

The Dine Print

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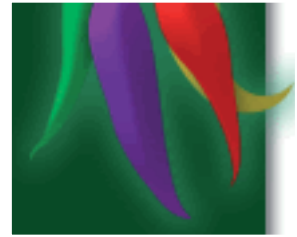


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A Word on Words brings together many reflections on the vagaries and constant evolution of the English language in a logical and conversational manner.



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Welcome to new readers and welcome back to those who read and commented on issue number one. The response was overwhelmingly and gratifyingly positive. We hope you like number two. From this issue, you can subscribe to *TFP*. This simply means that we will send you an email to let you know when each issue is published. And for those who develop email fatigue, you can elect to be removed from the list at any time.

This issue has some treats. Editors handle language like bakers deal with dough—it's our tool of trade, our livelihood and a source of fascination. The articles by Nick Hudson and Julian Burnside reflect on this in different ways. 'Some parsing thoughts' takes up the question of grammar—four kinds of it, how much of it an editor needs to know and what is 'acceptable grammar'. Read on to identify your grammatical niche. 'Talking about asylum' is a timely reminder of the meaning lurking behind the language of power and persuasion. It is impossible to read this article and not feel moved to take a position about the words we hear and read every day from the lips of government and politicians.

This issue's interview is with Dorothy Johnston, a Canberra writer whose crime novel, *The Trojan Dog*, was republished in the US, a development that involved a major editorial re-working. For those unfamiliar with science editing and the coming BELS examination to be held in Australia, Rhana Pike's entertaining account 'On becoming a certified editor' should help demystify the process. Everyone in publishing is affected by the final stage of the process—book sales. Keith Binnington's piece on selling books is informative and told from an unusual angle.

Theresa Willsted muses on the charms and the frustrations of *The Style Manual* and *The Macquarie Dictionary* while Sheila Allison offers insights into fiction editing in her reviews of three titles which are not new but which continue to offer insight and guidance to fiction editors and writers. A review of the latest offering from Pam Peters, *A Word on Words*, completes the section on books.

We hope you are informed and entertained by this issue, stirred to reflect and to contribute. The first two issues of *TFP* have featured contributors from many parts of Australia. We'd like to extend the geographical reach by issuing an warm invitation to contribute to Western Australians, Northern Territorians, South Australians and to New Zealanders and other international contributors.

TFP is new on the scene and while it is in its early days, we'd also welcome contributions that broaden our understanding of the world of editing. New media has been underrepresented. What do readers have to say about the challenges of web editing, e-publishing, film and TV script editing?

Before the next issue is published, many of you will gather at the Editing in Context conference in Melbourne and at Style Council, which will be held immediately afterwards. We hope to see you there.

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Editing in Context—National Editor Conference

13–15 October 2005

Eden on the Park, Melbourne, Victoria

Presented by the Council of Australian Societies of Editors (CASE)

Hosted by the Society of Editors (Vic.) Inc.



Registration is now open for the Editing in Context National Editors Conference, to be held in Melbourne from 13–15 October 2005. The conference is shaping up to be an exciting and stimulating experience, not only for editors but for anyone involved in publishing.

The current state of the publishing industry in Australia will be discussed by the keynote speakers: Janet Mackenzie, Jackie Yowell and Michael Webster. Other sessions will include education, training and mentoring; editing in the online world; accreditation for editors; editing within non-mainstream publishing; and editing children's books.

Entertainer and author, Jane Clifton, will be the guest speaker at the conference dinner, to be held at the Melbourne Aquarium. Other activities include health and wellbeing sessions and field trips to sites around Melbourne.

Register now to take advantage of the early bird rate. A draft program and registration details are available on the conference website at www.socedvic.org/editingincontext or email editingincontext@optushome.com.au for more information.

At the Typeface

The Society of Editors (Victoria) will celebrate its 35th anniversary with the launch of the anthology *At the Typeface* <www.socedvic.org/editingincontext/social.html>. This publication features a selection of items from the Society's monthly *Newsletter*, including contributions from some of the leading names of Australia's publishing and literary world.

Style Council 2005

Style Council 2005 takes the theme 'Style in context, Australian and international'. It will be held in Melbourne at the Eden on the Park Hotel (15–16 October), dovetailing with the national conference of editors, and complementing its theme 'Editing in context'.

Style Council opens on Saturday evening with a celebratory event featuring author Thomas Keneally, who will launch the fourth edition of the *Macquarie Dictionary*.

On Sunday morning, Style Council's keynote speaker Professor Kate Burridge (Monash University) will launch the conference theme 'Style in context' with a wide-ranging paper on communicating with different audiences. Other papers will focus on the details of adapting publications for local and overseas consumers. There are details of editorial style to attend to, in spelling and punctuation adjustments; and adjustments to weights and measures, and to the institutions referred to, for example 'Canberra' for the central government. The cultural positioning of a text often requires some adjustment to work outside the Australian context. Offers of brief (20 minute) papers on these and related topics are welcome, to be submitted by 30 July. Please send abstracts of 300 words or three paragraphs to Mr Adam Smith, the conference administrator, online at: adam.smith@mq.edu.au.

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Talking about asylum

Julian Burnside

The word asylum has a long, honoured and relatively even history. It comes directly from the Greek noun meaning refuge or sanctuary, and its related adjective meaning inviolable. At first it could be used only as a concrete noun, referring to a place of refuge or protection.

Its first recorded use, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, was in 1430. 'A territory that was called Asile. This Asilum ... was a place of refuge and succours ... for to receyue all foreyn trespassours.' In the 15th century, a *trespasser* was a law-breaker or wrong-doer. This use is perpetuated in the familiar words of the Lord's prayer '... And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them who trespass against us ...' *Trespass* nowadays has narrowed its meaning, so that it refers specifically to actual or metaphorical encroachment on another's territory.

In 1691 Wood wrote: 'He fled to Oxon, the common Asylum of afflicted royalists.' (During Cromwell's time, Royalists were indeed afflicted, according to the then current meaning of that word: *Grievously affected with continued disease of body or mind; suffering*).

A later quotation from 1807 is in similar vein: 'Some were asyla for all men, and others were appropriated to particular persons and crimes.'

In 1791 Thomas Paine published *The Rights of Man*. He argued in support of the French Revolution and advocated many social institutions which are now regarded as basic to a civilised society. One of his proposals was for an asylum for the indigent poor:

Many a youth comes up to London full of expectations, and with little or no money, and unless he get immediate employment he is already half undone; and boys bred up in London without any means of a livelihood, and ... of dissolute parents...; and servants long out of place are not much better off. ... Hunger is not among the postponable wants, and a day, even a few hours, in such a condition is often the crisis of a life of ruin. These circumstances which are the general cause of the little thefts and pilferings that lead to greater, may be prevented.

He proposed the construction of a building in which people could be supported and protected in exchange for performing a certain amount of work each day:

By establishing an asylum of this kind, such persons to whom temporary distresses occur, would have an opportunity to recruit themselves, and be enabled to look out for better employment.

Tom Paine's ideas were not universally popular. He was charged with seditious libel, was tried in absentia and found guilty. His book was thereafter suppressed. Tom Paine was ahead of his time. Nowadays he would probably be considered a terrorist and be held permanently, incommunicado, in an asylum like Guantanamo Bay.

These early examples of the use of *asylum* (and its now defunct plural, *asylla*) reflect the primary meaning of the word: an asylum is a place of refuge and protection for all manner of people: debtors, criminals and the insane, as well as others who for different reasons may need protection. Asylum was, from the beginning, a concrete noun which referred to a place. It continues to be used that way (for example, in references to lunatic asylums).

