



# How I Survived My Husband's Writing

by

Ed & Marian Zaruk

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UNDERWOOD STANDARD TYPEWRITER

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Picture- 1920 Underwood #5 Typewriter

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Throughout our married life, I have, on occasion, set out dinner for two with candles. My husband, during rare impulsive moments, has brought flowers home, but what has kept us close through the years is our love of reading. Then his writing entered our lives, and after watching it grow and mature, I became his first reader. While re-working his novels, we've read his manuscripts out loud to each other over a bottle of wine with flames dancing in the fireplace. Such occasions border on the romantic.

When he picked me up for our first date in his '33 Ford hot rod, it should have been a clue as to his hobbies, but I married him anyway. We bought a four-door family car, and he took to flying model airplanes. After our daughter was born, he switched to building model trains, his layout eventually taking up space that I thought could be put to better use, so I gave him a son. He smiled, painted the room pink, and our daughter moved into her own bedroom. The remains of his train set moulder away to this day in a couple cardboard boxes under the stairs. I think he had ideas of waiting the kids out but I quashed those with our third child. Running out of spare rooms in our modest house, one evening he came to me and said he was going to take up writing as a hobby.

"Uh huh," I said, hardly giving his words consideration. What he said next, brings a chuckle whenever it's mentioned.

"Look, honey, how expensive can it be? A few sheets of paper and some pencils."

To me, it was the ideal hobby for a man who'd failed grade 12 English.

I suppose the first occasion I had to take him seriously was a Friday night when I heard my oldest son asking him to write a story for his English class. Now this son was an honour roll student, and fully capable of doing his own writing, but he'd bought his first car and was working hard to keep gas in it. This weekend, not only did he have extra shifts at the local Pizza Hut, but also a late Saturday night party to attend.

"Okay, what's it about?" my husband asked.

"It's based on *Lord of The Flies*," my son replied.

"Never heard of it," he said.

I couldn't believe it. Here is a man who always has a large non-fiction work on his bedside table, breezes through a novel for weekend recreation, thinks the only real authors are British, and he hasn't a clue what his kid is reading. Now he was going to rewrite a book, which still appears on bestseller lists, from a brief outline his son had given him while dashing out the door. Well, I thought, he shouldn't have too much difficulty making it sound like amateur writing.

A week later the paper appeared on the kitchen table with a 94.5% grade. I think it was at that moment I realized this writing thing would get out of hand. Running true to form, and now thinking he was a writer, my husband began work on a novel that winter.

I say 'began' because he picked a subject from a television documentary he saw about whaling stations in the South Atlantic. After spending hours researching material at our local library, he sat late into the evenings scribbling in long hand on lined, yellow legal pads. From borrowed books lying on the coffee table and the occasional comment, it came to light he was writing a thriller. No surprise there, his favourite weekend reads at the time were by Alistair MacLean, Desmond Bagley, and Tom Clancy.

Myself, I preferred Ken Follett or Clive Cussler and was reading my way through the *Daughters* series by Aola Vandergriff.

When spring arrived, he had numerous false starts and a couple of short stories that years later I stumbled across and read, having no idea how he received such good marks from his son's English teacher.

Deciding his new hobby needed some technical support, he bought a computer, a Texas Instruments 99/4A. This was a great leap forward. The only drawback, that gave no end of aggravation, was the split screen. Really, only half the page vertically showed on the screen and you had to scroll across to see the second half of any given line. After typing two hundred or so lines, the machine said it was full and required the information to be saved to a rather large floppy disk. Add that to the price of a couple pencils and few sheets of paper.

I'd like to mention that, although we always drove older vehicles, we lived as comfortable as anyone can with three kids and a mountain of debt, but in the early ninety's, I bought him a personal computer with Perfect Office installed. My husband still uses this program, claiming it is simple and more dynamic. From what I know of him, I think he just got used to it and doesn't want to change. Out of necessity, we have both become familiar with Microsoft Word.

His new ink jet printer spewed out reams of paper which he bought by the box. I have to admit that his writing proliferated in direct proportion to the amount of paper consumed, and finally the first draft of his novel was completed. Proudly displaying the finished product, he said, "I'm going to send this away and see if I can get it published."

Thus started my career as an editor. I didn't know that much about editing, but I did know how to spell, knew my husband's spelling was atrocious, and I wasn't about to let him send off a manuscript full of mistakes. Sure enough, as I started reading, up popped the spelling errors

and punctuation mistakes. But at the same time, I was engaged by his story and became his first reader. I also found a fulfillment in the printed page that only those who are on the inside world of authors and readers can experience.

