**‘But it’s fiction!’: Getting it right when you’re editing fiction**

Paper presented by Amanda Curtin at the Institute of Professional Editors’ national conference, *From Inspiration to Publication*, Hobart, May 2007

**Introduction**

As you know, one of the sub-themes of this conference is ‘getting it right’, and I wanted to raise this issue in the context of fiction for several reasons. First, it’s something that has come to the fore for me in several recent projects, so I’ve been mulling over it. Second, there haven’t been many sessions dealing with fiction at previous conferences I’ve been to, and I wanted to make a contribution towards rectifying that. And third, editing fiction is often thought to be instinctive, perhaps even a little mysterious or alchemical, and the practical issues are rarely written about or discussed. What I’ve chosen to talk about highlights one of these practical issues, and it shows fiction editors at work, doing what editors always do: engaging with what the author is trying to achieve, projecting themselves into the role of reader, and identifying possible problems—and opportunities—in the spaces between intention and reception.

It’s infinitely more interesting for you to listen to the experiences of several than to the pontification of one, so in preparing this paper, I canvassed several other editors of fiction, by way of a brief email survey, and I gratefully acknowledge the generous contributions of:

* Saskia Adams
* Janet Blagg
* Annabel Blay
* Sarah Brenan
* Elizabeth Cowell
* Anna Crago
* Janet Mackenzie
* Michelle Madden.

Mindful of our obligations towards confidentiality—Standard A3.7[**i**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note1)—we have not identified particular authors or works, and I’ve avoided attaching editors’ names to examples. I feel absolutely confident in saying that these editors respect and admire the authors they work with, and offer their experiences—the uplifting along with the frustrating—in the interests of stimulating discussion.

**‘But it’s fiction!’**

First of all, let’s tease out the implications of the main title of this paper: ‘But it’s fiction!’ This, I suggest, is sometimes the response, whether stated or not, when editors point out inaccuracies, implausibilities or inconsistencies in a manuscript of a work of fiction. It is a response that invites us to see ourselves as nitpickers, as concerning ourselves with minutiae that couldn’t possibly concern anyone else. It seems to me that, depending on the tone in which it is conveyed by word or look, such a response could be either staking a claim to the superiority of fiction or seriously devaluing the genre. In the first scenario, the message is that because fiction is read for qualities that do not overtly relate to factuality or accuracy, fiction authors need not address them; in the second scenario, the message behind ‘But it’s fiction’ is ‘But it’s *only* fiction’, and getting it right doesn’t matter in a genre that, by most people’s definition, is about imagination, invention, and playing fast and loose with notions of truth.

I reject both of these positions.

I’ll start with the second. The protest that ‘it’s *only* fiction’ is not something you would be likely to hear from a fiction author, but it’s an opinion you do hear from time to time. I heard a version of it myself, for example, when I was writing a novel as the creative component of a PhD in Writing: why was it necessary, I was sometimes asked, to undertake so much research when *it’s only a novel*. It’s insulting to writers of fiction to assume that their creative output is so trivial that it will be read without discernment; it’s just as insulting to readers of fiction to assume this. Works of fiction considered ‘literature’, along with those thought to fall squarely in the category of ‘entertainment’, are successful when they are convincing and credible on their own terms.

As for the proposition that ‘getting it right’ is of no great importance to the fiction author because this is not the focus of the reading experience, I would argue that ‘getting it wrong’ can undermine the very qualities of fiction that readers value: compelling characters, intriguing plot, linguistic inventiveness, structural patterning, thought-provoking ideas, the sense of being carried into another world and into an understanding of what lies outside our own experience. John Gardner, in his 1991 book *The Art of Fiction*[**ii**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note2), puts a good deal of faith in reader goodwill when it comes to ‘getting it right’, suggesting that where ‘superficial slips’ are concerned, the reader will ‘silently correct’ and move on: Gardner cites William Faulkner’s *Absolom! Absolom!*, in which a house is described as made of wood in one passage and of stone in another. But should we be relying on reader goodwill in 2007, when readers have so many books to choose from, so many other ways they could spend their time? I’m not convinced readers bring that much goodwill to the reading experience any more, if they ever did. Have you ever noticed how continuity errors in films are considered funny, even endearing, while errors in books are held up as examples of bad writing—or, more often, bad editing? And we have to remember, too, that one person’s ‘superficial slip’ is another’s egregious error. One of the editors I surveyed told me about an irate reader who had phoned the publisher to complain that pavlova was not invented until two years after it had been served to a character in a particular book!

