

A View from the Other Side of the Pen

Presentation to the Pensters, November 9, 2002

When Donna Esslinger asked me to do this, I did everything I could to get out of it. I protested that I had nothing to say to a group of writers. But Donna wouldn't take no for an answer, so I racked my brains for a suitable topic. As I told Donna, although I do a lot of writing, I don't really consider myself a "writer," and although I've written a few things that have been published, the very few I've been paid for are not ones I'm especially proud of. Although I'm on the fringes of the publishing industry, I can't tell you anything about how to get published. And you certainly didn't come to hear me talk just because I'm a celebrity—the closest I can come to that is being "Bubba's Fairhope friend."

What I am, I told Donna, and have been for most of my life, is a reader. So I thought I might talk about what satisfies me as a reader, what sorts of books and stories and articles I like to read (not to mention the things I *don't* like). If the goal of a writer is to be published, I said, and the goal of a publisher is to publish material that readers will buy and read, then this should be of some value. Donna enthusiastically agreed. While I was working on this talk, however, I talked to Phyllis Peck, and she encouraged me to talk more about my work as an editor. So I'm going to try to do a little of both.

When I started thinking about what I like to read, most of what I thought of to say seemed to be a rehash of a talk I gave some years ago at the Fairhope library on "The Perfect Detective Novel." The truth is that, although I do read some serious nonfiction, including biographies, especially biographies of writers, what I mostly like to read is mysteries. And what I don't much enjoy is "literary" fiction.

The reason for this is that mysteries can generally be counted on to have a strong plot line, well-defined characters, and a definite resolution. That doesn't mean they're all potboilers. Some mysteries also have a breathtakingly beautiful style, character development that rivals the best of modern psychological novels, colorful descriptions of exotic locales, and/or educational exploration of some unusual trade, profession, or interest. But what they always have is a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In contrast, a lot of literary novels seem to present a "slice of life" that, no matter how appealing and intriguing, never seems to go anywhere. I can enjoy every minute of reading a book, be impressed with the style and blown away by the language and insight, and yet I come to the end and think, "Well, what was that all about? Did anything really happen here?"

Conventional writing instructors tell you that the basis of a successful novel is a character presented with a conflict or problem. By the end of the book, the conflict should be resolved or the problem solved, and the character is usually changed in some way. In detective fiction, the problem is a simple one: a crime, almost always a murder, has been committed, and the perpetrator is unknown. The detective, usually the central character, must find out "whodunit"—and sometimes avoid being killed himself. At the end, some sort of justice is achieved (though this isn't always inevitably punishment of the criminal). There's usually not a lot of character development in mysteries, and when there is, it is often gradual change over the course of a series of novels. But a detective novel can still be uplifting, it can be provocative—many of the

modern ones address current hot issues—and it can be educational. What it always is, however, is entertaining and satisfying, which is all that most readers look for in a book.

Unfortunately, I have one flaw that makes me different from “most readers.” I was born with a proofreader’s eye, and I am by trade an editor. Mistakes just leap off the page when I read. Even when I try to focus on reading for content, I can’t help seeing the errors and wanting to correct them. This makes it painful for me to read books that are sloppily edited. A recent example: One of the authors I usually read (though I sometimes wonder why) is Dorothy Cannell. When I read her first Ellie Haskell novel, *The Thin Woman*, in 1983, I described it as “utterly perfect.” With each subsequent sequel, I’ve increasingly wondered if I was deluded. Although I seem to be compelled to continue to read the books, they get sillier and sillier, but evidently they are still popular. One of the saddest things that can happen to a writer is to become so successful that editors don’t do their job. Whether the bestselling writer has acquired enough clout to demand that his manuscripts not be edited or the publisher has decided that the public is stupid enough to buy the books no matter how bad they are and therefore doesn’t “waste” money on editing, the result is very shabby.

In this particular instance, I started reading *The Importance of Being Ernestine* and was uncomfortable from the outset because of the dearth of commas where they were needed. But when the name of a nearby town was spelled two different ways on the same page, I put the book down in disgust. Later, after finishing another, much better book, I succumbed to the temptation to pick the Cannell book up again, but I read it constantly distracted by increasingly annoying errors, which I noted on a Post-it stuck to the flyleaf.

Fortunately, this kind of distraction is rare in books published by mainstream publishers, but it is very common in newspapers because of their much more pressured publication cycle, and I have accumulated quite an impressive collection of what I call “howlers”—funny typos, grammatical errors, and other mistakes from newspapers, magazines, and other media.

