

## Where Can UVic English Take You? An Interview with Liz Johnston (BA 2008)

### What is your job?

Since 2019, I have been editing on a freelance basis. I've been incredibly lucky to work with literary publishers such as Flying Books, Véhicule Press, and Archipelago Press, as well as directly with authors and artists. I do everything from proofreading to copy editing to substantive and developmental editing.

Previous to starting a freelance career, I was the managing editor of *Brick* magazine, where I still sit on the editorial board. As a member of the board, I actively seek out new writing, soliciting submissions and then reading and assessing material to decide—along with my fellow editors, Dionne Brand, David Chariandy, Laurie Graham, Michael Helm, and Madeleine Thien—what will be included in upcoming issues. I copy edit for the magazine as well.



Liz Johnston

### What led you to pursue an interest in editing?

Quite simply, a love of literature led me to become an editor. I wanted to work with other people who care deeply about language and meaning. When I graduated from UVic, I had planned to become an academic, though I'd probably had the inkling of another path even then. My work study with *Victorian Review* likely sparked an interest; that's where I first read Amy Einsohn's *Copyeditor's Handbook*, which I still consult from time to time. Seeing how an academic journal comes together fascinated me, and I knew I wanted to explore this interest further. The more I learned about book and magazine publishing in Canada (through an internship with the *Literary Review of Canada*, volunteering at the magazine conference MagNet, and attending literary events around Toronto), the more I saw what a diverse and interesting career could be possible.

### What does a typical professional day look like for you?

There's no such thing as a typical professional day, and this is part of what I love about work in publishing. Even when I was on *Brick's* staff, my work was incredibly varied: in addition to editing material for publication, I managed the magazine's circulation, liaised with printers and mailing houses, applied for grants, headed up marketing projects, planned issue launches—even did some basic bookkeeping!

As a freelancer, I don't wear quite so many hats, but as I said, I offer a range of editorial services, so some days I'm proofreading on paper and others I'm suggesting substantive changes in Track Changes or writing an editorial letter for a developmental edit. With freelancing, work tends to ebb and flow somewhat, so when I'm finished one project and waiting for the next to come in, I might spend some of that downtime on self-promotion—checking in with clients, updating my website, posting on social media—or professional development, attending webinars or workshops. I write fiction as well, and so I like that freelancing allows me some flexibility to block off time for my own creative pursuits.

**What's your favourite part of your work?**

I love the variety itself: the different challenges with each project, the way language and usage constantly evolve. There's always more to learn. But my absolute favourite thing about editing is the relationships I develop with writers, especially when doing more substantive edits. I get immense satisfaction out of helping a writer find a way forward with a project, helping them conceive of a problem in a new way, or asking questions that spark a deeper line of inquiry. I find the conversations that arise out of the editing process almost always richly meaningful and invigorating.

**How did UVic English help prepare you for this work?**

I'm a better writer, a better reader, and a better editor because of my time at UVic. With the kind of literary works I have the good fortune to work on, my grounding in the literary canon often comes in handy; the breadth of works I studied at UVic helps me pick up on and understand references and allusions I come across in material I'm editing. I also learned the fundamentals of strong, effective writing, which I draw on all the time, whether doing structural or line editing. Likewise, the close-reading skills I honed at UVic help me appreciate the subtler things a writer might be trying to do—and occasionally suggest ways to better achieve that effect. In the most direct way, my work study with *Victorian Review* offered a primer in everything from copy editing to circulation.