Early in the eighteenth century, *asylum* began to be used as an abstract noun, meaning protection, refuge or help, as distinct from a place which offered that protection. A person seeking asylum is not looking to be held in a confined place, although those seeking asylum in Australia may be disappointed that before obtaining asylum they will be locked up, sometimes for so long that they develop such severe psychotic distress that they are sent to what would once have been called a lunatic asylum, but is now more politely spoken of as a psychiatric hospital.

Although it is no longer regarded as a proper thing to refer to lunatic asylums, they have left their mark in our language. The Hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem in London was founded as a priory in 1247. By 1330 it was in use as a hospital, and soon afterwards as a hospital for lunatics. In 1547 it was incorporated as a royal foundation for the reception of lunatics. It was originally located in Bishopsgate. It was rebuilt near London Wall in 1676. In 1815 it relocated to Lambeth. It was a chaotic place. The word *Bethlehem* being both cumbersome and alien, its pronunciation was soon worn down to *Bethlam* or *Betleem* or *Bedlam*. *Bedlam* is the commonest form, and has been known since the late sixteenth century. By association, it came quickly to mean any lunatic asylum, and then any place which was chaotic, then chaotic circumstances generally.

One group of asylum seekers has influenced language in a surprising way. Few people who enjoy Cajun food would realise that the cuisine perpetuates the name of a persecuted group. Acadia was a French colony in what is now Nova Scotia. It had been controlled alternately by the English and the French. In 1755 the English drove the Acadians out: the Acadians were French; England thought war with France was imminent and did not want to risk having traitors in Acadia. The Acadians found more peaceful prospects in Louisiana which was then owned by the French (The Louisiana Purchase occurred in 1803. America paid about 7 cents per hectare for just over 2 million square kilometres of land; it doubled the size of the United States. It is considered to be the greatest land bargain in American history.) The Acadians developed a distinctive patois of archaic French and American Indian, and a distinctive style of cooking. By a familiar process, their name—*Acadians*—was shortened to *Cadians* and rubbed down to *Cajuns*.

These historical curiosities do not diminish the very long history of asylum having a favourable connotation. A person who seeks or needs asylum is someone who, by definition, needs protection and by inference should receive it. The arrival of boat-people in Australia who seek asylum here created more of a linguistic difficulty for the government than a demographic one. Because the number of boat-people landing in

Australia has always been very small (an average of 1000 per year over the past 20 years), the Howard government deployed false language to mislead the public. Doublespeak is not new, but in the area where compassion threatens to challenge policy, the Howard government uses doublespeak to skew the debate.

Boat-people commit no offence under Australian or international law by arriving here, without invitation and without papers, in order to seek protection. Nonetheless the Australian Government refers to them as 'illegals'. This piece of doublespeak is not just for tabloid consumption: it is official. When the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission held an inquiry into children in detention in Australia, the Department of Immigration made a submission. That submission was stored on the Department's web site. The full web address of the submission showed that it was held in a sub-directory called 'illegals'.

Like all doublespeak, 'illegals' is used for a purpose: these people are immediately locked up without trial. No doubt it seems less offensive to lock up 'illegals' than to lock up innocent, traumatised human beings.

They are also disparaged as 'queue jumpers': a neat device which falsely suggests two things. First that there is a queue, and second that it is in some way appropriate to stand in line when your life is at risk.

When the 'illegals/queue jumpers' arrive, they are 'detained' in 'Immigration Reception and Processing Centres'. This description is false in every detail. They are locked up without trial, for an indefinite period—typically months or years—in desert camps which are as remote from civilisation as it is possible to be. They are held behind razor wire, they are addressed not by name but by number, and they slowly sink into hopelessness and despair.

Australia's newest detention centre is Baxter, near Port Augusta in the South Australian desert. It was announced by Phillip Ruddock as the 'family-friendly' detention centre—one of the most audacious pieces of doublespeak in recent decades. In addition to the usual layers of razor wire, Baxter is surrounded by an electrified fence. But in the doublespeak of the Department of Immigration, this is officially called an 'energised fence'. Wait for the energised cattle prods.



When a 'detainee' (doublespeak for *prisoner*) is removed from a detention centre for deportation, the process is generally done in the dead of night and may involve forcibly tranquillising the person by injection; it is generally done by a squad of guards in costumes reminiscent of Darth Vader. This alarming procedure is sanitised as 'an extraction'.

In the desert camps, dormitories are regularly checked during the night: at 8.00 p.m., midnight and 4.00 a.m., by shining a torch in the face of each detainee and demanding to see their identification. This is a 'security check'. It also fits within one of the standard definitions of torture.

If detainees are driven to the desperate extreme of suicide or self-harm, Minister Ruddock would disparage this as 'inappropriate behaviour' designed to 'manipulate the Government'. By that doublespeak, the victim becomes the offender.

The truth of our treatment of refugees is deeply shocking. Innocent people are locked up in dreadful conditions and for an indefinite period; they are deprived of sleep and isolated from the outside world; they are forcibly removed as circumstances require. They live behind razor wire and electric fences. Their powerful will to live is gradually eroded until—all hope lost—they are driven to self-harm. The truth is uncomfortable for the major political parties: they conceal it in doublespeak in the hope that it will be all right.

In 1946, George Orwell wrote 'Politics and the English Language', in which he exposed the deceits and devices of doublespeak. He might have thought that it would lose its power once its workings were revealed. But he would be disappointed. Language is as powerful now as in 1933: it can hide shocking truth, it can deceive a nation, it can hand electoral victory to the morally bankrupt.

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Some parsing thoughts

Nick Hudson

Book editors are perhaps the only people in the world for whom a basic grasp of grammar is a survival skill. A grasp of grammar is needed, we are told, because one of the editor's jobs is to make sure that their authors do not lose credibility for what Robert Burchfield called 'evidence of imperfect education', which includes grammatical errors. End of argument.

However, for many people who were never exposed to grammar lessons at school it is the beginning of the argument rather than the end. They believe that without these lessons grammar will remain for ever beyond their grasp.

This is palpable nonsense. If it were so, those people who have not had the benefit of grammar lessons would be unable to communicate with one another, since grammar describes the rules by which words are assembled into meaningful statements. Furthermore, these grammarless people would include many, if not most, of the greatest writers.

The fact is that anybody who can talk (as opposed to grunt or bark) must know a lot of grammar. Just as people can be sexually active without having studied a sex manual, so people can be grammatically active without having studied grammar. Like Annie Oakley, they are just doing what comes naturally.

Talking is probably the most spectacular example of the power of the human brain. In microseconds, we select the appropriate words from the thousands we have in store, and arrange them in one or more of hundreds of possible grammatical patterns. The possible permutations and combinations are so varied that almost any sentence of more than a few words is brand new, never uttered before.

Only a little less spectacular is our decoding skill. We hear these brand new sentences and can instantly identify the grammatical patterns being used. We are so good at this that we can often understand the message although its grammatical structure is incomplete or changes direction or gets lost on the way.

The core of the grammar each of us possesses is the grammar of our childhoods: homes, street and playgrounds. Some of us were lucky enough to have grown up in homes, street and playgrounds where the grammar was reasonably standard, and our grammar is labelled 'educated'. Others are brought up in playgrounds where the grammar is non-standard, and go through life being told that their grammar shows 'evidence of imperfect education'.

In fact, it has nothing to do with education at all, at least if education means 'what is learnt in grammar lessons'. The extent to which our personal stock of grammar stems from, or can be modified by, grammar lessons is very, very limited.