One of the most fruitful sources of howlers is obituaries. Having recently had to compose one myself, I perhaps shouldn’t make fun of people doing their best in emotionally trying circumstances, but their best efforts do sometimes turn out rather strange. There can be puzzling contradictions about the place of birth or residence. For example, Ellen W. Styron, “born in Glasgow, Scotland,” is also described as “a native of Tiree Island, Scotland.” And how about Joseph Alfred Florian Chandonnet, “a native of Lowell, Mass., a resident of Mobile, residing in Fairhope”? The reporter who noted the passing of USA English professor Lloyd Dendinger had evidently never heard of the Elderhostel program since he said that Dendinger had “taught with the Odyssey Elder Hostile program at the university.”

Some of you may recall the brouhaha that attended the announcement of the personalized brick pavers in Fairhope, when the *Fairhope Courier*, in a front-page article, described this Centennial project, concluding, “I’m sure you’ll want to be on hand to watch your special *prick* being laid into place.” These pavers were still causing problems five years later, when the *Mobile Register* obituary of Janet Carr Hildreth said, “Her aunt, Katherine M. Carr was a resident of Fairhope and was one of the first memorial bricks to be placed in front of the Eastern Shore Courier.”

Some untimely deaths have been reported in the pages of the *Baldwin Register*, too. The limited space allowed for the “Get to Know” feature forces writers to pack as much information as possible into subordinate clauses or adjectival phrases. Sometimes the modifier is just

irrelevant—something like “An avid golfer, Smith has been operating her needlework business for five years.” But sometimes the result is a dangling construction with unintended consequences such as “At the age of 13, her father died and the family moved to Mobile” or “Born in what is now the Czech Republic, her mother died when she was only 3 years old.” But one of my favorite “Get to Know” dangles is this one: “Clad in a bright pink robe and matching slippers, Mrs. Brock’s white hair was perfectly styled.” This reminded me of the tiger in *Little Black Sambo* who put the slippers with crimson soles and crimson linings on his ears.

As writers you’ll appreciate this dangler, which comes from a Plots Unlimited ad in *Writer’s Digest* and describes the agent you’d all love to have: “After rewriting my first novel...for three years..., a New York agent has finally taken my book.”

Some writers get tangled up with negatives. One writer of a letter to the editor wrote, “Permit me to say that I could not possibly fail to disagree with you less.” That may have been intentionally jocular obfuscation, but how about this quote from a teacher featured in the *Mobile Register*: “There is not a day that goes by that I don’t wake up not excited to go to school.”

Sometimes diction is the problem. It’s often difficult to be sure whether it was the speaker or the reporter who made the mistake, but they’re funny either way. A snowbird featured in the *Baldwin Register* was quoted as saying, “The people are just wonderful. I go to Lady of the Gulf Church and they let me become an *accolade* there.” And an artist describing her design for an Arts & Crafts T-shirt reportedly said, “I just took something *androgynous* to the area, a shrimp, and fashioned it with a master artist’s idea in mind.”

Most of the best howlers, though, just result from fuzzy thinking. When Gene Owens was here, he spoke to you about Bubba’s Law of Cerebro-Syntactical Correspondence, viz., “Sloppy thinking leads to sloppy language, and vice versa.”

Surely sloppy thinking was responsible for examples such as these:

- The youth minister who said, “Easy answers to teen-agers’ questions are difficult.”
- A photographer who claimed that “No one sunset is alike.”
- The writers of ads asking these questions:
 - “Did you know that 80% of women wear the wrong size bra....Are you?”
 - “Haven’t You Always Wanted A Bedroom Like This? Now You Can!”
- The correspondent who wrote, “I am a very senior citizen of Baldwin County and have been the majority of my life.”
- The editor who wrote this headline: “Tyson blames timber industry on slow business.”
- The writer of this notice:
NOTICE: THE CITY OF FAIRHOPE WILL HAVE NO GARBAGE, RECYCLE, OR TRASH SERVICE ON FRIDAY, JULY 3, 1992. CITY RESIDENTS WHO ARE ON FRIDAY’S ROUTE FOR GARBAGE, RECYCLING AND TRASH WILL BE PICKED UP ON THURSDAY.

Certainly we’d like to think we wouldn’t be guilty of errors such as these, but many errors creep into the public prints through sheer bad proofreading. Here are some examples:

- “The bridegroom is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Cellilli Jr. of Belle Meade, N.J.”
- “The midway lights will brighten the Robertsdale skies when the 46th annual Baldwin County Library cranks up for a time of fun and excitement.”
- “The Maids of Jubilee is the only Mardi Gras society featuring female horses on horseback.”

One of my all-time favorites combines two mistakes. It appeared during an election season and was the cutline for a photo of a sign saying “Vote for who removes bumps.” The caption read: “Motorists traveling along County Road 27 know what this sign is all about, having just hit a series of speed bumps approaching the intersection at County Road 104. We remind you to do your duty and get out and vote. Pools will open Tuesday at 8 p.m. and close at 7 p.m.” (You’d have to be in a time warp to swim in and cast your vote!)