Whenever a reader’s attention is distracted, even minutely, by a name that doesn’t seem quite right, a date that doesn’t fit with another, an expression that seems wrong for a character, an obvious (or maybe not so obvious) error of fact, a discordance in detail like the construction material of a house—that’s a fracture in the bond between the reader and the text, a moment when they’re disengaging from the fictional world. A member of the original CASE Standards Working Group coined a lovely expression for this: ‘garden-pathing the reader’, allowing their attention to wander up the garden path and away from the words on the page and the author’s intention. The aims of ‘getting it right’ must be cast in the negative—*not* getting it wrong, *not* distracting, *not* fracturing the bond ,*not* garden-pathing the reader—and there’s nothing trivial or nitpicking about that. Rather, it cuts to the heart of the reading experience.

**Examples**

I must confess that when I first hit ‘send’ on my little email survey, I did so nervously, wondering whether perhaps I was the only one who had had these experiences: such is the plight of the freelance editor who works largely independently of peer interaction. But I was heartened as the replies began to trickle back, and it became clear that we all grapple with similar frustrations and similar desires to get it right.

The first question I asked was whether there were particular examples of implausibilities, inaccuracies or inconsistencies that remained vivid in respondents’ minds. Inappropriate language was commonly cited.

An editor who works principally in children’s books said:

‘Do kids still use this expression?’ is a common query back to authors…One recent manuscript used the word ‘rotter’—I am familiar with this from my childhood reading of prewar British authors but I doubt if many, or any, Australian children know or use it.

Here is a similar response:

Errors of tone…are embarrassing. (I’m copyediting something at the moment that is filled with modern children saying things like ‘it’s been donkey’s years’.) It’s complicated by the fact that they’re sometimes subjective calls, and often the hardest thing to convince an author to change.

In my experience, this conversation between writer and editor over the intricacies and fidelities of what is, after all, a created world—things that *are* subjective—is exciting and challenging, but not always successful. In one case, I thought I had been tactful in expressing concern that a certain character might not utter a certain phrase, only to have the author write waspishly at the end of my long query: ‘Well, he did!’ And once that conversation is closed down, it’s hard to open it up again.

Another colleague said:

Choice of words [can pose a] problem; for example, teenaged characters who use the word ‘bloody’ rather than stronger and more offensive words they’d be more likely to use, like ‘f\*ing’.

It’s not only in children’s literature that language can be a problem. One editor said:

I find myself wondering whether many 25-year-old women wear ‘denim slacks’ these days (especially teamed with a ‘denim blouse’ in the particular example I am thinking of).

And this from another:

I recently read a thriller set in late 17th century London in which the characters kept asking each other ‘How was your day?’ This jarred on me because I don’t think this concept of a ‘day’—meaning out and about in public life—was known then. I think the 17th century division between public and private was different to ours.

I came across a language matter more about sensitivity than accuracy when an author used the word ‘tsunami’ as a metaphor (as in ‘a tsunami of emotions’) not long after the tsunami disasters in South East Asia. I asked him to reconsider, as I felt the word had acquired a new set of meanings and associations that rendered it distracting. Language doesn’t exist in a vacuum.

Dialogue was cited as another problem area, with one editor complaining of ‘dialogue that seems like it’s been composed on a keyboard but never been spoken aloud’. And another gave the example of a character recounting word-for-word a long conversation between two other characters that happened many years before, and at which she was not actually present and had only read about in a letter.