Why is all this relevant to editors? Because the first stage in the process of correction of grammar is identification of non-standard usage. An editor cannot check everything. As we read a text, we subconsciously check it against our own set of sentence patterns. If we find a match, we read on; if we don't find a match, we suspect that something is wrong. But this only works if the grammar against which we are doing the checking, the grammar wired into our brains, is itself standard grammar.

And it works the other way, too. One of the hardest editorial jobs I ever did was on a couple of plays in English by New Guinean students at the Goroka Teachers College. The problem was that the grammar was full of non-standard sentence patterns, about a third of which were clearly misprints and mistakes which had to be corrected. Another third were equally obviously patterns which reflected Pidgin or vernacular influences. They added enormously to the flavour of the plays, and had to be preserved. Between these two sat the problem sentences. They must have been one or the other, but I had no way of knowing which.

I would have had no trouble if I had simply decided to translate the plays into standard English. The problem arose because I felt that the language should be the English of educated New Guineans, a grammar with which I was not familiar.

Indeed, the terms 'standard' and 'non-standard' beg the question. Translators use the terms 'source language' and 'destination language', and this concept can be applied to the editorial process. Every manuscript arrives on the editor's desk in its 'source grammar', the grammar of its author, and must leave in the 'destination grammar', the grammar expected by its readers. Editors do not need to be fluent in the source grammars—they only need to be able to work out what the author had in mind—but it does help enormously if they are fluent in the destination grammar.

Most editors are fluent in standard English, and happily, this is the destination grammar for most books. In short, most editors know more than enough grammar to do their job.

So, why is it that so many editors wish (or say they wish) that they knew more grammar, or that they had been taught more grammar at school? I suspect that the answer can be found in the diversity of the intellectual pursuits which gather under the general label 'grammar'.

First, there is descriptive grammar—the study of the grammar which is actually used in the real world. This is an extraordinarily complex academic study. It is essentially a behavioural study, often relying on statistics. It delights in variety and eccentricity. It is also reluctant to make value judgements, if only because it knows that yesterday's grammatical error is today's acceptable alternative and tomorrow's correct usage. It offers few solutions to editors' problems.

Second, there is traditional formal grammar—the grammar which until the sixties was taught in almost every school. This was largely devoted to parsing and analysis, labelling each word in a sentence with its part of

speech. Many people enjoyed it, just as they might enjoy sorting garbage for recycling. But it seemed an odd way to learn the art of writing, akin to the belief that the beauty of flowers could best be explored by cutting them up and drawing neatly labelled diagrams of their reproductive organs. How or why parsing would of itself solve grammatical problems was not obvious, so the schools threw it out.

Third, there is prescriptive grammar. This takes the grammar of the great writers of the past and says 'This is how they wrote. If you want to be a great writer, you must write as they did'. It delights in value judgements and in discovering rules which distinguish good writing from bad: do not split infinitives; watch out for hanging participles; never end a sentence with a preposition. These dogmas are of some use, provided they are taken with a largish pinch of salt. It is very easy to find excellent sentences that break them, and would be less excellent if the rules had been followed.

Fourth, there is shibboleth grammar, which is like prescriptive grammar except that the rules are invented rather than discovered. A current example is the proposition that 'which' is the preferred relative pronoun in non-defining relative clauses while 'that' is preferred for defining ones. Another is the rule of political correctness which, having banned the use of 'he' as a gender-inclusive pronoun, allows us to use the plural 'their' as a gender-inclusive singular in such sentences as 'each child shall bring their own lunch'. Both these are recent inventions, but they, too, have their place, giving the editor a reason to make a great many marks on an otherwise impeccable manuscript.

Fifth, there is house grammar, the set of rules which a particular publisher may require. For example, many American scientific publishers are very sticky about 'data' being a plural noun. Knowledge of these rules is essential to editors working for such publishers.

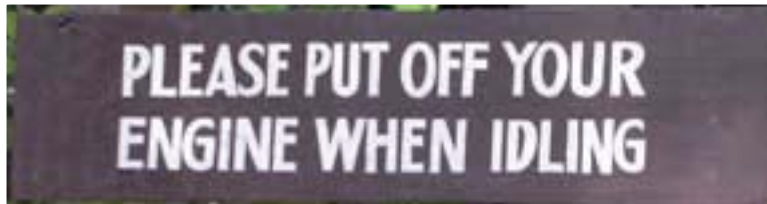
Now, when editors say that they wish they knew more grammar, they may have any or all of these grammars in mind, but I suspect that their real problem is with none of these. It is that they were never taught, or encouraged to learn, the jargon of grammar, the dozens of words like subjunctive and gerund and antecedent which pepper grammatical discourse. And it is not because they want these words as weapons to hurl at one another or their authors, but because they realise that without them it is very difficult to discuss grammatical questions, or even to formulate the issues to be discussed.

Many descriptive linguists would argue that these words generate more smoke than light, given that most of them have come down to us from grammars written about highly inflected languages, where the various parts of speech were much more significant and clearly distinguished than they are in English. However, the simple fact is that none of the proposed alternative labelling systems has caught on, and all the standard dictionaries and style manuals continue to use the jargon of formal grammar.

Fluency in the jargon does not help us to notice that an infinitive has been split or a participle is hanging. We notice a problem if and when we feel that something is wrong. But the jargon then enables us to put a label on the problem, succinctly and precisely. Let me give an example:

DO NOT FEED BABIES WHEN SMOKING

This sentence is in theory ambiguous but not so in practice. So, what about this:



I saw this outside a hotel in Sri Lanka. It was ambiguous enough to make me smile. And what about this:



This is a sign which has just gone up all over Melbourne, and when I first saw it I laughed out loud. In fact, I was amazed that it had ever got past the Inspector of Grammar at VicRoads

Try explaining the joke without using any grammatical jargon terms. I don't say it is impossible, but I do say that jargon would reduce the length of the explanation by half and generate a more precise answer.

This, I think, is all that the teaching and learning of grammar can do. It is not that it can solve problems, but it can give us the vocabulary to articulate and discuss the problems and to come up with coherent answers. And the final irony is that I know no better way to become a confident and precise user of grammatical jargon than by that most despised of exercises, parsing.

God forbid that our schools should ever reintroduce parsing as a part of the core curriculum for every pupil over seven. If it ever returns to our schools, it should be placed in a cupboard of exotic delicacies reserved for an elite minority in Year 12: those whose burning ambition is to become book editors.

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The publishing pie: Who gets what?

Jeremy Fisher

Ah, a new Harry Potter. Booksellers are swooning, publishers are lurching and everybody's jealous of J. K. Rowling's millions. It all makes writing and publishing appear very lucrative.

However, the reality is somewhat different. The returns from publishing for Australian publishers are not significantly different to those from cash investment. According to the most recent figures available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2003 the profit margin for book publishing in Australia was just 5.6 per cent. That makes the 5.9 per cent currently being offered by Citibank a very attractive option.

It's not as if big amounts of money are involved either. The entire operating profit before tax for book publishing businesses in Australia in 2002–03 was a relatively modest \$88.4 million. J. K. Rowling earns more all by herself.