All of this is just to illustrate that proofreading and copyediting are essential components of writing and publishing. I maintain—and I can certainly illustrate it from my own writing—that no writer can effectively proofread his own work. All writers need editors.

Before you show your writing to a publisher, you probably have it read by a lot of people. Your wife or husband or mother or child will tell you it is wonderful (what else can they say?). Your English teacher friend may point out grammatical errors—maybe more of them than actually exist, leaving your playfully colloquial writing overcorrect and lifeless. Your fellow writers will suggest ways to improve your plot development and make your descriptions more colorful. All these suggestions are helpful. But at some point before your work is published, it should be read by a professional editor.

Now I know that “editor” is a scary word. Nobody likes to be corrected. When I was a schoolteacher and marked corrections on student papers, I used a red pen, as most teachers still do. Students said it reminded them of blood, and they often tossed the papers away without looking at them. Now, like many other editors, I use green instead, though I have no way of knowing that this raises writers’ blood pressure any less.

Most writers hate to be edited—I know I do—and they often disdain editors, perhaps because they fear them. In my collection of “editor” cartoons is a “B.C.” panel from July 5, 1989, in which *Wiley’s Dictionary* offers this definition of *editor*: “A person who never mastered the business end of a pencil.”

Someone once said to T. S. Eliot that editors are failed writers, to which he reportedly replied, “Yes, some editors are failed writers, but so are most writers.”

Experienced writers have come to know that an experienced editor is their best friend. A good editor can often make a good piece of writing even better, and this is what a good editor wants to do, though sometimes it’s hard to tell. In dealing with publishers’ editors, I’ve often suspected that the editor feels she has a quota of errors to find; if she can’t find legitimate ones, she’ll invent them. So I’ve suggested to my authors that we should submit manuscripts with easily corrected errors strategically placed, to allow the editor to feel she’s earning her pay. But a truly good editor isn’t motivated by finding mistakes; she just wants to make sure there aren’t any left when she gets through with your manuscript. She wants *you* to look good; she doesn’t want anything to get into print that will make you, or her, or your publisher look bad.

You may be convinced that your writing doesn’t need editing. But even writers who need no editing do require copyediting and proofreading. Even if your spelling and grammar are perfect,

your typing may not be. When you're writing, you're thinking about what you want to say and how you want to say it. You may not be paying as much attention to how it actually gets onto the page. Maybe you've left out a necessary comma, and that omission changes the sense of your sentence. Or you get so caught up in writing dialog that some of the quotation marks get misplaced. And you probably won't be able to see the mistakes you've made because you know what your writing says. The editor will read it with a fresh eye. She will be a proxy for your readers. If she doesn't understand what you have written, you can be pretty sure your readers won't, either. She can anticipate how readers may misread a sentence and help you recast it so that it is clearer.

And even if you have no mechanical errors, you may have inconsistencies. Maybe you started out with a character named Jane and decided to change her name to Jean. Maybe you went back and changed every occurrence of Jane to Jean—all but one. A good copy editor will notice, even if you did not, that you have called a character called Jane on one page and Jean on another. Or maybe she's 21 years old in one chapter, and in the next chapter, five years later, she's 28. A good copy editor (or possibly even a poor one) would have noticed that Dorothy Cannell called a town "Mucklesby" in one paragraph and "Mugglesby" farther down the page.

And a good copy editor might suggest that it is unwise to name three minor characters Walters, Carter, and Harper because readers might get them confused.

If you are lucky enough to find a commercial publisher for your writing, you can hope that the publisher will have your work professionally copyedited. The copy editor may recommend changes you don't like, and you have the right to reject them. We saw a lot of that in *Stories from the Blue Moon Café*, for which MacAdam/Cage employed a California copy editor who was unfamiliar with Southern dialect and idiom. Still, try to keep an open mind and see that some of the editor's suggestions really would result in improvements.

If you opt to self-publish your writing, however, I urge you to have it read by a professional copy editor—not just your spouse or an English teacher or your fellow writers—before you take it to the printer or a subsidy publisher, especially if that publisher doesn't offer in-house editing, as many don't. That's one thing we do offer at Over the Transom Publishing. No book is published with the Over the Transom imprint that we would be ashamed of, and that means that we do our best to make sure that there are no mistakes in it that would embarrass you, either.

A good book, I said, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. I wish I could say the same of this talk, but "Of the making of many books there is no end," and I haven't come up with any grand finale for this talk, either, so I'll just open the floor for questions.