CLOSE-UP: EDITING

Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

T.C. BOYLE*, interviewed by Diana Bishop:*

How do you revise?

Constantly, as I go along.

Do you find that you have a revision process that's different, after the first draft is complete?

This is hard to answer because I'm asked these questions all the time, especially in front of an audience. Everyone wants to know if there's a formula or a secret. The fact is that you do it in your own way. The draft I just finished of the first part of the novel that I've pushed myself to complete before I go to New York in three days, that I'm going to deliver to my agent, is as perfect as I can make it. And it is, with minor exceptions, exactly as it evolved on the keyboard. Because I could never work in that "chapter five needs revision and maybe I have to change scenes" mode. I couldn't work that way. Everything behind me must be as perfect as I can make it or I couldn't sleep at night. So until I get to that point, I can't go on.

Submission Calendar

So, as you write, you're processing what's come before, perfecting it. Is your current novel perfect so far?

As perfect as I can make it, yes. Today, before I came to see you, I worked till three p.m. I finished this yesterday, driving myself crazy, pulling my hair at work until five p.m. I like to be done by two p.m. I reread what I did yesterday and polished it. That's the last part of this. I read the first seventy pages today. I'm looking forward to completing the next eighty-five or so tomorrow and then writing what's to come and be done. ■

CHARLES JOHNSON, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

I realized that I could get deeper into something with each draft, that revising is like filling a cup. Basically, what happens is that you fill the cup and it spills over. You add more layers, and things pop up in the fifteenth draft that you had never dreamed of when you first began. These things lead you forward, and the book grows out of its own potential rather than following an outline regardless of the other possibilities. This process also results in having to throw lots of pages away.

For *Oxherding Tale*, I threw away 2,400 pages to get 250. It was 3,000 for *Middle Passage* and easily 3,000 for *Dreamer*. There are issues I pursued that were fascinating, but they didn't belong in the book. If I hadn't pursued those issues, I would not have gotten to other things that did belong in the book. I keep all those drafts. There might be a paragraph or a line that might be useful in something else. There is a section in *Dreamer* where Chaym Smith shoots heroin. I wrote that scene in another novel back in the early seventies. When I was writing that scene for Chaym, I went back and found the passage so I wouldn't have to do the research again.

Sometimes there are nuggets of good writing that have to be cut when they don't fit, but some of it is publishable. There's a book called *Literary Outtakes* that includes poetry and passages from stories and novels that didn't make it into the final products. They are great, but they just didn't fit. The book contains a passage of *Oxherding Tale*.

If you want a really good example of what I'm talking about, look at *Juneteenth*, Ralph Ellison's second novel, which was edited by John Callahan. He edited the 2,000 pages of that novel down to 350 pages of a story, more or less, so we could have something after Ellison's death. In the edited version, we read that the main character receives a letter from a woman.

Well, Ellison actually wrote the letter, and it takes up a whole chapter—and is probably magnificent in itself—but Callahan decided it didn't fit. Ellison probably would have decided the same thing. **But you have to be open to every possibility.** ■

THOMAS BELLER, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

An early draft will go out into the world and get shot back to me, and I'll sit down much later—I might just leave it in a drawer for a year. That piece in *Ploughshares* ["Sally the Slut"] probably saw its earliest draft in 1995. And then I really worked on in it in 1996 and 1997, and then I hated it so much, and it wasn't until—it's a bit fuzzy now, 2002 or '03, that I took it out of the drawer and worked on it again. I showed it to this guy, a poet named Rodney Jack, who did this bizarre little edit with a very light pencil. He made a few other small remarks, and it was like going to the fiction chiropractor. The vertebrae snapped—cut this out, add that, and Amy Bloom had a few more suggestions. **I am not imperious when it comes to editing—I need help. Suggestions are good. And I am glad you liked the story, but that wasn't something that just popped out.** ■

KAREN OUTEN:

I'll admit it: Revision used to terrify me. When I was a new writer, I mistook revision for something that interfered with the creative process, rather than the only way you get what you want from it. I wasn't alone in that thinking. In my teaching now, I see young writers continue to butt their heads against the idea of revision. Either they mistake real revision for something that fits nicely into a sentence like this: "If I just change this one sentence, then it'll all be fine." By thinking this way, they fail to take advantage of the opportunity to truly re-envision their stories. Or they think, as I once did, that revision "ruins" the spontaneity of their writing. The general fear of revision is, of course, simply our fear that what we want from our stories cannot be achieved.

How often do we approach revision fearing what we'll discover about our stories? What if at the moment when we begin revision, we allow ourselves to dwell most significantly and earnestly in the possibilities of our stories? As I've come to think of it this way, I've found that the moment of revision is in fact the most exciting time. You know much more about what you're doing by that time. Your characters have already revealed so much of themselves to you. What you bring to that knowledge, then, is the clear-eyed reader, the one who asks the hard questions of each moment and line of dialogue, the one who turns over each gesture looking to see what is unearthed, the one who both embraces the failure of a scene and wards it off by relentless questioning and re-envisioning. The way that we serve our stories best in revision is in that spirit of expectation, wonder, and, yes, enough fear and trembling to invite the unexpected. ■

TIM GAUTREAUX*, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

How do you respond to editorial comments you don't agree with?

I generally trust an editor and go with whatever he or she suggests. **If I don't understand why an editor wants something changed, I'll ask for the reasoning behind the change.** Sometimes the editor just needs an explanation of a detail or idiom he or she doesn't understand. But unless the recommended change is a big mistake, I just follow directions. Most editors have a vision, or at least a notion of what's good for their readers, and I trust that. And it's really foolish to alienate an editor over a trifling edit. ■

JAVIER MARÍAS*, interviewed by Eli S. Evans:*

I never change anything that I've written. I work very hard, I correct a lot on each page, as I write it, and I do this as many times as is necessary, and I don't go to the next one until that one is completely finished and clean. Then it goes to the file, and that's the way it's going to go to the printer, as well. And I never do a second or third version of the whole. This means that if I have written something on page two, and I did that almost intuitively, or even whimsically—because in the beginning you're really only groping—and then I find out on page two hundred that, Oh, dear, I should have said something else because it would be more convenient now, I don't do what most writers would do, which would be to change page two. That, of course, is a legitimate thing to do, but I say, No, I said this on page two, so I must stick to what I said, and I must do something now to make things match. I apply to writing a novel the same principle of knowledge that rules life. When you're twenty you do things, and when you're forty you say, Oh, dear, I wish I hadn't done this when I was twenty. But you did it, and you can't change it. That's the same principle I apply to my novels. I stick to what I said. Which is absurd, I know. Nobody would blame me if I didn't, and indeed nobody would know. But I don't make the story mold itself to what comes afterward. On the contrary, I make what comes afterward mold itself to what I already decided to write. So in a way, I suppose, I am always sticking to what I said in the first paragraph.

