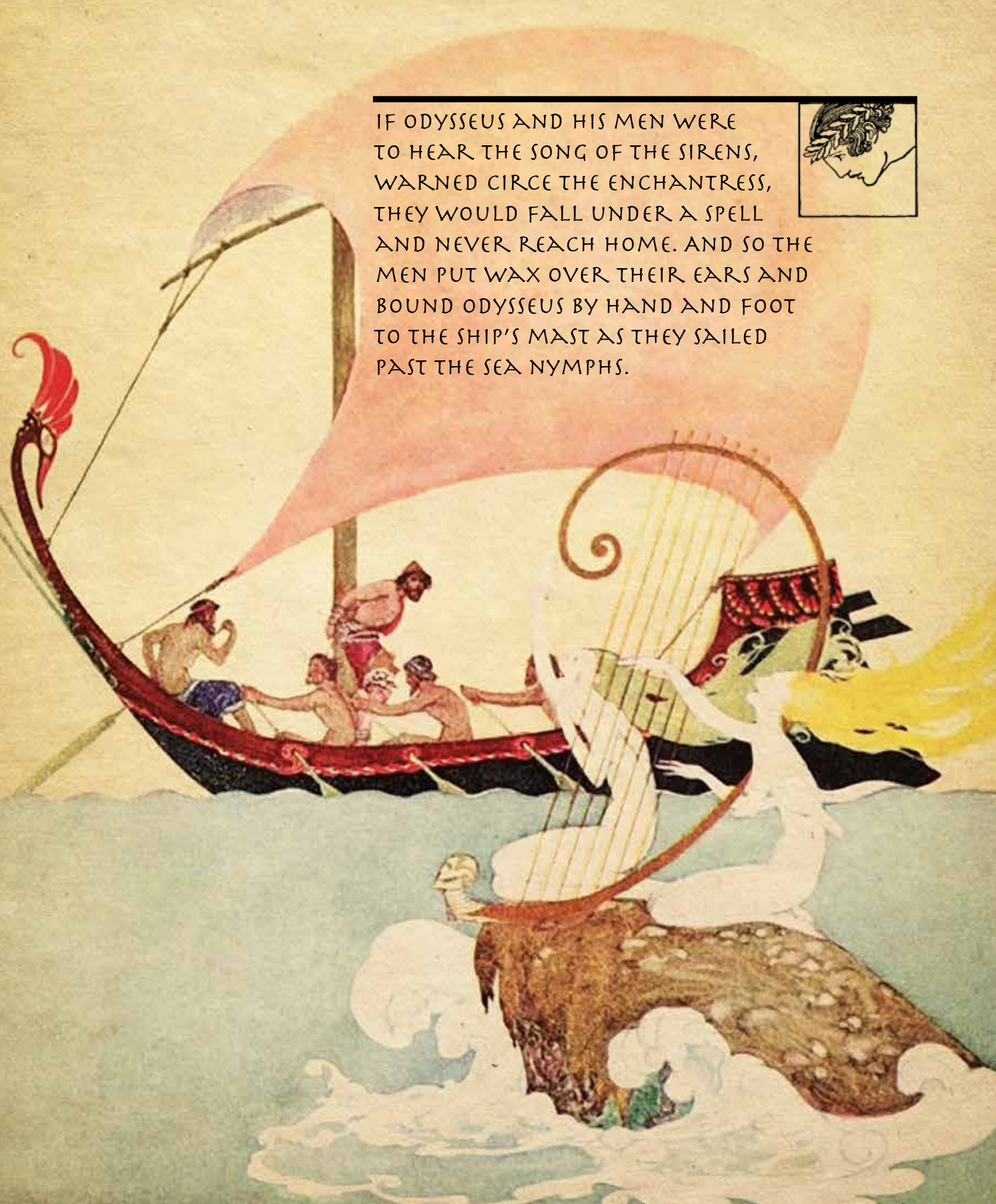


IF ODYSSEUS AND HIS MEN WERE TO HEAR THE SONG OF THE SIRENS, WARNED CIRCE THE ENCHANTRESS, THEY WOULD FALL UNDER A SPELL AND NEVER REACH HOME. AND SO THE MEN PUT WAX OVER THEIR EARS AND BOUND ODYSSEUS BY HAND AND FOOT TO THE SHIP'S MAST AS THEY SAILED PAST THE SEA NYMPHS.



