

# PIKES PEAK WRITERS

official publication of the Pikes Peak Writers

## contents

NewsMagazine

- From the Editor page 2
- Rainbow Editing page 2
- How an Agent Works page 3
- New Web Site page 4
- January Write Brain Page 4
- Big Book Deal page 5
- Legal Writes page 5
- Historical Accuracy page 6
- Self-Editing 101 page 7
- Joining PPW page 7
- Hot Topics page 8
- Sweet Success page 8

VOLUME IV, ISSUE 1  
January 2005

# PPW Launches New Year With Expanded Programs



This year PPW members will get more bang for their membership bucks without an increase in dues. One of our most popular member benefits—the members-only, free Write Brain Sessions—will be expanded to twelve sessions. Members will now have the opportunity to meet for discussions, lectures, and interactive exercises more often throughout the year. (See article on “Monthly Member Meetings” for details.)

To kick off our “Get More for Your Membership” theme, we begin the year with a whopper of a Write Brain Session on Tuesday, January 25, when we offer a free three-hour interactive workshop on “Packaging Yourself.” Three media professionals will impart the basics and the finer points of successfully promoting oneself as a writer. (See “Packaging Yourself” article for details.)

In February we launch regular monthly member meetings in conjunction with Write Brain Sessions. At the first meeting, Tuesday, February 8, attendees can “Ask An Author”—several

decreased the cost to attendees without sacrificing the quality you’ve come to expect from PPW. On February 26, local author Dawn Smit Miller will present a half-day workshop featuring her innovative Rainbow Editing technique. (See “Rainbow Editing” article for details.)

Our fee programming will be dispersed throughout the year, with one event per quarter. After Rainbow Editing in the first quarter, the second quarter will see our Thirteenth Annual Pikes Peak Writers Conference, beginning April 22. In July’s third quarter, we host Brad Schreiber, who is part of the renowned “Writer’s Journey” team. For the final quarter in November, we will present a full day on “World-Building: Creating Setting for All Genres,” where multiple speakers from different disciplines will present lectures in the tradition of our “CSI” workshop. In addition to the overall price reduction for these attend-for-fee events, members continue to receive discounts below the general admission price.

Also, as another innovation to increase the value of your membership, we are publishing the full schedule of 2005 programs NOW. That way you have the information you need to plan ahead to attend any—or all—of the programs that interest you. The date, topic, and price of each event have been finalized, so you can mark it in ink on your calendars. However, since speakers and venues can change due to circumstances beyond our control, check our Web site and this publication frequently to keep abreast of updates.

Your member benefits will still include our Yahoo! loop, the bi-monthly *NewsMagazine*, and our new-and-improved Web site ([www.pikespeakwriters.org](http://www.pikespeakwriters.org)). Plus there are several innovative and exciting things planned for the conference this year.

For more information on all PPW programming, please visit our Web site at [www.pikespeakwriters.org](http://www.pikespeakwriters.org). Questions about non-conference programs can be directed to [workshops@ppwc.net](mailto:workshops@ppwc.net).

**“Be persistent. Editors change, tastes change, editorial markets change. Too many beginning writers give up too easily.”**  
—John Jakes

### PPW 2005 PROGRAM SCHEDULE

DATE	TOPIC	MEMBER FEE
1/25	Package Yourself	free
2/8	Ask An Author	free
2/26	Rainbow Editing	\$15
3/8	Improv for Dialogue	free
4/12	Conference Prep and Pitch Practice	free
4/22	Pikes Peak Writers Conference (see brochure)	
5/10	Queries and Submissions	free
6/14	Know Your Market	free
7/12	What’s My Journey?	free
7/16	The Writer’s Journey	\$45
8/9	Critique Groups	free
9/13	Finding Your Voice	free
10/11	Writing Contests	free
11/8	Character Arcs	free
11/19	World-Building: Setting for All Genres	\$45
12/13	Goals	free

authors, actually—how they got started in the business, their favorite tricks and techniques, and more. The authors’ names will be announced via our Yahoo! loop which is restricted to members, so contact our registrar to sign up if you haven’t already.