However, publishers still have a better chance of retiring rich than writers. At the end of June 2003, there were 5340 people employed in book publishing. Wages and salaries paid by publishers for the 2002–03 financial year came to \$248.6 million, or 17 per cent of publishers' total expenses, giving an average salary in publishing of \$46 554. In contrast, for the same period publishers paid royalties and fees to writers and illustrators of 1.7 per cent of revenues, or \$102.6 million. Authors survive on these royalties, payments for subsidiary rights, lending rights payments and payments for statutory reprographic rights (administered by Copyright Agency Ltd [CAL]). Even so, the Australia Council's Throsby and Hollister report 'Don't give up your day job' indicates that in the period 2000–01 writers had a mean arts income of \$26 400 and a median arts income of just \$11 700, reflecting the effect of a few high earners in raising the mean.

Remuneration is better for publishers. Senior sales and publishing managers may well receive salaries of \$150 000 to \$200 000; even more with bonus payments and fringe benefits. Sales representatives have salaries from \$50 000. Administrative staff start at around \$40 000. Editors also do better than authors. Under the Book Industry Award, trainee editors commence on a salary of \$30 600 and the highest grade receives nearly \$51 000 plus 9 per cent superannuation. In practice, many publishers pay above these rates and offer fringe benefits. Freelancers don't lose out. The freelance rate for book editors currently appears to vary between \$45 and \$75 per hour.

Even the humble indexer may earn more from a book than its author. The Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers (ANZSI) recommends a base rate of \$55 (excluding GST) an hour for its members.

Payments to publishers and authors from CAL in 2003 totalled \$46 956 773. But this was no cause for authors to splurge on champagne. Only 8.94 per cent (\$4 197 337) was paid directly to 4935 authors, an

average payment of \$850, or less than \$17 per week. Enough, perhaps, for three reams of A4 paper, but not enough for even an entrée at one of the restaurants publishers love to lunch at.

One bright spot for authors was the fact that payments for Public Lending Right (PLR) in 2003–04 increased. The PLR Committee recommended an increase in the PLR payment rate in line with the annual increase in the funding allocation for the scheme in 2003–04. The rate per copy of each eligible book was \$1.37 for creators and 34.25 cents for publishers compared with \$1.34 and 33.5 cents in 2002–03. The Committee approved annual payments of \$6 501 793.18 for 2003–04, to be distributed to 8737 claimants, of whom 8409 were creators and 328 were publishers. The majority of creators received payments of less than \$3000. Seventeen creators received payments greater than \$20 000.

Payments for Educational Lending Right (ELR) have not increased in the same manner as PLR because funding currently remains fixed. Educational Lending Right payments commenced in 2000 as part of the Book Industry Assistance Plan initiated in response to the imposition of a GST on books. Funding for ELR commenced in 2000–01 at \$8 million, and increased to \$11 million in the final year, 2003–04. An extension of funding of \$44 million over four years from 2004–05 was provided in the 2004–05 Federal Budget to continue ELR payments up to 2008. For the period 2003–04, ELR made payments totalling \$10.23 million to 8285 claimants. Of these, 7981 were creators and 304 were publishers.

No author resents J. K. Rowling her sales and income, but all writers know that writing is rarely a path to riches. In the absence of film deals and action figures, books make more money for their publishers than for their authors.

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Interview with Dorothy Johnston

Pamela Hewitt

Australian novelist Dorothy Johnston recently had the unusual experience of working with an editor after publication.

The Australian edition of her novel *The Trojan Dog* came out in 2000. When US publisher St Martin's Press bought it, along with a second novel, *The White Tower*, the editorial process started again. It was illuminating to compare the approaches of the two publishers and their editors. Interesting for editors, too, in a world where publishing is an increasingly global phenomenon.

Jumpers and galahs

Not surprisingly, the US publishers asked for changes to terms that might be unfamiliar to American readers. While Australian readers understand the meaning of, say, faucet almost instinctively because of their exposure to American media, American readers are less likely to know what a tap is. This aspect of the editing didn't present real problems to Johnston. 'The easiest thing for me to do, as an author responding to my American editor was to change a word—for example to change *jumper* to *sweater*—or to find a context where a colloquialism like *fair dinkum* made sense. There were more Australian colloquialisms than I thought.

'My editor sent me, first of all, a detailed general critique of the plot, the characters, the whole thing, and then a list of vocabulary which he either wanted me to change, to find a synonym which was an international word, or to find a way to contextualise my phrase, so that it wouldn't strike their readership as an obstacle.'

These superficial adjustments were an easy matter. Revisiting the published work as a manuscript was more demanding. The desire to leave a book behind after publication is common to authors and editors alike. 'After I publish a book, I don't even want to read it. You go through this emotional and psychological process. You let it go. It goes out into the public arena, warts and all—the mistakes, what you could have done better. And you think that's the end. I could perhaps go back after five years and bear to read them.'

With US publication, Johnston didn't just read the text again. It was more a case of going through it with fine-toothed comb, following the editor's suggestions.

'It went through at least three or four stages. He was extraordinarily thorough and the copyeditor who got it after that checked everything. He found a mistake with the date somebody died. I went back in my manuscript to try and find it in my notes and I think it must have got into the Australian edition as a typo.'

Most writers are pleased to have errors like these picked up but authors don't always welcome copyediting suggestions. 'I've had the experience

in a copyedit of all my punctuation being altered to semicolons and colons and all my sentences turned around so that they were facing the same way. It changes the rhythm of the sentences. My punctuation is rather idiosyncratic. Not as idiosyncratic as some people's but I never use semicolons or colons. I like dashes. My commas have to do the work of practically every other form of punctuation. That's what I can hear in my head. I've got my punctuation the way I've got it because it gives the rhythm that I want. I think an awful lot about my commas. If I've got a comma before an and, I've got a reason for putting it there, and if I haven't got a comma, likewise I've got a reason for not having it there. 'I had no idea what an American copyedit would be like. I was a bit scared after having been through this washing machine thing that the copyedit would be all-over changes. But the copyeditor just put in his little cover note "This is your style". In almost every case it was OK. That was a big relief.'

Putting the jigsaw back together

The real challenge came with structural work. It was also ultimately rewarding. 'Before *The Trojan Dog*, I'd been a literary novelist. I still regard myself mostly as a literary novelist. I never set out to write *The Trojan Dog* as a crime novel. It just sort of announced itself to me that that was the form it had to be in. I had to have this woman investigating a crime. But I was quite open when I got his report to the idea that there was a lot wrong with it. It was a learning experience for me writing in a new genre. I wasn't at all surprised when he said that there were lots of things that didn't work.

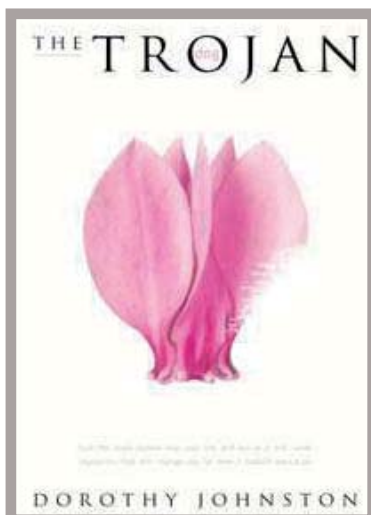
'The hardest thing was to face the old text with his comments and criticisms alongside it. I'd think "Yes, well, he's right, but what on earth can I do with something that I wrote all these years ago?"

'I thought they might not like so much Canberra stuff. There's a lot of description of Canberra, seasonal stuff, and some quite metaphorical things in *The Trojan Dog*. There's a metaphorical journey inside a Trojan horse—not a wooden Trojan horse but a virtual one. I thought he might just say "Get rid of it all". Streamline it and turn it into much more of a conventional crime novel. Get rid of what I thought made it distinctive,

even though they were literary things. But he didn't want me to do that. All of the things he homed in on were actual weaknesses.