It seems that there is great risk in writing this way, even more risk than the act of writing usually entails. Because, in a sense, you don't have the ability to decide that you've made a mistake in the writing, that something should be different or better, without losing the thing in its entirety.

It's very dangerous, and probably generally catastrophic. I hope not in my case, but normally it should be a real disaster.

It strikes me that publishing a book in volumes somehow multiplies the risk of calamity inherent in writing straight ahead without knowing exactly where you're going or how you're going to get there. Now, if somehow you find out that the book isn't going to work out, the problem is that you've already published the first two volumes, and you can't take that back.

Absolutely. I'm more tied than usual, because I suppose, at least in theory, that normally if I suddenly saw that something was a complete mess or a complete disaster, I could change things, or make a new version. The problem in this case is that I can't change what has already been published, so I'm more tied to it than usual—I really must stick to what I've already written. In a way, I must also stick to a previous novel, because in the end, even if you can read them separately, the narrator of *Your Face Tomorrow* is the same as in *All Souls.* So there's an accumulation of obligations. I hope not to spoil the whole thing in the third volume, if I didn't spoil it in the previous ones. Of course, there is also a memory problem. The first two volumes of this book make about nine hundred pages, so this book, as it is now, is going to have about fourteen or fifteen hundred pages in all. ■

D.B.C. PIERRE, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Does anyone read your work in progress?

I don't even print it out until I'm finished. There's a little sweetness in the printed page. I reckon that you get ten to fifteen percent more resonance off the page than you do off the screen. So I save that experience as a little sweetness for myself. If I can be happy with it on the screen, then I figure it will be really nice on the page. This is my reward.

What happens once it's printed?

From there, I play with it some more. It also goes to my editor. Many things in the book will become obvious to me because I've seen them so much. I tend to make clues too subtle and I often rely on my editor to tell me when he didn't see something coming because I had shaved some of it off. I'll get a better sense of how to do this over time. My editor doesn't interfere. If the errors don't distract from the reading experience, he'll let them stand. But he may say, "I had to read that three times to understand what was going on." ■

FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG:

The great playwriting teacher Daniel Alexander Jones once told me that before he begins a rewrite, he sits on his hands and reads the draft three times, once out loud, not touching a pen or pencil until the third go-around. Only then will he begin to rewrite, always with attention to the whole. ■

JOSHUA HENKIN:

My graduate students, many of whom are quite talented, are for the most part so afraid of being over the top that they're subtle to the point of obfuscation. They think they're being subtle, but the reader has no idea what they're talking about. I believe writers should risk being over the top. Charles Baxter says something similar in his wonderful book of essays *Burning Down the House*. You don't want to descend into sentimentality, but it's worse, I would argue, if your work lacks sentiment. And in order to get sentiment, you have to risk sentimentality. I tell my students not to be so afraid of being cheesy. They can always revise. That's the great thing about being a fiction writer. You can keep on revising until you get it right. ■

CARRIE BROWN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

What is the most difficult part of the editing process for you?

I once had to kill off a character that my editor, quite rightly, said was too whiny to be likeable. That was a difficult thing to do—to wipe someone off the page entirely, like wiping her off the face of the earth. However, once I'd done it, the novel improved almost instantly.

I quite like the editing process—after all, you're nearly done then, aren't you? ■

BARRY UNSWORTH,
interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:


Photo: Corbis

The original novel [*The Partnership*] was well over 100,000 words. I submitted it to a new outfit that aimed to publish first novels—a very enlightened enterprise, and they don't exist anymore in these harsher times of ours. I sent it, and got a note back saying that the editors liked it, but it was too long. They wanted me to cut 30,000 words. I wrestled with my artistic conscience for a moment, but I didn't hesitate very long before setting to work. **That business of compression, of economy, did influence me. A lot of what I'd written was redundant and self-indulgent. It's impossible to judge how much and to what degree, but I saw that, though I was very reluctant and even outraged to start with, cutting the novel down like that actually improved it.** ■

TIM GAUTREAUX,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

What is the most difficult part of the editing process for you?

Generally, every sentence I write is two words away from being good. For me, the hard thing is to study each sentence when I'm revising and make it as good as I can by cutting, adding, or changing at least a couple of words. **Ultimately, each word in a story is the result of decision. And the wrong word in a sentence is like chocolate syrup in soup.** ■

PERRI KLASS, *interviewed by Charlotte Templin:*

Do you revise extensively?

I do revise fiction a great deal. Nonfiction not so much. Especially for short journalistic nonfiction, I sometimes carry it around in my head for a while and then, by the time I write it down, it's not necessarily brilliant, but it's what it's going to be. ■

RUTH OZEKI, *interviewed by Kyoko Amano:*

How about the revision process of a novel compared to the editing process of filmmaking? Are they a lot different?

Well, it's hugely different because in film, by the time you get to the editing room, you should have all of the footage that you're going to actually need in the finished film. It's very difficult to go out and shoot more stuff, generally speaking. It's expensive, whereas in writing a novel, you're just dealing with the written word and your imagination, and you can change things rather drastically in the editorial process. You just don't have that freedom when you're editing a film. The process of production, too, is so different in filmmaking and novel writing. In film, you usually have a pre-production period when you make all of your plans and you decide what your shot lists are and all of that. Then you have a production period when you are actually out there in the field with your cameras, filming, and then you have a post-production period when you're in the editing room, editing. **And these three phases of filmmaking don't really overlap all that much. However, in the writing process, you'll be doing all three at once. You plan something, you write, you edit it, and that leads to the next bit of planning, which leads to the next bit of writing, and so on.** So it's a different kind of process in that all three of those phases can be happening at once. ■

CHARLES JOHNSON,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

A first draft of a novel or story should be written with the intention of seeing if you have something worth pursuing. You begin to clean up in the second draft. You take out what doesn't fit, and you fill the holes of the first draft. It's not until the third draft that you can settle down and begin to revise. After that, you might go through twelve or twenty drafts to improve and refine. To me, that is not a lot to ask. Nothing is perfect. I'm not going to say certain things don't approach perfection, but the goal is to have something that is as consistent, coherent, and complete as you can make it in that moment. If you revise thoroughly, that moment might be a long moment. It might endure for decades as a work. Writing well is the same thing as thinking well. ■

WILL ALLISON, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

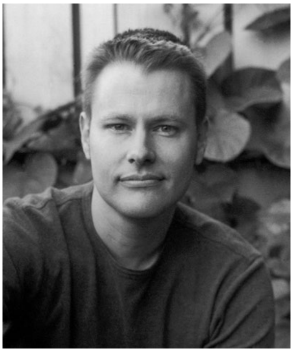
Photo credit: Lizzie Himmel

What do you find most difficult about writing fiction, and what steps do you take to remedy the situation?

The most difficult part for me is getting a first draft down on paper. I'm not being modest in saying that my first drafts are total garbage. It's especially hard with a novel—hard to write poorly for so many pages and still think of oneself as doing something worthwhile. I've gotten to the point where I tell myself that I'm not even writing, I'm just "sketching," dumping raw material on the page. That helps take the pressure off. In the end, it's really just a big leap of faith, believing that it will all eventually amount to something.