Future member meetings will be held the second Tuesday of every month through December 2005, 6:30 p.m. at 7850 Goddard Street, Colorado Springs. (Visit [www.pikespeakwriters.org](http://www.pikespeakwriters.org) for more information.)

Also, in February we host the first of our 2005 attend-for-fee events. For this year’s programming, we have

## From the Editor



January is an excellent time for writers to set goals and, in the process, review the past year's accomplishments. Did you write every day in 2004? Should that be a

goal for 2005? Did your name make the *NewsMag's* Sweet Success column in 2004? What can you do to reach that goal in 2005? Should you enter contests at least once a month or set aside a day each week for researching writers' guides and for mailing query letters or manuscripts?

*Bimonthly NewsMagazine of the Pikes Peak writing community*

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NewsMagazine

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PIKES PEAK  
**Writers**

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Let us know what worked for you in 2004 and what you plan for 2005.

We are delighted to report that Pikes Peak Writers had a very successful 2004. New members joined for the same low fee and greater benefits. Write Brain Sessions were initiated, offering free monthly workshops for writers. All-day workshops attracted attendees from other regions. A beautiful new PPW Web site prepared by Paul Carhart became available in

December. The Paul Gillette Memorial Writing Contest continued to attract hundreds of contestants. And most encouraging, numerous volunteers have come forward to support the new programs. Should volunteering be one of your goals for 2005?

Our staff wishes you a happy and successful new year!

## Rainbow Editing™: A Colorful New Way to See Your Writing

**What:** Rainbow Editing™ workshop

**When:** Saturday, February 26, 2005, 1-5 p.m.

**Where:** Colorado College, Gaylord Hall  
(for directions visit [www.pikespeakwriters.org](http://www.pikespeakwriters.org))

**Cost:** \$15 for PPW members  
\$25 for non-members

**Food:** Snack provided

**Details:** <http://www.ppwc.net/workshops.html>

During this half-day workshop, local author Dawn Smit Miller will reveal a colorful new weapon in the war against sloppy writing and the eternal editing cycle. Whether it be the fourth draft, fourteenth draft, or fortieth draft, Rainbow Editing™ can help writers find the unintentional patterns that bog down their writing.

Using the writer's best friend—the computer—a slew of colors, and pages from their own manuscripts, writers will learn how to highlight patterns so that they practically jump off the page.

### Topics include:

1. Uncover the natural habitats of "to be" verbs.
2. Seek out and eliminate the adverbs, adjectives, and other grammatical forms that slip under the editorial radar.



**Dawn Smit Miller**

3. Easily see how many times characters repeat certain actions (smile, grimace, scratch their noses, etc.). Is it overkill?

4. Discover personal "favorite phrases" that show up with shocking regularity in writing.

Workshop attendees can bring a page of their current work on floppy, CD, or flash drive for a chance to have it Rainbow Edited and critiqued by the group. (For more information on how to partici-

participate in this, go to [www.pikespeakwriters.org](http://www.pikespeakwriters.org).)

*Dawn Smit Miller is a writer and freelance editor who has been refining her Rainbow Editing™ technique since the 1990s. Her science fiction novel, Through Spiral Eyes, was published in 2002.*

# An Insider Look at How an Agent Works

By Kristin Nelson,  
Nelson Literary Agency, LLC

**I**t's finished! The novel you have worked on so hard for the last year is revised, proofed, and polished. You have done an extensive agent search and have compiled your agent wish list. You've spent hours, days even, perfecting your e-mail query letter. You know it's a query to get results.

It's out. An hour, a day, maybe even three weeks later, the agent wants to see some sample pages. Success!

Now, are you ready to hear what really happens when your sample pages land on an agent's desk? If so, read on. If you'd rather not know too much, stop now. Beyond here be dragons.

