

Editor-Writer Relationships: PASSION AND TENSION

by Lourdes Cordero

It was a winter morning. It almost seemed the hands of the clock stood still. Though Tomás tried over and over to explain his point of view, his attempts were drowned out by the sarcastic shouts from Ricardo, author of the publishing house's latest release.

"Ah! To conclude, let me *congratulate* you for *your* work." Ricardo shouted: "*You* forgot to give yourself credit; put *your* name on the book cover instead of mine." He slammed the door. Tomás, the editor, was left alone, with his arms extended, his lips pursed. This scene, with some variants, is familiar to editors.

Books and teamwork

When readers hold a book in their hands, they rarely remember that the book was made possible by the team that produced it for their enjoyment. Authors and editors are part of this team. However, their work relationships are not always as clearly defined as could be desired. Frequently, passion and tension are present in their relationships.

Both parties have a passion for the written word. Both are convinced that written words, though still and silent, are powerful and influential. In spite of this common conviction, they do not always agree in the editing process. In creative work, which is so often intense, the relationships between writers and editors can be very stressful.

An author's official contribution may end as soon as the manuscript is turned over to the publishing house. Even so, emotionally the writer continues to be bound to the work. The manuscript is the fruit of the writer's innermost being. Sometimes the writer is like a parent who has had to leave a child in the care of another person. The writer makes telephone calls, asks about progress, makes repeated suggestions, and complains about the quality of care received by the child.

Stress points

Tensions arise when the author is not familiar with, or underestimates, the task of editing. Instead of a pencil, some authors imagine an editor's favorite tool is a rifle with a telescopic sight. They are sure an editor's greatest pleasure is finding errors in a manuscript.

On the other hand, the editor must remember that his or her task is not to write a book. Though their work is not limited to spelling and grammar correc-

tions, editors must guard against the syndrome that Umberto Eco described in *Foucault's Pendulum*.

Suggestions to reduce stress.

Communication throughout the book production process is key. The more the writer is informed about the publishing process, the better he or she will be equipped to fulfill the expectations of the publishing house. Go beyond mere professional courtesy. Clear, respectful, warm and sincere communication disarms defensive attitudes. Ways editors can improve their relationships with writers include:

- Emphasize the writer's successes.
- Celebrate his or her extraordinary ideas or turns of phrase.
- Avoid approaching the author with a tempest of complaints. Instead, try to understand what the author meant to say.
- Schedule at least one session to show the author the editing work done on the manuscript.
- Be prompt in keeping the commitments made to the author.
- Work to create an atmosphere of teamwork in your meetings with the author. Avoid distancing yourself from the author or communicating an attitude that says, "The editor is the one who knows everything; the writer should only listen."
- Tactfully remind authors, when necessary, that once they have given their manuscript to the publishing house, their participation is minimal.
- Remind the author, time and time again, that the work of an editor is to turn the manuscript into an understandable and enjoyable text for the reader.
- Look for other points of contact with authors, apart from the books you are working on. Send them birthday and Christmas cards and endeavor to sustain warm, personal relationships with them.

Remember, passion—and tension—are present throughout the book publishing process, from the manuscript to the printing. Good editors keep the flame of passion for the written word alive by maintaining good relationships with writers. ❖

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