The Blood-Red Pencil

Sharp and pointed observations about good writing

SATURDAY, AUGUST 27, 2011

Writing a Novel from a Radio Show

My guest blogger today is Mara Purl, author of the Milford Haven series, which started out as a radio show. She is making a stop today at the Blood Red Pencil on her national blog tour for What the Heart Knows.

The traditional relationship between narrative fiction and screenplay is that book comes first, film comes second, as an adaptation of a popular novel. For me, however, this process occurred in reverse order. First, I created a radio drama. Second, I started adapting my scripts into narrative fiction.

When I first moved to Los Angeles, I lived near its famous Farmer's Market, a rambling collection of tented stalls selling everything from fifty varieties of fresh fruit juice to ethnic foods from thirty cultures. Of course, it had an espresso stand that served the most extraordinary latte in the city: the brew strong and bitter; the milk frothed almost to the consistency of cream; the cup thick and white, preferably with a small chip in the saucer, near the square cube of raw sugar balanced perfectly on the stainless steel spoon.

On certain mornings, I'd grab my yellow pad and be sipping a scalding hot latte before seven a.m., sunlight streaming past the cracks between awnings, round tables balanced on match books to compensate for the uneven pavement. Sometimes a sip of my freshly brewed elixir would produce a whole paragraph. Sometimes it would give me the perfect excuse for overhearing someone else's caffeine-fueled conversation.

This was the location where I overheard the story my husband and I have now adopted as our own: a couple who seemed to have been married for a hundred years, she admonishing "Your sleeve is in your food!" "No it's not," he parried. "It would be if I didn't tell you!" I've dined out on that story for years, marveling at its haiku-like capturing of an entire relationship.

Kill Your Darlings

Email Subscription Sign-up

Submit

Subscribe To

Posts

Comments

Share With Others

BOOKMARK

Blood-Red Alert!

© 2008-2011 Blood-Red Pencil Authors

The contents of these pages, including text and images, are the sole property of the authors and may not be used, reproduced, or reposted in any manner without written consent. All rights reserved.

Popular Posts

Grammar ABCs: D is for Dashes

A dash is an indication of interruption formed by typing two hyphens on your keyboard. Whether it is a long "em-dash"—or a shorter "en-das...

I share this story because it's about dialogue, and how important it is for a script-writer to be attuned to it. When you write for a medium that features only dialogue, augmented by sight or sound, but not by description—the conversation must fulfill several requirements. A) It has to sound natural, not over-laden with information. (At all costs, one must avoid what my editor and I call the "As you know, Bob" syndrome, where a huge chunk of plot is delivered like an overladen plate of teetering vegetables.) B) It has to carry sub-text which is the key to attitude, and thus to character. C) It must advance the story such that the scene actually serves a function.

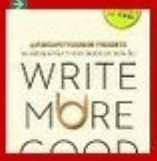
For radio drama, and for television, most scenes last three minutes, which is three pages in the script. It's a very tight structure, with a beginning and end, and some sort of twist or "landing" in the middle, which can be either "soft" or "hard" but must be tangible.

After writing several screenplays and theatrical plays and over one hundred radio scripts, I had a good sense of mastery of these forms. But now I faced the daunting task of writing narrative voice. I had a background in journalism, which taught me a very different kind of tight structure and flow, but it was mostly an information delivery format without too much room for poetic juxtaposition or colorful imagery.

My first attempt at converting the Milford-Haven scripts resulted in novelizations—not yet novels. They tended to be dialogue, dialogue, dialogue, description, dialogue. Or, they'd be terribly choppy with original dialogue interspersed with minute descriptions of everything "else" the actors had conveyed in their marvelous performances. These attempts were very useful, because my production company printed short runs and distributed them to potential readers. We found immediately that I did have a following into this printed form, and that the story easily jumped the pond back to its home territory of America. But I knew I had a long way to go, and much to learn.

What does an editor cost?

It's all well and good to tell a writer they need a professional editor to peruse their manuscript before submitting to an agent or publishe...



Ask the Editor - Part Two

The daily grind of an editor can sometimes leave us ready to snarl at a butterfly and kick our mother-in-law. That's when we need a bit of h...

Things That Drive An Editor Crazy

I've been editing for a long time and am still amazed at how often I see common mistakes repeated over and over again. For instance: Fred ...

Break Writer's Block: Become the Storyteller, Not the Protagonist

In Eric M. Eisenberg's "Building a Mystery: Toward a New Theory of Communication and Identity," one of the things Eisenberg discusses is the...

Are You Lying or Laying?

