

## 15. Promise.

Last week I went to a lecture. Barbara Kingsolver of *The Bean Trees* fame was the guest speaker. Her opening remark was a general one, applicable to all her novels. She says that when she begins a new novel, she makes a promise, to herself and to the reader. The novel is successful in her eyes if she has, at its conclusion fulfilled that promise.

So, since in article 14 we discussed conclusions, I thought that now would be a good time to ask that question and to discuss it further.

Now, as we prepare to re-read our first draft, and where necessary, edit it, I think it is of utmost importance to answer the question: Have I kept my promise in this novel? Have I come through, completed the task?

After the lecture I thought about *The Cloths of Heaven*, the basis for this topic, and asked that question and had to smile, because I had neatly packed the novel between a Prologue and an Epilogue, both incorporating some of the same sentences and scenes. In the Prologue I had asked the question: Was James' Street secret to be buried forever? And in the Prologue I have uncovered the secrets, given an answer to the question, and tied up the loose ends. What was my promise then, in this novel? The promise was to give an answer to that question and I did. The circle is complete, no loose ends, and a feeling of satisfaction at the novel's conclusion.

Making a promise when you set out, or asking that question that sparks off the novel, will give the novel its direction, will help you to filter the elements and utilise them fully. So that's what you do first, when it comes to revising your novel. Ensure you have fulfilled your promise or answered that all-important question.

Once you have established that, you can begin reading and revising. Other elements can now be considered simultaneously with that first question. You will find that there are passages that do not add to the fulfilment of the promise or pivotal question, and at these points you need to ask yourself what they add to the novel, if anything. Maybe they are descriptive of character or place. They might add an extra dimension in perception or be useful in adding clarity to the setting. If they do none of these things, it might in fact be better for the novel as a whole to scrap them. And be ruthless. Pieces of banality will weaken a potentially strong story.

There may be passages where the pace lags, or where you seem to skim over issues. Here you can either trim down or expand. Sometimes the sequence of events needs to be reconsidered in order to maintain the suspense or to heighten the emotional power of a chapter. Sometimes even whole chapters ought to be switched around. Remember, before you decided to write fiction you were widely read, so trust your gut on these matters. When does foreshadowing (hinting at an incident in the future) add to the novel, and when does it spoil the suspense? This is an individual issue, and the answer will vary from novel to novel.

In some psychological thrillers, the victim and the murderer may be revealed in the first chapter, and the purpose of the novel will be to have the investigator discover what we already know. In other novels, the power of the novel lies in keeping the reader in the dark until the last moment, and laying clues that will have the reader constantly guessing 'whodunnit'. Both forms are equally valid, but once the promise is made, the novel must adhere to that one route. To swap and change within the novel will in fact, break the promise to the reader, and weaken the novel. As a reader you know this, so as a writer, you will 'feel' it when you've got it right.

In *The Cloths of Heaven*, one of the characters dies. In my first draft I actually foreshadowed that event with a rogue sentence which simply stated 'he died' about two chapters before it in fact, happened. Instead of strengthening this event, I had weakened it, made it banal, and almost made the following chapters, redundant. I took out that one statement, (no more than three words) and brought the power back into the prose.

I would recommend that when you are reading that first draft, every time you feel your energy sapping away, just put a mark in the margin, even if you don't know what's wrong with the paragraph or sentence or whatever. On a second or third reading, when you've trimmed and enhanced other, more obvious faux pas, take the time to examine these again. Chances are, it might just be a badly constructed sentence, or paragraph that is difficult to read. Simplify it. Is it too long? Then split it into two sentences. Does it add to the story or could you do without it? Then scrap it.

Sometimes it's hard to erase a part of your creation. Sometimes there's that one, beautiful sentence, the one you fear you may never write again. And yet, it doesn't fit in. So you have to take it out.

In order to reduce the pain of this process, I have a reserve document, just for these sentences and paragraphs, a place where I put them out to pasture, instead of killing them off completely. I may never look at them again, but just knowing they are there, in case....., makes editing more bearable.