

# Editing fiction

by Janet Blagg

## 1. My approach to editing fiction

- is no different from my approach to editing generally. Biography/autobiography can also be seen as 'creative writing' and a lot of fiction has autobiographical elements.
- is to help make a work the best it can be: I like the sculpting metaphor, since paring away excess is often the best way to improve a piece of work.
- I also use the midwife metaphor, where the well-being of mother and child are equally my concern — and the concerns of publisher and reader.
- I see my role as ensuring the author's intention is coming through to the reader with optimum strength, beauty and clarity — so that an interested 14 year old could understand a work intended for adults.
- I'm high intervention — nothing is sacred — I encourage the author to defend their original, but make *every* suggestion/query I feel will improve the work. I note every instance on the page that trips me up, and suggest solutions to problems wherever I see them. The more I give the author in this way, the greater the chance they will take something of use from it. I am never afraid to suggest anything. The author may not agree, but it provides a leaping off point for brainstorming together other possible solutions.
- I work on the presumption that the MS on front of me is just a draft and that my job is to identify ways in which to encourage the author to extend the possibilities of the text and themselves as writer.
- There are many other aspects of editing, like dealing with sexism or racism (of course, a character can be sexist, etc); proofreading, liaising with the designer, and so on.

### Garry Fisketjon's tips for aspiring editors

1. have no preconceptions about fiction or form
2. champion the book (and author) in the publishing house
3. don't insinuate yourself into it

## 2. Relationship with the author

I realise I am working on something very dear to its creator, and try to find ways of expressing criticism so that the author realises I'm on their side. Even if I have to criticise almost everything, I do so as the author's champion, and respectfully.

As editor, I am in the middle of a triangle between author, publisher and reader, translating each to the other.

- I try to stay aware of my own limitations: I know, for example, that I am very literal minded, hate obscurity and always query it, so if obscurity is what the author is aiming for, I do not blindly impose clarity.
- I try to say as many positive things as possible to help offset the critical points, even stretching the truth occasionally, though not at the cost of ultimate honesty.
- I trust myself as a representative reader to push the author. In one memoir, at crucial points, the author was silent. I said, 'This reader really wants to know what you felt here.' She accepted this and the book went on to win awards.
- Tact is important. I work in pencil if the author seems likely to be offended, query intention rather than state facts.
- An author may insist on retaining something I think is problematic. I will not hold back if I am sure I know best. I will probably consult the publisher, or canvas other readers. I might point out, 'this is the sort of thing an unfriendly reviewer could seize on ...' But in the end I may have to live with the fact, and sometimes see the very fault I tried to avert attacked in a review. It is the author's work, after all.

## 3. Common issues in editing fiction

No matter what genre, including children's books, the plot must be interesting and coherent, characters psychologically believable and engaging, and the writing at least competent.

Many manuscripts I read seem to lack unifying structure and I may suggest the writer prepares a skeleton (précis) to see how well the plot coheres and character sketches of the main characters showing their basic psychology, motivation and how they change through the course of the novel. Preparing a time-line is also helpful when bits of plot are crashing into each other.

Reading the MS I watch out for:

- *plot* — interest, plausibility, consistency, coherence, loose ends — ringing true — of course this relates to a 'naturalistic' work. A fantasy has different rules, but still must meet most of these criteria. Plot infelicities (or annoying plot contrivances): illogical, uncharacteristic, or otherwise implausible behaviour; things occurring in impossible time frames; unnecessary complications; hiccups like changing from morning to night time in the space of a short scene.
- *character* — as for 'plot' above; also, the character has to be consistent or needs a plausible reason for changing; 3-dimensional not stereotyped; the *psychology* must be sound; plausibility includes such aspects as not being too good to be true.
- *style* — the main problems are cliché, wobbly tense, purple prose, wordiness, repetition, datedness, attempts to be original (see 4 below).
- *dialogue* — this is critical: whatever the genre, it must sound natural. I speak it aloud (and advise authors to do so) to ensure it carries the rhythms etc., of speech. A common fault in presenting dialogue is to use more specific verbs than 'said' (eg, affirmed). 'Said' is practically invisible, and generally that is good. Generally, also, it is better to avoid adverbs (sharply, reluctantly, etc); let the speech convey how it is spoken.
- *beware contriving dialogue to convey information.*
- *narrative voice* — a very common problem relates to inconsistency in the authorial/narrative voices and corresponding problems of tense that can arise from an insufficient understanding of the narrator's standpoint. Need to find the most effective voice/standpoint/tense for any particular part of a piece of writing. When we know exactly where the voice is situated, flashbacks and other conventions of time and space are more easily manipulated for effect.

