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Fighting off line editors II

In the Autumn 1989 issue, you published on the controversy over line editing an article by N N Jonson and a letter from Ann Kritzinger.

It is clear that, as so often happens when a controversy develops, the various disputants (of whom I have been one) are arguing without there having been sufficient clarification of the points genuinely at issue.

A professional author ought to produce a text which is publishable as it stands. As Ann Kritzinger says, the sense intended should get across line by line. If it does, line editors are not merely unnecessary but intrusive.

Who is to judge whether the sense is indeed getting across? Here the professional author is entitled to say: I am the judge of that. To suggest otherwise is to attack the author's competence. By entering into a publishing contract publishers have usually committed themselves to acknowledge the competence of the author.

If the publishers can indeed prove an author guilty of the lapses mentioned by N N Jonson, such as repetition, contradiction, factual inaccuracy, spelling errors, or stylistic perplexity, then this presumption of competence breaks down.

So we must distinguish two cases. If the author fails to deliver what a professional author should deliver, namely a faultless text, then he or she needs line editing. But if, and to the extent that, the text cannot be shown to be other than faultless within the limits of the author's individual style and technique it should be sacrosanct. The alternative is to substitute the line editor's style and technique for the author's, which is preposterous. Whose book is it?