'There were big structural changes. It was the first time it happened to me that somebody had taken a book which conceptually is quite old and said "Look, this is what needs to be done to this book to improve it". This is a gross phrase to use, but it's like eating your own vomit.

'I didn't find it confronting because I agreed with him. It was certainly



extremely difficult, on a whole range of levels. I put an enormous amount of effort into responding to that first report and sending him the manuscript again and he sent me another long list of things that still needed attention.

'I went through it three times, thinking "OK, now that's it", but it wasn't at all. He read it four times. It had to be done more quickly, obviously, than you'd write the original manuscript. It's very hard, especially in a crime novel, because of the synergy. Everything affects everything else. I know that in any text that's true, but there are particular ways that that's true in a crime novel. And you can run into some quite intractable problems that have been set up by telling the story in a certain way or by the narrator. The problems can be difficult to nut out. You can change something, and because you don't have a lot of time to reflect and to think about it and to recall everything you can actually make silly mistakes. I was really scared that that would happen, that it would end up being worse.

'I relied on them to remember, to think "No, Dorothy, you can't do that because that will affect that. It was okay in the original but if you're going to do this, you're going to have to do that", and so on. It was putting the whole jigsaw back together differently.'

Working with editors

Writers work in different ways with editors. Some welcome the editor's input. For others it's a tug-of-war. Is editing always necessary or is it something that writers can learn to apply to their work? 'With my novels, I get them to a certain stage myself and I need to have a break from them. And since I've published quite a few books now, I usually send it off because I don't want to think about it any more! I've been through a few drafts, I've shown it to a few friends and I've done what I think I can with it. That's perhaps my own myopia. I'll always be like that. I'll get a manuscript, on my own, to a certain stage, and it will need another person.'

Dorothy Johnston was a member of a group of seven Canberra writers whose 1988 book of short stories, *Canberra Tales*, also included contributions by Margaret Barbalet, Sara Dowse, Suzanne Edgar, Marian Eldridge, Marion Halligan and Dorothy Horsfield. Johnston said having her work critiqued by other writers was completely different to working with an editor. 'I had nearly two decades of being in a writer's group where we met every month and we discussed each other's work. Up to a point I became quite competent. But beyond that, I think I've reached my level of self editing.

'In our group, people would work things out or they'd say things, but nobody ever gave my work the thorough, in-depth sort of attention that a professional editor could give. Which is not to say that some of their insights weren't valuable. It was a relaxed atmosphere. After all, it was a friendship group and it was to help things along the way. But with a professional editor, the power dynamic is quite different. They're working for the people who have the money to publish you—or not.'



A good editing relationship involves developing a rapport with the author. As with any other relationship, the chemistry isn't always right. 'I haven't always had good editors. The American guy was really fantastic but I've had some editors who I've disagreed with. I had a bad editing experience with someone who I thought was just completely not on my wavelength, they just weren't into what I was really on about.

'They're midwives, really, good editors. The baby's coming out and the midwife has to work on that baby, not some other fictional baby that they've got in their mind. The first

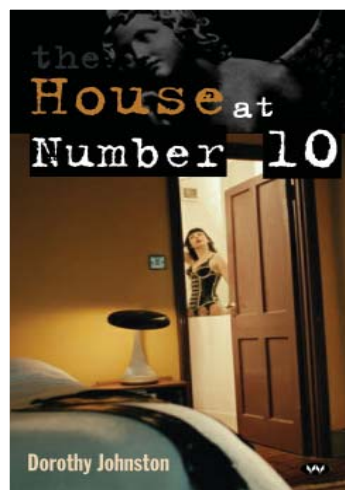
skill is to recognise the baby for what it is, or what it's aiming to be.

'I've got a wonderful Australian editor at the moment. She did *The White Tower* and now she's doing this new literary one. She's freelance. She sent me her report and we've had a few exchanges of emails. I've talked to her on the phone and we've met a couple of times. I think it was good to meet, to hear her voice. By the time I got to meet her, there were a few quite tricky things and it was good to nut them out. She's quite tough. She hasn't wasted my time and hers telling me everything was rosy. She would give me any time and any effort that I asked for. She's quite young, but she's very smart. She's got this ability to see into things.

'Other editors I've worked with don't even try to make suggestions. They just tell you what's wrong. It's easy to point to the faults. It's really only the half of it. She puts options. She'll say "Well this is a way to do this or think about doing this".'

Johnston commented that one of the striking differences between Australian and American publishing is the resources that go into the editorial process. 'One is that they have money and two, they make the decision that they're going to pay somebody to put that amount of effort into it. It was an enormous amount of work.'

So will this experience of more detailed structural editing change the way Johnston works? 'I don't know if it will affect the way I write in future. It will be interesting to see what happens with the second book.' Keep an eye out for it. And for her next Australian publication, *The House at Number 10*, about a suburban brothel in Canberra, set at the time when the laws about prostitution were being changed. It will be published by Wakefield Press later this year.



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The science of selling books to writers

Keith Binnington

About eight years ago I decided to set up a mail order bookshop specialising in books for writers and editors, a departure from my previous life as a CSIRO biologist. A couple of years before, I had been temporarily added to society's compost heap, courtesy of the pruning shears being applied to various branches of CSIRO in the 1990s. Rather than chase elusive positions to match my esoteric knowledge, I decided to build on my growing interest in writing and editing. This led to my enrolling in some writing courses, and when I found there were few or none of the titles on the recommended reading list in even the best of our local bookshops, I thought selling books to writers could be an interesting diversion from scientific editing. Almost a decade later, I still do enough editing to ensure there is wine of a reasonable standard on the table. But, with an ever increasing demand for books on writing and the promising response to our recent expansion into audio books, I am fast becoming a full-time bookseller. One of the great things about developing a mail order bookshop during the past decade is that it coincided with the rapid growth of the internet and it's been fun being part of it. While the internet has spawned magnificent bookshops such as Amazon and hundreds of small online bookshops (many simply portals for Amazon) the intense competition is outweighed by the convenience of online research and ordering and the value of internet advertising.

I envisaged setting up a mail order bookshop for writers and editors with perhaps 100 titles. There are now about 650 titles in our catalogue and the list continues to grow as does the demand for them from the many Australians who develop an interest in writing each year.

The value of how-to-write books is often questioned in the same way that writing classes are (even though we know that if we said the same thing about skills such as painting, music, acting and dancing, we would be laughed from the dinner party and not even be allowed to take our glass of chardonnay with us). But the romantic notion that we are born with, or receive from the touch of God, various abilities, is understandably strongest for what to many is the most romantic vocation of all: writing. No doubt, the degree to which successful writers have relied on books, courses and advice will vary markedly. Some of us may be lucky enough to osmotically soak up writing skills from exposure to literature, others may spend a lifetime imbibing the crafty tricks of others from their courses and books. What all agree on is that success in writing finally comes from the self and practice. It's fun to substitute other words for 'muscles' in the old body-building-course joke, 'I've finished the course, send me the muscles' ('discipline and commitment' are good candidates).

We should recognise, though, that the publishing of writing books is a sub-industry of book publishing and a great supplement to the earnings of many writers. Often a writer's how-to-write book will remain as a backlist title for many years after their novels can be found only in the second-hand book market. As with all books, it is wise to look at the

credentials of the writer and to seek out reviews and reader feedback. Word of mouth through writing groups and advice from tutors is invaluable in directing writing students towards the best references.

