Creativity, Editing, and the Business of Publishing

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Compare and Contrast Patricia Mulcahy

You've finished your novel. Friends and members of your writing group love it. With great anticipation and much hope, you send it to your agent, who inevitably asks: "What are your comp titles?"

Huh?

Will readers of Ann Patchett's books love yours? Are the novels of Stephen King realistic touchstones for your story of a wolverine child raised in the Maine woods? Will you get a humungous advance like Emma Cline's if your book is set in a cult and has "Girls" in the title, too?

In a highly unscientific business, "comps," or competitive titles, can help pinpoint which already-popular books might overlap with your potential audience. Pitching to editors at publishing houses, your agent needs comparisons to situate a manuscript in a marketplace with thousands of individual titles published every year. People who sell books live and die by these attempts to "brand" a book and help it find a niche. Often publishers' sales reps have mere seconds to describe your book, and who might read it: the more targeted this approach is, the better the sales results. If you're lucky enough to get an offer from a publisher, it was based on a Profit and Loss document drawn up with comp title numbers. Even if the P&L itself is a work of imaginative projection, an editor can't get authorization to buy a book without one.

But it's not just about sales. Coming up with valid comps is also a useful exercise that enables writers to think strategically about their work. No one expects a writer to mimic the "comps" precisely: they're comparisons or commercial touchstones for your work. Think about which books might be comparable in tone/subject/style/voice/theme. Comps are the literary equivalent of Netflix's "Recommended for you," based on your previous viewing selections, or one of those "Customers who liked this item also bought," listings on Amazon, or the titles at the bottom of receipts at Barnes and Noble, or on "shelf-talkers" at indie bookstores.

In marketing a book, agents and publishers often resort to hyperbolic, risible comparisons: "Anne Tyler meets Elena Ferrante meets Game of Thrones!"

Nonetheless, the hardcore commercial fact is that every book has to fit a category, and comps spell this out explicitly. When I worked for a publishing house, I was often frustrated by what seemed to be artificial category breakdowns: yet this is still how books are merchandised. Is a book addressed to women, primarily? Is it literary fiction? Commercial fiction? A mystery or thriller that meets qualifications of the genre? Every now and then, a blockbuster like *The Goldfinch* can cross categories, but this is an exception.

The key to coming up with successful comps is to be both market-savvy and imaginative, and to back up your selections with research. You want to list not just highly successful books, but realistic comparisons that show you've done your homework. In the age of Google and Amazon, it isn't hard to mix bestsellers or major prize-winners with moderately successful titles that have drawn the eyes of critics to an exciting new voice, or innovated in their category. Format doesn't dictate all: just because you've written a novel in letters doesn't mean *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* is your only comp. A novel in stories need not be compared only to *Olive Kittredge* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad:* consider Donald Ray Pollack's *Knockemstiff*, a portrait of a woebegone Ohio community that was compared to *Winesburg, Ohio*, when it was published to smashing reviews.

A comp can speak not only to a topic or historical period but also to a general approach or worldview. A reader of Edna O'Brien's newest novel *The Little Red Chairs* might be drawn not to the work of other Irish writers per se, but to books such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Pakistani-born Mohsin Hamid. Both novels use contemporary politics and issues around immigration to illuminate stories of The Other in their native countries. Hence both might attract readers of serious fiction that incorporates world affairs.

Recently an agent acquaintance asked for feedback on Facebook about books in the category "upmarket commercial women's fiction" that feature a major romantic hurdle the protagonists must overcome. Advice from the publishing hive mind could yield a stellar set of comps that make or break this sale. Carefully selected comps highlight the precedents set by a work like yours, and can mean the difference between a serious review for your work at a publishing house, or a cursory glance.

The ultimate goal of course, is to have *your* book used as a "comp" by another author in the very near future.

A former publisher, ***Patricia Mulcahy*** *is the co-author of* It Is Well with My Soul*:* The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year–Old Woman*, by Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson (Penguin, 2010) and* Making Masterpiece: 25 Years Behind the Scenes at Masterpiece Theatre and Mystery! on PBS *by Rebecca Eaton (Viking 2013). Her freelance editorial clients have included musician and entrepreneur Quincy Jones; NBC Foreign Affairs Correspondent Andrea Mitchell; and Acumen Fund CEO Jaqueline Novogratz. See www.brooklynbooks.com for more information.*

Fighting to Save the Day: How to Write a Hero, Not a Goon

Liz Van Hoose

A recent client had all the necessary ingredients for a high-octane vigilante thriller: lush locale, hero with a tortured past *and* access to high-tech gadgetry, and villains we'd all like to see destroyed—if not literally, then fictionally. For purposes of anonymity, let's call this novel's hero G.I. Joe. Unfortunately, every time Joe executed a well-wrought plan to take the bad guys down, the story sagged rather than soared.

