

On Killing Your Darlings (or how to receive critique)

One of the biggest problems for new and young writers to overcome is that of what one person we know calls 'killing your darlings': the process of gaining considered critical feedback, and learning how to deal with that feedback. It is called 'killing your darlings' because after taking so long to create written work, having them edited can feel like sending them to the slaughter; especially if you are unfamiliar with the editing process.

It takes such a long time to create written work—especially book-length works. Writers can become so enamoured of their own writing, having been through the struggles involved in planning, writing, revising. They deal with so many problems: reticent characters or characters that just won't act the way they're supposed to; some situations seem bland but need to be exciting, and it doesn't appear possible to re-create them; writing a tense piece with the right level of movement, so that it feels 'natural'; ensuring that there isn't anything that is overly clichéd or passé; managing dialogue and action effectively; and maintaining a sense of plausibility even whilst rendering something completely innovative or unique.

The entire process, in short, of creating a written piece is one of continual, often solo, struggle. Usually up-hill. By the end of the process, a writer has spent so much time crafting and honing that it really does consider the work complete. Imagine, therefore, giving your work to an editor, or a friend or colleague, and finding out that they think your work is far from complete. Some people will even be rude enough to consider your work a first draft—not knowing that you have spent two years on it and have reworked it a million times.

On getting to such a situation, where your readers consider a piece a first draft whereas the writer considers it finished, tells so much. The fact of a piece feeling 'complete' may not actually be that it is complete, but that you have reached the point of not being able to improve it any further on your own. It feels done because as far as your muse is concerned, it is. This is where you feel like your darlings have been killed on

you, especially if you are unable to receive critical feedback without taking it personally.

The problem

The problem with taking criticism personally is that it makes your struggle even more difficult, and it also greatly reduces your chances of getting anything seriously published. There are two reasons for this: the first is that you get defensive, and the second is that to get published (unless you self-publish of course) you are going to need a good relationship with an editor.

An inability to receive critical feedback without taking it personally puts you in a defensive stance right from the start. It makes the job of your reviewer or editor terribly difficult, and will result in them feeling unable to give you any 'real' feedback. Instead, your 'critique' will simply tell you what is good about your work. This is a situation that, while pleasing in the short-term, does not help you to develop your craft. It can actually do the opposite: by only gaining positive feedback you never learn to overcome the flaws in your writing or your style, and thus never get the opportunity to develop as an artist. Artists need to struggle to learn how to overcome difficulties: unfortunate, but true.

Critique is important

As a writer seeking publication, you must work with an editor. Unless you are of very high standing, and of very high rank professionally, editorial suggestions cannot be ignored without a very good reason. 'Clichés are clichés for a reason', is not going to convince your editor that a cliché works well, or that it is good practise to use them often. But, if you can explain your reasons for the way you wrote something in greater detail, you are more likely to get a considered response from your editor, and further suggestions on how you can develop your work without compromising your intentions. There are many publishing houses that will not publish your work unless you accept editorial suggestions, so in a sense an artist needs to learn how to be edited.



One of the key things that many writers forget is that an editor is there to help you shape your work. They are working in the best interests of you, as an artist, and of your work, as a separate issue. An editor will want to know all about the work: who it is intended for, why it was written a particular way, what your intentions were, and so on. It is only in this way that editors can help provide shape and/or polish that does not deviate too dramatically from a writer's vision.

Having said that, a great editor is one who can make drastic structural change, and have an author writhing in rapturous joy because of how a simple change transformed the work for the better.

Learning how to cope with critical or editorial feedback can be one of the most confronting things to learn how to cope. Those who have studied writing in any form at a tertiary level, especially in a course that is workshop-driven and collaborative, will know that the process of gaining peer criticism can be incredibly confronting. And, as any editor will tell you, one of the most frustrating things can be dealing with a writer who refuses to accept any changes to his or her work. Indeed, one of the keys to becoming a published writer is learning 'how to be edited'.

How does one learn to 'be edited'? There are few courses that will teach you such a skill (if any); most creative writing courses are focused on writing and writer development, and not necessarily on that absolutely essential skill of coping with criticism and using a writer-editor relationship to advantage.