What do you least like about your own writing?

I read books all the time that I like a lot more than mine. That said, once I finish a piece of writing—really, really finish it—I usually like it pretty well. If I didn't, I wouldn't show it to anyone. Along the way, it's more of a love-hate thing: I get what I think is a great idea for a story, then I put it on paper and it's a terrible disappointment, then I start revising and it becomes something else altogether—which can be good or bad. **For me at least, writing fiction isn't about taking the stories in my head and transferring them to paper. It's about getting a mess of material on paper and then figuring out what it all means, what the story is. Sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't. Either way, it's a humbling experience. ■**

SIGRID NUNEZ, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

I tell my students this and actually mean it—I do think in many ways it does get easier. Much of it gets easier.

Really?

Yes, in the sense that you pick up your mistakes earlier as you are writing. And you are more alert to certain pitfalls.

How about the part where you worry whether your audience will like what you are doing or whether you can deliver on what you began?

Well, that's not about writing, that's about publishing.

[Laughs.]

What I meant was that the writing gets easier; you become more skillful unless something is wrong. And you waste less time. I can remember this and **I see it in my students—this idea that I have spent all these hours, days, even weeks, on these pages, on this story, they must be good. Well, the truth is that it is quite possible that they aren't. It doesn't matter that you spent all this time on it. It still might not work.** And after you have done this for a while, you are much more willing, much smarter, you know, to throw that away. You have to realize that that's part of the process and not this big waste. You are able to say that won't work and cut it. Whether it's a sentence, a paragraph, a page or a whole story or chapter, you learn how to tell sooner when it's not working. And you begin to feel more confident because you know you're more skillful as a writer. But when it's working, when the actual writing is going well and you know you're doing a good day's work, that's enormously satisfying. And in that sense it is fun.

What I hear you saying or what it suggests is that some people can keep those thoughts in the foreground, focus on the skills that they should have accumulated, so they can accelerate dealing with their mistakes, and some people seem to start fresh with every project.

True.

No real explanation for that—just individual character.

But I don't know if you start fresh again each time—

How to explain writers who say it doesn't get easier? And that every start is fraught with angst.

When writers say that it doesn't get easier what they mean is that it is always hard. ■

YIYUN LI, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

So the publisher is sending you around to help sell your book. Some writers seem to like that, but it's very hard on most writers, I think. How can they write?

You just have to do it, right? But I want to write probably three hours a day. I used to, when life was more settled, I probably wrote three or four hours a day. I tried to do a thousand words a day, or fifteen hundred.

A thousand words in three or four hours.

Yes. If I can do that many words, I'm a very happy person.

Do you edit as you go?

I do.

So there's not too much editing to be done at the end.

There is still a lot of editing done at the end. I try not to over edit. A lot of writers I know have the tendency to over edit instead of going forward, so I just spend a little time in the beginning to edit the last day's work, and then move forward. I think that's one thing I just have to stick to, just to go, go, go, go. ■

D.B.C. PIERRE, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Does anyone read your work in progress?

I don't even print it out until I'm finished. There's a little sweetness in the printed page. I reckon that you get ten to fifteen percent more resonance off the page than you do off the screen. So I save that experience as a little sweetness for myself. If I can be happy with it on the screen, then I figure it will be really nice on the page. This is my reward.

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ELIZABETH McCRACKEN,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Allan Gurganus always said that in order to move your readers, to put them through any kind of emotional state, you have to put yourself through ten times that much for it to translate to the page. That's the physics of writing. If you're a good writer, you intensely feel anything you write, but you have to learn not to make it easy on yourself or your characters. I especially feel this way about revision, which is frequently a matter of getting closer to the heart of the matter, and at the same time pushing yourself further. The reason you have to revise is because you have to wait until you've forgotten how difficult writing was during that first draft. I am capable of writing a draft that I think is obvious, but when I give it to people to read, they say, "I don't understand what happened." I find that writers sometimes want to steer their characters in a way that is not satisfying in fiction. They want to suggest something instead of actually making the characters do it. They take the reader right up to a confrontation and think they stop at a moment of great possibility, but they really stop before the conflict of the story begins. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM,*interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Lucas is deformed and cannot express himself as he'd like [in Specimen Days*], but when language fails him, he speaks as "the book"—*Leaves of Grass*. In order to write these passages in which Lucas speaks from the book, you had to be deeply in tune with both his character and with the contents of* Leaves of Grass*. What did you do to immerse yourself in the book and in Lucas's relationship to the book?*

One of the testaments to the greatness of *Leaves of Grass* is the fact that I found the appropriate passages quickly and almost effortlessly. It's so incisive, inclusive, and smart—usually within five or ten minutes I'd find exactly the right passage, for which Mr. Walt Whitman gets full credit.

What made you decide to have Lucas meet Walt Whitman on the street?

I went back and forth about that. In an early draft, Whitman is more physically present—he and Lucas are friends, having met on the street before the story begins. Then I took Whitman out entirely, made him a spiritual but not a corporeal presence. I settled finally on that one, slightly hallucinatory, visitation. There are some decisions one makes for logical reasons, and others because doing it this way or that simply feels right. This was one of the latter. ■

ARMAND ML INEZIAN:

My small epiphany came in a revision course taught by Pamela Painter. Before that course, I'd always been afraid of revision work. I felt as though my first draft was a house of cards and any slight change would collapse the whole story. By rigorously revising a short story in that class (I rewrote it entirely three times), I discovered that I had the ability to make things better via revision. This was huge! Not only that, but I suddenly had a better sense of what to look for when editing. (Although in the class Painter suggested that we use the term *revision* instead of *editing*.) That story eventually went on to be my first short published in a literary journal. ■

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

I've always heard the advice, "You have to kill your darlings. You have to cut the lines you really like." I hate that kind of advice. One of the main reasons I write is to break into laughter at three o'clock in the morning. Writing can be salacious fun. The lines I love are never the lines that anybody else loves. When I finished "Some Have Entertained Angels, Unaware," I gave it to a friend. I told her that it contains the funniest line I have ever written. She read the story and came up with six guesses. They were all wrong. Even when I told her which page it was on, she had to give up and ask me. And yet when I wrote that line, it made me so happy that the idea of taking it out…I just couldn't.

Do you remember the line?

I do. Isn't that pathetic? There's a character, Kenneth, who has three finches and their names are Sidney, Sidney, and Sidney-Lou. I found that so funny. I don't find it quite as funny as when I wrote it, though. ■

CHARLES JOHNSON, *interviewed by*
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Did John Gardner offer you any advice as your work began to be published?

