

Red Pencil

CINDY VALLAR *analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles John Shors' Beneath a Marble Sky.*

Where to begin? This may seem like a strange question, but it's an important one each writer asks when he begins a new tale. There are three possible answers: in the past, the present, or the future. A story that begins in the past provides the reader with a brief glimpse into the back story of a novel so the reader will understand some aspect that influences the present. A novel that begins in the present, regardless of the historical time period, allows the reader to follow the characters in a sequence of events from start to finish. A tale that begins in the future permits the main character to tell a story that happened in the past through older and wiser eyes. John Shors chose this final option for his novel, *Beneath a Marble Sky*, which recounts the love story behind the building of the Taj Mahal.

Princess Jahanara is no longer the young daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan of Hindustan and Arjumand, his favorite wife. Rather she is a grandmother with secrets to impart to her granddaughters. John chose this way to introduce his principal character and the story "because *Beneath a Marble Sky* can be intense from an emotional perspective [and] I wanted to give the reader the break of knowing that Jahanara survived all of the turmoil. Second, I wanted to show Jahanara as an older woman, and these scenes were a good way of doing that. Third, I felt that these scenes were a nice change of pace from the rest of the book. Most readers, I've found, are happy that I left these scenes in the book," even though one editor wanted John to delete them.

Originally entitled *Souls in Stone*, an early draft of the opening began:

In the early days, when I was still a girl of innocence, my father believed in perfection.

Once, musing over his empire, over the splendor he'd created, he composed a poem. On an arch above his Peacock Throne, he inscribed, "If there is a paradise on the face of the Earth, it is this, it is this, it is this." Simple words from a simple man. But how true they were.

Dawn on the Yamuna River has often prompted me to think of Paradise. From the broad shoulders of the waterway, I've cherished the sights before me like I might the face of my lover. This morning is much the same. To my right sprawls the magnificent Red Fort. On my opposite side, awash in the sun's blood, is the Taj Mahal. The mausoleum doesn't soar as a falcon might, or crest like the sea. Rather it stretches upward, strong and noble, a gateway to the heavens. To contemplate that the Taj Mahal was built for my mother is among my greatest joys, and my most profound sorrows.

Today, I'm not alone. My faithful companion, Nizam, patiently rows our boat across the Yamuna. Behind our craft's bow sit my granddaughters, Gulbadan and Rurayya. They're no longer girls, but young women, wondrous incarnations of my daughter. Giggling, they whisper of things that young women do – of the men who strut before them, of the dreams they encounter.

John changed the book's title because he "was never truly pleased with" it, "[b]ut coming up with something better was quite hard. Naming a novel is akin to naming a child. A great deal of thought goes into it. When musing over how Jahanara and Isa built the Taj Mahal, and spent so much time beneath its white marble, the title *Beneath a Marble Sky* occurred to me. Plus, with Shah Jahan and Arjumand being buried there, the title seemed even more apt."

He also edited the manuscript fifty-four times before arriving at the version in the published book. Not only did he tighten the writing and take greater care in his choice of words, but he also instilled a better sense of place and added elements that hint at Jahanara's life experiences. Why include the foreshadowing? To "compel the reader to keep reading."

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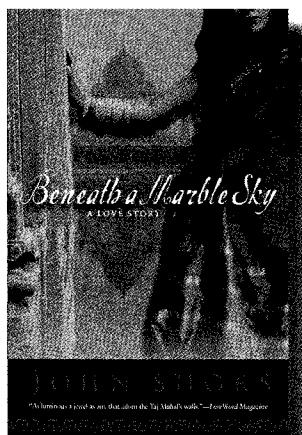
Once, musing over his empire, contemplating the splendor he had created, he composed a poem. On the vaulted ceiling above his Peacock Throne he had an artist inscribe in gold, "If there is a paradise on the face of the Earth, it is this, it is this, it is this." Simple words from a simple man. But how true they

were.

Sunrise over the Yamuna River has often prompted me to think of Paradise. From the broad shoulders of the waterway I have cherished the sights before me as I might cherish the face of my lover. This morning's views are as inspiring as ever, especially after having been away in hiding for so long. To my right sprawls the magnificent Red Fort. Opposite, awash in the sun's blood, stands the Taj Mahal, neither soaring as a falcon might, nor cresting like the sea. Rather the mausoleum arches upward, strong and noble, a gateway to the heavens. Knowing that the Taj Mahal was built for my mother is among my greatest joys, and my most profound sorrows.

Today, I am not alone. My guardian, Nizam, patiently rows our boat across the Yamuna. Behind our craft's bow sit my two granddaughters, Gulbadan and Rurayya. No longer girls, each is a wondrous incarnation of my daughter. Looking at them, I think that time has moved too swiftly, that just yesterday I was stroking the soles of their diminutive, untested feet. My love for my granddaughters is even stronger now than it was then. When I see them I feel as if I'm moving forward into places harboring no regrets, no memories to remind me of my scars, those thick welts upon my mind and body.