Almost all books on writing are written by great writers; so, regardless of their value, they are often a surprisingly good read. Even the titles entertain: for example, *Negotiating with the Dead*; *Damn! Why Didn't I Write That*; *Inventing the Truth*; and *Too Lazy to Work, Too Nervous to Steal*.

The best are often those that are not so much how-to-write books as introspective and inspirational works by writers such as Natalie Goldberg (*Writing Down the Bones*), Annie Dillard (*The Writing Life*—winner of a Pulitzer Prize) and Ray Bradbury (*Zen in the Art of Writing*). More recently we've had Norman Mailer's *The Spooky Art* and Stephen King's *On Writing*. Some of these are on their way to becoming classics like *Becoming a Writer* by Dorothea Brande, first published in 1934 yet still in print and popular.

While these books may include some strategies to stir the muse, there are others written specifically to do that, their pages being packed with exercises and tricks to help you think laterally and defeat the dreaded writers block, for example, *Writer's Idea Book*, *Fiction Writer's Brainstormer* and the cutely cube-shaped *Writer's Block*.

An overview of fiction-writing essentials can be found in many books that use a broad-brush approach, often also covering publishing and marketing. Fine Australian examples of such books are *The Writing Book* and *Everything I Know About Writing* by two of our most accomplished authors, Kate Grenville and John Marsden. One of the best American books of this type is Sol Stein's *Stein on Writing*.

Other books are more precisely aimed at helping either the novel or short-story writer. And there are many that specialise in a particular genre, whether it be romance, crime and mystery, or fantasy and science fiction. Other specialist how-to-write books include those on poetry, non-fiction, the memoir, screenwriting and humour.

Then there are those references that home in on a particular element of writing: characterisation, plot, dialogue, voice or description. These books are able to delve much more deeply into how to make characters seem real, dialogue sing and plot intrigue.

Regardless of whether a writer is driven by plot, character or place they must be telling a good yarn. For his book *The Power of One*, Bryce Courtenay must surely have drawn heavily on the books that have articulated the elements of classic Homeric stories. The best known of these are Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and Christopher Vogler's more readable sequel *The Writer's Journey*.

Perhaps the most useful of the books we sell are those that need the greatest discipline to apply and the ones most likely to give real muscle to your writing. That is, those on editing and re-writing. It is heartening that one of our bestsellers in recent years is an inexpensive, highly readable small volume *Self-editing for Fiction Writers*. If any of our books are

resulting in more publishable manuscripts being submitted it will most likely be books like this.

Having written and polished a manuscript, the writer then faces their most difficult task, that of getting it published. It is difficult to break into a market made tight by publishers inflating the reputations of the already published at the expense of those not yet recognised. This has increased the number of writers wanting to self-publish and there are various books full of practical advice on this. Also, regardless of whether you are self-published or commercially published, you still need to know plenty about self-promotion and marketing. Titles such as *1001 Ways to Market Your Book* and *Guerrilla Marketing for Writers* strip away much of the mystery of how the publishing and bookselling industries work.

In the same way that even the most abstract of artists will have first become skilled in the art of drawing, all writers should be able to express themselves in plain English. That this is well recognised is clear from the bestseller status of books such as Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* and William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. References on grammar, word usage and punctuation as well as dictionaries and a thesaurus all help in making a piece of writing readable and devoid of distracting inconsistencies.

I sometimes wonder if our books have helped our customers to write successfully and get published. But then I remind myself that many are not setting out to make a career of writing. And that of those that have that aim, many will at least have enjoyed the often cathartic and joyful experience of writing. Knowing this I feel satisfied when charging off to drop yet more parcels into the mailbox before the 6.00 pm deadline.

A writer's booklist

Negotiating with the Dead, Margaret Atwood, Cambridge University Press, 2002

Damn! Why Didn't I Write That, Mark McCutcheon, Quill Driver Books, 2001

Inventing the Truth, William Zinsser, Mariner Books, 1998

Too Lazy to Work, Too Nervous to Steal, John Clausen, Writer's Digest Books, 2001

Writing Down the Bones, Natalie Goldberg, Shambhala, 1986

The Writing Life, Annie Dillard, Harper Perennial, 1986

Zen in the Art of Writing, Ray Bradbury, Joshua Odell Editions, 1994

The Spooky Art, Norman Mailer, Random House, 2003

On Writing, Stephen King, Pocket, 2002

Becoming a Writer, Dorothea Brande, Jeremy Tarcher 1981 (first published in 1934)

Writer's Idea Book, Jack Heffron, Writer's Digest Books, 2001

Fiction Writer's Brainstormer, Writer's Digest Books, 2000

Writer's Block, Running Press, 2001

The Writing Book, Kate Grenville, Allen and Unwin, 1999

Everything I Know About Writing, John Marsden, Pan MacMillan, 1998

Stein on Writing, Sol Stein, St Martins Press, 2000

The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell, Bollingen, 1972
The Writer's Journey, Christopher Vogler, Michael Weise Productions, 1998
Self-editing for Fiction Writers, Renni Brown and Dave King,
HarperResource, 2004
1001 Ways to Market Your Book, John Kremer, Open Horizons, 2000
Guerrilla Marketing for Writers, Jay Conrad Levinson, Writer's Digest
Books, 2000
Elements of Style, William Strunk Jr. and EB White, Longman, 2000
On Writing Well, William Zinsser, Collins, 2001

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Macquarie Dictionary and the Style Manual

Theresa Willsted

'Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation.'

So spoke Toni Morrison in her lecture and acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Trust a great American author to bring us back to basics in 16 gorgeous words. And how often in that (sometimes) meditative practice called editing do we confront the everyday scariness of not knowing the answer, no matter how much we've loved and worked with words? Who to turn to then?

Descending from the heights of Stockholm to a freelancer's home office anywhere in Australia, the simple answer might be: reach first for the *Macquarie*, second for the *Style Manual*. By that time you've probably found your answer but, if there's time and space before the deadline, you might consider a third solution—that whole host of strong voices in Fowler's, Strunk and White, and Hudson's *Modern Australian Usage*, amongst other rigorously entertaining experts.



The soothing green, hardback covers of my *Macquarie Dictionary* have been re-joined with masking tape (inside and out) more than a few times now. This isn't a criticism of its production values, more an indication of how often I use this reference tome. It's grandly thick enough in page count to almost qualify as editing's own *Book of Spells*, and it's just as useable. Ninety per cent of the time, all that's needed is a quick flick to check a spelling (rather than a spell), and all's well on the *Macquarie* and editor front. I also love the fact that you can look up a whole host of other matters, including names, places and Australian events (well-known, or once so). For example, under 'Starr' you'll find 'n. 1. Sir Kenneth William, 1908–76, Australian surgeon; one of the founders of the Cancer Council of NSW. 2. Ringo (Richard Starkey), born 1940, British pop drummer, singer and composer; drummer for the Beatles'. (Note, in the quirkiness of *Macquarie's* hierarchy of information and emphasis, Ringo's connection to the Beatles is mentioned last?!) Want to know about the 'Ern Malley hoax'? Just look under 'E' in the *Macquarie*.



But then one morning, you'll be working on an article, for an art magazine perhaps, and that *Macquarie* magic happens. You do a quick check of 'post modernism' (noun, two words, no hyphen), just to make sure; and then notice 'post-impressionism' (noun, two words, connected by hyphen) in the next column. What's the rationale here? Using the *Macquarie* can be like that: a love-hate tussle with the official definer of the Australian language. The

puzzle of unpredictable hyphens skipping through its pages can consume a lot of time—they're difficult guests, never there when invited, and always there when you least expect them. Look at just a few examples: bottommost; free trade (noun), but free-trader (noun) and freethinker (noun); long day care; quarter-day but quarter point (both nouns). Perhaps the editors' bible, the *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, sixth edition, can throw some light on the *Macquarie's* choices?