#### **4. The question of style**

People often consider that in fiction style is sacred and not to be interfered with, but I find that most of the fiction I edit actually has no particular style.

I have no preconceived notion about what is appropriate or not for any particular genre; more, I am guided by how I *feel* as I read. This is obviously very subjective. One young adult novel was written entirely in present tense, which I found draining, too intense. Another novel written entirely in present tense I found no problem with, but a reviewer did.

- I believe every editor would edit the same work differently, much as translators would translate poetry differently.
- advice I give at the development stage is: don't try to be too clever in the writing — the important thing is to have an *interesting idea* and then to convey it in the clearest, simplest, most straightforward way. Generally, only very good writers can get away with being innovative in style.
- to one young author who was trying very hard to stamp his work with unique 'style' I showed Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy and told him he would not find a single sentence in it that wasn't standard English. He listened and has been very positively reviewed for a first time author.
- *postmodernism*: there are times I simply don't know what's going on. It can be done well, but I let authors know when *this* reader can't keep track and remind them that such writing limits the potential readership. They might be happy with that; the publisher may not though, and this therefore needs to be discussed with the publisher.

A favourite trick: When something is impossibly complicated on the page, I ask the author to explain to me what is going on. Usually, then, I can honestly say, 'That's it, what you just said, in just that voice.' A tape recorder is obviously useful. If you get feedback that something isn't making sense, try explaining it out loud, as if to a friend, and record yourself fresh.

An exercise for purple prose: Save a piece of your writing that is particularly adjective-ridden and delete every adjective in it. Read this fresh copy and now reinstate adjectives only where needed for sense. What do you think?

## **5. The editing process**

1. I go through the work once to pick up a general feeling for the shape of the MS, noting in pencil trouble spots. If I think there are very serious problems I consult both the publisher and author before going on.
2. If there are a lot of large-scale problems — plot flaws, character flaws, bad dialogue, that sort of thing — I note all these on the page, and in a set of notes, and include my suggestions for solutions if I have any. I have the author address these issues with a revision before doing finer scale editing. I am available to the author to discuss and brainstorm possible solutions. This part of the process is called *substantive* or *consultant editing*.

3. There may be a repeat of this process until the basic issues are resolved.

4. Once the MS is generally resolved, I *copy-edit* it for style and syntax, strength and clarity; micro-level issues of organisation and content. I point out contradictions, repeated words, dubious assertions, redundancies, etc.

If a sentence doesn't sound right, I look for the simplest way to make it right, shifting a word from here to there, or deleting, often the best tool we have.

If I think of better alternatives I suggest them, impressing on the author that these are suggestions only, and invite them to substitute other solutions.

5. If I can't understand what's intended I circle it and note in the margin [meaning??] or [do you mean *this* (and provide one interpretation) or *this* (another interpretation)? or [if you're trying to accomplish X then it's not working because . . .]

6. I may go through the MS more than once if there are things in different categories that consistently need attention, thus concentrating on one thing at a time. If I get stuck on something I just circle or tag it and come back to it.

## **6. Writers editing themselves . . . a laundry list**

Editing is writing, of course. The issues of editing are writing issues.

My first line of advice to writers is to read, voraciously. I think that's where I got my competence with the written word, and my confidence as an editor.

Discover your weaknesses — through an editor's help or a critique group — and address them — through writing classes, books — so that you shift the balance from weak to strong.

Don't consider a work finished till you've done at least 3 drafts. This isn't to say, however, that you shouldn't consult someone at earlier stages for development advice. That's a good thing to do.

Get a draft read by a representative reader, ie, children for a children's book, and ask them to note any problems.

Plotting, if complex, often goes awry, so maybe start diagrammatically with a skeleton and a time line to make sure it's sound, that the logic is foolproof.

Leave the micro-level till the end. What's the point of trying to fix up commas and semi-colons if a whole slab is going to be deleted?

Have your writing very critically read before you submit it to a publisher. The first chapter is often the most wobbly. You have to get the reader's interest in the first page. Get help for this if necessary.

## **7. Writers editing each other . . .**

You *know* the difference between good writing and bad.

You *need* good criticism so you know what you need to work on.

It is a good tactic to ask specific questions of critical readers; let them know your weaknesses so they can look out for them. Use the co-editing principles, but make sure you understand them first.

Being edited is an exercise in setting aside ego. The worst thing you can do is fail to criticise for fear of hurting another's feelings. I have been to writers' groups where everyone appeared afraid to give constructive criticism.

Of course, you are primarily writers, not editors, and cannot be expected to provide the level of dissection that an experienced editor can, but as discerning readers you will still have much to offer, and the experience of putting yourself in the reader's shoes will probably help you in relation to your own work too.