## The Reality in Statistics

Don't be discouraged but the odds of landing an agent can be daunting.

On average, my agency receives from 150 to 200 e-mail queries a week. Out of those 200, we might request about 30 partials. Ballpark figures mean we see about 800 queries a month and only look at sample pages for 120 projects. Staggering, isn't it? Out of those 120 partials, I may request to see one full manuscript on the average. After reading a full manuscript, it's 50-50 on whether I offer representation.

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**"I'm thinking about how fast I can get through the pile."**

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## The Etiquette on Submitting Your Partial

Please do every agent a favor and follow the submission guidelines specified when materials are requested. It streamlines our reading process and allows us to respond in a timely fashion.

Some general thoughts to keep in mind when mailing those pages: 1) Do not bind your pages. Simply office clip them; 2) Use white paper and Times New Roman 12-point font; 3) Use the regular post to mail; 4) Also, never send your sample pages by certified mail or in any way that needs a signature. My building has a reception desk that handles all incoming packages but

many agents don't. An agent friend told me this story. The post office attempted to deliver an envelope and left the yellow announcement on her door. The next day she wasted a morning going there, standing in line for forty-five minutes to receive a proposal she had not requested. She was livid. She opened the envelope. Took out the SASE. Wrote on the author's cover letter the rejection and a curt note. Tossed the proposal in the post office recycling bin, dropped the SASE in the post box, and walked out.

## What's Actually Going Through the Agent's Mind as Your Partial is Read

As I mentioned above, the pile is enormous. Most agents have assistants who do the first read and determine what will be passed forward. I'm currently training my assistant to read on my behalf. However, when I'm reading, I'm thinking about how fast I can get through the pile. I wish I could be thinking about what gem I might discover today, what a pleasure it is to read for a living, and what interesting stories I may get to read today. Then I look at my dayplanner...

So, a partial that snags my attention and engages me is a partial for which I'll request a full manuscript. All others are going to get passes. And remember, a pass from my agency doesn't necessarily mean that a work isn't publishable—just that I didn't love it enough to take it on.

## The Evaluation Process

In truth, agents decide whether a manuscript is right for them in five to ten pages. I'm not kidding. It's that fast. We know exactly what we are looking for and whether the manuscript can deliver.

### What we look for:

**Voice.** As a writer, you either have it or don't. The best way I can describe this is to have you imagine that you are in a bookstore. You read the back cover copy of a book and it entices you to flip it over to read the opening pages. You start reading and either you are hooked (from page one) or you shrug your shoulders and stop reading. The author's voice didn't speak to you. It's the same gut reaction for agents.

**A fresh and original storyline.** I see partials every day that are well executed but don't have an original story to tell.



Editors who would love to see this. Off the top of my head, can I think of five editors who would enjoy this partial I'm reading?

## What will get a pass:

1. Fresh storyline but the writing isn't strong enough. Often I'll see partials where I'll think, "This is a terrific concept," but then the writing just isn't strong enough to carry the story.
2. Sharp writing with a tired storyline. I can tell the author is talented but the story has been done (and done, and done again...)
3. A beautifully written but boring work. I hate when this happens. The author is clearly talented but has a story that I just wouldn't buy if I were in the bookstore. Clearly, I'm not the right agent for this novel.
4. Poorly written material regardless of story.
5. Stories that clearly don't fit in the market. I'll get a cover letter that will say something like this: "My story is a blend of science fiction and romantic comedy with elements of suspense. It can be called chick lit." Huh? You need to know where your novel fits in the market.
6. Partial with demanding or unprofessional cover letters. Life is too short to deal with negative and demanding people.

## Words of Encouragement

If this is your dream, then persist. Just realize that publishing is first and foremost a business. You need to be professional; you need to make your novel the best it can be before shopping it because you only have one shot to do it right.

And despite all the daunting odds, success happens all the time—and for new writers.

