

State of the Art  
March 19, 2016  
Our re-writing obsession

Writers often tell me that their published novels went through many drafts—seven, twelve. When someone tells you the same fact three or four times, you know it's important to them. This has got me thinking of the wide-spread use of the analogy between craft and writing: "the craft of writing", the importance of re-writing. But when we talk about craft, we're not talking about remaking an individual craft object. We're talking about practice. If potters make a clay pot they think is inferior, they don't try to re-do it. They discard it or sell it at a discount although sometimes the very imperfection is what makes it more beautiful, unique. What other art or craft would be so worked over as to re-do it seven times? Artists and craftspeople perfect their art or craft by practicing, by making one pot after another for many years. Once for my creative writing class, Heather Browne wrote the first poem she'd ever written. It was wonderful.

Where did this obsession with re-writing come from? This analogy of the "craft" of writing has come to mean revision. But if the analogy holds, the craft of writing would be writing a lot, practicing.

When my friend the artist Stephen May paints a canvas, he's either disappointed with the result or he's "surprised" that it has turned out good: "Surprised by joy — impatient as the Wind" by what he knows in his heart of hearts is pleasing. If the painting has no spark at all, he discards it. Or goes back later to see if there's anything worthwhile in it.

What is all this revision of novels, short stories, poetry trying to accomplish? It doesn't seem to be to add sparkle, excitement, originality, but only to make it conform to a pre-conceived notion of what the form should be.

Of course a writer must edit to eliminate awkward sentence constructions, ambiguity of pronoun references, unnecessary vagueness, and time inconsistencies.

On another subject: At Odd Sundays one of the leaders, the poet Kathy Mac, announced that she had just received a shipment of 300 of her remaindered book, *The Hunderfräulein Papers*, published in 2009 by Fernwood/Roseway. She would give a copy to everyone present. After supper I sat down with the book, having four hours to wait until the last episode of "Downton Abbey". I read it straight through. It's a captivating story told in poems, letters, announcements, drawings, quotations, obituary. Kathy Mac captures a complex narrative in only 81 pages. Her delightful hodge podge evokes the six years in Sambro Nova Scotia she spent being a dog nanny (hence Hunder-dog, fräulein-young woman, babysitter) for Elisabeth Mann Borgese, famous for her championship of oceans, daughter of Thomas Mann.

And on yet another subject: I defied the forecast of freezing rain and attended Ryan Griffith's play, *Back to Zero*. I love the teamwork, the camaraderie, necessary to the production of a play. In this case, Griffith collaborated with Jordan Stewart; in his short story Stewart furnished the characters, the plot, and Griffith wrote the play script.

As I wrote in a previous column, I had not appreciated the importance of a stage manager, but my daughter instructed me. The stage manager in this case was Danielle Chiasson, with assistance from Shae McCarthy and Natasha Cliche.

The play was absorbing with everything in it you could ever want in a play, even a kitchen sink. It was part *Twin Peaks* (acknowledged in the program), part *Waiting for Godot*, part *Jurassic Park*. It was a murder mystery, a psychological drama, an unhappy love story. It used the full black box theatre to great effect, with a psychologist's office on one end, a diner on the other, and a street scene in the middle. The director, Jean-Michel Cliche, had gathered the best of the local actors—Elizabeth Goodyear, John Ball, Michael Holmes-Lauder among them. He pulled off an astonishing coup—the introduction of a dinosaur with a combination of alarm, surprise, and comedy.

The great thing about local theatre is that the playwright can experiment. Griffith is talented, knows how to create drama, even while using the clichés of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of a policeman, an overbearing mother et al.

In the biographies of the members of the company, I counted eleven local theatre groups they had worked for.

When I came out from the play, the freezing rain had started, but I hobbled very carefully to my car, and when I got there, its thermometer said plus 7. When I got home, it said zero. Back to Zero.

One of my readers thought that an editing mistake had cut off my discussion of Wayne Curtis' new book *In the Country* and was disappointed. One insoluble problem with a weekly column is that there occasionally isn't time for a full-blown consideration of a book, concert, or exhibit.