Creativity, Editing, and the Business of Publishing

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This month's issue includes:

SPRING 2016

Playing With Status Judy Sternlight

"Playing With Status" first appeared on the Center for Fiction website under Writers on Writing

As an independent developmental editor who specializes in fiction, I help writers to fine-tune their novels. Sometimes a central character needs a stronger intention to drive the plot. Or one character is rock solid but others feel sketched in. Multiple storylines may obscure the central narrative arc; or the stakes should be raised, to build suspense. I love solving these puzzles with one writer at a time, on the page. But before I became a book editor, I worked with actors on similar storytelling challenges. And some of the improvisational exercises we did are perfect for writers who want to hone their narrative skills. Here's one example:

In preparing to teach "Improv for Writers" at the Center for Fiction, I revisited one of my favorite books: Keith Johnston's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. The chapter on "Status" explores a character's relationship to other characters, and to the setting. Most protagonists slide between high and low status as a story unfolds, and this grabs our interest. Harry Potter holds the lowest rank when he's living with the nasty Dursley family and sleeping in a cupboard under the stairs, but when he returns to Hogwarts and excels at magic and quiddich, his status soars…until Professor Snape cuts him down to size with scornful insults.

Whenever we communicate, we're raising or lowering our own status, or trying to influence the status of others. We praise, tease, threaten, cower—pick any active verb—and it has an effect. We initiate actions and react instinctively, often with a larger purpose in mind.

Playing with Status—pushing your characters to actively engage with a sense of immediacy—draws readers in and keeps them turning the pages. Muriel Spark is a genius at this. Take this snippet from *Memento Mori,* depicting an elderly brother and sister. Godfrey has insisted on driving Lettie to his home to protect her, after she's received some disturbing anonymous phone calls:

> *"Nonsense," said Lettie. "I have no enemies."*
>
> *"Think," said Godfrey. "Think hard."*
>
> *"The red lights," said Lettie. "And don't talk to me as if I were Charmian."*
>
> *"Lettie, if you please, I do not need to be told how to drive. I observed the lights." He had braked hard, and Dame Lettie was jerked forward.*

She gave a meaningful sigh which, when the green lights came on, made him drive all the faster.

"You know, Godfrey," she said, "you are wonderful for your age."

"So everyone says." His driving pace became moderate; her sigh of relief was inaudible, her patting herself on the back invisible.

Lettie's first line boosts her status as she dismisses her brother's implied question. When Godfrey urges her to "think hard," he lowers her status by implying that she's dim-witted, like his wife, Charmian. Lettie lowers her brother's status by criticizing his driving, and he retaliates by jerking the car, lowering her status physically.

When Lettie praises Godfrey for being "wonderful for his age," his status rises. He rewards Lettie by driving slower. Lettie knows what she's doing, flattering her brother to achieve the result she wants. And Muriel Spark knows what she's doing, too. In this short passage, she gives us a rich impression of these two siblings and their dynamic relationship.

Analyzing a scene like this, on paper, looks dry. But getting on your feet to improvise with other writers (with supportive side coaching) is a thrilling and empowering way to explore points-of-view, character intentions, subtext, sensory awareness, and moving a scene along. It takes guts to get up in front of other writers to create spontaneous scenes. But in my experience, most writers are brave souls, willing to dive into unknown territory to pull out the gold.

Judy Sternlight *is the founder of Judy Sternlight Literary Services and a co-founder of 5E, the independent editors' collective. Prior to her adventures in publishing, she enjoyed a long career in theater and communications, which included performing improvisational theater in NYC with Some Assembly Required, touring to comedy clubs, theaters, colleges and resorts, and teaching numerous improv-based workshops. Judy was an editor at Random House, Ballantine, and The Modern Library. She has edited a number of acclaimed writers including Elliot Ackerman, Marie-Helene Bertino, Rita Mae Brown, Gwen Florio, Bret Anthony Johnston, Peter Matthiessen, and Daniel Menaker. She edited* The Brown Reader: 50 Writers Remember College Hill *(Simon and Schuster, 2014), featuring Jeffrey Eugenides, Rick Moody, Meg Wolitzer, and many more.*

Chain of Improvement

Patricia Mulcahy

When writers ask, "What do editors want?" I'm not always ready with an easy answer. Paraphrasing a judge trying to define a legal threshold for obscenity: "I'm not sure how to define it, but I know it when I see it."

