

Editing as a **blood sport**

Editors – who needs 'em? Erm... we all do!

Commissioning editor **Nik Morton** takes us behind the scenes...

It may be a heretical thought, but books are not necessarily acquired by publishers for their literary quality but perhaps for their story content and their subject's commercial appeal. That's why they need editors.

I've edited magazines and books and found that the more editing I do, the better my own writing becomes. That's one of the secrets of acceptance. Yes, if your book has been accepted, it may cross my desk (or screen, in fact) and I will edit it. But the process can be a great deal faster and the book can be published much earlier if only light editing is required. For that

ink is going to be splashed over your pristine pages?

communication

In the old days, an editor and author might have worked on the book together physically. This is no longer necessary. Many, like me, work on the screen and communicate via e-mail and attachments. That remoteness is only in spatial terms, not in the relationship between author and editor.

Naturally, an author is very close to his or her creation. It may have taken many months or even years to get to this stage. It is a cliché, but some authors liken their books to their 'babies' and can be very defensive. That's quite understandable. Showing respect to a difficult author can be a problem, too. Authors can be demanding, dense or even exasperating, rejecting even the smallest proposed changes.

Editors are there to spot the inconsistent, the illogical and the incorrect items which the author couldn't identify because he was too close to the work. The author knows what he means, but is it clear to the reader? Are the events and actions depicted in a logical way? An editor is always striving for clarity of understanding.

I begin the working relationship with an author by proposing changes. The emphasis is on the 'proposing'. I'm not in the business of insisting on rewriting the book to suit my sensibilities. In the final analysis, it's the author's book, not mine. An editor strives to make the author look good by improving the book's appeal and flow. Good writers appreciate

intelligent editing; sadly, bad writers don't like being edited.

Editors should follow the credo, 'Do no harm.' Harm is done by altering the author's style or the meaning of the prose. A few writers might believe that editing is a blood sport and it's their baby being hunted. To retain the blood analogy, editing can be the fine line between surgery and butchery. A bad editor will butcher – this may occur with an article or a short story, but rarely with an accepted book.

electronic copy

In the good old days, editing required a knowledge of printers' marks – hieroglyphics for copy preparation and proof correction; they're still used, of course, and a selection can be found in the *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook*. But now they're not essential where electronic pdf (portable document format) files are being used by more and more publishers. The pdf files save on trees, too. I proof corrected my last two books for Robert Hale using the pdf file they sent through the ether.

My editing is usually done in red on the electronic copy. I accompany the changes with a separate commentary sheet, explaining my reasoning. Some insertions are self-explanatory. I'm looking for spelling and typographical errors, lax or inconsistent punctuation and grammatical errors. All of which should rarely appear, if the author has done an adequate final self-edit.

Every writer – me included – will unwittingly re-use a particular word more than



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reason, I would make a plea to all writers: the final author edit is vital. To achieve that final edit, step back from your work and appraise it with fresh eyes. Never send off a manuscript unless this final read-through has been done with a critical eye. As a commissioning editor I've rejected many manuscripts because it was obvious that this final re-read wasn't performed.

If you're going to be edited, however, that's all in the past. You've been accepted and finally you're allocated an editor! Time for celebration – then the worry sets in: scare stories of butchery, disagreements and abandoned contracts? Probably not. But a legitimate concern is: how does the process work? How much red

once in close proximity; this is called the 'echo effect' because that word is simply echoing in the writer's head at that time. Elsewhere it may be a different word entirely. I will point out word repetition by underlining the culprits; occasionally, I'll offer alternatives, or I may leave it for the writer to seek a more suitable replacement. Successive sentences or paragraphs beginning with the same phrase or word can be tedious and again will be highlighted, asking the writer to seek variations.

be specific

Generalisations in fiction are not helpful to the reader. The author's aim is to create imagery in the reader's head – not overly detailed, but enough to assist the reader in visualising the scene, character or situation. You can't do that with generalisations; wherever possible, be specific. If you mention a dog, why not define its breed? If your hero drives a car, allocate a make. If your heroine wears a dress, specify its design or at the very least its colour.

At times, a scene may be too hurried or inadequately conveyed; the author hasn't used all of the scene's potential and this may be pointed out, to improve the drama, to create atmosphere and enhance characterisation.

Sometimes, there may be a need to point out where an excess of 'tell' has been allowed to survive to the detriment of 'show'. Naturally, it depends on the story's flow, whether to show or tell. If you're in a dramatic scene, it has more emotional impact if you show the scene through the eyes and heart of a character, rather than simply describing what is happening.

Good writers have a visual sense. They see what is going on in each scene, very much like a movie producer, and write down that scene so that the reader can see it too. I may from time to

time highlight a section which would benefit from additional visual cues.

Inevitably, an editor will identify clichés, mixed metaphors and malapropisms. People use cliché in their everyday speech, so it may be appropriate in characters' dialogue. Otherwise, the writer is advised to find fresh ways of saying what is meant. Literary writing tends to require the metaphor, but ensure that it isn't strained. If the reader has to stop and think about the writing sense itself, then the writer isn't doing his job properly. The cliché phrase 'lost in a good book' means exactly that. Any time the reader is pulled out of the world of the book, the writing is not doing its job.

good narrative flow

That brings us to the story flow. These days it is rare for an adult to find time to read an entire book at one sitting. Chapters and time breaks are useful, as they provide points where the real world can intrude. Those are designed breaks, however. As an editor I don't want to falter over an inept description, an inconsistent logical issue or an impossible scene; that stumble pulls me out of the story and upsets the narrative flow. Style is equated with story flow; each word and each sentence follows the next, without any aberration to impede the reader's progress.

Striving for good narrative flow also entails seeking an economy of words. I've encountered writers who say the same thing in three different ways in one paragraph. Ideally, say as much as you can with as few words as possible.

All writers should read widely. Naturally, they should read the majority of the works within the genre with which they're familiar. That's what is meant by 'write what you know'; the phrase doesn't mean, 'write

about your boring job in the office.' Editors too need to read and should have an interest in many subjects as this broad knowledge can be essential for spotting inconsistencies and inaccuracies. I need to know enough about any given subject to raise questions that a book's potential readership might ask. Wherever possible, I will check the author's research to ensure that it's correct. Of course, the author shouldn't be derelict in the research department,

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either, thinking, 'Oh, the editor can check all that.' In truth, it's unlikely that a writer with that cavalier attitude would get accepted.

My library of books to assist me in editing is also useful for guiding me in my writing. They include *The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*, *The Good English Guide*, *Copyediting – a practical guide*, *Usage and Abuse*, *The Complete Plain Words*, Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, *The Economist Pocket Style Book*, *The Times Guide to English Style and Usage*, the *Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases*, *Collins Thesaurus* in dictionary form and the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, as well as about a dozen specialist dictionaries.

Editing requires perseverance, but it's fun and really satisfying when you see an author's acknowledgement is quite nice too.

Nik Morton is a book editor for Libros International. His latest crime thriller, *Pain Wears No Mask* is now available www.freewebs.com/nikmorton



To order a copy of *Pain Wears No Mask*, £7.99 pb, call Writers' Bookshelf on freephone 0800 015 0554. Postage and packing is £1.95. Please have your credit card ready.