(This article was condensed from *Backspace: The Writer's Place* at [www.bksp.org](http://www.bksp.org).)

*Kristin Nelson specializes in representing commercial and literary fiction. The agency also represents a few story-based nonfiction projects. Please visit our Web site, [www.nelson-agency.com](http://www.nelson-agency.com), for more submission guidelines. Member: Association of Authors' Representatives and Romance Writers of America.*

# PPW Has New Web Site



By Paul M. Carhart

If you've been a member of Pikes Peak Writers for very long, you've probably stopped by one of our Web sites. Yes, sites.

Traditionally, year-round Pikes Peak Writers events and information has been housed online at [www.pikespeakwriters.org](http://www.pikespeakwriters.org) while Pikes Peak Writers Conference details could be found at [www.ppwc.net](http://www.ppwc.net).

If you're particularly Web-savvy, you may have already noticed a recent change in our Web real estate. As of November 13, 2004, the Pikes Peak Writers Web site has been merged with the conference site to form one online destination for all things PPW. Both Web addresses now take you to the same site.

In order to support such a convergence, the navigation has been streamlined. The use of some well-placed linework and subtle coloration distinguishes PPW year-round content from conference information. And, boy, is there a lot coming up.

In addition to spotlighting the next workshop on the schedule, we've posted a sneak peek at the entire workshop schedule for 2005. Not only are there monthly offerings to PPW members (either a free Write Brain

Session, a workshop, or the conference itself), there are only three workshops that will cost PPW members anything beyond the membership dues! One thing hasn't changed: you can still use the site to register for workshops.

Ever want to submit an article to this publication? The site now boasts a *NewsMag* page, complete with submission guidelines and article deadlines for all six 2005 issues.

The WRITE Series writer's videos are another valuable resource available from the site. Produced by Forest Rose Productions, LLC in association with Pikes Peak Writers, the WRITE Series is designed to inform, educate, and motivate writers of all levels. The videos are hosted by Teresa Funke and feature such authors as Robert Crais, David Morrell, Elizabeth Lyon, and Robert Vaughan. Many other literary luminaries, including editors and agents, are also interviewed. Two volumes are currently available, "Getting There from Here: Getting Published" and "I Have the Story You Want: Writing the Successful Query Letter and Synopsis." For more info, visit [www.ppwc.net](http://www.ppwc.net).

We've also expanded our use of Adobe Acrobat PDF files to bring you exact copies of registration forms, brochures, and flyers

in case you've missed any along the way. As the conference nears, we'll have the PPWC registration brochure available in this format as well.

If you'd like to volunteer, either to help out with the conference or on a longer term basis, make sure to visit the "About PPW" page and scroll down to the volunteers section. PPW is always happy to welcome new faces into the fold. PPW members can also join our informative e-mail loop from this location.

So check out the PPW/C Web site. Tool around with the navigation and become familiar with the content. I'm sure you'll find yourself returning to it throughout the year to get the latest information on upcoming year-round workshops, locate the site of a Write Brain Session, or delve into the details of the faculty and workshops for the 2005 conference. And don't forget, PPW members can register for the conference online after January 1, a whole month before open registration.

*Paul M. Carhart is an award-winning art director in print, Internet, and new media. He is also the author of three novels in his Fairlight SF series, all available at [www.paulcarhart.com](http://www.paulcarhart.com). When he's not working on his new spiritual contemporary fantasy, he's hanging out with his wife, Lori, and their seven-month-old daughter, Melody. Oh yeah, he also designed, produced, and maintains the new PPW Web site.*

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## January Write Brain Session: Package Yourself

After you've finished the manuscript and after you've signed the contract, there's nothing left for you to do but sit back and watch the profits roll in, right? Wrong! Writers in any genre are self-employed, having created a cottage industry out of their own creativity. Like any sole-proprietorship company, writers and authors have to handle marketing, public relations, the creation of collateral materials (sales aids), and hopefully manage the media attention that comes with being a successful writer.