Of course, writers of fiction manipulate what characters do and say in the interest of story all the time, but as editors we often have to remind them that characters on the page are representations of people in the world, and that unless the fiction is deliberately playing with notions of representation or intentionally evoking the extraordinary, readers might find it hard to connect with characters whose modes of behaviour seem contrived, just as they might be disenchanted with plots that rely too much on coincidence or dreams.

Names, too, were mentioned as a problem area. I quote:

I’ve worked on several manuscripts in which characters had names that were inappropriate to their age and background: for example, young women in novels with contemporary Australian settings with names like Beryl or Edna. I think it’s fine to give a character an old-fashioned name, but the anachronism needs to be acknowledged—perhaps commented upon briefly or explained in some way. (For example, ‘She had never met another Edna her own age. It had been her grandmother’s name, and as a child she’d hated it’, or something similar.)

Inaccuracies involving chronology, geography and spatial relationships are common. My special favourite was the author who had a character travelling 2,000 kilometres from Melbourne to northern New South Wales. But I’ve also been frustrated by the chronological inaccuracy of plot elements set against verifiable external events: the fall of the Berlin Wall, natural disasters, events connected with wars, when particular songs were popular. Internal chronology can be just as difficult: in a recent book, I constructed a timeline, only to find that one character would have to have been married at the age of ten!

Sometimes when I mention to an author that I’ve drawn up a timeline for their novel, or a family tree, or a map, they look at me with something akin to benevolent pity (*you sad person: get a life*)—until such time as this simple tool saves the day, as it often does. Other authors, however, are delighted that someone else has delved so deeply into their fictional construct—and to me it feels like I’ve played a valuable educative role when an author takes on board the idea and says they’ll use such tools for future novels.

Of course, some things seem to defy normal chronology. In one novel I queried how it could be that the weather was fine and hot one day and on the next the characters were lighting a fire in the living room. I was unaware that the weather in the mountain town where the book is set is precisely this changeable. The author’s partner told me recently that he had enjoyed that particular query immensely and so had all their friends and neighbours. However, the author, to her credit, understood the point, and made some reference to the capricious nature of the weather in that place to explain what, to an outsider, seemed an anomaly.

One editor surveyed confessed:

I am not particularly good at spotting anomalies in space–time (I remember hearing about one editor who queried a load of washing that had been hanging out to dry for three months…I would never have noticed).

This is a reminder that it’s good to know your own weaknesses. Mine is anything to do with science. I’m not sure I would have picked up the following one concerning ‘misinformation about eclipses (in which sun and full moon appeared close together in the sky). If that had not been corrected, how could the reader who knew that the sun and the full moon could never appear together trust anything the author said?’

And what about when science is fundamental to the plot—and it’s wrong?

Recently, I had a conversation with an author who had written a blue-tongue lizard hatching out of an egg in a nest after the egg was looked after by several children. Blue-tongue lizards give birth to live young, do not live in the area in which the novel was very conspicuously set and this was a key scene.

The editor concerned made calls to various ‘lizard authorities’ so she could offer the author some concrete suggestions on how to fix this serious problem—and apparently it was resolved happily. I only hope the author appreciated how well she or he had been served by the editing process.

**Responses**

I also asked my colleagues about the reactions from authors when such problems had been identified. Had they ever faced responses of irritation or impatience? There were several positive responses:

…most authors I work with are perfectionists and think of details that haven’t occurred to me. For example, one author agonised about which version of the Catholic missal to use for a quote in a novel for 10-to-14-year-olds; [and] she researched guns so that she was clear about the range of a pistol as opposed to a larger gun.

Most authors (say 90%) have been grateful to be saved from embarrassment, but I can think of three who pigheadedly insisted that it didn’t matter, draft after draft. One…novel was about a bunch of kids going back in time and visiting the period around Federation. [The author] had accuracy problems in terms of his timeline and his geography but felt that only the history mattered.