Our Odyssey

The Quest
for an Effective
Volunteer Editorial Board

By Sarah Perlman

Picture a crew in a small but important vessel at sea. They're on an extended and harrowing journey. The sailors face a series of bitter storms, fierce monsters, and tempting diversions that threaten to wreck their ship and abort their mission. The beleaguered group vacillates in the face of adversity, while the captain and the rowers try to keep the ship afloat. They have no navy for defense, nor a charted course to follow.

Sound familiar? This was (roughly) the state of affairs for the Greek hero Odysseus as he persisted through his epic sea voyage toward home at the end of the Trojan War. It was also (more roughly) the state of the Federal Bar Association (FBA) magazine staff and editorial board in the spring of 2015.

The FBA is the primary bar association serving federal legal practitioners. And

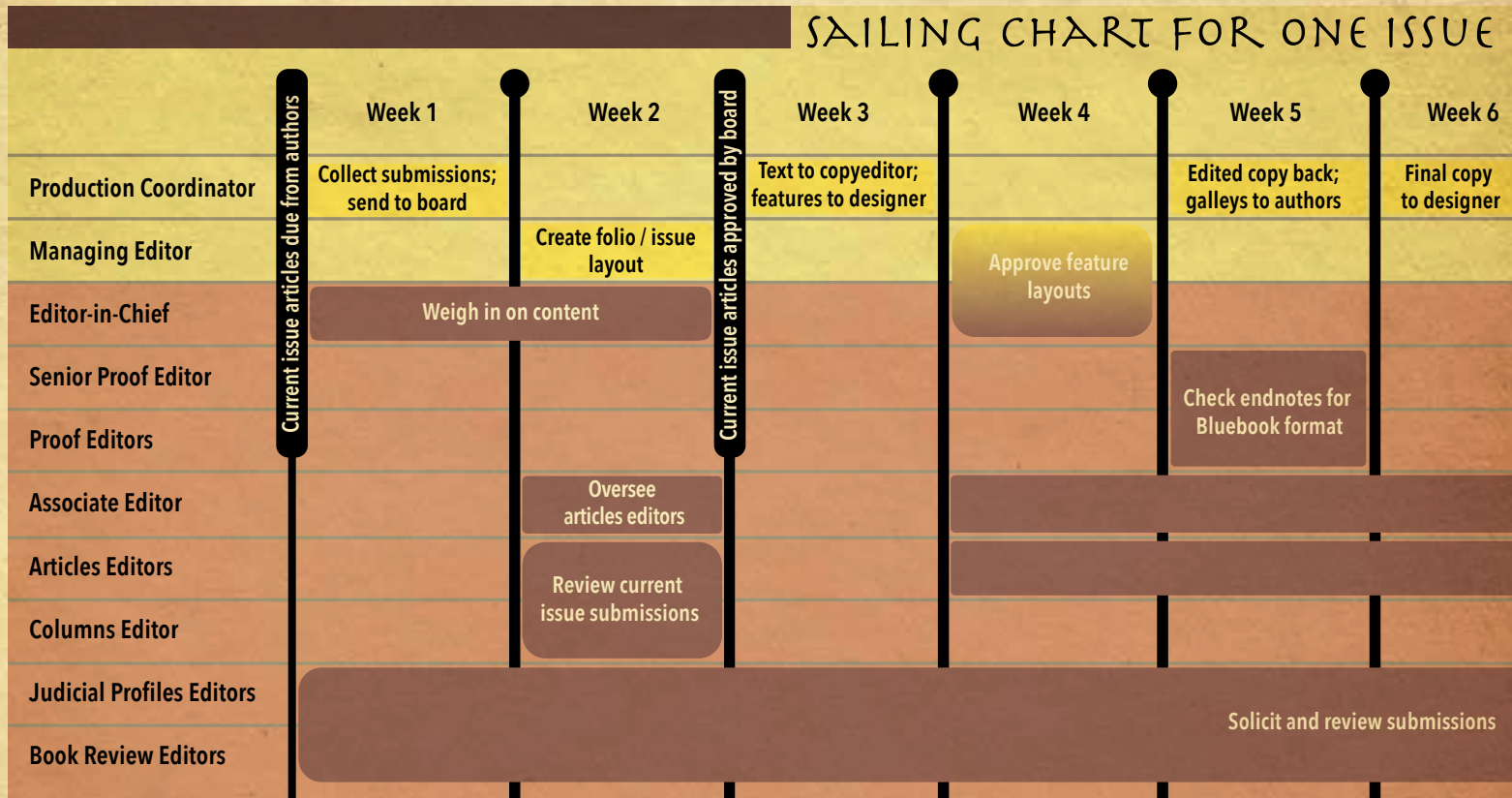
we rely on an all-volunteer editorial board to produce our flagship publication, *The Federal Lawyer*. In theory, these subject-matter experts are critical to the success of our magazine. They ensure that our content is accurate, credible, and highly informative so it serves our members and proudly represents our association. Here was the problem: We had a hearty group of 21 volunteers — all with demanding day jobs as federal attorneys, judges, and law clerks — who were willing to help but unsure of how to contribute. If you'll forgive my ever-so-slightly dramatic analogy, we were a group lost at sea.