Aspiring writers and published authors will get an assist in learning these skills from three media professionals at the January Write Brain Session, where attendees will be encouraged to think of themselves as a business—in the most creative sense possible!

Deb Courtney-Bertha, director of exter-

nal communications for the Greater Colorado Springs Economic Development Corporation, will trace the path from marketing plan to product development, to the ten steps toward creating a successful cottage industry out of your writing endeavors. Get the business marketing info you need without pursuing a B-school education.

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**"Writers will be encouraged to think of themselves as a business."**

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Paul M. Carhart, award-winning art director in print, Internet, and new media, will offer insight on visual print and Internet presentation, including business cards, let-

terhead, author photos, and Web site design. Whether you're trying to get an agent's attention or promoting your book signing, come to get ideas on how to improve your image and to avoid sure signs of a graphical amateur.

Susan Goldstein, media writer, producer, and director, will offer ideas and helpful tips about dealing with the local, regional, and national media—from getting your press release to the right people to creating positive media relations. She will give advice on how to create simple tools to package your information in the most media-friendly way, plus, teach you what you need to know about being prepared for a media interview.

This Write Brain Session will be held January 25 from 6:30 p.m. until 9:30 p.m. at The Village at Skyline, 2365 Patriot Drive, Colorado Springs, CO.

# Carwyn and Fahnestock Celebrate Big Book Deal

By staff writer

Fantasies appear in more than one medium. Some people—like Giles Carwyn and Todd Fahnestock—write them. They also live them. I found myself sharing a real-life episode at a December critique group meeting, where I interviewed this successful co-author team. All PPW members know that Carwyn and Fahnestock captured the attention of agent Donald Maass at the PPW Conference last April, subsequently signed with his agency, and sold their fantasy novel, *Heir of Autumn*, in a three-book deal to Eos, the science fiction division of Harper/Collins. We wanted to get an in-depth story about how it happened.

I discovered their critique group meets for dinner and conversation before getting down to the hard work of creating winning manuscripts. This night the fare was yummy potato soup, salad, crunchy bread, and wine, with homemade cookies for dessert. I came away convinced that such a repast was a perfect way to get creative juices flowing.

My first question to the authors: “Was your luncheon meeting with Maass a lucky accident or did you stalk the agent with plans to do a pitch?” Humm. It seems one of their critique members (the same one who made the yummy potato soup) offered them her reserved seat next to Maass and they took the opportunity and ran with it. Fahnestock—who appears to be the brash



one—broke the ice by asking Maass what he liked to see in a pitch. When the agent said he preferred to read a sample, Fahnestock handed him the first pages of their novel, which he had ready. The next thing they knew, Maass read them at the table and asked to see more. You know the rest of the story.

The next questions: (1) How do co-authors produce a coherent book? (2) Do you ever disagree? (3) If so, how do you decide who’s right? (4) With such pressure, how have you stayed friends all these years? And (5) Did your critique group help or hinder the writing of the book?

First, they brainstorm ideas for a story. Carwyn then plots each chapter. Fahnestock writes the first draft, which is passed back and forth for revisions. Frequently, they run across passages which are really cool, but they’ve forgotten who wrote them. During the “tweak and revise” stage, they take it to the critique group, who “tells them it’s bad.” They revise, and once they feel the revision is complete, they sit down together in front of the computer and listen to an electronic reading of the manuscript.

They do disagree at times, but Carwyn joked that he is “always right.” Fahnestock

smiled and refused to pick up the gauntlet, which is probably why they have stayed friends since high school. They attended Colorado College together off-and-on and now live in nearby suburbs of Denver with their wives and daughters.

*Heir of Autumn* was begun October 3, 2003 and finished August 8, 2004. If you’re the kind of nitpicker who counts back from the birth of a child to the day of the wedding, you’ll note that *Heir of Autumn* was not complete when the authors talked to Maass in April, 2004. They assumed it would take months and months to hear from his agency, but two weeks after the conference, Maass asked to see three chapters. “We usually wait months and months to get a reply. He really threw off our timing,” Fahnestock said. After hearing from Maass, they had to rush to finish the remaining eighty percent of the novel.