My client and I were at a loss for why Joe's omnipotence was making him seem boorish rather than lion-hearted. Could it be a point-of-view problem? After all, the ultimate vigilante of our time, Lisbeth Salander of Stieg Larsson's Millennium Series, comes to us mostly through the perspectives of other characters. Is a certain distance necessary to keep the suspense level high and the grandiose acts out of the realm of self-aggrandizement? In the case of my client's novel, a point-of-view shift away from Joe would have opened up all sorts of other problems. I decided to search for iconic vigilantes whose own points-of-view dominate their respective narratives. I landed on Lee Child's Jack Reacher and Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne.

It turns out both strapping vanquishers exhibit two qualities I'd never before considered *de rigeur* for the vigilante perspective: extreme vulnerability and total disorientation. In the opening pages of *Killing Floor,* Jack Reacher discerns he's about to get cuffed, but he doesn't know what for, nor does he know the first thing about the Georgia town he's wandered into. Jason Bourne, when he wakes in a hospital bed, doesn't even comprehend who he is, and the better part of the *The Bourne Identity* is devoted to this eponymous problem.

When I shared my findings with my client, he confessed he wasn't really thinking of the formal demands of the genre. He was thinking of Robert Jordan of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. But hark! Even Hemingway's hero, rendered in close third-person point-of-view, abides by the vigilante creed. Tasked by a Soviet general with blowing up a bridge in Civil War Spain, our brainy American partisan is ordered to detonate his target at precisely the right moment, only he doesn't know when that moment will be, who will help him, or how the landscape has changed since he was last in town for Study Abroad. Every orienting factor has been eviscerated by war. We first care about Robert Jordan's story not because he's a good guy or even an interesting guy, but because he's a guy in a pickle and we'd like to see how he gets out of it.

Papa Hemingway famously wrote, "The best people possess a feeling for beauty, the courage to take risks, the discipline to tell the truth, the capacity for sacrifice. Ironically, their virtues make them vulnerable; they are often wounded, sometimes destroyed." I would argue that these people make great vigilantes, especially when their wounds are incurred in the opening pages of the book.

Was Hemingway lifting from genre conventions when he developed his vulnerable fictional men? Were Robert Ludlum and Lee Child lifting from Hemingway? All three of them have certainly taught me much about the importance of circumstance in fiction, especially when the protagonist's might and prowess are on display from the protagonist's own perspective. The harder it is to save G.I. Joe's skin, the more likely we readers are to slip inside it, and root for him when the justice slayings—or the bridge explosions—begin.

Liz Van Hoose *has worked in the editorial departments of Viking Penguin and Alfred A. Knopf, where she edited a wide range of fiction and nonfiction, including works by Ron Currie, Jr., Alex Gilvarry, Garrison Keillor, Haruki Murakami, Jim Shepard, and Amor Towles. She has been a guest editor for writers' conferences at Bread Loaf, Sewanee, and Aspen Summer Words, where she served on the faculty in 2015. She joined 5E in early 2016.*

In Short: Sentenced to Topic

Joan Hilty

I've sat on many panels about graphic novels at book festivals and Comic Cons, and for years, every single panel seemed to be about one of four things: breaking into comics, teaching comics, diversity in comics, or, while I was a DC Comics editor, one publisher's product line. One of those four things was the topic, every single time. The discussions were good, but eventually the numbing sameness of the subject matter drove me onto programming committees because I couldn't bear to have one more generalized conversation about being gay in comics or female in comics or approaching an editor or learning from superheroes. I wanted to have different conversations.

This year marks the first time I have truly felt a sea change. The panels may touch on those four things, but they aren't focused on them. They are focused on book design, sex and power, war journalism; on fairy tales, game theory, and revolutionary art. The analysis of the medium is finally becoming secondary, as it should be. The graphic novel is a format, not a genre; it's a vehicle for ideas. We've gone beyond talking about how to drive the vehicle. Now we just drive it.