At our annual meeting in September 2014, many of our board members voiced the same mea culpa: They felt they weren't pulling their weight. Meanwhile, our association staff and editor-in-chief were pulling their

own and then some — chasing down articles, juggling production deadlines, maintaining a log of articles to be published. And crucially, we weren't getting enough members to review each issue before it reached final proofing. Like Odysseus' constantly disrupted journey, we were not achieving the essential goal of an effective and fully engaged editorial board. We weren't getting the benefit of each member's expertise and perspective, and too few hands were doing all the heavy rowing.

We realized we needed a major course change when we went to press with an issue of *The Federal Lawyer* rife with spelling, grammatical, and layout errors — even botched endnotes (the pride of attorneys). Worse, this was the second such issue in three months. We had a broken process. There was a lack of accountability and

SAILING CHART FOR ONE ISSUE

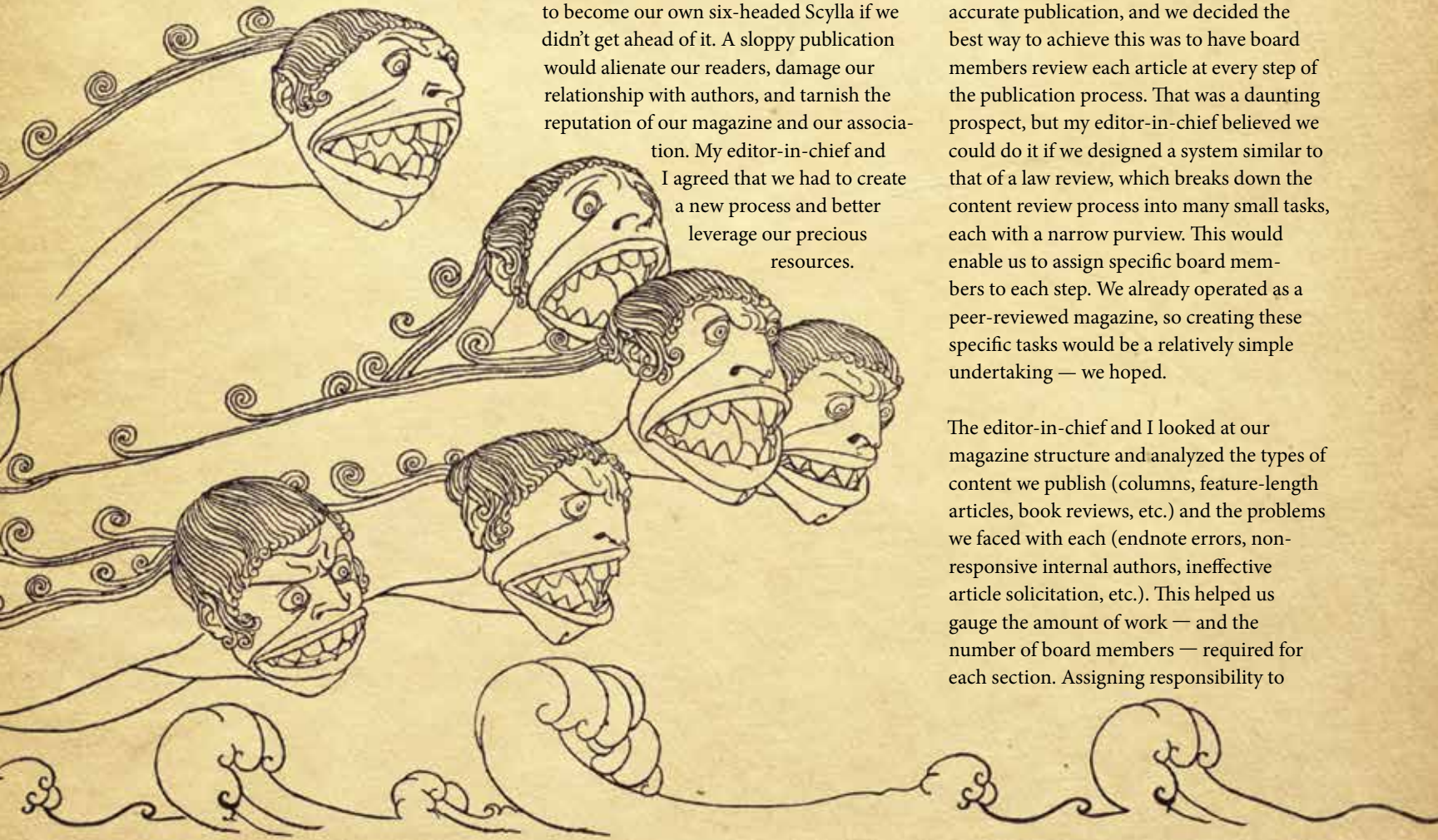


proactivity from the very beginning of the editorial cycle. And this problem threatened to become our own six-headed Scylla if we didn't get ahead of it. A sloppy publication would alienate our readers, damage our relationship with authors, and tarnish the reputation of our magazine and our association. My editor-in-chief and I agreed that we had to create a new process and better leverage our precious resources.