The explanations begin in Chapter 6, 'Spelling and word punctuation', at page 88, and continue right up to the end of the chapter at page 94 (it's a complicated business, hyphenation!) Hyphens also turn up at other points in the *Style Manual*, according to the easy-to-use index. Without going into the finer details here, every possible situation seems to be covered in clear, simple language, but with enough exceptions to confuse me into still trying to sort the puzzle of unresolved words such as 'freethinker', 'bottommost' and 'long day care'. Perhaps the editors' intro to the 'Word Punctuation: The hyphen' section is answer enough? 'There are few firm rules dealing with uses of the hyphen, and dictionaries are often in disagreement ... This divergence in practice means that there are no simple rights and wrongs in this aspect of word punctuation.'

It's probably one of the few times that the *Style Manual* will recommend living with ambiguity, so grab it while you can. Most times it has a Trinnie-and-Susannah-like certainty of tone (e.g. p. 105, 'What not to do with commas'). For the uninitiated, even its title—the *Style Manual*—is redolent of the 'In' and 'Out' lists of countless fashion magazines, promising all the secrets of chic between its paperback covers. But, just this once, the editors know better! We know how to skim the guide's index, flip back through the well-designed pages, and find our answers. Am I the only one who has certain pages always marked out, which reassuringly cover my own grammatical blind spots? Like the *Macquarie*, the *Style Manual* has its own eccentricities that can give rise to rebellious stirrings. For example, when did it become officially recommended 'that a superscript numeral be placed before all punctuation marks save the end-of-sentence ones ...'? Did we all wake up one day to find that white was indeed the new black, and that a minor, but basic, copyediting practice had been rewritten?

Despite these quibbles and slight eccentricities—and what would our work be without them?—I concede that I wouldn't have the tiniest clue of where to begin in compiling a national dictionary or a style manual for authors, editors and printers, and have great respect for those who do. After all, we may never get to write like Toni Morrison, or anywhere near editing her texts, but we all stand in the same awe of language as does the Nobel Prize-winner. And any reference text that makes the ground more stable between the writer's imagination and 'the scariness of things with no names' does a great service to everyone who works with words. (And in the meantime, we'll just let those hyphens dance to a tune of their own!)

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On becoming a certified editor

Rhana Pike

One of the indiscretions of my youth was an unusual one and until now an almost forgotten secret: I copyedited the draft of a short book as a favour to a friend. My only qualification was high-school Latin grammar. Imagine my embarrassment now about the red-ink corrections, and the peremptory comments and queries to the author. In terms of editing, I was at the rock bottom level of competence: the one in which you don't know, but are unaware that you don't know. The author didn't know either. I was good at language, so he asked me to edit his book.

In those days, I thought that the editor was a well-educated person with a flair for language and good contacts who had no need to earn an income. There wouldn't be a living in it. Why I did not become an editor at an earlier age was that Jackie Kennedy was my role model.

Like many editors, I found my way into the profession after seeing other people doing it and finding my niche. Although the person who trained me had been formally trained by a major publisher, there was no assessor or judge of the thousands of pages of text I was paid to edit.

Without agreed standards, how do we know how good an editor's work is? How do we know how good our own work is? Many groups have discussed this many times over the years, and the talk usually leads to thinking about tests to identify capable editors. The Australian societies have progressed along this path in recent years.

An objective test of competence is essential in any profession. Unless you are periodically evaluated by your peers or supervisors, how do you know how you are doing? Readers and authors usually can't tell you.

The Board of Editors in the Life Sciences

At a time when accreditation is the main issue for Australian editors, it may be interesting to look at the longest established editors' accrediting body, BELS. BELS, the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences in the USA, offers two levels: the first is depends on experience and a three-hour examination and the second is by a longer period of experience and a portfolio. It is specifically for editors in the biological sciences, although many general editors without science degrees have qualified.

BELS was conceived in 1980 by a group of editors, talking informally at a meeting of the Council of Biology Editors in Boston, who were concerned about the standard of science editing in the USA. They noticed that the profession was growing, that inexperienced people were entering the profession and that they had been hearing complaints from scientists about poor quality work. Also, some of them wanted a way of finding competent people to help authors whose first language was not English.

By the mid-1980s, the CBE had established a committee, which consulted members of other credentialing bodies and gradually formulated a certification program for science editors. There would be two levels of

testing: certification and diplomate status. By 1990 a suitable set of exam questions had been developed by the committee and validated in pilot exams. However, the culmination of the committee's work was disbanding by the CBE; the committee was expensive and the CBE feared that it could be sued by a future candidate.

Ten of the members of the committee immediately began discussions that would lead to the formation of a new entity—BELS—which eventually became the body that issues the editors' credentials. For seed money, each of them paid the equivalent of the fees for both levels of credential and became the first ten members. BELS was incorporated in January 1991.

Now, BELS has 550 certified members, including the original 10, most of whom are still active on the executive council. Fewer than 20 have obtained the higher level diplomate status. All the work of BELS is done by volunteer members, which means that membership (and doing the examinations) costs very little.

The BELS certification examination

Most people find the certification exam difficult, because they have to answer the questions quickly to complete them all in under three hours, but a person who has worked as a manuscript editor for two years (a prerequisite) and is familiar with the standard style guides should be able to pass it.

It helps to have absorbed *Scientific Style and Format*, from the Council of Science Editors, and the *American Medical Association Manual of Style*. Almost all of the content of the examination is independent of national style differences: not knowing American style would not, alone, be enough to fail.

I did the exam in Philadelphia, with about 20 others, in a hotel room separated from a fraternity reunion party by a flimsy partition. They were pretty good singers, the fraternity, but along with my jet lag, made it a challenge to concentrate. I made mistakes and assumed that I could not possibly have passed—but I did, and obtained the first level of accreditation.

When I did the BELS exam, I was employed as an editor and did not need the credential to show my worth, as a freelancer would. But my skills and knowledge had become unconscious or tacit, and I was unsure about my own standard of work. The BELS accreditation reassured me that I met a professional standard.

The science editor is a professional

In the scientific field, all work is a collaboration. Scientific articles and books are always formally reviewed before being accepted for publication. As well, they are usually extensively informally reviewed by colleagues and friends of the authors throughout a prolonged writing process.

Sometimes these reviewers become co-authors and their contributions are thus recognised. However, they are never paid.

Where does that leave the editor, who also reviews the work? Editors can sometimes also offer to work for nothing, but they misunderstand the tradition: there is a currency floating about in these arrangements, even though there is no payment. I believe that the editor, who does not receive recognition as an author, and who does not expect reciprocal reviewing of scientific work, must be properly paid and recognised.

BELS in Australia

We held the first examination in Australia in 2001, with five candidates. Three passed, which is about average. In 2004, we had ten candidates and eight passed. This was an excellent result and shows not only the proficiency of the individual editors, but also suggests that the standard of Australian science editors is high. That unscientific statement remains to be supported by the results of future examinations. With two editors who have qualified overseas, now 13 Australians are members of BELS.

BELS is holding an examination in Melbourne on 13–15 October, to coincide with the Editing in Context conference.

