



Facing Your Harshesht Critic: SELF-EDITING

BY JULIANNE GOODMAN

I'm a firm believer that good editing can make a mediocre book great, while bad editing can reduce a good book to nothing more than kindling. Writers who claim to perfect their writing during the initial writing are either:

- (A) unpublished, and unlikely to *be* published
- (B) so far beyond professional that they are Brooks, Asaro or Jordan
- (C) revising as they write the rough draft

You want to make a decent living at writing? You have the completed story in front of you, yes? Then you have to come to grips with that tough critic inside of you and begin the hardest phase of this creative process: *editing*. Editing is what separates those who write from those who write as a profession. I've been asked to critique or evaluate many unpublished manuscripts over the years, and the following is a compilation of what I call "Big Baddies" of writing fiction.

Let's assume that you've read *The Complete Guide to Writing Fantasy* and that you've risen above standard grammatical errors and typographical errors. Here in *The Fantasy Writer's Companion*, we're going to take a close look at those "Big Baddies" as they relate to plotting, pacing and other important components of telling more than just a good story, but a *damn* good story.

As the title indicates, it isn't enough to type "The End," hit spell check and call a novel complete. Every author has common writing habits—and I don't mean staying up too late, allowing daily responsibilities to slip and forgetting to eat—that weaken their writing, and thus every author must seek to counteract them. For space constraints, I'll hit on the most common.

But before I dive into the bad habits, let's talk about objectivity. An essential component to being an effective editor is the ability to view your writing with an objective eye. It's difficult, true. You've spent months, perhaps years, crafting this masterpiece. But every artist knows you don't slap some paint on a canvas and call it finished. You need time to become objective about your work, to fine tune your focus and to polish and hone your little gem until it sparkles. Then you can send it off for someone else to admire.

SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION:

GETTING OUT OF

THE "WRITE" FRAME OF MIND

After you have completed your manuscript, this living, breathing essence of your soul, the first thing any smart author will do is put it aside before the editing phase. Preferably for a week or two, but if you're up against a deadline and can't wait, then at least a few days. I once read that Ray Bradbury finishes a first draft and puts it on a shelf in the closet of his office and doesn't touch it again for a year. Not a bad system, but your time constraints may not allow for such a lengthy

cooling period. Spend your free time reading something enjoyable and take a break from the demands of the creative process. Every book is a learning process and you need time to digest what you've learned on your last foray. Take time to clear your mind of the words you bled onto the pages, time to become objective, time to separate yourself from your work. This technique will come in handy when you get to the next phase of your journey—revision and submission. You must learn to disconnect yourself from your work so you can utilize the critiques of others and understand that rejections do not pertain to you personally but to your novel. Nothing in this business is personal, it's *business*. It's *work*. When next you pick up your novel for editing, try to pretend it isn't your life in those pages.

When you feel confident that you can objectively evaluate your own writing, find a quiet spot where you can read through the entire book in one sitting. I know authors who revise as they write the first draft and others who go on “retreat” at the end of the completed first draft. They hole up in some remote location and switch to editor mode with more aplomb than the Sorting Hat weeds out the Slytherins from the Griffyndors. I champion the latter approach, as composing words and editing are two distinctly different aspects of writing. Better yet, *do both!* Having a place to edit that is different from your drafting workspace is a great way to divide the two actions of writing and editing. Print off a clean copy, head to a favorite hotel or bookstore (if home is not a viable option) and load up with munchies and plenty of strong coffee. You'll catch more inconsistencies on paper than you will on your computer screen.

Now that you have your editing space defined, let's begin with the “Big Baddies” that will cause any reader to lose faith in your ability to tell a good story. The “Big Baddies” are the gremlins that infiltrate your writing and make it less saleable. They encompass the main flaws inherent in newly-drafted manuscripts, the ones that make editors and agents cringe. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but this will introduce you to the laborious task of self editing.

BIG BADDIE # 1: THE “THROWAWAYS”

Throwaways are any agent or situation that can be effectively cut without changing the overlying story. The first of these are prologues. I've had the good fortune to chat with many editors and agents, and they are of one mind when it comes to prologues. If possible, find a

way to tell the story without them. Prologues weaken the immediacy of the reader's immersion into the story by giving us a diluted prelude to what actually happens in the story we wish to tell—sometimes years or centuries prior to the real action or conflict taking place in the novel. No one wants to fall in love with characters only to discover that the real characters the novel focuses on aren't the ones they thought!

Prologues, by and large, are a weaker form of writing. You're establishing that you cannot set up the story mood, character motivation or plot points without resorting to an "easy out" of writing it all up front. I'm not saying that prologues should be banned. There are a few authors that have used them to good effect, but a truly talented storyteller can find a way to insinuate emotion, plot and setting in a story without resorting to prologues. If you have perfected your craft, you should be able to establish setting or mood without resorting to those first few "throwaway" paragraphs or pages of a prologue.

An exception would be to establish a character's motivation or important plot point, but even that can be done without the clumsy approach of laying it all out up front. Think of telling a story as a fishing analogy. You don't want the fish to see the frying pan before you toss in your line. You want to reel him in slowly until you're sure the hook is imbedded. It takes more finesse to write without using a prologue, just like it takes a certain finesse to land that big fish. This holds especially true when the characters you introduce in the prologue don't return to the spotlight for half the book, if ever.