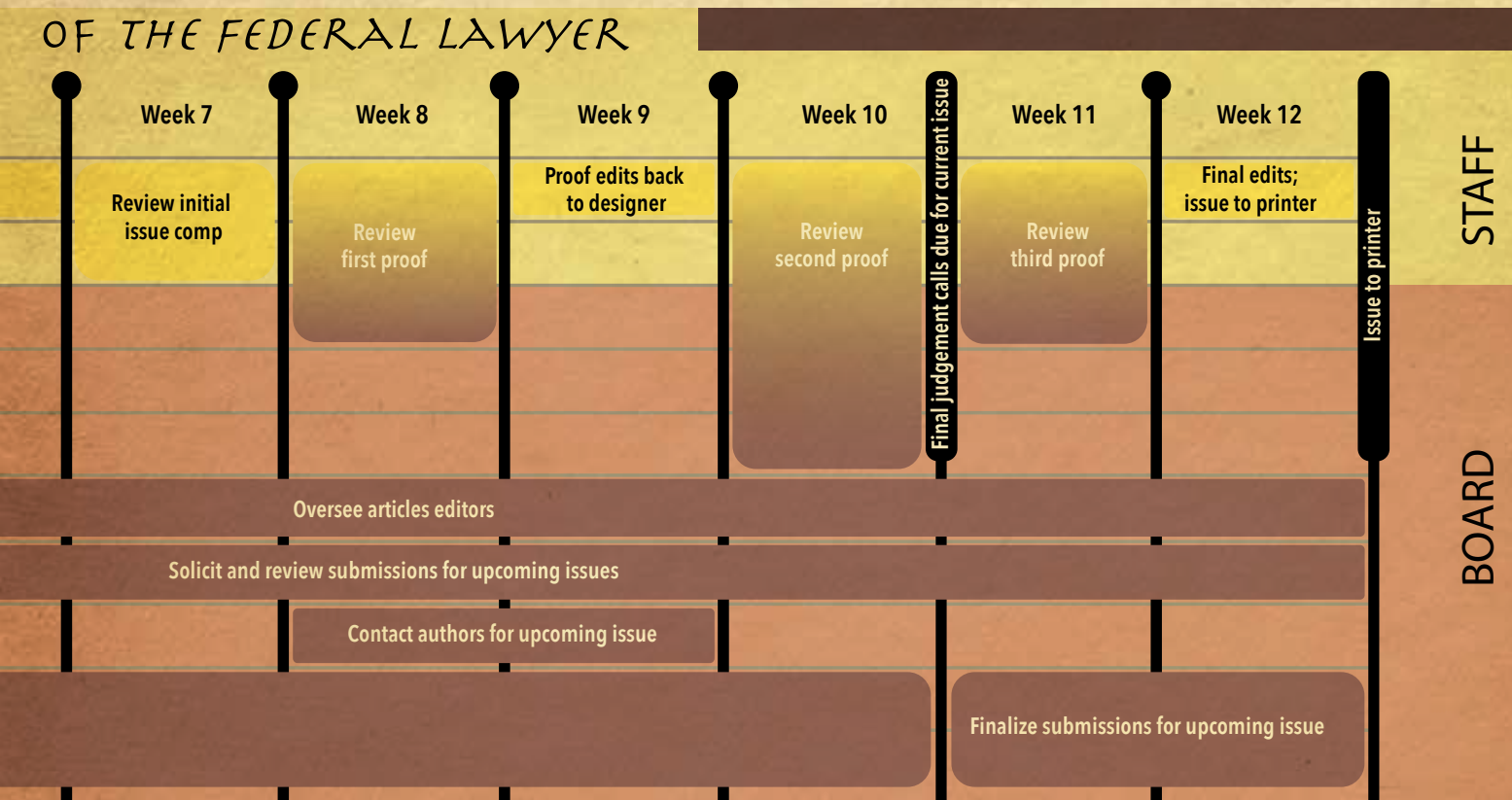
CHARTING A NEW COURSE

Our overall goal is to produce a reliably accurate publication, and we decided the best way to achieve this was to have board members review each article at every step of the publication process. That was a daunting prospect, but my editor-in-chief believed we could do it if we designed a system similar to that of a law review, which breaks down the content review process into many small tasks, each with a narrow purview. This would enable us to assign specific board members to each step. We already operated as a peer-reviewed magazine, so creating these specific tasks would be a relatively simple undertaking — we hoped.

The editor-in-chief and I looked at our magazine structure and analyzed the types of content we publish (columns, feature-length articles, book reviews, etc.) and the problems we faced with each (endnote