Of all the characters who might have told this story, John's selection of Jahanara was crucial. She "was the one person who could talk about all of the big events in the book. She could talk about her parents' love affair, the rise of the Taj Mahal, the civil war, and her years of imprisonment with her father in the Red Fort. Given that she was the only person [who] experienced all of these events, I knew that she had to be my narrator." This choice necessitated that the



reader identify with her as early as possible. Through subtle changes in the draft, she became like other women, even though she was a princess, raised in a privileged life.

When I was their age my emotions were more closely guarded. On the surface I acted much the same, secure and stout. But within the thick shields of my defenses dwelled much more troubled thoughts. Foremost among them was a yearning for acceptance, a need to feel worthy.

One of the few people to ever glimpse my longing was Nizam, who now propels us to the far bank, away from the prying ears about the Taj Mahal.

One particular change that caught my attention involved a single word – longing. In the final version, it became “insecurities,” so I asked why John made the switch. “As I continued to edit and refine . . . I came to realize that in order for Jahanara to be effective and real, she needed ample insecurities. I didn’t want her to be the perfect heroine. I wanted her to at times be weak, be foolish. I think this line alludes to her shortcomings.” Would you agree?

Gulbadan and Rurayya giggle, whispering as young women do – of the men who strut before them, of the dreams they encounter. When I was their age my emotions were more closely guarded. On the surface I acted much the same, but within the thick shields of my defenses dwelt more troubled thoughts, thoughts often dominated by a yearning for acceptance, a need to feel worthy.

One of the few people ever to glimpse my insecurities was Nizam, who now propels us to the far bank, away from the prying ears about the Taj Mahal.

In opening the story in the future and in foreshadowing the troubles Jahanara faced in the past, John needed to insert a reason for the unveiling of secrets that readers would believe.

Gulbadan’s mouth opens, but no words spring forth. Her brow tightens. Her hands drop. “Then why do you live so far from Agra? And why . . . why have you lied to us? Why have we never known?”

“When you bear my tale you’ll understand.”

“But how can it be?”

I’ve rarely seen Gulbadan vexed. But she is vexed now. Rurayya acts as if she’s awoken to find a sky with two suns. “Please listen, Gulbadan. If you listen, I’ll explain.”

“Mother deceived us?” Rurayya mutters.

“Only, child, because she loves you. As do I.”

“But Mother never lies.”

The problem with this early draft was that it lacked a compelling reason for revealing long-kept truths. John realized this, so he introduced Jahanara’s grandson in the final version. “I needed to do a better job of giving the reader a reason for Jahanara’s disclosure



of her life story. After all, she was putting her granddaughters at risk by telling them her story. The fact that their brother might be able to make a claim for the throne justified Jahanara’s revelation. In Jahanara’s mind, her granddaughters needed to know the story because they might someday be in a position to help their brother take possession of the throne.”

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“When you bear my story you’ll understand.”

“But why are you telling us now?”

“Because of your little brother.”

“Because of Mirza? You make no sense!”

I have rarely seen Gulbadan so upset. Rurayya acts as if she’s awakened to find a sky with two suns. “Please, please listen, Gulbadan. If you listen, I’ll explain.”

My granddaughter stifles an angry reply. I close my eyes for a moment. Silence descends and I question the prudence of our decision. They are certainly old and wise enough to keep my terrible secrets. But will events ever unfold that might warrant such knowledge?

“I must tell you of our family’s history, and of the beliefs of those long since dead,” I say. “I can’t predict the future, but in these troubled times the throne may someday be empty. If it becomes so, and if Mirza is willing, he might try to claim it. He’s far too young to hear of these tidings today, but you are not. Mirza will need your guidance if he wishes to follow the path his great-grandfather so carefully laid – a path that led to peace and compassion, not the war and mistrust surrounding us today.”

“But Mirza’s just a boy,” Rurayya replies.

“Yes, but someday he will be a man, just like your father. And his blood is royal. Such blood could reunite the Empire again. It could save thousands of lives. That is why I ask that you listen well. You’ll tell this story to your brother when he’s ready. You will all need to know it if Mirza ever seeks the throne.”

Aside from Jahanara and her granddaughters, another character shares this opening scene. His name is Nizam, and he plays an important role throughout Jahanara’s life. In the draft, after the above scene, Jahanara mentions the extraordinary life that her parents lived and that she, Nizam, and the girls’ parents know the story.

Rurayya glances at Nizam, who confirms my words with another nod. My friend isn’t a man prone to exaggeration, and Rurayya’s lips part in wonder. “How did it begin?”

When I first read “prone to exaggeration,” I felt the phrase was too modern-sounding for the story. It wasn’t that the words were anachronistic. They just didn’t seem to fit the time and place. They subtly altered the atmosphere John was attempting to create. He must have sensed this, too, for the final version compared Nizam to

a mirror. When I asked him about this, he wrote, “The metaphor of a mirror seemed natural for Jahanara, as mirrors were everywhere in the harem, and Jahanara is somewhat concerned with how age affects her appearance. It seemed like something she would say, and I liked how the sentence sounded.”