Reading fiction in particular is a highly subjective process—not scientific at all. It's more like walking into a party and deciding who to sidle up to: who makes you feel comfortable? Who seems like a kindred spirit? Or conversely, who scares you out of your wits but exerts a powerful pull, or ignites your curiosity?

As writers seek professional help to market their work, they have to be ready for what might euphemistically be called a chain of improvement. An indie editor hired to help polish or improve a novel or a memoir or story collection is judging not only what's on the page, but also trying to envision a readership for it. He or she wants to find something to connect with sufficiently to be effective in making it sharper, more involving.

I don't need to share the experiences depicted in a manuscript in order to have editorial insights into it, because all good writing invites readers in, no matter

who they are or where they come from. This is one of the joys of reading. But I have to engage sufficiently with the voice to want to read more. Only then can I also imagine a readership that will do so, too.

Most importantly, I need to feel I have something to bring to the party. If it's a thriller, do I have ideas about how to make the plot more suspenseful? Do I "get" the characters and their motivations? Do I have a sense of where this writer is headed? If I don't, how would I expect readers to be able to follow the narrative "through-line"?

Agents want polished material they think they can sell, no matter what the genre. An editor at a publishing house has to take this further, because he or she is part of a team and must take into account a work's commercial potential or its literary prize-or-review worthiness. All along the way, passion and enthusiasm need to carry agents and in-house editors—all hustlers of a sort if they are effective—through walls of skepticism and negativity, from market-hardened sales and marketing people to jaded and overworked publicists to data-driven buyers for major chain stores and online outlets.

So if your indie editor/agent/editor makes informed suggestions, ones that make sense to you the writer, bear in mind that they are looking to shore up your work for the journey ahead. In my decades in publishing I never met a real writer who didn't appreciate thoughtful and considered editorial suggestions—because he or she has the confidence to engage in what should be a real learning process for all involved.

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.*

The Scent of Soda Bread

Jane Rosenman

In an earlier issue of our newsletter, I wrote about editing memoir, explaining a key difference between editing fiction and nonfiction. In fiction, there is no elephant in the room demanding to know why a potential reader should care about unknown, non-famous characters. In non-celebrity memoir, however, it's imperative that the writer's personal experience strikes universal chords among readers.

After reading Mary Karr's *The Art of Memoir*, I thought I'd share some additional thoughts. As a rock star memoirist and celebrated writing teacher, Mary Karr has truly inhabited the form. For the lay reader who enjoys reading memoir, the book may be a tad technical. But I highly recommend this title for writers all along the spectrum of experience. Karr's "Do" and "Don't" list had me underlining like a madwoman. Do not write a memoir if you're driven by one unchanging emotion. Self-righteous rage, bitterness and revenge all become unreadable very quickly. (They are the rightful province of lawyers and therapists). Put down your pen if you are loathe to apologize or are allergic to reconsidering previously held beliefs. A psychologically unaware writer is not a likely memoirist. But do push on with the hard work if, in Karr's words, "You feel a living, emotional connection to the past…and want to make sense of that past." Do push on if you possess, in her lovely phrase, "a passion for the watery element of memory."

What I am most taken with in *The Art of Memoir* is Karr's astute dissection of memoir's most crucial and slippery contract—the one between writer and

reader. In fiction, a world may unfold through many different voices and points of view. But memoir, in Karr's blunt words, "lives or dies 100% on voice." Karr argues that all successful memoirs "need a special verbal device to unpack all that's hidden in the writer's voice so we can freshly relive it." That device can only be a writer's voice. It must, therefore, be an unusually round, supple one that always meets the reader halfway. If the reader thinks the writer is being coy, less than truthful, self-aggrandizing, admitting to a lesser crime to hide something worse, the reader will lose patience, will lose identification with that writer's voice. The trust between writer and audience—akin to the intimacy of having a friend tell you something important over a cup of coffee—will be lost. Memoirs are catnip for people with, in Karr's words, "an inner life big as Lake Superior."