errors, non-responsive internal authors, ineffective article solicitation, etc.). This helped us gauge the amount of work — and the number of board members — required for each section. Assigning responsibility to



OF THE FEDERAL LAWYER



each group and letting go was a frightening prospect. But, just as the captain of the vessel must entrust the crew to batten hatches and follow orders, we had to trust our editorial board members to perform more tasks if we guided them effectively.

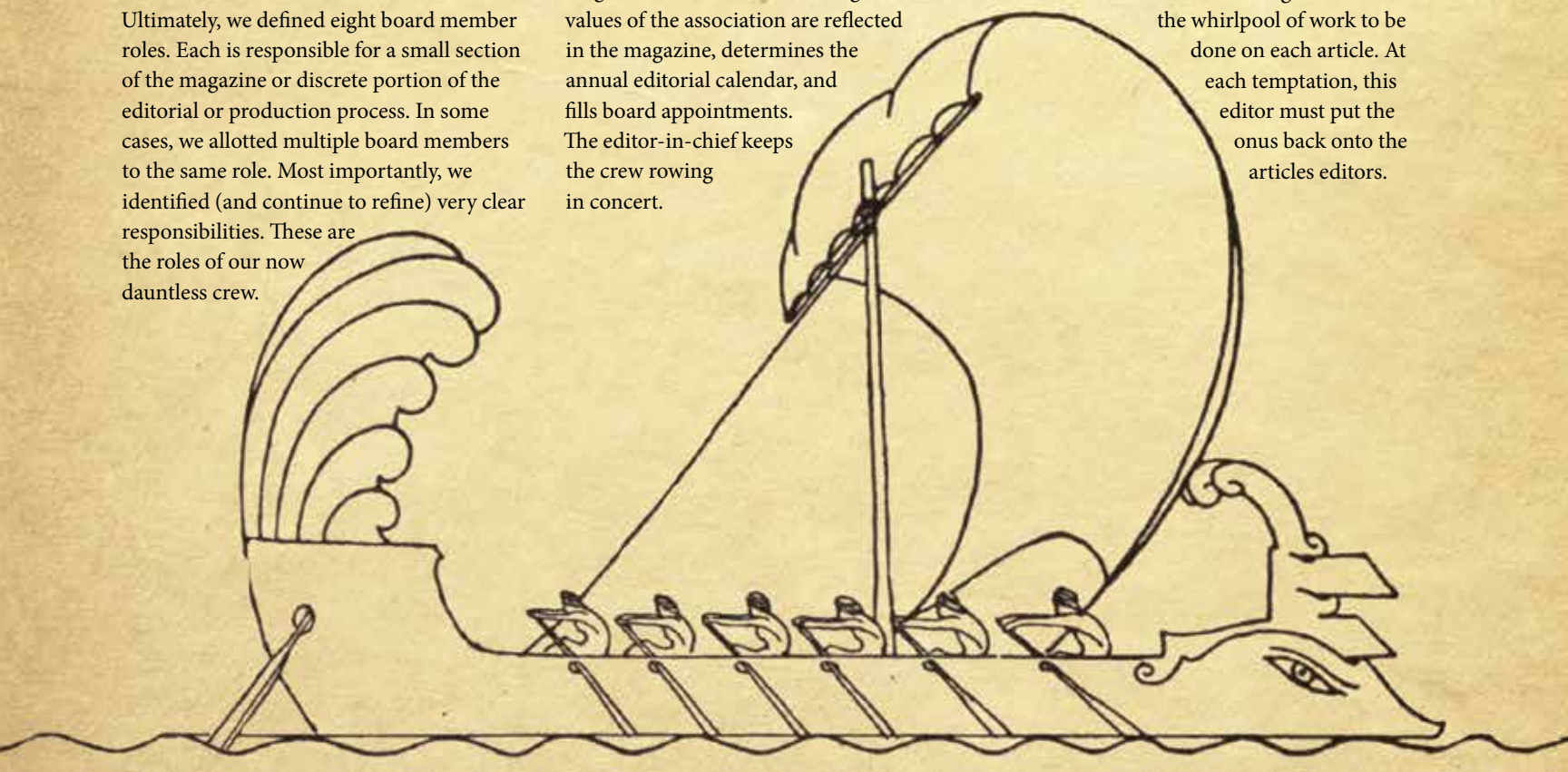
Ultimately, we defined eight board member roles. Each is responsible for a small section of the magazine or discrete portion of the editorial or production process. In some cases, we allotted multiple board members to the same role. Most importantly, we identified (and continue to refine) very clear responsibilities. These are the roles of our now dauntless crew.