He said the real danger for a well-known writer is that you don't get edited; nobody touches your stuff. He said that when you submit your manuscript, it has to be perfect. You can't expect an editor to work through every line. You have to do it all yourself before you send it in. But you still need a good copy editor and a good editor to ask questions like, “Don’t we need a scene for that? Isn’t this an idea you want to reinforce later in the book?” You need another eye, but you don’t always get it. John taught me that I had to do much of that work myself.

In what other ways did he instruct you in your writing?

I was working on my seventh book when I met John. He was never my teacher in a classroom setting. I met with him in his office. He would give me suggestions about how to fix problems. I would usually go back and change the scene in a way that we hadn’t talked about because I needed John, as an editor and friend, to identify the problem. That’s the issue—the problem. I would find the solution. The solution has to come out of the writer’s own sense of how this world works. John often told a story about a woman who approached him after a reading. She said, “I like your fiction, but I don’t know if I like you.” He said, “That’s fine. That’s the way it should be because I’m a better person when I write. I’m talking to you right now, and I can’t revise what I say. But when I write, I can fix it.” He believed he could fix language, even if it took twenty drafts, and make it more accurate so that it would not hurt anyone. And **writing may be the only time in your life that you can be “right” because you can revise yourself**. ■

MYLA GOLDBERG, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What is your process like for revising a manuscript? Is there a point at which it goes from being a manuscript to being a book or a story?

It doesn’t feel like a book to me until it’s a book and the publisher has given it to me in a box. I do a lot of revision in fits and starts. When I write, I barrel through from beginning to end, and then back up and if the beginning isn’t working, start over. Once it works I write through to the end, and start revising, and then, if necessary, I’ll trash the whole thing, which is what happened with *Wickett’s Remedy.* Two and a half years into it I had a finished draft of about three hundred pages and I gave it to my readers and they told me that it didn’t work. I was grateful that they told me, but I had to throw it out and start over again. That revision had given me the narrative. The plot was good but the characters were dead on the page. I had to start on page one and tell the story in a very different way and with characters who functioned very differently.

With *Bee Season*, revision had to do with finding the right voice for it. That did start out as a first-person book in the voice of Eliza, which I realized was far too limited for my purposes. I had to start over and make it third person so that I could get into everybody's head. **I was participating in an informal workshop in Brooklyn and someone pointed out to me that first person might not be the right voice for that book, and he was right. I might have gotten there on my own, but he certainly expedited the process.** ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

Photo credit: Jack Perkins

What do you find most difficult about teaching? Is there anything you find yourself stressing over and over again that either doesn't sink in or that students don't seem to grasp?

A resistance to revision is the most frustrating thing about students. I'm sure it was the most frustrating thing about me as a student writer. I really had to learn to write the revisions. At the beginning of class I always stress, "If you feel like the story is done and you're not going to change it no matter what we say, then don't bring it in here." My assumption is that everything is up for grabs. It's fine if you have a story you think is done. Good for you. Get it published. Pat yourself on the back. But bring us something that needs help. Be willing to take that set of suggestions you get from us and do something with them. **The commitment to the first draft, that's the most tiresome thing about teaching students. When they say, "I want it to be confusing. I want it to be ungrammatical. I want it to be a big freaking mess."** Well, I don't. You get an F.

Is there one story that helped you realize the importance of revision? A story that you struggled with, perhaps, that you now see as a benchmark?

When I first was writing, I assumed that if a story wasn't working, and that it wasn't getting published, then I should just toss it. That was my assumption, that it just sucked. I operated under that assumption for a while. Then I sent a story to the *New Yorker* that Daniel Menaker liked, but he wanted me to tone down a certain element. I didn't want to tone down that element. I liked the element he was asking me to tone down. It was pretty pervasive in the story, and was where the story had started for me. But I did it because he asked me to, and I wanted to be published in the *New Yorker*. Eventually, the story was published in the *New Yorker*, and it was my first publication there. It is a better story for having been toned down. His vision—which I trusted for the reason of getting it published, not because I thought it improved the story, but then later realized was a wise suggestion—made me respectful of the notion of trying out a revision, even if I wouldn't hang on to that revision, making large changes to the fiction—that was not something that was really part of my early nature as a writer. I would abandon a story rather than revise it. I'd say, "This sucks. I'm going to the next story." Which is hard for a short-story writer to keep doing. It's not that many worlds you can erect.

What story was that?

I can't think of what it was called. The one with the Easter party.

"Naked Ladies" [reprinted in Best American Short Stories 1993*].*

Originally, that was about an Easter orgy that was actually factual. My family were terrible, complete atheists, and on Easter they'd have an Easter orgy, these hugely sacrilegious events, like the Jesus Christ Look-Alike contest. Just really awful stuff. Offensive, I'm sure—I mean, not to me—but Daniel Menaker said I needed to tone that down. It wasn't allowing the subtler stuff to come through. And I think he was right. I'm very grateful for that advice, that request for revision. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM*, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What went on in the first draft [of The Hours*], and then in subsequent revisions?*

I did a lot of shuffling and reshuffling from draft to draft. I also discarded a good deal of material. There are chapters centered on Julia, Clarissa's daughter; on Mary Krull, the gender theorist who's in love with Julia; and on Oliver, the movie star who wants to make an action film with a gay man as the hero. But they strained the fabric of the novel too much. **Any book, I've found, has its own natural length, and one of the tricks is determining just how long it needs to be.** A certain gauge of wire can be easily stretched across a room, but not across the Grand Canyon. I did leave in a chapter told from the point of view of Sally, Clarissa's lover, and thought the book would be criticized for that breach of form, but no one seems to have noticed, or cared. Books are usually criticized for things you don't expect, and what you consider the flaws generally seem to slide right by. ■

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

What is the most difficult part of the editing process for you?

The manic swing—loving and then despising what I've written, and not knowing where the truth lies. ■

TIM GAUTREAUX, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Your editing technique consists of several different methods, doesn't it?

When I started teaching technical writing, I became more sensitive to little mistakes in short stories. Let's say there are fifty things wrong with the first draft of a story. I can approach the second draft by attempting to go after all fifty things, or I can focus on one thing, such as sentence structure.

So I make a pass going only after sentence structure. I decide which compound sentences should be made into complex sentences, where to bust long sentences into smaller ones. Then I arrive at a level of coherence, flow and readability. Then on a second pass I look for stuff to cut. Generally there's a lot. On a third pass, I look at dialogue.

Then I've got it fairly clean, but I check for underdeveloped sections and a wrong ending. For that, I've got to show it to somebody else. I show it to my wife or my agent. **Every writer has a blind spot, and he's going to overlook certain obvious things. Endings are the hardest things.** That's where experience in poetry writing comes in handy, because good endings are often the result of a careful manipulation of the connotative values of images. Sometimes you've got to end with a picture that tells the story.

