended that the authors enlist professional copy editors. He ends the chapter by stating, "Although the work we did on writing was invisible to readers, I regard it as being among our most important tasks." Manuscript editors reading the chapter are likely to cheer.

Like many association publications, *American Anthropologist* includes both peer-reviewed research articles and magazine-type features, such as columns, essays, obituaries, and book reviews. Thus, Chapter 6 focuses on Chibnik's work regarding *American Anthropologist* as a magazine. It devotes considerable space to the periodical's book review section, which contained many reviews, given books' importance in anthropology. This chapter may especially interest editors of other association periodicals (including *Science Editor*) that combine peer-reviewed research content and other material to serve a broad readership.

Editors of association periodicals also may especially relate to chapter 7, which concerns *American Anthropologist* as a business. The chapter includes sections on economics,

metrics, production, and open access. Chibnik's accounts of his interactions with the parent association, the publishing company, and others in these regards may be enlightening, if sometimes disheartening.

Finally, Chapter 8 regards the end of Chibnik's editorship. Chibnik notes that he especially liked reading manuscripts and working with authors but was less enthusiastic about some other aspects of his role. Among closing lessons he conveys are the following: When choosing associate editors and others to work with, consider not only ability but also collegiality. Be "both tactful and persistent" in pursuing one's goals as a journal editor. And do not worry excessively about matters beyond one's control.

Scholarship, Money, and Prose provides a valuable inside look at journal editing. As well as summarizing common procedures and issues, it offers specific examples of an editor's reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making, and communication. In keeping with Chibnik's emphasis on readability, the book also is clearly written. Reading it resembles shadowing a journal editor.

Two slight cavils: In places, indented extracts that seemed at first to be single examples turned out to be multiple ones; skipping lines between the examples or otherwise distinguishing them might have helped avoid confusion. Also, Chibnik, who writes that little has been published describing what journal editors do, seems unaware of the science editing literature and science editing organizations. Resources that might have been worth mentioning—and might have aided Chibnik—include articles in *Science Editor* and *European Science Editing*, classic books such as Claude T. Bishop's *How to Edit a Scientific Journal*¹ and Peter Morgan's *An Insider's Guide for Medical Authors and Editors*,² the CSE Short Course for Journal Editors, and CSE annual meetings. Maybe CSE should reach out more to editors in anthropology and other social sciences.

Despite its minor limitations, *Scholarship, Money, and Prose* has much to offer. Although, as Chibnik says, much of the content may be familiar to other editors, reading about counterparts' experience can be engaging and instructive, especially to those new to the field. The book, or parts thereof, also may interest others who work in scholarly publishing, authors who submit their writing to journals, and members of the public who may wonder what journal editors do. Rightly, Chibnik calls for more accounts of this type. May their authors emulate Chibnik's anthropological eye and clear voice.

References and Links

1. Bishop CT. *How to edit a scientific journal*. Philadelphia (PA): ISI Press; 1984.
2. Morgan P. *An insider's guide for medical authors and editors*. Philadelphia (PA): ISI Press; 1986.