The Captain: Editor-in-Chief

The editor-in-chief is our Odysseus: our hero, our leader, our captain. Serving as the chair of the editorial board, the editor-in-chief manages all strategic planning for the magazine. She ensures that the goals and values of the association are reflected in the magazine, determines the annual editorial calendar, and fills board appointments. The editor-in-chief keeps the crew rowing in concert.

The Navigator: Associate Editor

The associate editor keeps us on course. She oversees the article solicitation and review performed by our articles editors (see next). This person must stay focused on the horizon and not get sucked into the whirlpool of work to be done on each article. At each temptation, this editor must put the onus back onto the articles editors.



The Officers: Articles Editors

Six or seven seasoned editorial board members are responsible for soliciting articles on topics chosen by the board as a whole. This group is also responsible for reviewing these feature-length article submissions, which are lengthy (4,000-8,000 words) and substantive in nature, and determining their readiness for publication. This is the largest group within the editorial board because this role is so important.

The Explorers: Judicial Profiles Editors

The Federal Lawyer features judicial profiles (1,500-2,500 words each) on federal magistrate, district, and circuit judges. These three editors solicit profiles from federal courts around the country and review all submissions. Judicial profiles editors must stay on task and not get swayed by any sirens that may come calling — such as suggestions for profiles that are not relevant for our audience or staying too long with a profile that just isn't coming to fruition.

The Archer: Columns Editor

The FBA is organized by 24 practice area sections and five career divisions. In a quest to provide “something for everyone” in each issue of *The Federal Lawyer*, the board obtained agreements from some of these groups to submit short columns (2,000 words or less) five times per year. Since these groups are FBA entities, the columns editor

must loose arrows of fairness, tact, and perspective while securing and editing these articles.

The Scholars: Book Review Editors

The Federal Lawyer publishes up to six pages of book reviews in each 100-page issue. To manage this, we have two members who look for books to review and solicit profiles as necessary. They then sort through the myriad submissions to decided which should be published. All books are newer than 2 years old and must be of a legal bent. This ranges from constitutional history to LGBTQ rights to legal fiction. Perhaps an obvious warning: The book review editors must avoid eating the lotus and getting lost in the books themselves, forgetting all deadlines. It's a real risk.