This editor kindly gave me a set of notes from a third review of the manuscript concerned, and I really sympathised with her plaintive comment to the author: ‘Please, oh please, let us have a mud map’.

Another colleague said:

In all but one case, my authors have been grateful when I have pointed out implausibilities or inaccuracies and have happily taken on board my suggested changes…However, in one case, a particularly difficult author accused me of meddling with her ‘voice’ when I tried to mend some errors…

One editor said she ‘found it really surprising that a writer of fiction was uninterested in the experience of her readers at the expense of “the truth”’:

[The] author had quite a few foreign characters and insisted on using language for their dialogue that was awkward and clunky. It really felt like the author was doing her darndest to re-create ‘refugee dialogue’—but it was hard to read and felt wrong. Three readers independently noted the dialogue used for these characters, but the author’s response was: ‘I’ve done my research, and this is really how these people talk’.

The following represents the negative end of the spectrum of responses:

Questioning inaccuracy and inconsistency in fiction can create problems—sometimes even the smallest requests can put an author offside, even in cases where a heavy structural edit went smoothly. This sort of fact-checking can give us a bad reputation—making us seem like detail-obsessed control-freaks who’ve lost sight of the bigger picture.

But at the positive end was this:

Something I have frequently found: when a seemingly difficult glitch is found, it presents an opportunity for the author to come up with something really original in order to fix it, something the author would never have thought of in the absence of such a glitch. Thus, from a more positive perspective, the identification of infelicities, and the insistence that they be addressed, may be the source of true innovation in writing—invention that arises from necessity rather than merely trying to be clever.

**Why it matters**

When I asked my colleagues why they thought ‘getting it right’ matters, their focus was, as expected, very much on the reader. As these comments are more general, I’ll identify the editors.

Anna Crago commented:

If a reader is beginning to question *anything*, I think it does matter, because once you’ve questioned something maybe you’re more likely to question something else. It’s all about suspension of disbelief, and that’s quite a fragile thing.

Annabel Blay echoed these sentiments:

We all know that as a reader, it only takes the teensiest inconsistency or factual inaccuracy to completely undermine the reading experience. As editors, we feel responsible for protecting our beloved authors from this.

Janet Blagg, speaking about glitches in a children’s book, said:

I tried to tell the author that if smart kids saw the flaws in some aspects of the work, they would not perhaps trust accuracy in other aspects…I feel that leaving loose and wrong ends is an insult to the intelligence of the reader.

For Sarah Brenan:

Imaginative integrity (wholeness and consistency) is important…If a book announces itself as having an actual setting, then the events portrayed should fit that setting. If it is set in a specific period, the characters’ ideas and actions should be consonant with that. Alternatively, the author should make it clear that he/she is playing with or extemporising from history and geography…For me it’s a matter of keeping faith with the reader.

Michelle Madden, reminding us that ‘an editor should represent the author’s most careful reader’, went on to say:

I think it’s important to remember that most readers of novels expect not to be misled by what they read, and some readers actively look to fiction for non-fiction information. In novels for children, there is almost always an assumption that there will be some sort of educational benefit derived from the reading.

Saskia Adams reminds us of the more public responses of readers:

In terms of how the book is received, it matters greatly in reducing the likelihood of bad reviews that may highlight errors in the novel to potential readers. This reflects badly on everyone…and can affect sales.