When I get it back from my readers I go through it again and fix things they've noticed, and it still might not be right. The agent might send it around and I'll get it back with a note from an editor that says it's too long, or there is some other problem with it. Then I have to take it apart and do it over. ■

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I polish and edit, intensively work over my sentences as I go, and so when I have six hundred words at the end of a work day, for example, those six hundred words are pretty close to what I would expect them to be in the book. I will do global editing as well, but generally the words are close enough that I feel comfortable every night reading over what I've written during that day. ■

VALERIE MARTIN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

How do you deal with editorial suggestions you don't agree with?

First I try to ignore the suggestion, then, if the editor is insistent, I try to make some very minimal change, such as changing one sentence in a scene that has been described as problematic. It's surprising how often the response to this is, "Now it's perfect." ■

MELANIE RAE THON, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

You said you had never worked with such intensity for as long as you did with Sweet Hearts *and that it took you one year to write the first forty-five pages. How do you know when it's time to step back and begin to edit?*

I've discovered there is a point where I begin changing the work without making it stronger. That's when it's time to let go, to move on to new challenges so that I can continue to grow as a writer and a person. ■

RUSSELL BANKS, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

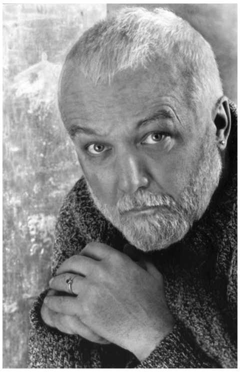

Photo credit: Marion Ettlinger

Do you reread your work?

Not deliberately. Sometimes an occasion will arise where I have to for a public reading. But generally no. Once it's done and out there…

[Laughs.] Are you afraid?

Yeah, I wouldn't want to, because then I would want to rewrite it and who has enough time? I did that when I did the stories in *Angel on the Roof*. I had to throw out a lot of stories I just didn't want to save, and then look freshly at the ones I wanted to save, and it was kind of painful. I don't think I'd want to do that again. I am going to leave that to someone else. ■

HA JIN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

You've said that you write slowly and go through many drafts, but since 1996, you've had six books published. Had you been working on these books for many years?

The material had accumulated over the years. I couldn't get my first few books published. That's one of the reasons for the build-up of manuscripts. Some of them sat around for a long time. *Waiting* stayed on my shelf for nine months before I sent it to a publisher. I didn't know where to submit it. I knew that Zoland, my former publisher, couldn't do much marketing for the book. I think that was good for me, especially as a beginner, because it taught me patience. **Every time a manuscript was returned to me, I would work on it and see that there were possibilities for improvement. I think that's part of the process that helps a writer to develop his ability.**

What is your editing process?

It's crazy and endless. Usually, I write longhand and then rewrite it when I'm putting it on the computer. I like the state of the screen because the text is fluid and it gives me the feeling that nothing is fixed, that I can do anything. But I have to keep a record; otherwise, I may lose some good passages. It takes a long time for me to make the text relatively fixed on the screen, and then I print it and work on hard copy, using different pencils over many drafts. I don't know how many drafts I go through in hard copy. I take it to the point where I don't think I can do anything about it. But nowadays, I have deadlines to meet. This is not good because the work is not fixed and finished yet. A manuscript somehow has its own demand of time and of how much energy it needs put into it. I try to always give myself enough time to edit so I can meet its demands. ■

A. J. VERDELLE, *interviewed by Nancy Middleton:*

You want to let things fly in writing as much as possible. That's why I've come up with strategies to make it happen. I'm always looking for the place that's going to respond to nurturing, rather than trying to edit something down into some sort of crystalline appearance. There's always time to do that. It's like when a painter mixes and makes new colors. They're just mixing. They know, "I want something in the orange-brown family," and they mix until they get this great color. Then and only then do they begin to use it. And editing is using. But in order to use, you have to get the material.

You spoke to the students about the difference between drafting and revising, and also about the importance of words, clarity, specificity.

Yes. I try to write as randomly as possible at the start, while choosing the right words, using the most colorful language to circle around the theme. There are many ways to go at writing, and the first thing you want to do is separate the draft from the revising. I'm trying to teach a positive approach to revising, instead of the approach that says, "This is what I hate, this is what is problematic, this is what needs to be changed." **We want to look for where the passion is in the work, because that is going to be the anchor**, that is going to be the basis of the mountain that is built. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Susan McInnis:*

I do a lot of writing without stopping to write anything down. I write first in my mind—driving around, just thinking. With this approach, a lot of my material is thrown out before it gets anywhere, because before I get it to the desk I've worked it over and over in my mind so thoroughly that I know whether it's still interesting. By the time I actually sit down at the computer, I feel confident that what I've come up with will work out in some way. I do a lot of the editing process in my mind. ■

ANDREA BARRETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What's your process like when you're working on a story or a novel? What goes on through each draft or revision?

I do a great many drafts, no matter what it is. I'm a very clumsy writer. I've given up apologizing for it. It's the way I work, so it's the way I work. My first drafts tend to be unspeakably bad. I don't know how to express it: astonishingly bad, much worse than most student work. I'd never get into graduate school if I applied with those drafts.

I think all of you established writers should let us read your first drafts to renew our faith, to let us know that everyone starts at the beginning with each piece.

I gave a talk at the University of Michigan several years ago to the graduating students, the Hopwood Lecture. I was talking about exploration and discovery, but I talked some about *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, and I did actually read them the first three quarters of a page of the first draft of that book.

Was it horrible?

Oh, it's amazing. Wrong in every way. It diverges from the final book in every way that it could. It's first person, not third. It's set thirty years before the time I actually started the book. They went to the Antarctic instead of the Arctic. Reading the draft was fun; it gave the students some sense of how messy the process always is. It always is, no matter how long you do it.

So how do you get from those early drafts to the final, beautiful piece?

I write a lot of drafts. I draft and I draft and I draft. Some people can do more of this in their heads and not have to write it out so many times, but I seem to think largely on the page. This means doing it and letting it sit for a few days before looking at it, then doing it again and letting it sit and doing it again. I let my friends read drafts after the first ten or twelve, when it's starting to get faintly coherent and you can faintly see the direction. My closest friend is Margot Livesey, a wonderful writer. Margot and I have shared our work for about a decade now. I let Margot look at it at various points along the way, although I try not to hammer her more than two or three times. Often she'll look at something like the tenth, the twentieth, and the thirtieth iterations: it's a huge help, to have a wonderful, brilliant reader asking great questions. I cut a lot. It isn't as if I write very long the first time and cut in all the successive drafts, nor is it as if I write very sketchily the first time and add through all the successive drafts. Strangely, it's both. **My early drafts are sketchy in the most important ways—everything vital is left out—and they're wordy in other ways—there's all this extraneous material that doesn't matter. So the revisions are in both directions.** It's like building a house, if you don't know how to build a house and you're not very smart. You run around and you throw up some walls where you think the rooms should go, and then you come back in a week and you realize there's no bathroom and two kitchens, so you have to tear down some of those walls and put up others, and then in a week you come back and realize the attic is half the size it's supposed to be. The walls go up, the walls go down, the walls go up. Somehow a house gets built, but

I don't exactly understand it. But that's what it feels like, putting up walls and tearing down walls until you get it right.

