

This article was published in *Newswrite*, the magazine of The NSW Writers' Centre, April/May 2010 edition.

N.B. The title of the book was subsequently changed to *The Wedding Shroud – A Tale of Early Rome*.

WIELDING THE 'PEN KNIFE'

Write, rewrite and 'murder your darlings'. It's a long way from first draft to finished copy, and you have to practise the kindest cut.

By Elisabeth Storrs

"Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration."

THOMAS ALVA EDISON

Have you heard this quote before? Or read others like it in books on the creative process? Well worn they may be but I've decided to pay attention to them.

Sources of inspiration vary, but from my experience the perspiration required to complete a novel always involves passion, perseverance and practice. Of these, practice is the hardest. It requires you to 'murder your darlings', as Sir Arthur Quillan-Couch

said about deleting anything you might think is 'exceptionally fine writing' before submitting your manuscript.

After a lot of practice my historical novel, *The Wedding Mantle – An Etruscan Tale*, will be published this year. Not being a full-time writer, it took me four years to research and write. After rejections I started again. I spent three years rewriting, only to find I needed to edit it for a further three years in order to bring it up to publishable standard.

The accepted version differs markedly from the first. I have changed style and viewpoint. It has changed from being plot-driven to character-driven. Research inspired me to let history permeate the story rather than merely providing a backdrop. I've tried to instil a sense of place. Hopefully all extraneous scenes and unnecessary detail have been removed and the structure and plot altered to increase pace and drama. How did I achieve this? By wielding the 'pen knife' in revision and more revision.

'All writing should be selection in order to drop every dead word.'

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

While practising your craft it is important to have a clear vision and be faithful to it. This doesn't mean that you must be wedded

stubbornly to all you write upon the page. Seeking guidance is one way to help you be less subjective. The trouble is that readers will judge a novel upon their interests and tastes, and of course you will be drawn to those whose viewpoints match your own. Resist the urge to listen only to praise. Conflicting counsel is inevitable but I decided that to deal with such confusion I would accept that each suggestion could be valuable provided I distinguished practical advice from pure opinion. In doing so I determined that there were two different types of useful feedback – one relevant to individual components of writing and the other to overall product.

Direction came from various sources. One was writing groups. I enjoyed sharing my passion with people with similar goals. Reading aloud each month helped me to hear the flow of dialogue and the cadence of my prose. Passages were rewritten then critiqued repeatedly to assess if my editing had 'worked'. However, the feedback from a writing group has its limitations because your audience is unable to assess a novel in its entirety (even when they have listened to you reading it for ten years!)

Writing seminars and manuscript assessment services gave me an overview of how effective my writing was when approaching important elements such as plot, setting, characterisation and structure as well as identifying deficits in grammar, spelling and

presentation. I sought the experience of two wonderful mentors who honoured my vision but provided objective criticism. My agents assessed whether my novel had met both literary and marketing standards. Most daunting of all was the advice given to me by a professional editor. Even as I write this article, my publisher is giving me important feedback to achieve my vision and finally put the editing process to rest.

'Advice is seldom welcome; and those who want it the most always like it the least.'

LORD CHESTERFIELD

Every time my work was criticised I felt something akin to grief. First I denied that anything needed to be changed. Then I was angry that my writing was misunderstood. Depression followed – especially after rejection – and I would enter into a type of bargaining process over why I should keep the book as it was. Finally though, by being as objective as possible, the benefit of accepting change dawned upon me each time.

So pick up your 'pen knife'. Wield it to cut out each 'dead' word and so breathe life into your writing. Because only then will it even be considered for publication.

ELISABETH STORRS' first novel, *The Wedding Mantle – An Etruscan Tale*, will be published by Pier 9 Murdoch Books in September 2010.