Since signing with the Maass Agency (actually, they didn’t sign a contract because Maass believes in handshakes), they have had three long telephone conversations with the agent and have talked to Diana Gill, their editor from Eos. She anticipates it will be January or February before she asks for revisions, and publication should be in April 2006.

Lessons to be learned from this success story? After fifteen years of writing short stories, screen plays, and novels, attending critique groups, and aggressively seeking an agent, you, too, may enter Fantasy Land. PPWC faculty coordinator Chris Olson has invited Carwyn and Fahnestock to present at the 2005 conference, so sign up for their workshop and learn more about this fairy tale.

The authors may be reached at [atyourback@hwow.org](mailto:atyourback@hwow.org).

## Legal Writes

By Brenda Speer, esq.

**QUESTION:** Before I parted ways with my agent, I had sent him another manuscript. Does he have any rights in it?

**ANSWER:** It depends on what your contract says as reviewed and analyzed in view of the facts of your particular situation. Unfortunately, your contract is unclear, so expect to fight about what the parties think it says.

Per this provision:

*“Author appoints Agent as his exclusive agent to negotiate the publication, sale, license or other disposition of Material, defined as Author’s manuscript titled The Great American Novel.”*

The agent has the right to represent only the named manuscript. However, this provision cannot be read in isolation, because the contract also says:

*“This Agreement shall govern all Material the Author authorizes the Agent to represent.”*

Taken together, the agent has the right to represent anything for which you give permission. For the manuscript you sent, the agent could fairly interpret this act as representation authorization. Did you mean that?

Since the contract has ended, can the agent no longer represent any of your work? Again, it depends on what else the contract says:

*“Agent-of-record status shall continue for Agent’s efforts begun before termination of the Agreement.”*

What are “efforts”? Is the agent’s receipt of your new manuscript an “effort”?

This example stresses the importance of

not only seeking legal advice prior to entering into an agency agreement, but also good writing, both in your work and in your contract. What the agreement says will govern the rights of the parties, including the disposition of any manuscript.

**DISCLAIMER:** Any material provided herein is for illustrative and educational purposes only and should not be relied upon as legal advice, should not be considered confidential, and is not the basis of an attorney-client relationship. Any information and opinions provided by Brenda Speer are solely of her own efforts, making, and responsibility, and are not, nor do they reflect, the work or opinions of PPW.

Brenda Speer has been practicing law for over fifteen years, with an emphasis on intellectual property law (patent, trademark, and copyright) to protect the technological and creative arts. You may contact her at (719) 381-1708 or [brenda@bbspeer.com](mailto:brenda@bbspeer.com).

# On Historical Accuracy in Fiction

By Margaret Bretschneider

**Editor's Note:** The first section of this article, which appeared in November, described the awakening of Bretschneider's German high school class to the importance of being accurate in the use of places and events when writing historical fiction. She whetted our appetites when she wrote of discovering anecdotes of World War II that she ascribes to her main character, Mutti. Bretschneider jotted the stories on scraps of paper. Her story continues...

The most difficult task was sorting them all out into some type of logical order. Memories don't come in chronological order, but since this narrative moved across Europe, an old 1944 book of maps helped me sort the stacks of notes by location. I further sorted by Mutti's equivalent emotions and perceptions through events as they unfolded. Keeping in mind her physical, political, and emotional journey also helped me unify the premise and eliminate excess events from the log line.

To me, this is where the "fiction" part of historical fiction comes into play—making order out of the chaos of some era by seeing it through the eyes of an observer, a character with whom the reader can identify.