And since we are talking about prologues that feature characters we shouldn't get attached to, let's discuss another "throwaway" in writing: the dreaded "*Character with No Name*" (hence referred to as CNN). A CNN is the Captain, the Wizard, the Woman, the Monster, etc. ad nauseum. A CNN is any unnamed character who receives undue attention from the author. Most common is to place CNNs in a prologue, but I've seen them materialize in sagging mid-sections of many a manuscript.

If my lead character walks into a java hut to order a coffee, we don't need to know that the coffee barista had a bad childhood and beats his wife. It's enough to know that the barista gave our POV character a cup of joe just the way she ordered it—hot and sweet. His function is simply to fill her order. He is a throwaway character. No name is necessary. End of his function and his one line of fame in the spotlight.

The problem with a CNN arises when the character is given undue importance. He is a POV character, or has a lot of important dialogue. Say the barista above turns out to be the ultimate evil doer, who is bent on destruction of the realm. Important, yes, but no name? Who will remember him?

Here's a radical thought. If the character is so fascinating and integral to the plot that you cannot tell the story without them, then perhaps that character ought to have a *name*, so the reader can identify and remember them! No one gives a rat's patoot if an old withered King quaked in his tower by the sea, they want to know *who* he is and *why* he's so afraid of unicorns. Otherwise our poor King is the epitome of a throwaway character.

Conversely, it is not acceptable to simply go in and name every character in your book. Names have an important function in fiction. They cue the reader into paying special attention. A name signifies that there may be some greater importance for this character than what is currently depicted. You don't want your reader to be introduced to a character by name, unless you have a specific reason for doing so.

If you can't substantiate why a particular character is in your main POV focus, then perhaps that throwaway character should be tossed into the round file or could be used in another book to better effect. Introducing minor characters who will appear in an overall story arc that stretches across several books is acceptable, but be certain that this character has some degree of importance in *this* book, or your reader will lose faith in your ability to lead them through the world you've created.

We'll discuss this in more depth in my next Big Baddie. There are ways to tighten your writing. One of them is to insure that every character has a purpose for being "onstage" in your story at any given time. Chefs hold to the rule of three in creating a new delicacy. That is, they only use three main "flavors" or the recipe becomes a mishmash of tastes, the original flavor lost and overwhelmed by the sensory stimulation of the palette. The same holds true in writing scenes with characters. More than three to five and you've overdone your scene as in the next Big Baddie—the Cast of Thousands.

BIG BADDIE #2: THE CAST OF THOUSANDS

As authors, we tend to know our plot and characters intimately, as if they were flesh and blood. As Supreme Creator, it's our job. But not

every character is necessary. Less can be more, especially in fiction. Part of being a good storyteller is knowing when to cut the fat from the meat of our tale. The empty carbs of writing, to use a popular dietary analogy. A cast of thousands is like a diet of potatoes, pasta and beer. It's heavy, bland and unfulfilling, not to mention Atkins Unfriendly. As you edit your manuscript, ask yourself if you have too many characters for each scene. If you have more than five named characters going about their business onscreen, chances are you've got excess flab. Yes, there are exceptions, but if you can cut or condense characters it will allow for deeper characterization of the remaining individuals and help prevent two-dimensional cutouts from appearing onscreen. Make sure you ask these key questions when creating heavily-populated scenes:

- Can you cut someone out of the spotlight?
- Can you combine two or more characters into one?
- Will they serve the same function?
- Do we really need to know this character's name?
- What is their function in the story?

Too many characters can take the focus away from your lead POV character and lead to head-hopping or cheating your reader out of personal emotional impact. We don't know who to follow, because frankly everyone is fighting for our attention.

Take the following example:

Sir Rodderick sets off to fight a battle against the evil mage Proscipio. Assisted by his page, a young boy named Tom, Tom helps Rodderick clap on his metal armor and sword. Then the squire, Franklin, assists Rodderick onto his horse, and warns him to be careful of Proscipio's henchmen, who have been sighted nearby. Suddenly, a stable boy, Theodore, runs to Rodderick's side. Still wearing the signs of mucking out the stalls, he is captured by Proscipio's henchmen and forced to tell what he overheard of the knight's plans.

Confusing, eh? Even I had to go back and reread it. *And I wrote it!* For a single plot point in the story, there are far too many characters on the scene, even though we've only named four, and one, Proscipio, is off-screen at the moment. The reader will quickly become confused.

Who is this knight Rodderick? What about young Tom? Should we heed the words of the squire Franklin? And what of poor Theodore? Will Rodderick even care?

I sure don't.

For our purposes, this scene has too many guests coming to dinner. We don't need the stable boy, the squire and the page in the scene where our hero mounts a steed to ride off into glorious battle. Time to find a focus in your scene. Trim to just the squire, a young boy—once a mere stable boy?—who assists our hero onto his mount. And don't give the squire a name, unless he plays an important part in the novel later on. If he's just there to saddle the horse, no need to put a badge on the kid. Depending on how you handle the remainder of the story, determine if it is important to remember who Tom was, and why his acts have created such conflict for our hero.

By trimming down your cast, you can find a better focus for your scene and pacing of the plot. Perhaps you'll discover scenes that can be trimmed away completely. If the main focus of the scene isn't moving the story along, then you can probably cut it without changing the end result of your plot points, which leads us into the next Big Baddie.