

The Rocky Road to Paper Heaven (The Process that Transfers the Work from the Writer to the Ideal Reader)

- 1) Writing it. This is the writer's own business. No one can help while s/he forges in the smithy of his/her soul the uncreated conscience of its race, and labours in silence, cunning and exile. (If you don't recognize this paraphrase you may be in the wrong business.)
- 2) Resulting in: the work. Considered, reconsidered. Vised, revised, revised. To the end of your tether. Till there's nothing more you can do to it. Till you need help!
- 3) The work is shown to a few knowledgeable friends, if the writer is lucky enough to have some. Suggestions may be made, which the writer is free to accept or reject.

Pitfall 1: If s/he savages the friends for giving the suggestions, they are unlikely to make any more in future.

Pitfall 2: The friends may be wrong.

Pitfall 3: If all the writer wants from these people is an encouraging "reaction," i.e. not real suggestions but a "Hey, that's great," it would help matters to say so at the outset. There is nothing illegitimate about such a wish. Everyone needs morale uplift.

- 4) If the writer already has an agent, the work goes to the agent.

Pitfall 1: Finding the right agent. (Would-be writers are lined up around the block. The agent has a lot to choose from.)

Pitfall 2: The agent may be wrong, or incompetent, or caught at a moment of life crisis.

Pitfall 3: If the writer makes life too impossible for the agent, the agent will decide there are easier ways of making a living, and dump the writer.

- 5) The agent sells the work.

Pitfall 1: The agent may fail to do this. (Would-be writers are lined up, etc.)

Pitfall 2: The agent may sell the work to the wrong publisher, who doesn't understand the book.

Pitfall 3: The writer may make life so impossible for the publisher that the publisher dumps the writer. Or vice versa.

Pitfall 4: Recession strikes, and the publisher dumps the writer anyway.

- 6) The work gets edited. (Pitfalls of not understanding, etc., as above.)

Being edited is like falling face down into a threshing machine. Every page gets fought over, back & forth like WW1. Unless the editor and the writer both have in mind the greater glory of the work, to the subordination of their own egos and peevishness, blood will flow

and the work will suffer. Every comma, every page break, may be a ground for slaughter. Editing comments are likely to be of these sorts:

- A. "You have spinach on your teeth." (Spelling, grammar, unfortunate double-meanings, factual errors, and some punctuation – other punctuation being a matter of house style or taste, see below.) In other words: These are some mistakes which look accidental. I am pointing them out. If you have done these things on purpose, you'd better have a good reason.
- B. "Your socks don't match." (Internal consistency: Mary's name is Mary on page 1, and Mary-Jane on page 5, and Marianne on page 11.) Perhaps you did this on purpose too – why? Does it work? Etc.
- C. "I think you look better in blue than in green." Matters of taste and judgment. Here is where the writer must be prepared to stand his'r ground. Sulkily changing things you feel in your gut should not be changed, and then blaming the editor, is no good. But the writer must be prepared to put the case. Sometimes the case is simply, "I choose green."
- D. "You just pulled a turnip out of your hat, when it's supposed to be a rabbit." (Bathos, failed effects, patchy character development, stuff that doesn't convince, magic tricks that don't come off, loose ends etc.) See C.
- E. "You've jumped the gun, you've blown the plot, you've got the art before the hearse." Matters of structure, which means timing, too. You've told too much too early, or too little too late. There are logjams. There are digressions that lead nowhere. There are windows you don't need to look through, there are doors that don't open.
- F. "Where is the voice coming from?" Who's telling this story, anyway, and do we believe it? Is there unwarranted authorial intrusion? Does the narrator sound like Descartes on Page 5 and like Tugboat Annie on page 10, and is there a reason for this? Matters of tone enter here.
- G. "In India they drive on the left." Fact checking. Can cover anything from the accuracy of Biblical quotations to what year Tabu perfume came in. A good editor will pick every nit. No point in accusing them of nit-picking. It's their job.

And so it goes, and so it goes FOR EVERYONE. The final decision however rests with the writer – because it's the writer who will have to take the rap (the criticism) and stand behind the work. You're really in trouble when you get so famous, or so irascible, that people are afraid to tell you you've got spinach on your teeth. You'll become like those Bad Breath ads of the 40's: "Even his best friends won't tell him."

Both writer and editor are engaged to the same end. The end is – should things go so far – the reader's experience of reading the book. Moments that bring the reader up short and cause her/m to say, "This is an error" or "I just stopped believing in the author, or the spell, or the charm," or whatever it is, are like someone turning the lights on during a movie.

If a guest you'd invited to dinner started to eat the spaghetti with his hands, there might be several explanations.

- The man is a mannerless boor, or drunk.
- He is trying to shock you, and insult those present.
- It's a 'happening.'
- He knows that spaghetti was once eaten thus, and is a period-piece purist.

(Point of story: there are many reasons for "breaking" "rules." Some breakages may have an artistic point to make. Others, not. The editor is there to help the writer sort out his/her intentions, and to make the work WORK.)

Some people treat editors as the Room Service of literature. This is a mistake. A good editor's price is beyond rubies (although a bad one may be a tedious pedant). But if you spit on these (good) folk, they won't want to edit you again.

- 7) The work gets published. Now – after the last galleys have been proofed – now the die is cast! Now it's too late to turn back! Now is when all that hard work you put in with your editor pays off – or not, as the case may be. Now is when you open the book and say – Oh no! Why didn't I fix that, when I had the chance?

One of the results of publication is that some of your friends will stop speaking to you, because they won't be able to handle what they perceive as your sudden fame. Others will accuse you of not speaking to them. The friends you'll need now are those who can acknowledge your accomplishment without thinking you've suddenly become stuck-up, or a different human being. Treasure them.

You may be asked to do Publicity. Sometimes this sells books, sometimes not.

If your book does very well, you will receive three nasty vicious personal attacks from people you've never met, in print, within the year. Don't take them personally. They aren't personal. They are just part of the time-honoured tradition of cutting the legs off people who grow fast – especially beloved by Canadians, but observed elsewhere as well. Keep the clippings. Apply them to your head if it gets swelled. Don't bother with revenge. It will take care of itself.

- 8) If your opus is a book (ie. not a magazine story), it gets reviewed. (You wish! You hope!) This is like Kafka's *The Trial* – altogether a surreal and nightmarish experience. The ego is put in the stocks, and eggs, tomatoes and inexplicable bouquets of flowers – if you're lucky – are hurled. But if you've been well-edited, at least you won't be accused of having spinach on your teeth. Just remember: not being reviewed is worse.
- 9) People buy the book. Whether this happens or not will depend partly on the reviews, partly on luck, partly on how good a job the publisher and its sales force have done – and partly on whether or not the people who own and run bookstores like the book. No good sneering at them as a class, either. Some are jerks, but others are well-read and intelligent folk who are devoted to books and who are ardent readers. Why else would they be in the business? Not to make a million, that's for sure.

10) The book reaches the ideal reader, who understands every word, every nuance, every hint, every melody, is elated when you want her/m to be, mystified on cue, enlightened ditto, gets all the jokes (if any), participates fully, thinks you are a Great Artist, and writes you touching letters of gratitude. At these also it would be as well not to sneer. Answer them graciously, and save them up until it's time for 1. (above) again. They may help to remind you why you are putting yourself through this meat-grinder in the first place.

May the Fierce be with you.

END OF SERMON.

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