The Ship's Master: Senior Proof Editor

This leader of the proof editors is one of the highest positions in the board, under only the editor-in-chief and associate editor. This person is responsible for overseeing the final proofing of *The Federal Lawyer* and monitoring each proof editor's work. The senior proof editor must not become a cyclops with a narrow perspective. He must watch for big-picture errors that an individual reviewer may miss, such as inconsistencies in article jumps or between the table of contents and articles. This seasoned member of the board is often next-in-line for the position of associate editor.



SHORTLY AFTER PASSING THE SIRENS, ODYSSEUS AND HIS MEN HAD TO THREAD A CHANNEL BETWEEN TWO PEAKS. TOO CLOSE TO ONE, AND THEY RISKED THEIR MEN GETTING EATEN BY THE SIX-HEADED MONSTER, SCYLLA. TOO CLOSE TO THE OTHER, AND THE ENTIRE SHIP MAY BE SUCKED DOWN INTO CHARYBDIS' WHIRLPOOL DEN. WHEN THEY ERRED TOWARD THE FORMER, SCYLLA DEVoured SIX OF THE HARDEST MEN.

The Marines: Proof Editors

The newest members of the board get the most intense position. Four or five proof editors review all articles at the galley proof stage. They perform an endnote review (following *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation*) and a final review of the entire magazine before press. This work is always deadline driven. We try to give our proof editors plenty of advance notice so they can expect and prepare for inbound materials.

The Rowers: Staff

The FBA currently has two staff positions assigned to *The Federal Lawyer*: managing editor and production coordinator. The managing editor (yours truly) is the staff-side counterpart to the editor-in-chief — making production decisions as necessary and taking ultimate responsibility for keeping the magazine on time and within budget.

The production coordinator is the traffic manager for all aspects of production. She receives submissions and sends them to the appropriate editors; communicates with all production vendors (design, copy editing/proofreading, and print); coordinates with authors; and directs all communications in each of the three rounds of review. The staff

members see every part of the production process; in many respects, we are the rowers who keep the ship underway.

HOME PORT

After designing the roles and presenting them to the editorial board, we implemented the new structure in October 2015. To fill the positions, we solicited each board member's top three choices and were able to assign everyone with a first or second choice.

We were thrilled to see our board members immediately take ownership of their roles. In fact, many of them asked for additional improvements. The columns editor decided the best way to keep the FBA's sections and divisions on track was to call each author before the start of the new editorial year. We augmented this with an automated email system that reminds the authors of due dates throughout the year.