I recently reread one of my all-time favorite memoirs, Edna O'Brien's *Country Girl*. Once again, I was knocked out by the very short Prologue. With Karr's roadmap now in mind, I smiled when I recognized O'Brien's use, to brilliant effect, of two of Karr's dictums.

Karr explains you can start the book "sitting on the coffin, telling the tale of death—or rebirth in my case." O'Brien is getting fitted in London for hearing aids at the age of 78. She is told by the young examiner with imperfect English that in terms of her hearing, "you are broken piano."

Karr also recommends that, "Every memoir should brim over with the physical experiences that once streamed in." Edna O'Brien—she of the broken piano hearing—goes home and takes out a cookery book from her western Ireland home. For the first time in thirty-five years, she bakes soda bread and as that old smell, "the begetter of many a memory" fills the air, she decides to start the memoir she swore she would never write.

Jane Rosenman *has been an Executive Editor at Houghton Mifflin, Scribner Publishing, and St. Martin's Press. Prior to that, Jane worked as Editorial Director of Washington Square Press as well as a Senior Editor at Pocket Books. From 2008 to 2009, she worked part-time acquiring titles for Algonquin Books while also starting to work as an independent editor for literary agents and individual writers. For more information, visit https://www.linkedin.com/in/janerosenman.*

A Plot of Message Is a Mess of Pottage

Liz Van Hoose

On more than one occasion, I have been asked what a writer can do to make a novel appeal to a "female book club readership" or some other equally circumspect marketing niche. On the other end of the spectrum are those who fear they'll lose artistic cred if any vig is paid to plot. Since sales handles and comp titles—or literary critics and prize judges—couldn't be further from mind when I'm editing, as I hope is the case for these writers when they're writing, I've often wondered what rough beast keeps stoking these anxieties. Perhaps it's the growing number of searingly good "commercial" authors who have never won a Pulitzer, PEN/Faulkner, or Booker Prize. Or the fact that Stephen King and John Grisham once bought a table at the National Book Awards because "that was the only way we were going to get in the door." Mystery writer Tana French's *Faithful Place* is arguably the best Irish family epic since Alice McDermott's prize-winning *Charming Billy*, and Elin Hilderbrand, queen of the beach read, honed her craft at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, so why do unknown, unlabeled writers worry about being "commercial" novelists, seemingly locked into a genre and deprived of literary caché?

Consider these writers' own views on the matter. When the National Book Foundation finally honored Stephen King's "Distinguished Contribution to

American Letters," he asserted: "I never once sat down at my desk thinking today I'm going to make a hundred grand. Or this story will make a great movie. If I tried to write with those things in mind, I believe I would have sold my birthright for a plot of message, as the old pun has it."

The original figure being, *He sold his birthright for a mess of pottage*, in which case the message is pottage, and the plot is a mess?

King's twist on the saying describes the beautiful tangle with which every great writer—commercial, literary, or otherwise—must contend. A "plot of message"—a plot enslaved to market trends—is as vacuous as an ornately described character without a story. Tana French recently told *Gawker*: "I've never seen why audiences should be expected to be satisfied with either gripping plots or good writing. Why shouldn't they be offered both at once?" Witness the dazzling feat of tension, humor, and social depth Gillian Flynn achieves with Nick's and Amy's conflicting senses of place in *Gone Girl*. Or the delicious creepiness that mounts as one tries to guess which of the myriad details of family dysfunction will tie to the three murders at the heart of Kate Atkinson's *Case Histories*. The standard-bearers of commercial fiction serve a far higher purpose than market bellwether; they offer the astute burgeoning writer, as well as every editor who reads them, a treasure trove of crafty maneuvers to marvel at and steal from, irrespective of genre or standing in the dubious commercial-literary binary.