__Joan Hilty__ is an editor specializing in graphic novels, illustrated books and transmedia; her clients include Farrar Straus & Giroux, Abrams, Nickelodeon, and many comics and prose authors. Previously, she was a senior editor at DC Comics and syndicated cartoonist. She is a member of Powderkeg Writers and teaches at the School of Visual Arts in NYC. For more information, visit www.joanhilty.net and www.pgturn.com.

Artistic License in Historical Fiction

Leslie Wells

In some historical novels, the protagonist interacts with famous characters from actual history. In others, all the characters are made up, while the setting and period detail are accurate. In both cases, the author most likely will use a certain amount of artistic license.

But the amount of license may be limited by how recent the time period is, and how well-known the historical figures are, if such characters are used. Think of the difference between, say, *Loving Frank* by Nancy Horan, and *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel. Horan's book about Mamah Borthwick's affair with Frank Lloyd Wright takes place from 1907-1914. Given the abundance of biographies and articles about the architect, Horan's challenge was not only to revive the youth of a main character who lived well into the 1950s, but to imbue a life that had been written about extensively with fresh evocative detail. She had to write within a certain framework of accuracy since there was so much information available about Wright.

Wolf Hall, on the other hand, is set in England in 1527. Thomas Cromwell is a major historic figure, but no one knows what his private personality was like, or how he spoke in casual conversation. Mantel herself has said that the early years of Cromwell are so poorly documented that she was free to make up certain elements of the book. But she did enough research into the period that her work is convincing; it's extremely educated guesswork — which could be described as the definition of artistic license.

Novelist Erik Haugaard says, "When you write a story that takes place in times long past, you are more

free. Your readers have less prejudice and will accept your tale with open minds. You and your reader have less at stake, and thus you might get nearer to the truth; possibly even to reality."

However, to use artistic license properly, first you have to do the research. Writers of historical fiction usually spend a huge amount of energy reading about the time period, and sometimes even visiting the places where the novel occurs. And all this research is necessary. A good novelist conveys a sense of the period through minuscule details: contemporary expressions in speech, social mores, food, and clothing. Through a series of carefully placed accurate facts, a writer can create an overall feeling of authenticity.

Yet these facts must be balanced with narrative.

You don't want your wonderful story to drown in a mind-numbing sea of facts. Author David Mitchell says, "Lines such as 'Shall I bid Jenkins ready the Phaeton coach, or will Madam prefer the two-wheeled barouche landau?' will kill." Let's say you've found a fascinating recipe for an unusual type of cobbler made by the Pilgrims. You can mention the name of the dish — Chokeberry Buckle — and describe how it tasted, but please don't list every single ingredient. If you feel compelled to plug most of your research into the first draft, it will be important to force yourself to go back and trim in the revisions.

On the other hand, without enough period detail, the book could take place anywhere and in any time period. Most readers of historical fiction enjoy learning about a certain era and place while also enjoying a good story. If you're writing about St. Louis in the early 1900s, then you should explore this setting. Figure out which details from your research make St. Louis unique from other cities during that decade, and include those. Then you'll use artistic license to imagine characters and events that could have taken place in St. Louis in that era.

Artistic license does not mean that you can use anachronisms (attributing a custom, event, or object to a period that it doesn't belong in). These mistakes are surprisingly easy to make. One often-mentioned boo-boo occurred when Geoffrey Trease opened his novel of ninth-century England with a scene where the characters eat rabbit stew. Only after the novel was published did an eleven-year-old boy point out that there were no rabbits in England at that time. Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth* features a number of poor characters eating breakfast regularly, even though in the twelfth century most people of that economic status wouldn't have anything to eat before their main meal of the day. Be extremely careful to check such details to make sure they aren't anachronisms.

If you're fastidious about historical plausibility, how, then, do you give yourself latitude to invent interactions between real characters that existed at one point in time, so that that they develop into three-dimensional characters? In describing real individuals who existed in the past, you have to take a certain amount of artistic license. You *have* to create their speech and reactions, or else they never develop into three-dimensional characters. Yet many authors become paralyzed at the thought of putting words in the mouths of well-known historical figures: How much license is one allowed to take?

Let's say you're writing a novel in which Winston Churchill is a character. In that case, you'd have to come up with plausible action and dialogue befitting him, as well as the time frame. You may not know what Churchill said in the privacy of his home or at social gatherings, but if you've done enough research into the era, read his letters and memoirs by people who knew Churchill, you can put together a convincing scene.