The three steps

There are three basic steps involved: letting your work go, knowing that an editor will never insult you personally, and practice makes perfect.

1. Let your work go

Letting your work go is the first, and most difficult step of all three. One thing that can help is when you realise that this thing you've created (or given birth to) is not like an arm or a leg: you won't die if someone cuts into it. You won't be disfigured if it is dramatically altered. You might feel a bit of emotional pain for a start, but that passes if you can step back a bit.

One of the greatest things that can help a writer who is unable to let go of his work is, when you consider a manuscript finished, to put it in the bottom of a

drawer (if printed) or archive it (if on file) for a period of not less than one month. Some writers advocate six weeks, others six months. Whatever works for you. The key is to have a sufficient breadth of time in which to get the piece out of your head, and away from your eyes, before you go back to it.

You need to be able to see the piece with fresh eyes, so the time away from it needs to be sufficient for you to forget about it. This process has two benefits: the first is that you can attack it with fresh vigour, and the second is that you'll be able to let someone else read it with less misgivings. Very often, the process results in a writer making significant changes to a piece that, previously, was considered 'finished'.

If you are in the process of gaining feedback on your work, it is a good idea to let the manuscript lie fallow for at least a month before you send it out for review or editing. If you do not look at it in between, then you will find that you will have two or three months between readings; and that the review of it will seem a lot fairer when you come back to it after a long break. Gradually, you will be able to see that reviews and edits are fair anyway, and you won't need to go to such lengths to remove your 'control' from the piece.

2. Know that editors will not insult you

The second step in this process is knowing that an editor or reviewer worth his or her salt will never ever insult your ability as a writer, even if you write at a grade three level and truly believe that you are a better writer than Solzhenitsyn. Quality feedback is quality because it addresses elements of the work directly, and the editor will offer suggestions on how to get around problems with those elements. It's called 'constructive criticism': critique that helps.

A good editor will never say to you, 'you have no idea how to write effective dialogue', unless you've been in a rather heated discussion and both parties are at their wits' end, saying things that they regret. Instead, an editor will say to you that the dialogue seems not to fit the purpose of the work, that it doesn't move the story forwards, that it doesn't suit the characterisation—or whatever is appropriate to the situation—and will suggest a way to deal with this. In the best writer-editor relationships, when suggestions don't appear to work, collaboration ensues. A good editor knows that appropriate feedback is tactful, useful, and collaborative; a reviewer who says that he or she hates the ending, but can't suggest anything else,



is going to be as much use to you as the proverbial breasts on a bull.

3. Practice, practice, practice!

The third step is practice. With anything, practice makes perfect. If you hate the idea of getting your work edited, of sending your darlings out into the world alone to be ripped apart (though now you know that an editor won't tear them apart unnecessarily), and you can let your work lie fallow before you track down an editor of quality, then the next thing you need to do is practice receiving effective critique. A key element of this practice is learning to become aware of your own reactions.

It can happen that when you speak with someone (or when you read an email) about their proposed changes, you can find yourself colouring up with emotion. At this point you can learn to realise that you are defensive or worked up, and you can then sit back and remind yourself that your editor is not criticising you; he or she is criticising the work in order to help you.

Concluding remarks

There is a fourth thing that many writers also forget: that editors' suggestions are only suggestions. Unless an editor is working in a house that (unethically) forces changes to be made to a piece, you don't have to accept any suggestions made. But the reality is that if you do make the changes—or even just some of them—you will often end up with a stronger piece of work.

Being edited is probably harder than being an editor. Learning to write something and then dissociate yourself from it is not easy. But if you can do this, then you will be well along the road to many strong and effective professional relationships, you will find that your craft develops, because you learn how to leap hurdles that previously had you stymied, and you are more likely to produce publishable works—and to end up with an editor that you respect.

Where you can get your work reviewed and/or edited

for manuscript development: Brascoe

We provide editing, critique and mentoring for new and emerging writers especially, but also for others who want assistance with their manuscripts. Visit www.brascoebooks.com.au/writers.html

for publication: Driftwood Manuscripts

This organisation in Adelaide provides manuscript appraisal, with feedback, for those seeking publication. Visit www.kirstybrooks.com/driftwood for more information.