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The joy of writing well

Reviews by Sheila Allison

Elizabeth Benedict, *The Joy of Writing Sex: A guide for fiction writers*

Henry Holt and Company, 2002

Paperback, 234 pages, ISBN 0 8050 6993 3

Australian RRP \$24.95

When British author Stella Duffy (*Parallel Lies*) was here for the Sydney Writers Festival this year she mentioned the paradoxical situation that gives crime writers immunity from suspicion that they have personal experience of murdering people in novel ways, but writers who tap out wacky sex scenes on their keyboards are assumed to have actually 'done it'. This is just one of a multitude of issues that writers who want (or need) to include sex scenes in their work have to deal with.

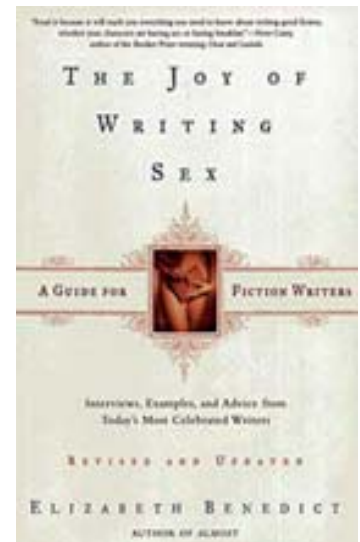
How fortunate they are to now have Elizabeth Benedict to turn to. Her own experience as a successful novelist (*Almost* and *Slow Dancing*) and teacher of fiction writing (Princeton University), together with her Jane Austen-ish name and Sigrid Thornton-ish face, instil in the reader/writer a confidence and trust that seem necessary to the topic. (Would I be interested in a guide by Norman Mailer on the joy of writing sex? I don't think so.)

Benedict opens with a brief analysis of why sex in fiction is so difficult to write—'our circuits jam, our feelings of self-consciousness surge ... we may not want our spouses, lovers, or children to know where our sexual fantasies take us'—and states that her aim is 'only to help writers craft better sex scenes'. She has no other agenda and does not believe that sex scenes are necessary in fiction, that there should be more or fewer, or that they should be more or less explicit. The book does not cover sexual violence because that is about violence, not sex.

The four organising principles of Benedict's book (p. 6) are:

- 1 A good sex scene is not always about good sex but is always an example of good writing.
- 2 A good sex scene should always connect to the larger concerns of the work.
- 3 The needs, impulses, and histories of your characters should drive a sex scene.
- 4 The relationship your characters have to each other—whether they are adulterers or strangers on a train—is critical to what happens in a sex scene.

There are two chapters of basic principles and a look at different types of sexual relationships (first times, honeymoons, married people) and lots of examples from contemporary literature.



The issues relating to sex scenes in the age of HIV/AIDS are comprehensively dealt with, and there are even some suggested writing exercises at the end.

Benedict is a fine writer, entertaining, well read and a generous teacher. This revised and updated edition of *The Joy of Writing Sex* is a true gem for fiction writers, editors and critical readers.

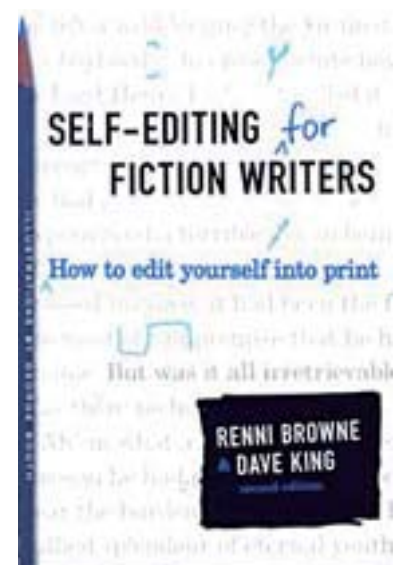
Renni Browne & Dave King, *Self-editing for Fiction Writers: How to edit yourself into print*

Second edition, HarperCollins, 2004, Paperback, 279 pages, ISBN 0 06 054569 0, Australian RRP \$24.95

Betsy Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees: An editor's advice to writers*

Revised edition, Riverhead Books, 2000, Hardcover, 284 pages ISBN 1 57322 152 X, Australian RRP \$15.95

These books make excellent companion pieces for new (but dedicated) writers and also for editors who are new to fiction editing. Browne and King take the reader through an orderly progression from the familiar (show and tell, characterisation and exposition, point of view) to the more technical (dialogue mechanics, interior monologue, beats and break-ups) and on to the art (sophistication and voice) aspects of writing.



Each chapter has a checklist and exercises, except for the final chapter where the authors sensibly say 'the best exercise in developing your voice is to

work on your own manuscript'. The professionalism and experience of the authors provide a reassuring sense of authority that will appeal to editors who might be well grounded in non-fiction but want some expert advice from the other side of the fence before they'll venture across to fiction.

Writing about the mechanics of dialogue, Browne and King offer the kind of nitty gritty advice that is often overlooked in books for writers. For example, they show how pace can be controlled by commas, ellipses, em dashes and full stops all in the one short piece of dialogue—a combination of punctuation that would make a non-fiction editor feel very insecure. They also show how a 'beat', a short bit of physical action, can break up dialogue and give the reader more information about the character. That type of advice is great for writers, but it also gives the non-fiction editor new tools to work with when they move to fiction.

Browne and King are charming, entertaining and often funny writers. Their advice on the use of profanity makes its point well and provides a good laugh at the same time. The book is indexed, and an appendix lists their Top Books for Writers, grouped into Books on Craft, Books on Inspiration and Reference Books. The lists are short and I would trust their judgement.

Betsy Lerner's *The Forest for the Trees* puts the reader in a difficult situation—you can't put the book down because it's so damn good, but you want to put it down so you can get to the keyboard and write your own damn good book. She's that good.

Betsy (she feels like a friend now) has a long history as an editor—at Houghton Mifflin, Ballantine, Simon & Schuster, and Doubleday. At the time of writing this book she was an agent at The Gernert Company, but this year she joined the Dunow and Carlson Literary Agency as a partner. In her spare time, she's an award-winning poet.

Despite all that, Betsy writes in an unpretentious and informal style and is happy to share with the reader a few stories against herself. It's easy to see why she is so loved by her authors. The book is anecdotal, funny, inspiring and yet authoritative.

Unlike the Brown and King book, there are no exercises here. Betsy's is not a 'how to'. And yet, while you read it, you will get lots of ideas about 'how to'. The book is a beautifully crafted conversation that will have you leaning into her words in a tell-me-more attitude. Her paragraphs often start with phrases like—

'I won't say there's no such thing as a natural talent, but ...'

'No sooner did I sign up the book for a modest advance, than ...'

'I've come to look at neurotic behaviour as a necessary ...'

'I felt privileged to witness the innermost anxiety of ...'

—and you just have to read on.

The book is in two parts. In the first, Betsy describes the different types of writers—ambivalent, natural, wicked child, self-promoter, neurotic, and 'touching fire' (alcoholics, drug addicts, brawlers)—with great accuracy, concern and constructive acceptance: 'Whoever you are, whatever your bizarre behaviours, I say cultivate them; push the envelope. Becoming a writer never won anybody any popularity contests anyway.' (p. 101)

The second part includes chapters on seeking agents and publication, rejection, what editors want, what authors want, the book, and publication. It's all useful to writers and immensely interesting for editors, and there's a meaty bibliography where you can see what Betsy reads.

In her chapter 'What editors want', Betsy writes: 'No reviewer ever says, "By God, this book was well edited!" Well, this one was. It is also beautifully produced and designed.

An Editor's Advice to Writers



Betsy Lerner

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