

GETTING IT RIGHT: THE EDITOR'S CRAFT*

FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE PRESS published *A Fortunate Life* by A.B. Facey in 1981. Early in 1982 I received a telephone call from a gentleman who said something like, 'Listen, on page 302 of *A Fortunate Life* Facey says that he got an average of fifteen bushels of wheat per acre at Nomans Lake in 1924. Well, I was farming out that way then and he's made a mistake, no one was getting anything like that. If you're going to be printing those books you should be getting it right.'

After the publication of T.A.G. Hungerford's third volume of autobiographical stories, *Red Rover All Over*, I received a very belligerent telephone call from a gentleman, accusing me of stupidity and incompetence as an editor for not checking and correcting Hungerford's passing observation that the *Queen Mary* was docked in Manhattan when he looked out of his hotel window upon his arrival in that city in 1956. Apparently, everyone knows, the *Queen Mary* was not in Manhattan at that time.

These two anecdotes highlight one of the great difficulties that editors are up against. Even the things which you get wrong because they were difficult and/or impractical to check, or because you felt that they were of little consequence to the general purpose and veracity of the text, will inevitably be of consequence to someone — and, of course, in a way you may not anticipate. A minor piece of information in an autobiography, in a novel or a poem even, may one day become a primary source for another writer and thus an error can be perpetuated.

Clearly it is rarely possible to check everything in a book, so hopefully four things happen to you as you become more experienced as an editor: you develop a thick skin; you learn quickly how much you can trust a particular author's memory or knowledge; you develop a sixth sense for what might be incorrect; you build up a wide general knowledge. None of these things happen by accident but can develop through experience. As with many occupations editing is a craft which, in large part, can only be learnt on the job. And, unfortunately, I have found that you learn the most from your mistakes. Courses can be useful in providing the basic technical equipment necessary for editing, but it is only on the job that would-be editors can really discover if they have the aptitude, and the capacity to develop their skills.

Every editor works slightly differently and therefore it is impossible to lay down point by point general principles which will give you an unequivocal understanding of the editor's craft. My comments therefore will be in the way of personal observations based on what, over fifteen years as an editor, I have learnt works for me. My editorial experience has largely been with fiction, biography and autobiography, and social history, texts which are intended for a general readership.

There are, for me, two basic tenets which as an editor I always try to remember.

The central purpose of editing is to assist authors to communicate their intentions and those of their text to the reader as clearly and as accurately as possible. (Sometimes those intentions are not the same, with the author aware that

*A paper presented to members of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand at their annual conference, 5-7 October 1990.

they have written a different book to what was intended. This, of course, must be reconciled.

It is important that editors edit the book that is in front of them, that they do not edit the book that they think it should be. To seek to produce a book other than that which the author has written is the publisher's prerogative, and to be negotiated prior to acceptance of the work. Once a manuscript is accepted for publication the editor should accept and work within its parameters and its intentions.

The second tenet is to get the author to do as much of the editorial work as possible themselves. I engage in actual on-the-page editing as the very last step in the whole process. I try to provide direction and advice to the author which enables them to carry out any rewriting and reorganisation of the manuscript. Authors feel less threatened in such a situation by remaining in control of the process, and hopefully they also learn something from such a process which will assist their future work. Finally, it also means that the seamless edit (everyone's ideal) is more easily achieved. It is less likely that I as editor can inadvertently impose anything on the text, if the author, with my guidance and encouragement, does the bulk of the actual on-page work.

When I first read a manuscript which I am to edit I try to do so as an ordinary reader and not as an editor. Once an editor begins working on a text he/she has the same problem as an author. The work can never be read as if for the first time — the way in which ultimately the intended reader of the book will do. Although I may, in the process of editing, go through a manuscript many times, up to a dozen I would estimate on books like *A Fortunate Life* and *My Place*, I can never do so, except on the very first reading, with a fresh eye.

So with the first reading I try to be an ordinary reader — no pencil in my hand and, unless absolutely necessary, I make no notes. Most often this reading will be done away from the office, in my own time, as with any other leisure reading. I ask myself the question that all readers unconsciously confront — is it a good read? is it worth reading? is it well written? does it all make sense? do the plot and characterisation stand up? and so on.