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**“Conversations can either be imagined or reconstructed from the gist of what your subject remembers, but they should be accurate to the prevailing thought of that era.”**

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The next problem was that Mutti told time by events. She would say something happened “the year the Jews were made to wear stars.” It fell to me to find out that was in 1941. Or she would forget the name of a small town, but say “It was in the hills on a dirt road across the Czech border.” Names of villages had changed from Czechoslovakian to German, to Russian, and now back to Czech. All such allusions had to be tracked down for 1944 in order to use them in the story as accurately as possible. Such research and organization is

rewarding because it adds realistic details to the fabric of your imaginative story.

I found local color and detail by interviewing other people who lived during the era. I also used these interviews to check Mutti's perceptions against theirs. I found her remarkably accurate, but if she had not been, I would have had to choose the details

that could be verified by books, newspapers, or old photos. Writing historical fiction, historical romance, or creative nonfiction must work within an existing framework of known events that actually happened and known people who actually moved history. And those events and people cannot be changed drastically, or ignorantly, without distracting the reader, as were my disgruntled students.

Your subject's memory may have holes where it is too painful for them to remember anything but their raw emotion at the time. Could I be sure that running with children from a faultily ventilated bomb shelter into the fiery storm of a bombing raid happened exactly as I depicted? Was the characters' dialogue accurate? Did events proceed in the proper order? In the chaos of that eerie moment, Mutti could remember little except the choking fumes and a child singing in the night to drive away the bombers—a definitive moment. But I could imagine my emotions under those circumstances, and the emotion itself brought realism.

Conversations can either be imagined or reconstructed from the gist of what your subject remembers, but they should be accurate to the prevailing thought of that era.

One of the most difficult parts of writing my story and, I think, of writing any historical romance or fiction, was deciding which cultural data to keep in and which to leave out. In a completely fictional work, one can decide solely on the basis of what maintains the story's momentum. But when working within the limitations of an historical era, one must include enough cultural data to bridge the gap between what a reader of today would think was normal and what a character of the era depicted would believe.

For instance, a modern young mother would simply refuse to do something her husband wanted her to do, or at least argue with him if she feels it is dangerous or impossible. A young German mother like



Mutti, of the thirties and forties, would have obeyed blindly, at all costs. An American child would say, “If the people didn't like Hitler, why didn't they vote him out?” A European child would have known not to speak out against a dictator in public. The author must be careful not to ascribe to people of another era or place ideas that would be common here and now.

Accuracy in characterization is another factor. A real event may have had fifty important actors. One cannot have fifty heroes or heroines, so one may choose a few and incorporate the actions of many into the actions of these few. My work in progress is a novel of the Cold War. Rather than confuse the reader with a myriad of names and events, I am using six characters to carry the load of fifty. However, in doing so, I have to be sure I don't change the effect of the defenses they actually used on the Cold War Border.

Invented minor actors on the field of history can become the author's major characters—those observers who refine and amplify understanding of historical events for the reader. Think of the broad spectrum of understanding we get from Herman Wouk's good naval commander in *Winds of War* as this fictional character walks through real historical events. Or consider John Hersey's *The Wall* and his fictional diarist, who opens up the Warsaw Ghetto to our scrutiny.

For me, one of the greatest rewards of writing historical novels is seeing readers react to their new insight into history. One reader of *Mutti's War* called to say the story had helped her understand what her own silent German mother must have endured in order to save her. She felt that Mutti was everyone's mother. We cried together for the loss of those two women.

As long as historical accuracy is observed in event and setting, an author can legitimately imagine a minor player who observes and interprets that history. Such a story can illuminate real history and bring understanding in a more fascinating and satisfying way than any history book. Besides, my students would approve.

# Self-Editing 101

## By Staff Writer

Can you spot the flaw in these sentences?

"You always get to be the bad cop," Feeney complained.

"It's some bank in the Bahamas!" she announced.

"There is a man," he panted.

"Hey, clown head," Jason chuckled.

Do you see it yet?

"It isn't his pattern to hit in a public place," Peabody pointed out.