The more interesting question is how do you know when you get it right, but I can't answer that one. I don't think anyone can, truthfully. We all have feelings about that, but most writers, if we're honest, admit that that's what those things are—they're feelings, they're intuitions. **Things *feel* right at a certain point. They assume a proportion or a shape that feels right. It's not an intellectual decision. It's an emotional or an intuitive decision. ■**

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

How many revisions of a story do you usually go through, and what happens during each revision?

I have to make myself write chronologically, first page to last page. I try to do that, but don't always succeed when writing a novel. I'll take notes for later scenes, but won't look at them until after I've already written the scene. I'll try to write without looking at the notes, then incorporate the notes at a later date. I have to forbid myself from doing the fun parts first, partially because I'm worried that I'll lose interest in the project after I've done all the parts that I wanted to write. Also, I can't think about writing unless I'm actually writing. Ann Patchett, my great friend and first reader, is somebody who spends time thinking about the work. She conceives of it and understands it and turns it around in her head, and then sits down to write. She wrote her first two books in a relatively short period of time. She wrote *The Patron Saint of Liars* when she was a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center, a five-hundred-page book, in six months. She spent the last month revising, then sold it three weeks later. She's a real legend at the Work Center. People say the strict rules of fiction writing require that you revise often, yet she scarcely revised at all on the page. In many ways she'd been revising in her head for a year, before she even began.

I, on the other hand, can't do that. I can sit and think and write paragraphs in my head, but as far as any useful work about writing—I can't do it. The minute I start to write, it changes. I could come up with a whole novel in my head and turn it around, and the minute I tried to put it into words, it would be totally different. It's amazing how much my work changes from conception to finish, and it changes rapidly, especially when I'm first working on a project. That's the reason I have to write from beginning to end. Otherwise, the concept is going to be off. I won't have thought enough about the big scenes unless I've written right up to them.

I revise endlessly. I'm probably on my fourth or fifth major draft on my new novel, but there have been zillions of revisions and rearrangement within that. What usually happens is, in the beginning, I'm very indulgent. I only show my work to people who will tell me it's wonderful. I don't show it to anyone who will give me any kind of serious criticism, because it will break my heart. My friends know not to say too much. I want them to tell me if it's awful or misguided, but if they think it's on the right track, I don't want to hear any more criticism. If they suggest something, I always say, "No, I don't want to do that!" But as I go on, I become more and more hard-hearted. On Wednesday I cut the first fifty pages of the book I'm working on, and it was no problem. It was a section I'd been holding onto desperately, for ages. I called up Ann and said, "I have to lose the scenes in Iowa," and she said, "You knew that." ■

SIRI HUSTVEDT, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

How much rewriting do you do?

I do endless rewriting. Paul says, "Siri, you don't revise; you rewrite," which I think is true. If there is something I don't like, I tend to throw it out and then remake it. It's almost as if I need a certain speed to redo the whole thing. I also edit sentences carefully, but that is later. When I'm making drafts, I produce hundreds and hundreds of pages of work.

What is involved in the editing of a sentence for you?

I remember Paul and I had a conversation about vowel sounds in sentences. Sometimes repetitions are nice, and sometimes they're ugly. That's where you find yourself at the end of the day. How do I avoid repeating that vowel sound or that ugly unintentional rhyme? There are too many *T*s in this sentence. I have to change it. There are some truisms in prose, however. Strong verbs are nice. Use necessary adjectives but not hysterically. Of course, that's a matter of style, too. Rococo prose is beyond my sphere. It grates against the Midwestern, Protestant personality. Sometimes I admire it, but I can't do it. It's too decorative. I tend to banish words, throw out sentences I've made if they're elegant just to be elegant. Showing off is to no purpose.

Is it hard to cut something you were happy with but later realized was overwritten?

It's not hard because I do become an engine for the work. I'm happy to be corrected by myself or by a reader like Paul. There often comes a time when I'm so close to a book, I can't see it anymore. Then I have to put it aside and get Paul to read it. That usually comes only after years of work, however. ■

MELANIE BISHOP:

I used to be the type of writer who would start any session of writing by reading through all of what I'd written before, and revising it. Sometimes an entire day of writing didn't get me any farther than I'd been the previous time. But the work was getting stronger, I felt, and that was a different kind of progress. The first time I attempted a novel, I became overwhelmed by this method of mine. There was no way, once you were fifty pages or so into the draft, to read all fifty before starting the next writing session. And I learned that each new time I read a section, no matter how many times I had read it before, I could always find something I wished to change, a word to get rid of or a better way to describe something. Revision, it seemed, was relentless, never ending. As long as a piece was not yet in print, I could keep tinkering with it. To make any headway on a novel attempt, I needed to free myself of this burden. I asked a close writer friend who'd just published her first novel to give me some advice. She said (and I've never forgotten this advice), "Just get the story out there, A to Z. You can always go back later and make it beautiful." What a relief. By not even reading the beginning I could just start right out where I'd left off and save a lot of time. Sometimes I needed to read a paragraph or a page, just to remind myself where I was, what the tone of the section was, or whatever. But I forbade myself from reading the thing over from page one. While this approach may leave you with an enormous amount of revision after your first draft is done, it allows you to proceed each day without falling into a crippling critique of what you've already written. If you dislike your entire first chapter, you're likely not to feel like writing on until you've fixed it. If you don't read it after you write it, there's no way you can dislike it or like it. It's just there and you go forward. With a longer manuscript, I believe this is key. Psychologically it is so crucial to feel that sense of forward movement, of momentum. Within what you're writing there will be truly ugly sentences, gaggy phrases, clichés you'd sworn off long ago. The whole piece may be grossly over-written and desperately in need of editing, or so under-written as to be skeletal, bare bones without any musculature or connecting tissue. But you're writing toward an ending and when you get there, you begin again. Again, this does not work for everyone. Some writers cannot write chapter four until chapter three is perfect. These writers will have less revision to do later. For me it's important to push toward the end and have a completed draft, completed as in start to finish. To feel and see the heft and the bulk of it. So much work left to do but so much already accomplished—the weight of it there in your hand. ■

KENT HARUF*, interviewed by Jim Nashold:*

When you wrote that first book, it seemed like it grew as you worked on it. Do you write all the way through in one draft and then revise, or do you polish as you go along?

I do the latter. I'm not sure it's a method I recommend, but I'm sure I'm not the only writer who works that way. My habit is to perfect individual sentences, individual paragraphs, and individual pages, and when I think they're as good as I can make them, I feel free to go on to the next part. So when I write the last sentence of the last paragraph, I'm done with the book. ■

DAN CHAON*, interviewed by Misha Angrist:*

Do you feel at all bound by the outline you gave to your editor?