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.*

Addition and Subtraction

Leslie Wells

Good editors help authors decide what a book needs to make it more compelling. This may involve adding some important aspects to the manuscript, while taking away unnecessary elements. Below is a little math exercise that may help in thinking about what a manuscript is missing—or has too much of.

For fiction:

Add:

Vivid details about characters and settings; use the five senses to place the reader in the story

Action that reveals motivation, rather than explaining the characters to the reader (show, don't tell)

Dialogue that is utterly convincing and sounds like speech you'd overhear (for best results, read aloud)

A consistently compelling storyline that builds with each ensuing chapter (1 + 1 = 3)

If at all possible, a dash of humor

Subtract:

Minor characters that don't add to the overarching theme or storyline

Unnecessary adjectives that clutter up the description

Unconsciously repeated words or phrases

Subplots that go off-track, derailing the forward motion of the main storyline

Extra scenes that don't add to our understanding of the protagonist (1 + 1 = 0)

For nonfiction:

Add:

In memoir, vivid details to make the anecdotes come alive

Also in memoir, remind the reader that Emily is your cousin if we haven't seen her In 50 pages

In general nonfiction, specific examples to illustrate theoretical points

Ibid, citations where needed (don't be sloppy with sources)

In narrative nonfiction: humor, irony, passion conveyed by author's voice (*#@#!)

Subtract:

In memoir, one hundred pages on childhood years (unless the memoir is specifically about childhood)

Also in memoir, the phrase "Looking back, I now see…." Avoid interrupting the ongoing action to comment on it from a future point in time.

In narrative nonfiction, going into great detail about a person who never reappears in the story

In general nonfiction, excess research information that should go into the end notes

In memoir, any anecdotes that only someone who knows you would understand (1 + 1 =?)

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 http://www.lesliewellseditorial.com.*

Outside the Lines: The Disruption Dynamic

Joan Hilty

At the School of Visual Arts, I teach a course in professional practice. This is a daunting topic for any artist, let alone Cartooning majors; they've chosen a labor-intensive and often-underestimated category within the competitive world of illustration. To keep them thinking positively about their futures as storytellers, I ask them to think disruptively.

I remind them of the original definition of "cartoon", which didn't refer to a stand-alone work of visual story until the 19th century. Before then, per its linguistic roots in the Italian *cartone* (sturdy paper), a cartoon was just a preparatory drawing made to scale for a tapestry or painting. In the case of cartoons for wall frescoes, the drawing's linework was often punctured with pinpricks so that a bag of soot patted over its surface, held flat against the wall, would outline the basic design onto the plaster. In the case of more elaborate, colored cartoons for tapestries, the weavers followed the forms and colors by eye as they sat at the loom.

Then, in 1843, the satirical illustrator John Leech mocked a boondoggle effort to decorate the new Palace of Westminster with historical frescoes. He visually compared the lofty narratives of the submitted cartoons to the sitting politicians' paltry accomplishments, and thereafter the word took on a totally new meaning.

In short, cartooning began as a way of leading the eye, and became a way of leading the mind. The process outgrew its definition, and became a profession.

I tell my students this mainly as a way of encouraging them to think strategically and flexibly as they plot a career path. But disruption is a never-ending dynamic in writing and publishing. The "novel" is defined as a long fictional narrative of human experience, derived from ***novella*** or "new". Yet novellas are now considered a derivation of the novel, and often graphic novels aren't fiction at all. Fiction begets metafiction; autobiography begets memoir; historiography grows out of objective fact and subjective interpretation to make sense of the world. As we keep expanding and changing these definitions, we expand the craft of storytelling as well.

A story form shouldn't be fixed in amber, any more than a cartoon should remain a drawing full of holes pressed against a wall to make a painting. As writers, editors, and publishers charged with staying imaginative in an ever-challenging field, we must keep disrupting our own fixed expectations for story creation, and for its possibilities in the marketplace.

Joan Hilty *is an editor specializing in graphic novels, illustrated books and transmedia; her clients include Farrar Straus & Giroux, Abrams, Nickelodeon, Marvel, Blue Man Group, 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.*