"He does seem anxious," Yarber observed.

"Okay," she checked her watch.

"Well," Lori handed Sam the conditioner.

Maybe this comment by Newgate Callender in *The New York Times Book Review* will help:

Mr. [Robert] Ludlum has other peculiarities. For example, he hates the "he said" locution and avoids it as much as possible. Characters in *The Bourne Ultimatum* seldom "say" anything. Instead, they cry, interject, interrupt, muse, state, counter, conclude, mumble, whisper (Mr. Ludlum is great on whispers), intone, roar, exclaim, fume, explode, mutter. There is one especially unforgettable tautology: "I repeat, 'repeated Alex."

I could add to that list, but I think you get the idea. Speaker attributions can get out of hand. As the above published examples show, some editors find alternatives to "said" acceptable. In fact, some house style sheets *require* writers to vary speaker attributions. Despite that, I discourage the practice, and I have company. There are editors and writing instructors who will go so far as to say that abuse of speaker attribution is one of the marks of an amateur. Even though these substitute verbs appear all too often in published

works, I still urge you to forego them. Here's how Mr. Callender finished the above review:

The book may sell in the billions, but it's still junk.

What's wrong with using a variety of strong, vivid verbs? Don't writing teachers encourage this? Didn't I advise searching for just the right verb in last issue's column? Consider the following:

- In the case of writing dialogue, variety is not the spice of life. Verbs other than "said" can distract the reader. This is true for me. After a while, all those substitutions begin to irritate, especially the ones that aren't verbs of speech.

- Alternatives to "said" tend to explain the dialogue. For instance: explain, order, counter, boast. This actually slips into telling, rather than showing. The dialogue should be clear enough to show that a character is explaining something, ordering someone, countering previous dialogue, or boasting.

- Some alternatives produce redundancies. "What is your name?" he asked, or "I'm sorry," she apologized.

- Often, substitutes create physical impossibilities. Grimace, chuckle, purr, and breathe are just a few such verbs used as speaker attributions.

- Many manuscripts are littered with non-"said" verbs. The good news is that this is a pretty easy fix.

- To begin, eradicate the impossibilities. There is no circumstance in which one would be appropriate.

- Next, as Oscar Collier and Frances Spatz Leighton state in *How to Write and Sell Your First Novel*:

[D]on't try to find a lot of ways to say "said." Leave "said" alone unless the character is screaming or whispering, in which case, say so.

William Noble ("*Shut Up!*" *He Explained*)

and Renni Browne and Dave King (*Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*) agree. Browne and King offer a compelling reason to stick with "said:"

"Said" . . . isn't read the way other words are read. . . . It's absolutely transparent, and so is graceful and elegant.

Remember, attribution's primary function is to let the reader know who is speaking. If an explanatory verb is necessary, the dialogue needs to be stronger.

- Going further, see how many "said"s you can eliminate. "In the cleanest writing, of course, we don't use anything at all. We let the dialogue passages stand for themselves," William Noble writes. Again, strong dialogue should identify the speaker and convey the mood.

- Another method to remove "said"s replaces them with beats, those bits of stage business sprinkled through dialogue.

Todd grabbed her arm. "Please don't go."

Not only can beats act as speaker attributions, they allow you to insert those small actions you may have been trying to attach to your dialogue as speaker attributions.

"Hello." She smiled. "I'm glad to see you."

Beats work extra hard in scenes involving more than two characters engaged in dialogue. They also prevent monotony. Everything can be overdone. An entire page of "said"s can draw attention to themselves and away from the dialogue. In that same vein, don't get heavy-handed with beats, either.

Following these steps has the added benefit of improving your dialogue. You will discover weak lines and characters who sound too much alike. Fixing dialogue is tougher, but your manuscript will be better for it.

Even if your dialogue sizzles, eliminating unnecessary speaker attributions, cleaning up others, and inserting beats will result in a more polished, more professional manuscript.

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