I can't, really—it's becoming less and less pertinent. **The unfortunate and disturbing thing, at least in terms of getting it done, is that every time I sit down to write, the novel changes.** It's like this Mark Danielewski novel, *House of Leaves*, where the measurements for the inside of the house are a few inches bigger than those for the outside of the house. [*Laughs.*] My novel is like that: the inside of the house is getting bigger while the outside remains the same size. I'm not sure how to solve this problem except just to feel my way through another draft.

I feel enormous pressure to get this book done, though frankly I don't know that I can do it any quicker than I'm doing it now. So, if it takes me five more years…Oh, God.

Are you a compulsive reviser?

Oh yeah, though mainly at the micro level. If I'm writing a story, I'll write the first page, rewrite it, write the next page, and so on. So I'm constantly rewriting and reorganizing as I go. ■

CHARLES BAXTER*, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Sometimes a story will stand or fall on a simple word choice or on one sentence in the middle of a paragraph that either says too much or doesn't say enough. It either takes us too far or doesn't take us far enough in knowing where we are in the story. **I am amazed by the way that a story can fail by having a few words out of place. More often than not I think it's because the writer has been afraid of turning the heat up.** He or she—the writer—has found a situation or a feeling and been afraid to face it down. And so the language goes a little dead. The scenes go a bit dead and you think this story isn't facing up to all the consequences that it set into motion. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

When you're working on a novel, how do you know when you're done?

What I recently started doing is to finish it, then put it aside for about three months. When I say put it aside, I mean that I send it to my editor, my agent, and a few trusted writer friends, but I don't look at it while they're reading it. After three months, I get everyone's feedback, and I take a new look at it myself. Then I can make decisions because I have a much better perspective.

How many drafts do you do?

It depends on the piece. Some of the stories in this new book, I've been working on for ten years, because I just wasn't happy with them. I was convinced about the importance of the stories, but I knew that I didn't have the form right. "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," for example, I must've thrown away ten completely different versions of it before I got the final version. I knew that it wasn't ready until I got to this last version, and then I had a really good feeling. ■

VIKRAM CHANDRA,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

What was your editing process for Red Earth and Pouring Rain*?*

After I finished the first draft, I left it completely alone for five months. I'd lived with it for such a long time that it had become something of a joke with my friends in Houston and Bombay, Vikram's endless novel. I needed to be able to detach myself from it for a bit. Then I came back and read it again. My friend Alexis Quinlan read it at the same time, and she had some suggestions. Then I went back through the entire manuscript and did a pretty close edit. After Penguin/India accepted the book, my editor there, David Davidar, had some important ideas about the structure of the book, which I found useful. I spent a couple months moving things around, looking for resonance and clarity, and then finally the manuscript seemed quite stable. ■

HA JIN, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

How many revisions will you do for a novel, and what are the tasks of those revisions?

I used to revise very rapidly, doing many revisions—around thirty. I read every draft and made corrections and added material and deleted material as I thought necessary. I used different colored pencils to keep track of the revisions. But nowadays, I do revision at a very slow pace, so a book manuscript needs fewer drafts. Actually it isn't the number of drafts that's important. It's when you reach the stage where you can't do anything more to improve it. That's when I send it to my agent and editor for feedback and suggestions that will help me finish it. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Susan McInnis:*

I feel like I could go back into each of my collections and fix them, make them much better by tinkering with them. I'm sure that's not an exclusive characteristic for writers of the short story.

When do you consider a piece of writing complete?

When it's in print I guess everyone else feels it's done. Before I do a public reading, though, I'll go over the printed versions of the pieces I'm going to read, and inevitably start fixing them. While I'm at it, I'll find myself thinking, "Wouldn't this be better in the third person instead of the first?" At some point it has to be over, but even when a story's done, the same material revisits me. It's not as if the material goes away or is tamed just because a story's written or published. It crops up, comes back in other forms. If I go back through my books, I can find an image, a motif, an idea, a character coming back in a new incarnation, because I'm still compelled by it. Nothing fully disappears, which makes the revision process ongoing, even into new material. I'm always rethinking what I thought I had figured out. ■

DANIEL WALLACE,
interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

That's the difference between art and life. You can have a relationship with somebody else and you can say, Oh, if I'd only said this. If I'd only done this. You can't go back and change it, but with a story you go through the process of discovery, you go roughly from beginning to end. It's just rough. It's not set. It's not set enough for another pair of eyes to understand the experience, and so you go back then. You see what it is that's happened. You have the process, the trip, whatever, and you figure what's happened. Then you go back and smooth the edges. You find out where your points aren't made quite as clearly as you'd like them to be. Or maybe they're made too clearly, and you want to make it less clear. You can go back and fix all that once you figure out what happened. That's what rewriting is. That's why it's so important. Because you can perfect the experience. That's a thing, one thing, that I like so much about writing, that I don't like about life. I mess up all the time. In writing and life.

And in one area you can fix things and in the other, not so easily.

You can't. Yeah. ■

JAMAICA KINCAID, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I understand that you don't rewrite material, that you work it all in your head.

Yes, I go over it and go over it. By the time it's committed to paper, it's fairly set. Rewriting it would mean that I … The reason I can't rewrite it is because what I put down is practically chiseled in stone, so if I start to rewrite it, something else altogether different comes out. I go off into a completely different direction. It's no longer a part of the thing that I've been writing.

How in the world do you recall what you've worked out?

Someone else asked me that, too, and it made me a little bit worried about my process, because it means if I had the slightest stroke that it would be erased. Some people lift things and their body goes, and I lift words, and so I'm very dependent on my memory.

You must have a remarkable mental filing system.

I don't know if I do. I've never really thought of it so technically. I've always thought of it more … Oh, it's interesting. You're making me think of how I've thought of my mind as sort of more another person. More like another person, and we have a conversation.

What is this person like?

We mustn't probe too deeply. ■

MELANIE BISHOP:

Reading your work aloud, at home, by yourself, is a great way to test the writing, line by line. Not only will you easily identify places where you've left out a word, or sentences that are awkward, but you'll find yourself bored in parts of the story, rushing through a long, dry paragraph or page. This is excellent information for revision. Cut these sections mercilessly. If it's boring or long to you, you can bet it will be to other readers. ■

KATHLEEN TYAU, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

With all my stories, I read them aloud after I'm done. I catch a lot of rough spots that way. Reading silently doesn't work. ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

I do an enormous amount of thinking and planning in the beginning, while it's still in my head. I get it all where I want it to be.

Then I have a really hard time starting. I'll write the first fifty pages of a book twenty times, but once I get going, once I have the voice right and the narrative right, the characters in place, and the start is right, I go pretty cleanly. When I finish a chapter, I go back and polish it for a couple of days, and then go on to the next one. I do not get to the end of a book and then start a second draft. Elizabeth [McCracken] will retype everything that she has once she gets to the end. She really does create a second draft. I don't do that. When I type that last sentence of the book, that book is extremely close to the book that you will see in the bookstores. I do it as I go along. I can't go onto the next part until the last part is right. ■

CHRIS OFFUTT:

How do I revise a new story?

