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FROM THE CREATIVE WRITING HANDBOOK

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REVISING

You may be the kind of writer who revises as they go along or who writes one draft and then revises it. It is rare indeed for a novel not to undergo many redrafts. Here are some things for you to bear in mind as you redraft and revise your work:

- 1) When you are ready to face it, take out the first draft and read it. Just read it. Read the first draft without comment or addition – no matter how your hands itch to correct it and your head aches at the experience. Don't charge in. See what's there.
- 2) If you use a word-processor, print off a hard copy and read that. The screen with its neat fonts and straight rows can be very deceptive. Besides, this is closer to how your reader will experience your work. You need to know this experience, too.
- 3) Put it aside for a while. Let it brew. D.H. Lawrence would often keep his first draft in a desk drawer and refer to it only occasionally while he rewrote from memory. William Carlos Williams' advice was to put the draft away until 'the conditions under which it was written' are forgotten. 'In the meantime you become a different person, you become other than the person who wrote it and can judge it more objectively.'

You might consider this relaxed attitude unwise but where is the rush? Time spent on a book, Anthony Burgess observed, is

of no real concern to a reader. If a first draft was written in white heat, let it cool down before you handle it.

- 4) Ask questions. All the time. *Is this what I want? What is it I want? Does this work? Am I trying too hard?* Remember this is not an exam. There are no right answers and take refuge in retaining a certain amount of ignorance. It is important to know what your intentions are in a work but too much knowledge can be prohibitive. If you can summarize your intentions succinctly, why bother with the elaborate disguise of a novel?
- 5) There may be great changes to be made. Salman Rushdie's first draft of *Midnight's Children* was 900 pages long and written in the third person. Just one of his decisions on redrafting – to adopt a first person narrator – meant every sentence had to be changed.
- 6) Be prepared – and brave enough – to make such enormous changes as well as small ones. If a scene bogs you down, move on to another. Let your unconscious mind solve problems, too. Move to something you can solve. The novel is always at work in your mind even when, physically, you are far away from it. The answer might come to you three days later on top of a bus or in the bath. It may be that the scene troubling you doesn't belong in the novel at all and its intractability is its only way of letting you know this.
- 7) Sometimes it is not your work that is tired and inadequate, it's you. You are human. This happens. The text is all potential. It wants to be realised, perfected. Leave it a while and return to it in a more belligerent mood. That said, it is often when one is most disenchanted that one makes the most merciless cuts.
- 8) Look at *all* your adjectives. Think of them as valuable coins. Spend them wisely. Don't waste them. A table that is *old*,

wooden, scratched and *pine* is no longer a table, it is a list. The table is lost from view.

- 9) A man who *runs quickly* is a weak verb and a weak adverb. Why not have him *pelt, dash, race* or *rush*? Look at anything that ends in *ly* and consider saying goodbye to it.
- 10) If in doubt, leave it out. If a word, a phrase, a paragraph, a chapter really belongs, it will find its way back. You might think think it easier to slaughter a particularly admired phrase if, instead of abandoning it altogether, you record it in your journal for later use, building up a private thesaurus of good lines that have yet to find their true home.
- 11) Is your work correctly punctuated? Punctuation is the breath of language, vital to a writer if you are to make sense, vital to readers if they are to understand exactly what you intend. To spend weeks, months, years on a novel and not endeavour to make it as accurate as possible is madness, laziness, simply ungenerous.
- 12) Use technology. Most word processors have grammar checks – you might find them hateful and you can dismiss what it throws up but, at the very least, it is a neutral – if insensitive – judge of what you have written.
- 13) Or have a friend read your work for grammar, spelling and punctuation. Friends will be much more helpful and more willing to comment about such things than about your work's literary worth.
- 14) Watch out for any confusions of singular and plural and, also, tenses. Such errors need the most careful checking. You must be prepared to groom your drafts with absolute care and discrimination. In dialogue tense changes occur naturally. In exposition, they look clumsy and can confuse.

When do you stop redrafting?

Trust me.

You will know.

Throughout this process you have been responding to your novel, trying to figure out what you need to do to make it work, to be independent of you.

A moment will come when the text will shrivel away from you, tired of your attentions and say, 'Enough now.' I'll do as I am.'

Look forward to that moment.