Your dialogue has to be credible for the time period, too. Recently I edited a historical novel set in 1889, in which a young woman said of a man's uncouth behavior, "That's just gross." Obviously that phrase was struck. On the other hand, if your novel I set in Medieval Europe, you couldn't have your characters using correct period language because no one could read it: "Sende fa ofer een Ingla-land invein ælcere scire tha men."

Again, a certain amount of artistic license is necessary, especially when there isn't a lot of written history about the era or place you're describing. As Kelly Kerney said in a recent *PW* interview about her novel *Hard Red Spring*, which covers one hundred years in Guatemalan history, there is much about history that we do not know; the information simply doesn't exist. Kearney reminds us that in the early days of photography, only rich people could afford cameras, and they weren't taking pictures of servants, factories, or farms. Instead, they were taking pictures of themselves.

As she points out, this can give us the mistaken idea that the past consisted of romantic balls, inheritances, the stuff of a BBC drama — thus ignoring the fact that there were children working in factories, people starving, and so on. Astute authors like Kerney take care not to romanticize the characters or setting.

So do your research, know the time period and characters intimately — and then go ahead and take some artistic license.

***Leslie Wells** spent two decades at Hyperion as an Executive Editor; prior to that, she was a Senior Editor at Pocket Books and E. P. Dutton. She is now an independent editor who works with publishers, literary agents, and individuals on both fiction and nonfiction. She has worked with such authors as Mitch Albom, Candace Bushnell, Rebecca Wells, Julie Andrews, and Michael J. Fox. For more information and author testimonials, see www.lesliewellseditorial.com.*

Reading with My Ears Judy Sternlight

At a recent lunch date, I told some publishing friends about my new passion for audiobooks. They asked how I found time to listen to long novels that I wasn't editing. They didn't like the idea of walking around the city with headphones on, and doubted that the listening experience could leave as deep an impression as the one you get with eyeballs-on-the-page. I had to laugh, because I'd held those same opinions—until I gave it a try.

My audio addiction began when I took my sister's advice and started listening to podcasts while tramping around Central Park with my dog. Enjoying various Slate, NPR, MSNBC, and New Yorker programs, it was an easy jump to audiobooks, which are ideal for plane and train rides, laundry folding, and local shopping expeditions. For someone who reads as much as I do, resting my eyes and listening to audio is a great way to absorb some of the big, new books each season, and to catch up on books I always meant to read. I've also listened to novels and short stories that first blew me away in print, so I could work out what made them so special.

While those publishing buddies of mine have been slow to the party, I'm not alone.

In July 2016, Jennifer Maloney of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote, "Audiobooks are the fastest-growing format in the book business today. Sales in the U.S. and Canada jumped 21% from the previous year, according to the Audio Publishers Association." This was compared to modest growth for hardcovers and paperbacks, and a decline in e-book sales. Maloney cited an explosion in available titles. "35,574 audiobook titles were released in the U.S. and Canada in 2015, compared with 7,237 in 2011." Hours and hours of great stories, read by skilled professional narrators.

The ubiquity of smartphones and other devices, and the availability of audiobooks via online

stores, subscription services, and libraries make it easy to listen to books wherever we go. But there are differences between listening to a book and reading one. I'm still working out the benefits of each format, and why it matters.

As a veteran editor, when I read a book, I often retain a mental map of the structure. And if I want to go back to an earlier point in the story, it's easy to flip the pages to the right spot. When I listen to a story, this visual map is not as distinct, but other elements are sharper. The use of language is more vivid—and the specific narrator is crucial, establishing the voice or voices of the story. My recent favorites include Tana French's *The Secret Place* (read in Irish accents by Stephen Hogan and Lara Hutchinson), Elizabeth Strout's *Amy and Isabelle* (read by Stephanie Roberts), *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead (narrated by Bahni Turpin), and Sarah Waters' *The Paying Guests* (read by Juliet Stevenson). A skilled narrator makes the characters burst into color. But the wrong reader can ruin a story, just as casting the wrong actor can wreck a movie.

I'm excited that publishers are continuing to experiment and innovate. Amazon's Whispersync for Voice technology (via Audible and Kindle) allows you to go back and forth between reading and listening to a particular book. And writers like Philip Pullman and Jeffery Deaver are creating original audiobooks.

Long before we had printed books, stories were transmitted through an oral tradition. So maybe that's the lesson: There's nothing new under the sun, and no matter what new formats evolve, people will always want good stories, well told.

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