

'Editing, at its best, is a conversation'

Bryony Cosgrove

Several years ago, students attending my fiction editing class in RMIT's Graduate Diploma in Publishing and Editing were given the manuscript of an unpublished novella to read and assess. After the students had engaged in lively, critical exchange, the author of the manuscript entered the classroom, and the surprised students fell silent. Alex Miller had generously made a draft of his work available for study and had also agreed to participate in a discussion about the author–editor working relationship. At the time, I was his editor; the manuscript in question was *The Sitters*. Students who were members of that class recall the session as one of the highlights of their course, impressed by Alex's openness about his writing and the to and fro of editorial discussion.

In an email written while we were working on his seventh novel, *Prochownik's Dream*, Alex commented:

A good editor can bring new energy and resolve to the writer. Such an editor can play a critical role in bringing a book to its full potential. After a few years working alone on a book a writer is like a marathon runner at around the twenty k mark. Stuffed and ready to quit. The fun has gone out of it. He/she will do anything to stop. But there's another fifteen k's to go and he/she needs the coach at this point in order to dig deep and ignore the pain and get on with it. With the right input from the coach at this critical moment the pain is miraculously soon forgotten again and the energies are back up. Writers have to discover something similar to this. I wonder if they can do it entirely alone? Editors can help them.

Shortly before publication of *Prochownik's Dream*, I spoke with Alex about the process of working with an editor. Propped on a wooden lectern in the study of his Castlemaine house were a hundred or so pages of a new novel, and he selected a handful of them for me to read. He had been working that morning on a conversation between two characters — and he had found the voice.

How do you approach the task of working with an editor? What is your initial response when you receive an editorial report and comments on a manuscript?

I make an assumption of professional expertise. I assume that as the editor has agreed to work with the manuscript that they love it — so they have the licence to provide a critical response. Editing at its best is a conversation, and from this conversation can come the changes a writer thinks of — taking an idea or a comment and running with it. Editing is very personal — it's a skill and a craft, a learnt thing. The stamp of an editor's personality is evident in their approach to the work.

Have you ever had a flattering response to your work that does not grapple with problems you suspect are in the manuscript but that you cannot put your finger on?

Interview



I think it's difficult for any of us to resist flattery, but if I know that somehow the book's not right then I lose faith in the person's judgement. I do like to know what the editor has connected with, though — which particular aspects impressed them, which is different from vague, flattering comments.

Do you prefer a straightforward response that might at first seem highly critical?

No one takes kindly to criticism, and my initial reaction might be that an editor has not understood the work — I usually think that a manuscript is finished when I send it off to my agent. Later, though, I might rethink this and ask myself why the editor might not have understood the work. If I have worked with the editor previously, I guess there's a sense that we can cut to the chase, though. We know each other's way of approaching a manuscript.

The first work of yours that I read was *The Ancestor Game*, which was submitted to Penguin as an incomplete draft. Even in that state your writing engaged immediately.

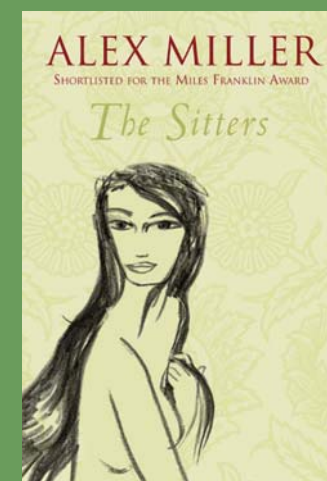
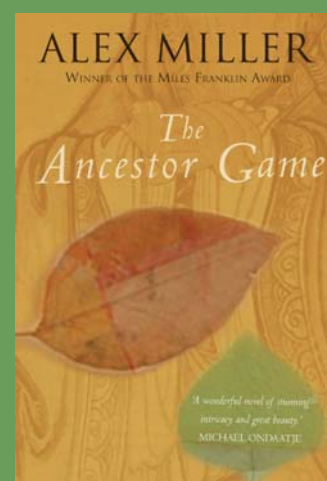
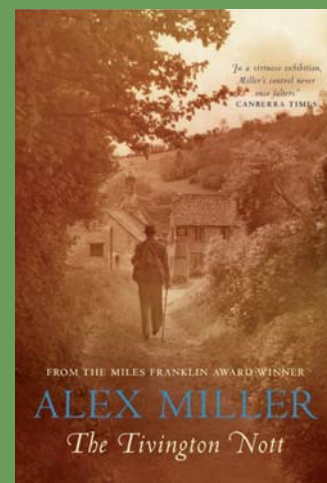
Yes, that was an exception. It was my then agent's suggestion — she thought that what we had was fine to send out. The draft was sent only to Penguin, and you and Bruce [Sims, then Penguin Publisher] were enthusiastic and responded very quickly, though you weren't too impressed by the narrator! But I would never again submit a manuscript that I didn't think was finished.

