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I often say that books are more than the sum of their words. A real book is an entire entityâ€”plot, organization, characterization, style, including all of the subheads for each one. Circling all of these things is the entire forestâ€”the shape of the book. All of those elements comprise it, and, paradoxically, more.

You can excel in all areas of writing, and still not wind up with a good or publishable piece. And when you donâ€™t, provided you did indeed accomplish all your goals in the other areas, the problem lies with the overall form of your book; its structure, and most importantly in the end, its shape.

Many writers work from outlines, which is a great way to go. Then you always have the structure in front of you and can reshape as you write while still being cognizant of the form. But many writers, especially more Mainstream and Literary ones, donâ€™t. They write from â€œdiscovery,â€• letting their characters drive the story and take them down avenues they never would have imagined at the start. Itâ€™s a freer form of writing, and one that allows for a greater range of creativity. But it also leaves you with a big blob of a first draft. Unfortunately, itâ€™s this craft of sculpting away, of reshaping and refashioning, of book development thatâ€™s being lost in todayâ€™s world of publishing (the reasons for which could fill volumes and weâ€™ll discuss later!).

Once your first draft is finished and youâ€™ve taken some time away from it, then begins the process of revision. And of course, revision isnâ€™t polish but rather a complete reworking of what you have. Here is where you must see both the forest AND the treesâ€”a difficult proposition at bestâ€”and one of the greatest challenges in editing books. Hereâ€™s where those beautiful words come into jeopardy of being axed by the hand of a jealous god (you), and where you must learn not only to find clarity of sight, but also have the courage to kill your storyâ€™s lesser aspects. Or, as Hemingway once said, â€œI write one page of masterpiece to ninety one pages of shit. I try to put the shit in the wastebasket.â€•

Begin by taking a hard look at the overall shape of your book. What is belabored? What is missing? I.e., what needs cutting away and what, additional attention? Map out the arc of your storyline, and the trials and tribulations your main character goes through. Do you have a sagging middle? Does our hero learn and grow through these trials, ultimately mastering the one thing, the final piece, so that he can save the day?

Next, be certain that what remains is absolutely necessary. Does a scene sort of further the plot? Does a section spend too much time on a character who doesnâ€™t really have much impact on the story? Do all avenues lead back into the main stream, or have you spent too much time describing a dry creek that while beautiful to look at, really doesnâ€™t mean squat to the river as a whole? (In fact, may bog it into muck, from which you, as the writer, canâ€™t extricate yourself.)

Focus is part of shape, rather than the other way around. Itâ€™s a tool to make certain the form of your story has symmetry and function. Anyone whoâ€™s ever seriously raised dogs or horses or cattle or any other animal understands very well how form relates to function. You can have a dog with a gorgeous front and powerful hindquarters, but if it doesnâ€™t fit together correctly, the dog canâ€™t move worth a flip. In animals, we call this â€œbalance.â€• And itâ€™s no different here. You can write a grabber opening, a cohesive middle, and a bang-up conclusion and if the front doesnâ€™t flow into the end correctly, well, you just have a big non-moving mess.

Structure is a huge part of this as well. Itâ€™s the infrastructure upon and around which you weave your story. Structure revolves around Plot Pointsâ€”where they must come in, among other things. Yet,

shape is still more. Structure is part of shape, but not the whole animal. Structure gives you the skeleton around which you add the muscles and tendons and ligaments and bone. But you can take two dogs (or humans) with almost identical skeletal form, sending them in opposite directions, and theyâ€™ll come back looking very different indeed based on lifestyle (other genetic factors not withstanding).

To effectively shape a book, you have to combine all of these factors and indeed, ALL of the ones about which weâ€™ve been talking, into one well-fashioned form. Again, itâ€™s not the easiest thing in the world to pull off. And until one finds his sea legs, the task can be overwhelming. It takes time, practice, and lots of good instruction and book editing.

What Michelangelo said of finding David in the marble holds true for writing as well. David was there all along, the sculptor said, he just had to carve away enough stone to find him. Sometimes I do think his job was a hair easier in that what he chipped away were pieces of rock, and often what we as writers must carve out are sentences and sections and passages that contain our very best words. Havenâ€™t you had this happen? You know, where youâ€™ve written something that takes at leas your own breath away, only to discover that it no longer fits the finished book? Oh, how we hold to those passages, defending them for no discernible reason except that of course, we love them. And thatâ€™s the rub in playing Godâ€”you gotta know when to let go, and have the fortitude to do so. In the end, thatâ€™s what separates the amateurs from the pros.

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