Reviewers do notice inaccuracies, and can even feature them. In a review of a gothic horror novel, Dave Luckett lists one after the other:

How could a slight girl—no matter how feisty—‘push’ two fit men simultaneously face-down on the ground by grabbing them by their throats?…Do vicarages usually have battlements?…Would anyone in the 18th century say, ‘What’s with the pistol?’[**iii**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note3)

Another reviewer, Dianna Simmonds, describes how ‘a tangible lack of verity’ can make the reader feel ‘uneasy’. For her, when a character living in England is described as going off to a ‘manchester shop’ to buy bed linen, it is ‘only a tiny moment, but it’s enough to rock the entire edifice’: ‘One hardly dare state the obvious’, Simmonds says, ‘that “manchester” is a uniquely Australian term and does not exist in the land of Manchester…’ Her succeeding comments echo what the editors quoted here have said:

Part of the enduring magic of fiction is the reader’s willingness to trust the author. To carry the weight of that trust, the author must construct a reality that is unshakeable. It can be utter nonsense but it must be authentic nonsense. [**iv**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note4)

**When it doesn’t?**

I also asked my colleagues if they thought there were times when getting it right didn’t matter. There was some difference in opinion about how this applies to fantasy.

One said:

I work a lot on fantasy titles, and I do have a certain affection for my authors’ ability to say, ‘Ah well, magic did it’.

Another suggested that getting it right might not matter ‘in speculative fiction where implausibilities are irrelevant anyway!’

Others disagreed, focusing again on the need for internal logic in any genre:

Even worse than the ‘but it’s fiction!’ is the ‘but it’s fantasy!’ response—some of the worst problems I’ve had have been with fantasy fiction. To a certain degree you can have discussions about how believable something is based on your initial response (‘does this seem ridiculous to me?’), but other than that it’s all about internal consistency. And you would think that an author, having invented the world, would be willing to play by its rules. Sadly, no.

And this:

A novel might be comic science fiction and make up all sorts of things to get itself out of tight cornersῂbut these devices have to work in their own framework. Every planet has to conform to the laws of physics unless you create a plausible new set of laws, and then they have to conform to them.

A distinction was made between getting it right and the exercise of creative licence, as in this quote:

An author has a right to manipulate ‘reality’ or history when it is a conscious and constructive decision to do so—to allow characters to behave in ways that they would have been unlikely to, to drop accents or update language in order to make something accessible to a modern audience, or ignore a historical fact if doing so allows them to tell the story they want to tell. But beyond these deliberate decisions, accuracy matters and research matters, and getting it right should matter to an author. (I wish it mattered to more of them!)

And perhaps there are times when too much precision/accuracy can be a distraction. An author I worked with chose to retain the phrase ‘flakes of lead’ in referring to pencil shavings, even though we discussed the fact that the flakes would actually be of graphite rather than lead. I supported her in this, believing that the term ‘lead pencil’ was sufficiently embedded in language to transcend its own inaccuracy. As my author commented, ‘graphite’ is an unfamiliar word and could momentarily confuse a reader.

Similarly, I had a discussion with another author—one who was very exacting and keen on using historically correct terms—about the contemporary name for a ‘potty’ in the 19th century. I had recently done some research myself in a related area and had come across the word ‘chanty’ as appropriate to the time and place, but we decided that the more generic ‘chamberpot’ would be less distracting in context.

One of my colleagues felt it was possible to take dedication to accuracy too far:

I had an author who was…very concerned about getting it right and ended up walking along night-time streets with a lantern to ensure that the shadows cast on the wall were similar to those he’d described (and so on, until I began to worry about his mental health)!

Interestingly, both Sarah Brenan and Janet Mackenzie recalled a meeting of the Victorian Society of Editors in which by legendary proofreader John Bangsund described querying a character whistling a Mozart aria that couldn’t actually be whistled (he’d tried), and the date of a party that was supposed to have taken place under a full moon (he had consulted a perpetual calendar and found there wasn’t a full moon on the date mentioned). Sarah commented: ‘I wouldn’t go to those lengths. (I would have been more likely to ask why *give* the exact date in a novel?)’

It can be hard to know where to draw the line. It’s an exercise of judgment, by authors, by editors, on what is going to matter to the reader. The trouble is: ‘the reader’ doesn’t exist. There are many readers. The ones who don’t know and don’t care how many kilometres are between point A and point B when they are enmeshed in a beautifully told story of human relationships. The ones who will throw down a book in disgust if it confuses Apollo 10 and Apollo 11, because they remember exactly where they were and what they were doing on the days each one was reported. The ones who will silently correct, and indulgently forgive, the unexplained change of a protagonist’s hair from long black ponytail to short brown bob. The ones who will take the time to phone a publishing company to point out when pavlova was invented.