Once again we welcome Terry Odell with a guest post. We like her so well, we have invited her to contribute regularly on the

So now I returned to my undergraduate studies as a lit major, reconnecting with everyone from Faulkner to Malamud, and from the ancient "Tale of Genji" (arguably the first novel, written in 1001) to Charles Dickens, a long-time favorite who also wrote serial-stories. I also re-read some of my mentor Louis L'Amour's work, and found some even more contemporary authors I enjoyed. The only thing I avoided was reading authors whose work seemed as though it might be similar to mine, because I had to listen closely for my own narrative voice.

What I "heard" in the novelists I did read was their own distinct voice and style. That's what I had to listen for in myself. And there is simply no substitute for this core work. Indeed, the roots for the words "author" and "authentic" are the same, pointing to an integrated sense of creating with one's own hand.

Gradually, through this process of listening, and by working with a brilliant and dedicated editor, Vicki Werkley, this narrative voice did emerge, and has resulted in numerous literary awards for early editions, and a new contract with the publisher of my dreams. But most importantly, the reader can now hear an authentic voice that takes her on a journey into her own heart.

A native Montanan, Heidi M. Thomas now lives in Northwest Washington. Her first novel, *Cowgirl Dreams*, is based on her grandmother, and the sequel, *Follow the Dream*, has recently won the national WILLA Award. Heidi has a degree in journalism, a certificate in fiction writing, and is a member of Northwest Independent Editors Guild. She teaches writing and edits, blogs, and is working on the next books in her "Dare to Dream" series.

third Tuesday o...

Leave a Tip Today on the Blood-Red Pencil

As on every second Tuesday of the month, it's Leave a Tip Day at The Blood-Red Pencil. I'd guess you know something about writing or you w...

Top 25 Reasons Your Submissions are Rejected

Tips from the Surrey, B.C. Writers Conference (Oct 22-24). Each year agents and publishers conduct an exercise, where they read aloud the f...

Busted!—Andre Dubus III Caught Adding a Late Entering POV

Authors can get away with breaking almost any writing rule if they do it artfully, intentionally, and without pulling the reader from the fi...

Ask the Editor Free-For-All Is Open For Questions

In my corner of the world, this summer is one of extremes. We went from a drought to a flood, both undesirable. Writers suffer from simila...

SHARE

Posted by Heidiwriter at 6:00 AM

+1 4

Labels: Mara Purl, Milford-Haven Novels, radio writing, What the Heart Knows

7 comments:

Kathryn Craft said...

A different sort of journey, Mara--interesting. Thanks for sharing it!

August 27, 2011 8:13 AM

Maryann Miller said...

Mara, thanks so much for sharing this. It was a good reminder for me of all those important elements of dialogue, and I love the example you gave for the "info dump" Any time a sentence starts with "As you know," the writer needs to stop and rewrite.

August 27, 2011 11:36 AM

Heidiwriter said...

This truly has been a fascinating journey for you, Mara. I enjoy getting to know more about it each time I meet you or read about you.

August 27, 2011 12:34 PM

Helen Ginger said...

I took a class in scriptwriting and found it eye opening. It was cutting everything down to the core. What you did was reverse it. Enjoyed your post!

August 27, 2011 3:35 PM

Our CafePress Shop

Click on the photo for fun editing gifts

Blog Archive

Blog Archive

Followers

Join this site

with Google Friend Connect

Members (1340) More »

Already a member? Sign in

Subscribe Now: iheart

I ♥ 🔥

Page Rank 4

Who Links?

WHO LINKS TO ME

Search This Blog

hearwritenow said...

Almost as bad as "As you know..." is "You see...".

"I wanted to quit my job, you see, so I began acting in a way that would get me fired."

"You see, Bob, the quantomatic machine works like this..."

Switching between media, and adapting one medium to another, is really good practice for developing writing muscle.

Elle
HearWriteNow & Blood-Red Pencil

August 27, 2011 11:48 PM

Elspeth Antonelli said...

My history as an actor has made writing dialogue a rather easy task; I'm very grateful for it.

August 28, 2011 12:39 PM

write my essay said...

interesting thoughts

August 29, 2011 3:03 AM

Post a Comment

Links to this post

Create a Link

Home Older Post

Subscribe to: Post Comments (Atom)

Search

powered by Google™

Visit Our Editors

- Dani Greer
- Elsa Neal
- Elspeth Antonelli
- Heidi Thomas
- Helen Ginger
- Kathryn Craft
- Linda Lane
- Maryann Miller
- Morgan Mandel
- Sherry Wachter
- Shon Bacon

NetworkedBlogs
Followers (275)

Follow this blog

Pageviews last month

10,550

All Visitting Writers

223,888