How do you handle conflicting responses to a manuscript? Is it possible to get too much editorial feedback from too many sources?

Once I think a manuscript is finished it can benefit from having several readers who can then talk to the author about elements that don't seem to be working — different readers will pick up on different things. My American editor, Sarah McGrath, made a comment about developing a conversation between two characters in *Conditions of Faith*, which actually led to major changes in the manuscript. No one else had picked up on that particular element. The author then needs the time and the space to go back into the work. Yes, it is possible to get too much feedback, but if the author has a strong enough sense of what the book is doing then that will override the feedback.

Do you want suggestions from an editor or just an indication of what is not working and perhaps why that might be?

I prefer that the editorial response not be too prescriptive. I appreciate an indication of what might not be working in the manuscript but I don't then want directions on how to 'fix' it. If I felt that an editor was trying to direct the manuscript then I would withdraw from the working relationship immediately. Editors probably need to have a sense of the right time to make suggestions, too. I remember phoning you to say I was going to drop a character out of *Conditions of Faith*, and your response was, 'Thank goodness!' Apparently, you had problems with her but you sensed I was attached to her so bided your time.



Do you feel differently about questions that concern voice, characterisation, setting — or are they equally important?

Literary fiction is writing to the demands of the heart, not to a perceived gap in the market. Tone is everything in fiction, and a terrific story can be rendered boring by the wrong tone. Once you cotton on to the voice in a piece of writing you are welcomed in — you are engaged. For *The Tivington Nott* and this manuscript I'm working on now, I found the right voice straight away. It's not that the characters talk to you, but the voice opens up to you. By comparison, I didn't initially get the voice right for *The Sitters*. It started off as a much longer manuscript that I cut right down when I found the right voice. And it took a while to get the voice right for *Conditions of Faith*.

Does a character come from the voice or does the voice come from the character I wonder? The character I'm writing at the moment has a particular background and profession so that influences the way he thinks and writes. Where do character and voice come from? In a way I'd rather not know because it might pull the pin on it. You seed something and wait for it to emerge. If you are struggling with it then the voice isn't right.

The context should never override a character's interior. I enjoy doing the background research for a novel — it's a pleasure, an enrichment — but I hate historical reconstructions that just show the amount of research a writer has done rather than any skill in making use of the material. A context should begin to fall into place as the writing comes together. A lot of background research went into the writing of *The Ancestor Game* and *Conditions of Faith*, but in neither book do the settings override the characters' interiors. Voice, characterisation and setting should merge in a happy coincidence.

A few days after our conversation, I sent Alex an article about the fraught relationship that developed between American writer Raymond Carver and his New York publisher Gordon Lish, who had heavily edited much of Carver's early short fiction. Alex enjoyed the piece, and responded, 'It's the problem of making the story from the scattered fragments that's the writer's greatest work, not the finishing touches ... The blank page is not so easy to deal with.'

Alex Miller is the author of seven novels: *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* (1988); *The Tivington Nott* (1989), which won the Braille Book of the Year Award; *The Ancestor Game* (1992), which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and the Barbara Ramsden Award; *The Sitters* (1995), which was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Literary Award; *Conditions of Faith* (2000), which won the NSW Premier's Literary Award, the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Literary Award; *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002), which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, and *Prochownik's Dream* (2005).

Bryony Cosgrove worked with Alex Miller on *The Ancestor Game*, *The Sitters*, *Conditions of Faith* and *Prochownik's Dream*.

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