Rurayya looks at Nizam, who confirms my words with another nod. My friend is as honest as a mirror, and Rurayya’s lips part in wonder. “How did it begin?”

The change is simple, but far more effective; there are other instances of this throughout the opening. The draft contains the sentence, “The tale isn’t without woe.” The book, though, says, “The tale has never been told.” John explains why. “It’s funny that you mention this line. I thought about it a lot. I actually really like how ‘the tale isn’t without woe’ sounds. I think it’s got a good ring to it. But upon further reflection it seemed to me that I might be over-writing just a bit here, that the sentence perhaps seemed a bit contrived. This kind of thing is tough for me, as I love the sound of such sentences, but sometimes [I] have to take a half-step back, to cut out language that I really like. I think that as a writer one walks a fine line of trying to create beautiful, compelling prose without getting carried away. I struggle with this on a daily basis, as I want my novels to read with a certain eloquence, but I don’t want the reader to feel like I’m forcing the issue.”

Another small change involved birds.

“I mean, can you keep a secret? Or are you like magpies on a water buffalo’s back, chatting away when hawks are about?”

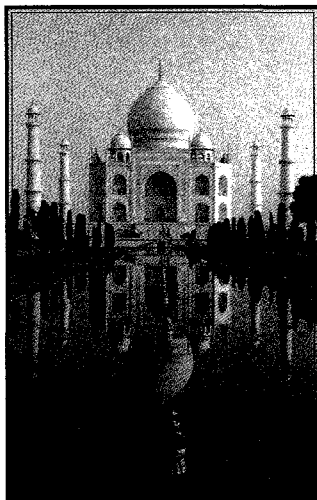
In the draft, John used “eagles lurk above” instead of “hawks are about.” Why was the hawk a better analogy than the eagle? “I ultimately decided that ‘eagles’ was a bit of a cliché. So many writers use the word ‘eagle’, and I didn’t want to fall into that trap. I do like the word ‘lurk’, but again, I think I was being careful of over-writing here. That’s why I ended up using the analogy that I did, even though in some ways it’s more pedestrian.”

Throughout the story, John successfully transports the reader to another time and place – a place with which few of us are familiar. Not so John. “I’ve been lucky enough to spend a great deal of time in Asia and have been powerfully influenced by its history, as well as the sights, sounds, smells, and customs found today in that part of the world. For a decade I’d wanted to write a novel set somewhere in Asia but waited to find the right story – or rather to have the right story find me.

“In 1999, my wife and I were traveling in India and of course made it a point to visit the Taj Mahal. We arrived at the mausoleum as soon as it opened to the public and were the first people there that day. Walking within its chambers, hearing our voices echo in the same manner as voices did hundreds of years ago, and touching its sculpted walls was an overwhelming experience. Seeing the wonder of the Taj Mahal, and understanding that a man built it for his wife – a woman he cherished above all else in life – was uniquely inspiring. Indian

poets have been writing about this love story for centuries. And yet, not many people in the West know the tale. I realized that I had to tell it. Quite honestly, I was amazed and delighted to discover upon my return to America that no one in the West had ever fictionalized the story.”

John also feels it is imperative for an author to visit the locales about which he writes. “I could never have written *Beneath a Marble Sky* without having spent a significant amount of time in India. Bringing a world to life – one full of sounds, colors, smells, and sights – in my opinion requires a firsthand experience. I know that not every writer agrees with me here, but I just don’t see how personal experiences can do anything but help the writing process.”



Of all the scenes in the book, John found writing the first scene the most difficult. “I probably re-wrote [it] a hundred times. Bringing Jahanara’s voice to life was quite challenging. And her voice really needed to shine. Plus, I really felt like I had to hook the reader from the first page. And I didn’t want to do so with a death, with an explosion. I wanted to do it with dialogue and foreshadowing. Essentially, I was trying to achieve many goals within a few pages – thus all of the edits.”

He accomplished all those goals even though he had a full-time job when he wrote *Beneath a Marble Sky*. “I was helping [to] launch a public relations company in Boulder, Colorado. Having a very busy day job, and trying to write at night and on weekends led to a great deal of chaos. I succeeded in managing both tasks by giving myself simple goals when it came to my writing. For example, I’d write two pages a day regardless of my other work load. Or I’d edit twenty pages a day. By sticking to such goals, I was able to finish *Beneath a Marble Sky* after about five years.”

Once his historical novel was published, John opted to promote it in a unique way. “I created a first-of-its-kind book club program through which I called into book clubs (via speakerphone) all over the world. Within a year of the publication... I spoke with a thousand book clubs.” This type of word-of-mouth promotion worked, for his novel “is being translated into nineteen languages, and made into a movie.” Today, John is a full-time writer whose next novel, tentatively titled *The Poet Makers*, will be released in September.

John was interviewed by Sarah Johnson in the May 2006 issue of the *Historical Novels Review*.

Cindy Vallar is a freelance editor, an associate editor for Solander, and the author of The Scottish Thistle (www.cindyvallar.com/scottishtistle.html). A retired librarian, she also writes about pirates, teaches workshops, and reviews books.