Thankful for the assistance, my husband faithfully went through the pages I returned to him with errors circled in red, and corrected them. There are certain marks professional editors make when reviewing material. I'm not that sophisticated. I read with pen or pencil in hand and circle or stroke the things I think he has to address.

Now it is important to mention that computers are not mind readers, so when one types 'bear' instead of 'bare' it just blithely carries on. So does my husband. Therefore, the first rule of thumb for line-editing your partner's work is, don't rely on the spell checker to replace wrong words spelled correctly. I have discovered over the years that the only way to purge an 80,000 word document of these errors is to read and re-read it over many times. There can't be anything worse for an author than to see his work between covers, then find it has typos. We think they breed. I recently found one that we know was in his novel, *Altar and Throne*, since the first draft. I'd read over it so often that my eye just became accustomed to it and assumed it was correct. I found it the night before we sent the manuscript to the printer. Such moments strengthen my resolve to ferret out every mistake in my husband's writing. Editors have passion, too.

That said, I'm impressed with the spell checker feature. My husband's computer is configured so that any incorrect word will be underscored in red. There are two ways to fix this. The lazy man's way is to click the appropriate symbol on the screen and have the computer make the correction. My husband is not a lazy man, although he does have his moments. Over the years (and I have actually seen him do this,) he looks at the suggestion box and retypes the word correctly. His spelling has improved immensely.

This is all basic stuff, but it's where I started and things went along smoothly until I suggested changes to his composition. In all fairness to my husband, he was working hard to improve his writing. I found this very early draft written fifteen years ago of his first novel, *Falklands Deadline*, and it clearly shows a weakness of beginning writers. "A new day began in the South Atlantic when, with the sparkle of orange, sunlight broke over a distant horizon." How droll. It tells the reader nothing and can be rendered down to, "It was a dark and stormy night." Absolutely nobody should start a novel with that line, so why re-write it?

Here is the final opening to the *Falklands Deadline* prologue. "Kapitän zur See Hans Langsdorff glanced at the chronometer: 5:56. Dawn. His steady gloved hands held up a pair of Zeiss binoculars while he studied the masts of two ships appearing over the horizon, 27 kilometres away."

Now it tells us something. Who- Kapitän zur See Hans Langsdorff, obviously German. Where- At sea, as noted by the ship's masts. When- 5:56. Dawn. That word 'dawn' is interesting because it subconsciously conjures up the weather in the reader's mind. It had to be a clear morning if the horizon was visible 27 kilometres away. Also the sun would be coming up. We have sense of place being created without a description of the weather. Why, and what was happening, are left out, but would the reader continue to the second paragraph? It is important to ask yourself this because that person may be an agent who has asked for your work. It may be the editor of a large publishing house, but most importantly, it could be someone in a bookstore, or online, reading your opening. You have just seconds to capture their attention. If the reader doesn't go to the second paragraph, your book will be returned to the shelf and the sale lost. My advice is, don't start your story with the weather. I know many famous authors do it, but they're making money for the publishing houses and I'm sure are cut a lot of slack. First-time authors need to get the introduction right.

It was a long struggle for my husband to get not only his opening, but the entire document right, which is why I believe first novels belong in a drawer. Many times he would come to me with different lines. Some, I'd screw my nose up at. Others that had merit, we reworked together, and over a period of years, developed a separation of our responsibilities. I can't write, but I know good writing when I see it. I'd offer suggestions, mention words that didn't work, and encourage him to keep at it. Back to the computer he'd go, type out a few changes, and we'd review it again. I don't always get what I want. In his third novel, *Altar and Throne*, he burnt down a house with three little Native children in it. I was devastated. "You can't do that to them! That has to go." Those were my exact words.

"No, this really happens," were his. As much as it still bothers me to read the passage, that event needed to be included and was pivotal to the development of the story. Recently, while on vacation in Hawaii, we read this novel out loud to each other at the beach, checking for word flow. When it came to this chapter, and was my turn, I couldn't read it. Even my husband had a hard time getting through it. Over the years I have come to learn that the work is the most important thing, all else is subservient to it, our personal feelings included.