After reading the manuscript I then make any general notes and observations based on my response and recollection of the text rather than on a re-examination of it.

The next step, if possible, is to meet with the author to discuss the book. I try to say very little but to draw out the author's ideas about the book, about their intentions, about how well, to their mind, those intentions have been realised, about any problems they perceive with the manuscript. It is only after the author has talked about these things that I discuss in detail my experience of the text at the initial reading. I believe that an author must always feel, and in fact be, the primary authority on the text.

At this first meeting, if I don't know an author already, I try to get an understanding of their personality so that I can determine how best to work with them — how blunt I can be, how delicately I might have to tread. The editorial

process can be a threatening experience for an author and it is up to the editor to make certain that the author is as comfortable as possible with the process. Of course, there are some authors who will only be reassured if nothing is questioned or changed. The editor has to find strategies to get round this.

I recall one difficult author who was extremely defensive and had something of a win/lose mentality — and he had to win. In the end the only way around this was to manufacture a large number of queries and suggestions that I could give way on so that I could get his agreement to the minority of changes that I saw as essential.

As difficult as this kind of author is the one who instantly agrees with everything. For me editing is essentially about assisting the writer to engage with the text in a critical and constructive manner, to help them to see the work afresh. The author who simply agrees with anything, like the one who is defensive about everything, is not constructively engaged with the process.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to edit a text if you cannot develop a reasonable working relationship with the author. Writing may be a lonely and isolated occupation but good editing, I believe, must be quite the opposite — it should be a close and open dialogue between editor and author.

Once I have met with the author and am (hopefully) clear on what his/her intentions are, on what the book is about, I then do a close reading of the text. At this stage I tend not to mark the author's text at all, but rather produce notes which are referenced by page, paragraph and line to the manuscript. As I have said, authors can easily feel threatened and if, as the first detailed response from an editor, they receive their manuscript back covered in remarks, suggestions, queries, and even worse, additions, deletions and redrafting, they can feel almost violated. By receiving back a clean manuscript with separate notes I find that authors tend to feel more at ease with the process. To reinforce this my notes include pacifying phrases like 'I think', 'I feel', 'I wonder', and 'perhaps', 'maybe', 'have you thought about', 'it occurs to me', and 'the reader may have difficulty with'.

I allow authors time to consider my notes before discussing them and the author's response to them. When, after discussion, and explanation where necessary, we agree on revisions, I encourage the author to undertake these. Of course this is not always possible. Many of the authors of our social histories are 'on-off' authors who don't always have the capacity to revise their work. In such cases I, of course, have to do the work, but I always confer closely with the author on anything I do. With Albert Facey, for example, his eyesight had deteriorated to such an extent that all revisions had to be read to him.

The next stage, under normal circumstances, should it be required, is for me to actually make revisions etc. directly on the manuscript myself. The author is, of course, consulted in this.

One of the effects of my approach to editing, when it works well, is that authors are often not conscious of the fact that they have been edited at all. This is particularly so with inexperienced writers. The problem with this, I suppose, is that your efforts can go unacknowledged, but this is nothing, I feel, compared to the satisfaction in knowing you have, hopefully, achieved for author and reader the best

text possible, with a minimum of fuss, and also, hopefully, you have helped improve the skill of the writer by allowing him or her to do as much of the work as possible. If nothing else this will mean that editing his or her next book will be that much easier.

The final stage of editing for me is copy-editing. Of course, one does draw attention to and/or correct technical things like spelling, punctuation, etc., at earlier stages in the process, as they are noticed. But it is not a primary concern until everything else is correct, and then the final draft of the manuscript is read solely for those things. If this is done earlier new errors can enter the text with subsequent revisions of the manuscript and not be picked up.

Basically the craft of editing is about getting it right — about assisting the author in communicating a text to the reader as clearly and as accurately as possible. Yes, of course, the gentlemen who contacted me about Albert Facey's wheat crop and T.A.G. Hungerford's sighting of the *Queen Mary* were correct — however difficult it is to get verification and however trivial something may seem, an editor should always be concerned about getting it right.

Ray Coffey,
Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

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