

The Power of Revision

“There is no great writing, only great rewriting.”

- Louis D. Brandeis

A few months ago I was browsing through Tumblr when I came across a picture of a frog crouching and handing off an envelope to a snail. In the picture, the frog was saying, “Here is an insurmountable amount of garbage. It disgusts me as well. I apologize in advance.” The photo was captioned: “me asking my friends to edit my writing.” Upon seeing this, I laughed and I shared it on my own profile, knowing that my other writer friends would relate. Around five minutes after sharing it, I received an anonymous message claiming that I, and other writers who had shared the picture, are ‘fakes’, and that we are incredibly talented writers, thus we have no right to complain about our work. I admit I was more than a little taken aback by this message. It had not occurred to me that I was attacking the quality of my work. Although the picture’s sentiment is unambiguously self-deprecating, I felt that the picture reflected the anxiety writers feel when they share their work and the willingness to admit when our work does not measure up to our own standards.

This was not meant as a criticism of my writing, as I do not believe it is a writer’s responsibility to create a respectable first draft. Consider the first draft of writing as a sheet of marble; it exists simply as the foundation of the work as the writer and editor work together to mold it and reshape the marble into something magnificent. As someone who is both an editor and a writer, I am hyperconscious of the fact that writing is an ongoing process. It is a process that requires patience, dedication, humility, and a sense of self-awareness through judging the strengths and weaknesses of your own work. The reader is never aware of the thorough, in-depth

revisions the piece required before reaching its final polished stage. The first, second, third, fourth, maybe fifth drafts are known only to me and my most trusted collaborators.

There are times when writing has me pulling at my hair or anxiously chewing my nails down to the quick. I have deleted entire stories and then rewritten entire stories out of frustration. I have sent documents to my editors captioned, “I know. *I know*. I am sorry.” Sometimes, as a writer, all there is left to do is to hand off the mess you call a first draft and wait anxiously for them to return it to you in shatters. Please do not mistake this for admitting defeat. I do not want to understate the courage that it takes to hand off the work you have slaved over tirelessly in the request that your editor tear your piece apart. Only writers dedicated to their craft are willing to subject themselves to that level of vulnerability. This process is painful, but it is also incredibly humbling and necessary for the writer’s growth, as each writer eventually learns that even the most impressive first drafts can always be improved upon with the help of an editor.

Simply put, an editor is invaluable to us writers. The work they do may be invisible to the reader, but I see my editors’ fingerprints everywhere on the pages of each of my works. I know what has been mended, cut, and erased and I know exactly where the fault lines used to lie. I can see, too, the bridges they have helped me build to new possibilities in my writing that I never would have considered on my own. The magic of skilled editing is that it makes the reader think that quality literature just spawns out of thin air. From the reader’s perspective, all the writer has to do is sit down and type; the story will unfold naturally, effortlessly, and without any guidance from the writer themselves. While part of me feels self-satisfied about this fictionalized, simplified process of writing, there is another part of me that worries this assessment undermines the skill that writers and editors require to maintain this illusion.

I have a complicated relationship with this perspective, as sometimes being complimented on my ‘seamless’ writing feels like being complimented on my clear skin after I have caked on five layers of foundation. Editing is a trick -- a clever ruse to make the reader think that no other incarnation of the work has ever existed besides the current perfected one. There is an old cliché by Nathaniel Hawthorne that compliments Louis D. Brandeis’s theory on editing and refinement. Hawthorne states, “Easy reading is damn hard writing.” It takes a tremendous amount of effort on the writer’s part for the reader to effortlessly navigate the text. But ‘hard writing’ implies not only the grueling process of putting pen to paper, but also the willingness to revise, revise, and revise until the writer feels satisfied with their work, or until the writer becomes repulsed by their own work and requires the counsel of a peer before continuing onto the next stage of their editing.

As readers, we constantly fall into the trap of believing in perfect first drafts, just as we are made to believe that supermodels wake up each day with flawless hair and makeup. It is a fallacy. “There is no great writing,” Louis D. Brandeis says, “Only great rewriting.” We need to stop expecting our first drafts to be perfect. We need to stop measuring our first drafts against the completed, edited works of others. Only by accepting that flaws are inevitable can we push past our feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. Even now, I refuse to make any apology for my lackluster first drafts. I absolve myself of the pressure that comes with trying to write a masterpiece in my first attempt. Working with editors—and working as one myself—has taught me that there are always ways to improve a story’s flow, style, perspective and voice and I do my best to keep my mind open to these possibilities and suggestions. These edits help me shape and reshape my story as I progress through the continuous stage of writing. Ultimately, I agree with Louis D. Brandeis. There are no great first drafts; a story is only partially realized after it has

been inscribed onto a page. It is only by committing oneself to the ongoing practice of editing that a work's full potential is ever truly met.