

You Finished Writing Your Novel – Now What? *Revision, Editors, and Publication*

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ABSTRACT

Among the top ten pieces of advice for aspiring writers from published authors is “You may think your novel is done, but it isn’t.” There is always another draft to write. My research investigates what readers look for in a book, what editors look for in a manuscript, and what writers can do to make their work publishable.

INTRODUCTION

I have always been a writer. It started with short stories, but a few years ago, I started getting into long fiction. Long fiction can be a novel or novella, but I feel the word “novel” sounds like it is something automatically publish-worthy. Really, it could be anything between eighty and one hundred thousand words. I have written four “novels” but not anything ready to be published yet. I sacrificed my fourth novel, *Riff*, to the case study of this experiment that taught me what readers look for and what editors look for.

As a Creative Writing minor, I could have done research on how to start writing or how to publish, but I chose revision because even though it is as important as those two ends of the spectrum, it gets glossed over more often. Lectures on how to go from having not written anything to having a book on the shelf tend to talk a lot about how to start and how to end, but do not express the importance of revision.

METHODS

The first thing I did to research revision was read. I read craft books inside and outside of class. I also started reading in my genre, which is something I hadn’t already been doing. I also did some research on the literary markets and publishing industry. I already had a background in this from interning at a publishing house, going to writers’ conferences and lectures, and internet research.

I also did some hands-on research. I took the second draft of my novel and sent it to ten people I trust, a group that represents a diverse set of people: readers who do read my genre, readers who don’t read my genre, writers who do write my genre, writers who don’t write my genre, people of different ages, and people of different cultural and spiritual backgrounds. I took their ten full critiques and wrote draft three.

Finally, I sent draft three to a professional freelance editor. I wanted to hire an editor for three reasons: to become a better writer with a better manuscript, to learn what an editor looks for and the format it comes in, and because it wasn’t coming out of my pocket. This is an expensive service. I do not recommend it to all serious writers because there are cheaper ways to get feedback (community and on-line writers groups, for example). However, I had a good experience with the editor. She was willing to work within my time frame and budget, and she gave me useful feedback.

RESULTS

On the subject of what to do after writing draft one, I broke the process into four steps. The first step is to realize that the book is not done. This is the hardest step for beginners. Finishing a first draft is a great achievement, but it is not time to start sending out query letters yet.

The second step is getting fresh eyes. A writer needs to become divorced from the manuscript because if there is something (a character, a sentence, a word, etc.) that the writer is unwilling to sacrifice for the good of the novel, the novel has already become compromised. Therefore, the writer should stick it in a drawer for a while so it will be fresh upon returning to it in a few weeks, a few years, whatever it takes.

The third step is revising. In order to revise, a writer must be willing to “murder” his “darlings,” that is delete even the best sentence in all of literature if it doesn’t fit this book. There is a common belief that because this story came from the writer’s head, this is their self-expression, this is their *self*. That’s not true unless it’s their diary. If the

writer is writing something that other people will read, it isn't just self-expression. It's communication. We don't always get communication right on the first try or the second try or the fifteenth try.

The fourth step is publication, which is another subject matter entirely. There are a lot of different types of publishing, some good, and some bad with the new digital age. There are many sources out there already if people are interested in traditional self-publishing, publishing on demand, and mass-market publishing.

All details and resources that I have turned up during this research can be found online at <http://revisionlaboratory.blogspot.com/>. My site includes advice on style, character, structure, and more.

I cannot go into all the details here, but to sum up what I learned, most of the bigger issues were not things I had never heard before, although there was some of that, but they were things I have been hearing all my life. There are things that happen naturally in writing, but I took that for granted. I thought that if I had a good story and solid characters through which to tell it, things like scene structure and character goals, for example, would fall into place naturally. That wasn't true for me, not for this story. My biggest piece of advice is to look at everything consciously. Writers can know craft tricks, but that does not mean they are using them. This isn't to say writers need to stifle their creativity. On the first draft, it's best to turn off the editor in the brain, not look at my website, and let the story come out however it will come out. But on the next drafts the writer can start to look at things like point of view or abstractions or psychic distance.

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