This is where tact comes in. Tact has been described as the ability to deal with other people without causing needless offence. My husband has a coarse saying – "You can tell a woman she is as ugly as sin, if you just use enough tact." He's never tried it on me, so I don't know if it works, but I have seen it smooth over the difficult times when words and feelings get sharp. Tact involves knowing when and how to say things. As writers and editors, we are constantly aware of words. We will agonize over a phrase, or even a single word to get it right, yet use un-edited speech with one another that can cut and hurt. The use of tactful words, I believe, is the basis for a warm relationship between you, the editor, and your partner, the writer.

Over the years, I've met and listened to many authors read their work. Some are well-known, Wally Lamb, Elizabeth Berg, and Sue Miller, are a few

that come to mind. Others were attendees at writers conferences we've attended. All have my admiration for one thing; they write from the heart, then are willing to bare their soul by sharing that most precious gift with us. We applaud authors at public readings; should we not do the same for our mate in the privacy of our own homes? Authors can be needy people and commendation fills that space, making it easier to accept suggestions and criticism of their work.

I was fortunate to grow up before the age of television. Home entertainment in the evenings was provided by books. Like most young girls of my age, I read *Nancy Drew* under the covers with a flashlight. I don't use a flashlight nowadays, but I do enjoy finishing the day by reading in bed. Things haven't changed much. I once peeked in on my eight-year old granddaughter after bedtime. There she was, sitting up in bed, flashlight in hand, reading one of her *Geronimo Stilton* books.

Both my husband and I grew up with books and magazines a constant feature of the family home, and very early in our married life discovered our mutual love of reading. Bedtime stories and reading together with our children gave us the satisfaction of seeing them enter school knowing how to read. I have seen television erode this away, but have come to believe that the two can co-exist. Our two granddaughters have shelves of books and a big screen TV but are read to every night. When I visit, they want me to read to them. In my opinion, it is the greatest gift a parent can give. Still, I wondered if the world would open to them through books.

On a recent visit, my husband suggested we take them to the bookstore. They were so excited. When we walked in, they headed directly for the children's section. The five-year old was keeping my husband occupied, and I found myself with the older one in front of a shelf of books when she turned to me, and said, "Grandma, I like hardcover books." At that moment, I knew the next generation in our family would be life-long readers.

Our first television was a small twelve-inch, black and white set that we used well into the colour era. Reading a book was a lot more entertaining in those years, and read we did. Wednesday evening was library night. Occasionally, a real gem would come home. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach was just such a book. One of our sons loved it and wrote a book report based on a philosophical viewpoint. His English teacher soaked it up. The other son couldn't see what the big deal was about a seagull. The lesson here, everyone will view your work differently, including agents and editors.

Growing up during the Cold War, we had an ever-expanding supply of spy novels that taught us pacing and plot. Community reading of these thrillers lead to the inevitable losing of each other's place when the bookmark fell out. It became a common occurrence when we discovered the author, James Michener. A walk along the beach without seeing a Michener book being read was a rare day. The waiting list at the library was so long we went out and bought our own hardcover copies.

I've tried to understand why his books were well-accepted since history is usually a subject people shy away from. Dry history is just that, long on facts and events, short on emotion. Michener brought it to life with characters and a story. If you're going to edit your partner's books (and he's supplying just enough facts for the reader to hang their imagination on,) I'd suggest you read at least one of Michener's novels.

The true source of character development for writers, though, is women's fiction. My husband had never read them, that would come later. Authors, Maeve Binchy and Rosamunde Pilcher, have a way of capturing you through place and character, and I was able to immerse myself in relationships developed through dialogue. These books taught me the value of dialogue.

My husband still has his moments with love and romance. He has two novels in progress that we are working on, and in both the relationships are

different and demanding. Getting it right is a blend of voice, story, and the author's view of the world. I would not want to change any of the three; my views are not always his views. Editing is very much a blending of personalities and feelings. My advice is to respect the individuality of your partner, yet allow them to influence you. In this way, writer and editor will complement each other to the enhancement of the work. Write from the heart. Write for your friends. Write for self-fulfillment. Edit for the same reasons. Passion is a much greater motivator than money.

Over the years, writing and editing have added an intimacy to our lives we might never have had. How else, I asked myself, could I read his novels through dozens of times? We've agonized over rejection letters and tried to read their hidden message. There are nights my husband is frustrated because he has to spend time running his business when I know he'd rather be writing. During those rare moments, I offer silent support. Along the way, I've seen his voice strengthen, his novels fill hundreds of pages, and sharing the written word bring us closer together.

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