

REVISIONS 101

by Allison Brennan

Last weekend I spoke to the local Sisters In Crime chapter and sat between two unpublished writers. The first has been revising endlessly the same book. Over and over and over. Especially the first few chapters. The second has written seventeen complete manuscripts and has yet to send one out to an agent or editor. Seventeen!

This week I'm going to talk about killing your manuscript, so it's addressed more to the first writer. Next week I'll talk about fear of failure and fear of success.

Right now, I'm revising *KILLING FEAR*, my February 08 release. This is Will Hooper's story (Carina's partner from *SPEAK NO EVIL*.) This is my process from beginning to end:

* I write the book. I edit as I go, so my book is pretty well done by the time I type *THE END*. I've been known to rewrite the beginning two or three times (for me that's the first 100-150 pages), but I do that before I continue with the book.

* IF I have time (which I did with my novella), I'll read the entire manuscript and line edit it, fix any problems, but mostly make every scene clearer and cut fat. I didn't have time to do this with *KILLING FEAR*.

* I send my book to my editor—if you're unpublished, I'd suggest finding a critique group or someone you trust to read your manuscript for the following: Character, Story and Pacing. They are the three most important things and without characters that grab you, a story that is intriguing, and good pacing, it'll be a tough sell. Avoid critique groups who mess with your voice or tell you what will sell or won't sell.

* My editor reads the manuscript and makes notes in the margin. Things like, "Abrupt transition" or "Too slow" or "I don't understand the purpose of this scene, is it necessary?" or "Draw this scene out." At the end of chapters she'll write more notes like, "I still don't have a grasp on the backstory." In her revision letter she'll make her general comments. For *KILLING FEAR* the key problem was that I didn't make it clear early on about the murders seven years ago which are important to the current story. I drew out the story of the past, feeding the reader details about a crime that everyone involved knew about. The other problem was similar—Will and Robin had a past together, and my editor didn't feel like the reader had a clear understand of how they got together in the first place, though their break up was spectacular 😊 I skim through all my editor comments and read the revision letter two or three times so I can internalize the problems. I also talk to my editor and she expands on her feelings about the book, the strengths and weaknesses, and that also helps immensely.

* Now, I go through the book starting at the beginning. Here I do my own edits—I tweak virtually every sentence, find better words, tighten where I can, and address my editor's comments which are usually right on the money. I'm a linear writer—I can't jump around. I start at page one and go

straight through to page four hundred and something. If I'm hung up on something, I can't push through it until I get that scene the way I want it.

* At this point in *KILLING FEAR*, I've only gone through three chapters and the prologue. About 35 pages. What I've done is expand the prologue which is now the longest I've written, but I think my editor was right and it was a great scene that needed more explanation. So we get to meet the main characters through the eyes of the killer during his trial. Then I cut the first six pages of chapter one and expanded on the second scene. Then chapter two is almost unchanged, just my own tweaks. Chapter three is where I got stuck. The scene was good, necessary, but the pacing was off. Ironically, my editor didn't make any comments on it, but I knew the scene could be so much more powerful. Also, I addressed one of her overall concerns which was that my past timeline (previous murders) was confusing. Here is where I fixed that by having a task force meeting and the detective in charge (my hero) given a technical run down on the murders, the who, what, why, where, when—through photographs of the victim and the crime scene and a general explanation of the investigation. I didn't go into everything because there are some bigger issues, but I did at least hint at one of the key problems in the investigation. That chapter took me longer to edit and fix than everything up to that point.

* Once I'm done with my revisions, I'll send them back to my editor. Revisions can take a couple days to a couple weeks. I asked for three weeks for these because I have the time and it's summer, which means there are a lot of family things going on and I didn't want to promise something too fast and then be stressed.

Okay, that's MY process. Every process is different. Sometimes it's trial and error. Before I sold, my process was different. On my first trilogy it was different still. It wasn't until I wrote *SPEAK NO EVIL* that this system clicked and seems to work for me (the novella totally screwed up my system, but that was it.) Before I sold, I would revise the book once on the computer, print it out and line edit it on hard copy, and then as I was making those changes electronically I would inevitably make more changes to the book on the computer. *THE PREY* I had a critique group for and edited as I went, then I re-read the whole manuscript before sending it out to agents. Then I did another round of revisions with my agent before sending it out to publishers. When it sold, I did *ANOTHER* round of revisions.

The thing to remember here is that no matter how well you write, you don't see everything. Why? Because you're too close to the manuscript.

Which brings me to killing your book.

I know several people who edit their book to death. It's possible. I think the key problem with over-editing is that you know the story so well that you see what is not on the page. You may have had it in the original draft, but now it's gone—and you still see it. You also get bored with the story and tired of the characters and start changing the story because of that boredom. You've already told the story you wanted to tell, so now you're creating new stories and plotlines and what you end up with is a mess.

You stress over individual words. Pour over a thesaurus. Question every sentence you write.

There are three things to look for as you revise your manuscript:

- 1) Are your characters compelling? Sympathetic? Are you emotionally invested in what happens to them? Do you care?
- 2) Is your story compelling? Interesting? The conflict real and not contrived? Does the combination of the story and the characters make you want to keep turning pages?
- 3) Is your pacing tight? Too much exposition? Too much introspection? Too much narrative? Or just enough?

I can't tell you HOW to do this. Some people read their manuscript in stages and will first edit for conflict, then plot holes, then description, then line edit, then a final read through. I can't do that. I see the story as a cohesive whole, that you can't have story without character, or description without story, or character without conflict. But everyone is unique.

What I CAN tell you is that I've heard too many horror stories of people who spend years editing a book, or worse the first three or four chapters. They edit and edit and edit and constantly question themselves and end up editing the life out of a manuscript. I've seen this in too many contests to count: an entry that is technically perfect—not a punctuation mark out of place or a dangling participle in view, but no spark. I just don't care about the characters or what happens to them.

If you want to sell commercial fiction, you're going to have to find a faster system. I'm not saying DON'T edit, because no one is perfect. But overediting is just as bad as underediting. You're going to have to learn how to say good-bye and send your baby out to agents or editors. And you're going to have to start another book.