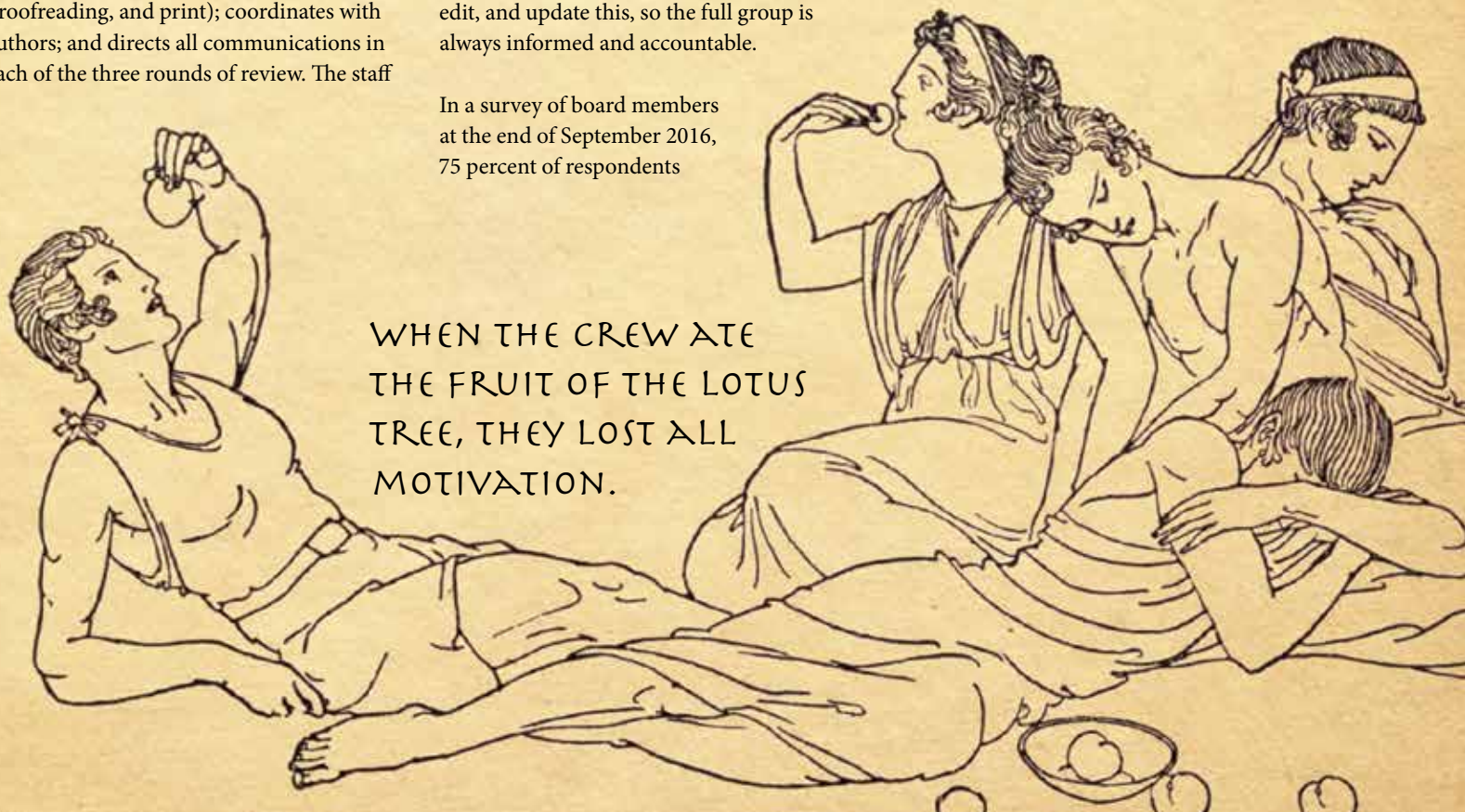
Board members requested more time in the schedule to complete the endnote review process, so we added three days to that portion of the production schedule. And, when the articles editors were losing track of who had solicited which articles for publication, we created a spreadsheet in Google Docs. Everyone can now see, edit, and update this, so the full group is always informed and accountable.

In a survey of board members at the end of September 2016, 75 percent of respondents

said that the new structure is more effective than the previous one. Respondents cited that the format is “clear as to each role and its expectations” and that “responsibilities are more streamlined and delineated.” From a staff perspective, we have more moving parts to manage but less responsibility for making content-related judgement calls. And substantive issues are brought up early in the process. We avoid the risk of pulling an article close to the press date, when it can be catastrophic.

Our editorial board is functioning much better. But, we're not finished improving it. For the year that began Oct. 1, 2016, we have new goals. We want to prepare our articles as completely as possible before getting to layout. We're asking our articles editors to vet our endnotes for Bluebook formatting earlier in their process and to hold our authors more accountable for meeting our writing guidelines. We're developing a “cheat sheet” of *Bluebook* and AP Style information for our authors. And, we're giving the entire board — especially the proof editors — more time for review at each stage and more frequent alerts of work coming their way.

WHEN THE CREW ATE
THE FRUIT OF THE LOTUS
TREE, THEY LOST ALL
MOTIVATION.



This has been a journey for us — a long journey through uncertain seas. We didn't have charts or a map — just a common goal. And we've had to work together to come up with the creative solutions that got us here. It hasn't been easy. There have been distractions and diversions. Some things have worked and some haven't. But, like Odysseus, we're persistent and tenacious. And the reward is seeing improved results for our readers, authors, and association.

Sarah Perlman is director of marketing and communication at the Federal Bar Association and managing editor of The Federal Lawyer. Prior to her decade of experience with the FBA, she began her career working in the printing industry as an account manager. Connect at tinyurl.com/linkedin-perlman.



ODYSSEUS AND
HIS MEN FOUND
THEMSELVES IN
THE LAND OF

THE CYCLOPES, THE
FRIGHTFUL ONE-EYED,
MAN-EATING GIANTS.
WHEN A CYCLOPS
TRAPPED THE
GROUP IN HIS
CAVE, ODYSSEUS
PLIED THE
GIANT WITH
WINE AND
STABBED HIM
IN THE EYE
TO ESCAPE.