First of all, you have to give yourself permission to cut the living daylights out of your work. This is a tough step, but remember—you can put it all back the way it was.

The key to revision is learning what the story is trying to do, rather than what you're trying to do with the story. The problem is that if it's a worthwhile early draft, you've staked everything on it—your life, your identity, your emotional well-being.

There's absolutely no way you can revise that.

So I suggest you let it lie out of sight for a while. Start something new. Get emotionally involved with a fresh piece. Stake your utter sense of self on another story. Only then can you come back to the first piece with the emotional objectivity that is necessary for revision.

Then—be ruthless. Cut the fat, shore up the weak spots, make the beginning and ending strong, and keep the middle tight and interesting.

The secret is to start a short story near the ending. ■

MARY MORRISSY, *interviewed by Ana Callan:*

For most stories, I do three or four drafts. I always write longhand first and then I go to the computer. They're very worked. ■

GEORGE MAKANA CLARK:

Our egos get in there and we want to show our hand all the way through the story. It's difficult to take yourself out and say, Okay, I'm going to take this really pretty piece of prose that I've worked on for an entire week, and kill it. If it doesn't fit, it will jump out at the reader. Where a story ends is where it ends—I've written on for four and five pages before I realize where the story really ends. It's difficult to delete those pages. That's why when I make changes to a story, I don't want the old versions of the story to be around, I don't want to see them, so when my computer says, *Replace file?* I always do. I think that's the strength of my writing. ■

DAVID LONG:

Cut every word you can possibly cut. We always say too much: too many words, and too many things that don't need saying at all. Get rid of everything people already know. A twenty-page story? Cut out two or three pages of individual words and sentences: hedging, pointless amplification, baggy constructions, words that are implied. Try shrinking every paragraph by at least a line. ■

JOHN McNALLY, *interviewed by Stephanie Kuehnert:*

How many drafts of a story do you usually go through? And here's the big one—how do you know when it is done?

Every story has a gestation period, and I never know what it is until I start working on it—or, rather, until it's done. Some stories take me a year to write. Most take me two to three years. One took me six years to write. I work on so many things at once, I don't mind putting something aside for a long time. For me, the story starts becoming something real when it moves from being a premise or a skeleton to a seemingly organic whole where everything is in the story for a reason, and when the unlikeliest of details start fitting together in unexpected ways. I can't plan that or force it; it just has to happen. When it happens, you feel it. You know it's right. Sometimes it never comes, and you have to accept the story for what it is, but when it does come, you feel a shock of recognition with your own work. It's as if someone else has written it for you. ■

BOB SHACOCHIS, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I love doing the refinement work. That's what I like most. And that comes out in rewrites and polishing and polishing and scrubbing. I absolutely hate first drafts. I hate creation. I hate making the raw stuff. It's too hard. The God part of it is too hard. You know, to come up with something out of nothing. It kills a lot of people, and sometimes it feels like it's killing me. But I love the attention that I get to pay to something that's already there on the page, to keep reworking. But to lay that big block of stone, to get it up there is really hard, and I don't like it at all. ■

MARY McGARRY MORRIS, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

For me, the hardest part of writing is to come up with something, to pluck the words from thin air, from the vast, blank nothingness. But after that, it's all rewriting, and that's not so bad, and then by the eighth or ninth draft it's looking so good you've almost forgotten what the labor pains really felt like. ■

MELANIE BISHOP:

I dislike revision as much as anyone, and have been known to put stories away for many months to avoid having to revise them. It's hard to feel fresh when reentering a story you'd hoped you'd already finished. So, putting it away and getting necessary distance from it is one strategy that I use. Another one I teach my students is to think of revision as re-seeing. Allow yourself to completely re-see the story, all its possibilities. Be willing then to abandon that draft that you were so attached to, and start over with this new vision for the story. Cutting corners in revision, trying to salvage as much of the first draft as you can to avoid having to write/type more, never serves the story. Until you're willing to let go of what was and imagine what could be, you won't be fully ready to revise. Revision involves much more than cutting here and adding a section there. Sometimes it's really necessary to chuck the whole first attempt in the trash and go back to the story's original impulse and see where it takes you. ■

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Do you do a lot of revisions?

Not really. I ceaselessly go over what I've written, but I'm not making major changes. I'm just fixing it by making minor changes that might have a big effect. I don't write reams of material and then throw it out. I hardly throw anything out. ■

MATTHEW SHARPE, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

And then there's revising. I print out everything, and rather than just messing around on the screen, I retype every word in the second draft so that I can reconsider every sentence I have written. It keeps me more creative. And then there's the third draft and the fourth draft and the fifth draft—I stop with the masochistic behavior of retyping each word by the third draft—and then I sort of lose count after a while of how many drafts there are. I'll take the manuscript and re-read it several times and make scribbles and erasures and draw circles and arrows and little people hanging themselves, but that process goes faster than the first draft. Say, six subsequent drafts take the same amount of time as writing that first draft. ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

Truman Capote said, "I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil." Can you describe your process of revision in terms of how much cutting and writing you do?

I love revision. It's so much more interesting than a first draft, which for me is laborious and exhausting. Early drafts are so discouraging. The quality of the writing is bad, you don't know where you're going with any of this, and you know that most of what you're writing will have to eventually be thrown away. But with revision, you're at the point when language and level of insight and clarity of theme are all at a more accomplished level; you can look at your work without feeling disgusted by it. Revision is where you move away from the subconscious and really scrutinize the architectural way in which a story is put together. You examine the details in relation to theme or mood, you look at the pacing. You have real control, which is a relief and a comfort after that earlier rocky period of navigating the subconscious. Actually, your quote from Truman Capote reminds me of something I once heard in an art appreciation class. Michelangelo was asked how he chiseled sculptures out of stone. How did he know what to chisel out? He said, I visualize the image within the stone, and then free it by getting rid of the parts that don't belong. That's a frustrating comment, isn't it, because what's so difficult is being able to visualize that image in the first place. For me, numerous drafts are crucial in order to get a clear vision of that image within the stone. You can't just look at a blank page and say, I'll plan it out now, before I get my hands dirty. Well, you can, but in my experience the story is going to come out shallow and flat. You have to give your story enough room to morph in mid-journey, to take on different shapes and different levels of depth. That's what's exciting. Once the story has found itself, it's easy to go back and cut out what doesn't fit, or add what needs to be added. In my writing classes, once my students figure out what it is that their stories are really about, the revisions are often remarkable. The problem with many writers is that they skimp on the revision process. In other words, they're in too big of a hurry to keep writing draft after draft so that their stories can be as deep and rich and insightful as they could be. It takes a really long time to see that image within the stone, in all its clarity. You have to be patient. ■

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Co-editors: Susan Burmeister-Brown and Linda Swanson-Davies
Typesetting and layout: Paul Morris
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