**What are our responsibilities as editors?**

This brings me to a final question I wanted to raise in this paper: what are our responsibilities as editors when it comes to getting things right?

Here a distinction is conventionally made between *content*, usually thought to be the sole responsibility of the author, and *expression*, in which the editor plays an important role. In reality, as the experiences related in this paper suggest, the lines are a little more blurred than that. We’ve heard about matters of expression such as tone, idiom, dialogue, internal consistency and consonance—but we’ve also heard examples involving dates, distances, historical facts, scientific facts, reflecting the way the fictional world often cannot be separated from the real world. What we do when we’re editing fiction, when we’re engaging with the work and projecting ourselves into the reading position, inevitably involves the negotiation of these two worlds and how they intersect.

The Standards Working Group discussed the matter of responsibility for accuracy of content at length when drafting *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*, eventually deciding to acknowledge the role a good editor plays, without diluting the responsibilities of the author: Standard E3.3 states that we should be aware of ‘When statements seem, from general knowledge, to require checking’.[**v**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note5)

Janet Mackenzie, in *The Editor’s Companion*, puts it more bluntly: ‘The editor is not a fact-checker: you take all care but no responsibility for accuracy of content’.[**vi**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note6)

If only we could have this tattooed onto the writing hand of every reviewer in the country so that they’d stop attributing errors in content to ‘declining editorial standards’!

Elizabeth Flann and Beryl Hill are also unequivocal in *The Australian Editing Handbook*: ‘Accuracy is the author’s responsibility, so if you find errors return the manuscript to the author for detailed checking’.[**vii**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note7)

True, but if an author believes the manuscript is ‘final draft’ when they submit it, are they objective enough to interrogate their work in this way? How can they know what they don’t know?

Editors at all stages of the process—and here I include proofreaders, too—represent the last line of defence, the author’s backstop, and it’s hard *not* to feel some responsibility.

The Victorian Society of Editors meeting referred to earlier, at which proofreader John Bangsund and editor Bruce Sims were speakers, concluded with a discussion on whether it was the editor’s responsibility to take on detailed fact-checking. According to the account of that meeting:

Bangsund affirmed that it is, adding that one should not trust even little things to the uncertainties of memory…Sims was inclined to think this was admirable though not essential. Others were divided over the matter, largely on account of the time necessary to achieve such standards relative to the remuneration that the publisher is likely to allow.[**viii**](http://tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html#note8)

This last point is important. There is an economic aspect to ‘getting it right’. If you’re a freelancer, you will be familiar with a certain sinking feeling that accompanies the suspicion that there are statements that seem, from general knowledge, to require checking. So you check, and you find it’s a good thing you did. And then you assess the effect of one problem on the rest of the manuscript, and you find it’s a good thing you did. And then you marshal your diplomatic skills to explain the problem—now problems—to the author, along with possible solutions, because you know the manuscript is at a critical stage timewise. And then there are the iterations of negotiating, consulting, reviewing revisions. It all takes time—and if you’re working on a fixed budget, this is another problem to be negotiated, or subsumed under the infinite heading of ‘things I have learned, to my cost’. I’m sure the dynamics of time and budget for in-house editors are just as fraught.

I would like to conclude with an astute quote by Michelle Madden that reframes the question of responsibility as an ethical one:

…it is, in the end, a matter for the author. We’ve done our job if we have raised the issue. If an inaccuracy is glaring, might affect the internal logic or is likely to expose the author to ridicule, then we have a further responsibility to push harder, but ultimately it’s their name on the book.

So perhaps the most valuable thing we can do as editors is to educate new authors about why *they*should care about getting it right as much as we do.

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